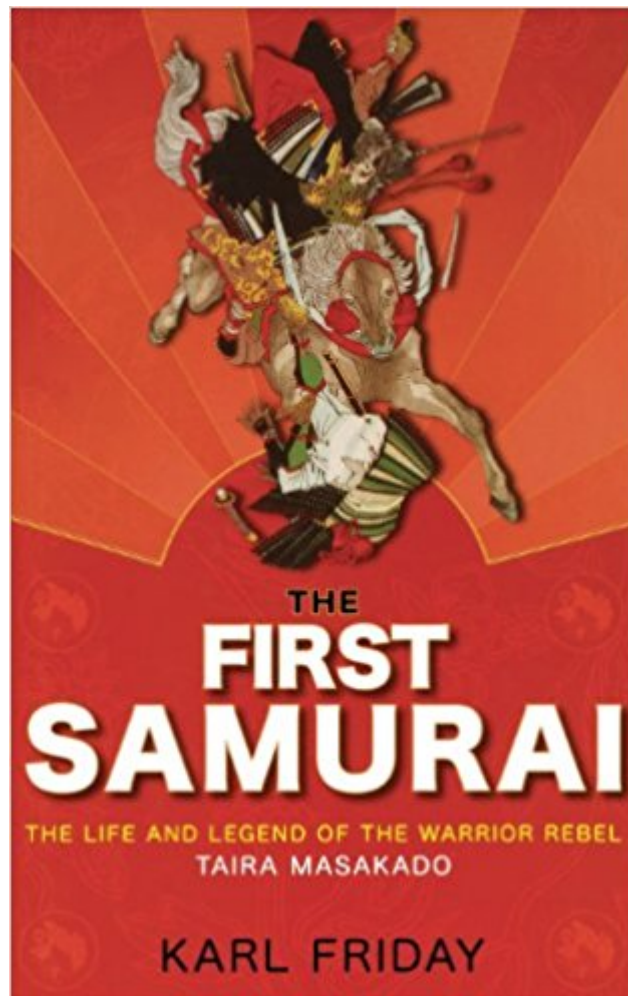




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# The First Samurai: The Life And Legend Of The Warrior Rebel, Taira Masakado



## Synopsis

A portrait of Japan's first significant samurai leader and his world Was samurai warrior Taira Masakado a quixotic megalomaniac or a hero swept up by events beyond his control? Did he really declare himself to be the "New Emperor"? Did he suffer divine retribution for his ego and ambition? Filled with insurrections, tribal uprisings, pirate disturbances, and natural disasters, this action-packed account of Masakado's insurrection offers a captivating introduction to the samurai, their role in 10th-century society, and the world outside the capital-a must-read for those interested in early Japan, samurai warfare, or the mystique of ancient warriors. Karl Friday (Athens, GA) is a Professor of History at the University of Georgia. A renowned expert on the samurai and early Japanese history, he has authored four books and appeared on numerous A&E, History, and Discovery Channel programs. He is active on several Web forums.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In his lucid and meticulously researched reconstruction of the tenth century rebel Taira no Masakado, Karl Friday illuminates the attitudes and institutions of tenth-century Japan, and explains the enduring appeal of this audacious man who strove to be emperor. Through the life of Masakado, Friday brings alive the patterns of early Japanese warfare, and the complex interaction between central and regional authority. [The First Samurai](#) will remain the definitive study of the legendary warrior and his age for years to come." - Thomas D. Conlan, Bowdoin College

