

---

# Heraldic Display in Medieval Japan

---

by Kihō (希鷗)

## 1 What is a Mon?

Japan developed a system of identifying symbols or crests that is frequently compared to European heraldry. These **crests are called ‘mon’ (紋) or ‘monshō’ (紋章)**. While there are some similarities to European devices, and both systems were used for similar identification purposes, the Japanese system has different basic principles and a different aesthetic.

Mon are generally simple designs. The vast majority of mon used a single color on a solid background. In addition, the way different graphical elements were combined was limited; many mon were constructed of only one type of element, and those that combined multiple different types of ‘charge’ did so in standardized ways, such as adding an enclosure around another element.

What were mon used for? **Primarily, they were used for identification**, and by extension for decoration. Samurai would use mon on banners to identify unit affiliation. They were used as designs on kimono, armor, camp curtains, roof tiles, carriages, and personal items.

**The most common type of mon is the ‘kamon’ (家紋), or “family crest”**. Kamon were used to identify family/clan membership or affiliation. However, there was never a one-to-one relationship between mon and families: different branches of a family could easily use distinct (sometimes related) mon, and multiple mon could be used by the same individual in different situations. Furthermore, different families could share similar or identical mon, either by coincidence (for families in distant parts of Japan) or due to a strong clan granting its mon to a favored supporter.

The use of mon was not restricted to families: non-family groups, such as temples and shrines, could also use mon. **Crests used by Shintō shrines are generally called ‘shinmon’ (神紋), “divine crests”**. Crests for shrines became increasingly popular during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333). Shrine crests were generally similar to family crests, and could be adopted in either direction: a family could adopt the crest of a shrine they had a strong connection to, or a shrine could use the crest of a patron family. Crests could also move from shrine to shrine, for example when an enshrined *kami* (Shintō deity) was transferred. These sorts of changes could leave a shrine with more than one mon in some cases.<sup>EoSShinmon</sup> Buddhist temples shared many practices with Shintō shrines in period, and also used crests in a similar way.<sup>FCoJ127</sup>

## 2 Display

The earliest known use of mon was not on banners, but on Imperial ox carts going back as far back as the Nara Period (710–794).<sup>SH6</sup> From here mon spread to be used by the Imperial family more generally and by the Heian Period (794–1185) this had spread to the court nobility, though given the small and highly interconnected noble class, there was little need to use them for identification.<sup>Dower4</sup>

**Mon were not used by the samurai warrior class until the 12th-century Gempei wars**, where they were used on wooden mantlet (“war-door”) shields, camp curtains, and flags.<sup>SH8</sup> Later in period, their use became progressively more widespread, leading to their use in such places as armor, sword guards, and other pieces of warriors’ equipment as well as boxes, and paper lanterns.<sup>Dower11</sup> By the Momoyama Period (1573–1603), the usage of mon had been common enough to spread to merchants in the capital.<sup>Oribe224</sup>

Some mon motifs originate in fabric patterns, and mon designs were used on clothing from an early age without serving as personal symbols. In the Muromachi Period (1336–1573), some warrior families wore highly elaborate kimono called ‘daimon’, or “great crest”, incorporating family crests half as tall as the wearer on large billowing sleeves.<sup>Dower12</sup> By the late Muromachi period, family crests were standardly used in more restrained ways to decorate various **everyday and formal garments** worn by samurai, generally with three or five prominent 1.5-inch mon.<sup>Dower15</sup> Relatedly, mon could be used on

---

(1a) A shadowed nine stars mon on an oxcart, 13th c.<sup>cM100148</sup>

(1b) An abbot’s seat with gentian mon, 12th c.<sup>WC:Raiban (Abbot’s seat)</sup>

(2a) 1650<sup>R:B</sup>

(2b) 1600<sup>R:N</sup>

(2c) A war fan and circles  
kokuin from Edo Castle<sup>EO</sup>

**armor**, either on small metal fastenings, as large metal crests on helmets, or as large designs on breastplates. They were also used on personal items, such as **dishes** and **boxes** (e.g., *figure 2a*).

Another place where mon were displayed was on **noren**, cloth curtains used in doorways to keep out dust and identify a business. While modern noren are generally labeled with kanji or decorative paintings, Momoyama Period (1573–1603) folding screen paintings show the use of mon on noren.<sup>Oribe224</sup> (See *figure 2b*.) A similar use of mon was on the camp curtains used in military encampments.

Mon were also used on stone blocks for building castles. Since many samurai would contribute building materials from different quarries, mon marks called kokuin were used to identify the stones' source. (See *figure 2c*.)

Mon were, of course, also used on several different varieties of **banners**. Many different styles of banner were used on the battlefield over time. Distinctive banners carried by attendants or attached to the backs of armor were common for battlefield identification.

It is interesting to note that mon were not the only form of heraldry used on the battlefield. Banners could be solid-colored, have only colored stripes, or have more complicated pictures or passages of text. In addition, daimyō, the samurai warlords who fought over Sengoku Period (1467–1603) Japan, often used large three-dimensional objects as personal standards instead of banners.

### 3 Regulation

While mon were regulated in Japan the way coats of arms were in Europe, this was a relatively late development, not occurring until the Edo Period (1603–1868). **For the most part, in the SCA period, mon were simply chosen by the bearer, and the mostly-consistent graphical style and rules were the result of custom**, not regulation. What rolls of mon we have are descriptive, often recounting how mon were used in a particular battle, rather than a canonical assignment of mon to families. This lack of registration is why samurai based in different parts of Japan could inadvertently develop similar mon. (This at times caused trouble for travelers, and could lead to a visitor temporarily using a substitute crest to avoid giving offense.<sup>Dower14</sup>)

### 4 Color

While color is a major part Western heraldry, mon have a stronger association with shape than with color. Mon today are defined purely by their shape, ignoring color; however, color is an important part of period usage.

Before the Edo Period (1603–1868), mon were strongly associated with particular color schemes. One main use of mon was for battlefield identification, and distinctive colors makes it easier to recognize banners from a distance. While the same mon with different colors could be used by different members of the same family or different divisions of the same army,<sup>SH24</sup> samurai in the Sengoku Period (1467–1603) used consistent color schemes for their banners. More decorative uses of mon, such as on clothing or lacquered items, would not necessarily use these distinctive colors, however.

So, what colors were used? Most commonly, the **five “lucky colors”: yellow, blue, red, white, and black**.<sup>SH24</sup> (Green is traditionally considered a shade of blue in Japan, though in some cases “light blue”, “blue/green”, and “navy blue” are distinguished.) There are also examples of purple, gold, silver, and light yellow as distinct from yellow. These colors can be found in a number of combinations, generally emphasizing contrast.

**While most mon only used two colors**, a foreground and a background (e.g., *figure 3a*), **there are a few examples of 3-color mon** used on banners (*figures 3b, 3c, 3d*).<sup>SHB2,H9</sup> Since there was no central authority for mon, there was nothing except custom to enforce the two-color style, and some samurai did their own thing.

It is worth noting that, on the battlefield, **banner color was used for identification in period more consistently than mon**. It is unclear whether there were mon on the earliest documented Japanese uses of identifying banners, the 12th-century Gempei War and the preceding rebellions, but it is well established that the opposing sides used red and white banners for identification.<sup>SH9</sup> Even in the late period Sengoku battles, many samurai used solid-color banners<sup>SH43.3</sup> (*figure 3e*) or ones with basic graphical elements but no mon (*figures 3f, 3g*).<sup>SHJ</sup>

(3a) OU2.7

(3b) Satake Yoshinobu,  
1614<sup>SH62</sup>

(3c) OU3.26

(3d) OU6.9

(3e) OU1.13

(3f) OU1.24

(3g)  
OU1.32

(4a) Chrysanthemum, Emperor Antoku, 1185<sup>SHA 2</sup>      (4b) 12-petal Chrysanthemums, 1470<sup>KS13</sup>      (4c) Paulownia, 1392<sup>SH6 2</sup>      (4d) Hollyhock, 1470.<sup>KnJ7</sup>      (4e) Three bamboo poles, 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup>      (4f) Plum blossom, Tsutsui Junkei, 1582<sup>SH6.4</sup>