It is the kind of story from which great tragic operas are made: A brave warrior of noble birth and

royal ancestry runs afoul of a jealous neighbor who then ambushes him in the countryside. The warrior and his followers defeat their attackers, only to be targeted by others who now fear his growing strength. Overly impressed with his continued success against his enemies, he becomes consumed with hubris and soon falls victim to his own ambition. Add to this the mystique of the samurai, the pageantry of Japan's tenth-century imperial court, and legends of a flying head whose curse has caused disasters for a thousand years, and this compelling tale becomes a drama of epic proportions. In *The First Samurai*, you'll discover the amazing true story of Taira Masakado, Japan's first samurai hero. This gripping account traces the roots of Masakado's bloody feud with local rivals, including his uncles and brothers-in-law. It explains how apparently trifling squabbles grew into years of bitter provincial warfare involving thousands of highly trained samurai. How could Masakado and the other elite landholders of his region amass and maintain such formidable forces? What led Masakado to seize control of eight provincial government headquarters, and declare himself overlord of eastern Japan? And why did he fail? The answers to these questions provide a fascinating glimpse into the political, social, and military structure of tenth-century Japan. You'll also discover that many popular and scholarly conceptions of early samurai warfare as picturesque, quaintly ritualized, and respectful of noncombatants are pure myth. In reality, ambush was the preferred form of attack, and ferocious raiding and looting were typical of the time. These tactics and strategies were partly the result of the nature of samurai combat, but they were also strongly influenced by the political and property structure of the country. Filled with harrowing battle scenes, enchanting portraits of early Japan, and astounding legends of Masakado's celebrated life after death, *The First Samurai* is a must-read for anyone interested in the samurai, early Japanese history, and a whopping good tale well told.

This is very informative and goes into great detail about many things of that time period. Taira Masakado is a very interesting historical figure. The only downside to this book is that it can get a bit boring at times. If you are not really into Japanese history then you probably will not like this book since it isn't historical fiction. It is just an account of what happened during the life of Taira Masakado

This was an interesting book. You not only learn about an ambitious guy who sort of stepped sideways into rebellion, but about a cut throat world of deviousness and blood. You see the beginning of the end for Kyoto central control and the rising power of the landed gentry. This book would make a great Taiga drama.

While the book is a discussion of the ups and downs of Taira Masakado, along the way it explains in a fair amount of detail the fight styles (ambushes, small group fighting) of the Heian samurai - how their arms (bow, arrow) and armor influenced military tactics [effective arrow range of 20~30 yards against armor], the importance of mounted cavalry, and the relatively small scale of armies and battles of the time. Very different from the large scale combat of later periods (such as the sengoku period). The author has extensive training in the old Japanese martial arts (koryu bujutsu) and it shows in his clear explanations. He is also a professor of Japanese history at the Univ. of Georgia. Of the three books of his I've read (Legacies of the Sword, Hired Swords, The First Samurai) this is the most fun to read - the others are quite scholarly.

this helps fill some gaps in my history books about the Heian era and the early samurai. I need more original literature and contemporary commentary

Very informative. I like how K. Friday explains "ambush" is the preferred tactic. Not like what the movies and other propaganda type books extolling honorable combat.

I ordered this book thinking it would be akin to *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori*. The book begins promisingly after the subject, Taira Masakado, is killed in battle and his head is paraded to Kyoto and hung in a tree. The author spends some time discussing tales of the dead warrior's remains and retribution for disrespect at the body's last resting place. However in approximately 140 pages of text the author expends an inordinate amount of space to the histories of those involved in hunting down and punishing Masakado for his illegal revolution, discussions of military equipment and tactics of the Heian era that seem disconnected from the history of the individual, and similar matters. The author struggles with a lack of definitive historical materials and does a poor job of carrying his theme throughout the book. He skips back and forth between historical events relevant to the Masakado uprising and events totally unrelated, at one point even essentially summarizing [\[\[ASIN:0804833184 The Heike Story: A Modern Translation of the Classic Tale of Love and War\]](#) a more deftly presented history of events about a century later. It is almost as if the author is seeking filler because there's not enough about his subject to fill a book. In the end I'm not sure there's any basis for the title, "First Samurai," because the author does not make it the central theme of the book. Instead he starts at the end, recites chronological events of about a three year period disjointedly, and ends with Masakado's death and the delivery of his head to Kyoto,

where he started the book. Throughout the author is easily distracted, following tale after tale, forgetting his thesis. I cannot recommend the book to any but the most avid Japanese History readers who have a foundation in Japanese history that allows them to follow the twists and turns of this author. Even then I suspect there are better reads in Japanese History they have not yet read.