(5a) Bellflower<sup>KS7</sup>      (5b) Wood Sorrel<sup>OU1.32</sup>      (5c) Apricot Leaf, 1470<sup>KS15</sup>

## 5 Charges

What was depicted in period mon? Stylizations of **plants** are the most common, used very widely. Plant depictions can be tweaked in various ways by varying the position of the plant or the number of petals, buds, or leaves. Common examples of plants include:

- Chrysanthemum, the 16-petal version of which was used by the Imperial line (*figures 4a, 4b*)
- Paulownia, used by the Ashikaga clan who ruled Japan in the Muromachi Period (1336–1573) (*figure 4c*)
- Hollyhock (*figure 4d*)
- Bamboo (*figure 4e*)
- Plum blossom (*figure 4f*)
- Chinese bellflower (*figure 5a*)
- Wisteria
- Wood sorrel (*figure 5b*)
- Apricot leaf (*figure 5c*)

**Simple geometric shapes** were also common. Shapes were given various names based on objects they resemble. Common examples include:

- A solid circle, or “sun disc” (*figure 6a*). This is familiar today as the flag of modern Japan, but it was not used as a national emblem in period.<sup>SH52</sup>
- Clusters of circles, called “stars”. (*figure 6b*)
- A hollow circle, or “snake eye”, originally patterned after a leather bow-string spool<sup>SHG2FCoJ94</sup> (*figure 6c*)
- A circle with lines, or “rice bowl” (*figure 6d*)
- A hollow square (*figure 6e*)
- Several such squares, or “eyes”<sup>FCoJ113</sup> (*figure 6f*)
- Several solid squares, or “stones”<sup>KS32</sup> (*figure 7a*)
- Three joined rhombuses,<sup>SH63</sup> called “chestnut” or “pine bark” depending on proportions (*figures 7b, 7c*)

(6a) <sup>OU1.11</sup>      (6b) Emperor Go-Shirakawa, 1160<sup>SH4</sup>      (6c) <sup>OU3.30</sup>      (6d) <sup>OU3.23</sup>      (6e) <sup>OU3.21</sup>      (6f) <sup>OU3.12</sup>

(7a) <sup>KS32</sup>      (7b) Ogasawara <sup>OU3.1</sup>      (7c) “Pine bark” diamonds on gourds, 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup>

(8a) <sup>OU5.8</sup> (8b) 1470 <sup>KS24</sup> (8c) 1470 <sup>KS36</sup> (8d) 1470 <sup>KS24</sup> (8e) <sup>OU3.32</sup>

(9a) Three tomoe. <sup>SHJ9</sup> (9b) <sup>OU3.14</sup> (9c) <sup>KS27</sup> (9d) <sup>OU2.30</sup> (9e) <sup>OU3.19</sup>

**Kanji**, Japanese characters of Chinese origin, were another common choice. These were often a reference to a patron deity, the first character of a clan's family name, or something that described the samurai in question. One example is Koide Yoshichika, who used the first character in his family name, 'ko', as his mon (*figure 8a*). <sup>SH19</sup> Longer texts were sometimes also used (*figure 8e*).

**Religion** was important to many samurai, and religious symbols beyond characters that refer to deities were commonly used. Examples include:

- The comma shape of the tomoe, generally seen in threes (*figure 9a*). The tomoe has various interpretations focusing on Shintō and imperial connections. It can be interpreted as a jewel or whirlpool, but it is most commonly associated with Hachiman, god of archery and war.
- Shintō shrine gates (*figure 9b*)
- Shrine amulets
- The Buddhist treasure wheel (*figure 9c*)
- The swastika (*figure 9d*), disallowed in the SCA, represents eternity and is strongly associated in Japan with Buddhism.