You know, I've always heard the phrase 'never judge a book by its cover', but until recently I've paid it little heed. Thus, when I saw the cover of Karl Friday's book on Taira Masakado I kept putting it off. After all, what meat could there be in a book with bright, flashing colors on the front and a confusing, anachronistic woodblock print shown in relief? In short, it looked like just another of the myriad populist books on Japanese history, designed to get readers to plunk down money just so the author can rehash old material and convey the same vague generalities about samurai warfare. It seemed to be playing off of the success in the English speaking world of the Tom Cruise "you, too, can live out your doomed romantic warrior fantasies" movie, and pandering to the samurai fanatics. On the other hand, it is Karl Friday, who brought us *Legacies of the Sword: The Kashima-Shinryu and Samurai Martial Culture*, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan*, and other notable works, so it was on my list. Now I'm kicking myself that I didn't get this book sooner. The information on not only Taira Masakado, but on the life in Japan during the 10th century and other famous figures of the time, is absolutely wonderful. Not only that, but it presents the facts in a way that is easy and enjoyable to read. I would easily compare it to other recent biographies, such as David McCullough's "John Adams", which open to the reader not just a dry tome of the dust from a person's passing, but the rich texture of life in their day and age. Taira Masakado is a figure that is famous in Japan, but his name has hardly made a splash in the English speaking world until this book, which will likely, as Thomas D. Conlan lauds, "remain the definitive study of the legendary warrior and his age for years to come." Friday begins by introducing his audience to the Masakado story as it is known in Japan--his rebellion, beheading, and the subsequent legends of that same vital appendage flying about Japan and causing havoc even as late as the mid 20th century. He illuminates for the reader the common conception of Masakado as the first warrior of the early medieval period to rise up in rebellion and challenge the imperial authority. However, just as he has laid out the groundwork for you, Friday turns the whole thing on its head. He lays out a cogent argument for Masakado as a victim of circumstances and poor judgment, rather than a committed rebel. Masakado comes off as an able warrior and administrator who was invested in the imperial system and likely had no real intention of setting up anything else, but he was driven into a position where he felt he had no other choice. In fact, the reader comes away with the feeling that

Masakado's entire reputation is quite overblown by later historians, and yet the story of his life is no less enlightening about the times he lived in. In fact, it is because he was an exemplar of his times and not an outlier that a study of his life is of such import. While examining the actions and motives of Masakado, Friday also examines the lifestyles of the provincial warriors during the Heian period and the combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces that kept court and countryside in balance. He reveals for the reader the economic politics of the often hastily assembled warbands, whose ties to their nominal general were often tenuous at best. He also dispels the later veneer of romance that later authors were prone to place on samurai warfare, putting pragmatism in its proper historical place. For example, he describes not only the lauds given for men skilled at ambush tactics, but the reasons why they were so necessary in this age of the horse and bow. His research is neatly referenced, with both in-page footnotes and 26 pages of footnotes at the end of the book. His bibliography is divided into Primary and Secondary sources, and the work contains a helpful index for looking up specific topics. Admittedly, the swirl of "Taira", "Fujiwara", and "Minamoto" surnames can often make following the complex familial relationships of the time difficult for the uninitiated, but Friday uses that confusion to highlight the all too real social complexity of Heian period Japan. In conclusion, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Anyone interested in the history of the samurai and the rise of the warrior class should have a grounding in the provincial warriors of the Heian period, who were adapting the previous ritsuryo military guidelines to the new era of private bands of horsed archers, and this book, by highlighting one such individual, brings that transition sharply into focus.

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