After the introduction of Christianity with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1543, some Japanese chose **Christian symbols** such as crosses for their mon (*figure 9e*); <sup>SH47</sup> such symbolism was used openly until Christianity's violent suppression, which culminated in the massacre ending the Shimbara rebellion in 1638.

Some mon incorporated **ordinary objects**, which often had symbolic significance. Examples include:

- Arrow fletchings (*figure 10a*)
- Coins (*figure 10b*)
- Fans (*figure 10c*)
- Cart wheels (*figure 10e*)
- Paper umbrellas (*figure 10f*)
- Knots (*figure 10g*)
- Other ordinary objects (e.g., *figure 11a*)

(10a) <sup>OU1.27</sup> (10b) <sup>OU5.15</sup> (10c) Cypress fan, 1470 <sup>KnJ7</sup> (10d) 1470 <sup>KS13</sup> (10e) "Genji" wheel, 1185 <sup>Dower130</sup> (10f) Umbrella, 1470 <sup>KS34</sup> (10g) Knot, 1470 <sup>KS43</sup>

(11a) "One" and  
"great" teapot,  
1470 <sup>KS43</sup> (11b)  
1638 <sup>SH63</sup>

(12a) Saito Dosan, 1556<sup>SH57</sup>      (12b) <sup>OU6.34</sup>      (12c) 1470<sup>KS48</sup>      (12d) 1470<sup>KS57</sup>      (12e) 1470<sup>KS68</sup>      (12f) 1470<sup>KS5</sup>

(13a) The Taira Butterfly, 1185<sup>SHA4</sup>      (13b) Hawk, 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup>      (13c) Goose on a stirrup or in tongs, 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup>      (13d) Crane, 1470<sup>KS32</sup>      (13e) Hōō, or Phoenix, 1470<sup>KS17</sup>      (13f) A mandarin duck and a dove, 1470<sup>KS28</sup>

(14a) Horse, 1470<sup>KS24</sup>      (14b) Shrimp, 1470<sup>KS49</sup>      (14c) Lion with peonies, 1470<sup>KS50</sup>      (14d) Shells, 1470<sup>KS30</sup>

Landscape features were also used. Examples include:

- A wave (*figure 12a*)
- Mount Fuji (*figure 12b*)
- “Suhama”, a stylized beach or inlet (*figure 12c*)
- A full moon with cloud (*figure 12d*)
- A garden scene (*figure 12e*)
- A landscape painted on a fan (*figure 12f*)

Finally, the last category of charge is **animals**, which were used relatively rarely. The most common animals were butterflies (*figure 13a*) and various birds (e.g., *figures 13b, 13c, 13d, 13e*), but some other examples exist, including a horse (*figure 14a*), a shrimp (*figure 14b*), a lion (*figure 14c*), a crab, and a rabbit.

## 6 Variation

**Most mon featured geometric symmetry**, either reflectional or rotational, whether composed of one charge or several. Unlike in European heraldry, which often featured multiple instances of an asymmetric charge, such as an animal, all facing the same direction, most Japanese charges were symmetrical, and when an asymmetrical charge like a bird or butterfly was repeated in a mon, the charges would often face each other as a mirror image (*figure 15a*).

The practices for combining multiple instances of a charge into a mon were relatively restricted. **Repeated charges within a mon tended to be standard charges**, with geometric shapes (*figure 15b*), feathers (*figures 15c, 15d*), or plants (*figure 15e*) the most common.<sup>SHD2,J1</sup> The arrangements tended to be rather simple.

(15a) 1470<sup>KS10</sup>      (15b) 1470<sup>KS17</sup>      (15c) 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup>      (15d) Kikuchi Taketoki, 1334<sup>SH14</sup>      (15e) 1470<sup>KS14</sup>      (15f) 1638<sup>SH63</sup>      (15g) 1470<sup>KS21</sup>

(16a) <sup>OU4.32</sup> (16b) Inaba Masanari, 1570<sup>SH54</sup> (16c) 1470<sup>KS22</sup> (16d) 1470<sup>KS28</sup> (16e) 1573<sup>AB17</sup> (16f) 1470<sup>KS20</sup> (16g) 1470<sup>KS34</sup>

(17a) Akechi Mitsuhide, 1582<sup>SH57</sup> (17b) 1470<sup>KS19</sup> (17c) Takezaki Suenaga, 1274<sup>SH57</sup> (17d) Ōkubo Tadayo, 1593<sup>SS73.4</sup> (17e) 1470<sup>KnJ7</sup> (17f) 1470<sup>KS31</sup>

Relative to European heraldry, the ways that distinct elements were combined into a single mon were limited, and some more complicated means of variation were uncommon or unknown in period. While sometimes different elements were combined, only harmonious combinations were used, in contrast to European arms combining unrelated charges.<sup>Dower11</sup> **The most common combination of elements was the addition of an enclosure around a charge.**<sup>Dower15</sup> This was most frequently a circular ring (*figure 16a*) or other geometric outline (*figure 16b*). A more complicated enclosure was a “turtle shell”, a hexagonal border with another thin hexagon inside (*figure 16c*). Occasionally, this enclosure could enclose multiple types of charges (*figure 16d*, *16e*). More elaborate enclosures were also known (e.g., *figures 7c*, *13c*, *16f*, *16g*).

A similar type of variation was to place a charge on a disc, with the charge color and background matching and the disc contrasting, effectively ‘piercing’ the disc with a charge (*figure 17a*).<sup>SH57</sup> Other geometric shapes could occasionally be used (e.g., *figure refsun-moon*).

Characters were sometimes placed among other charges; for example, Takezaki Suenaga, when fighting the mongols in 1274, used three square ‘eye’ designs and a character ‘yoshi’, meaning “good fortune” (*figure 17c*).<sup>SH12</sup> Wisteria’s depiction with two branches making a circle created an obvious place for another charge, which Ōkubo Tadayo (1531–1593) used to include the character ‘dai’, meaning “great” (*figure 17d*).<sup>SS73.4</sup> An earlier samurai similarly placed the character ‘yasu’, meaning “peace”, in a paulownia (*figure 17e*).<sup>KnJ7</sup> More complicated arrangements were also possible, such as this mon with the character for “three” and three multi-level pine trees (*figure 17f*).

Aside from enclosures and characters, it was relatively uncommon for multiple unrelated charges to be combined. Different charges could be arranged vertically (*figure 18a*) or, less commonly, horizontally (*figure 18b*). Another arrangement was showing a charge emerging from another charge, most famously the mon used by Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), who symbolized his support for the emperor by depicting the imperial chrysanthemum supported by water (*figure 18c*).<sup>SHB1</sup> Another form of emergence was a repeated design, most commonly a plant, emerging from the inside of a ring (e.g., *figures 18d*, *18e*). Examples of charges placed on a background design are found as well (e.g., *figure 18f*). A one-and-two arrangement with different charges is occasionally found; Yamana Sōzen Mochitoyo (1404–1473) used a paulownia above two gentian-like plants as his mon (*figure 19a*).<sup>SS73.14</sup> (See also *figures 19b*, *19c*.)

(18a) <sup>OU1.18</sup> (18b) 1470<sup>KS28</sup> (18c) Kusunoki Masashige, 1336<sup>SS22.3</sup> (18d) 1470<sup>KS33</sup> (18e) 1470<sup>KS11</sup> (18f) 1470<sup>KS18</sup>

(19a) Yamana Mochitoyo, 1473<sup>SS73.14</sup> (19b) 1470<sup>KS15</sup> (19c) 1470<sup>KS26</sup>

(20a) <sup>OU3.9</sup> (20b) Tomoe stars <sup>OU4.31</sup> (20c) A coin with stars, <sup>KS15</sup> 1470 (20d) 1470 <sup>KS9</sup> (20e) 1470 <sup>KS22</sup>

Another form of variation was depicting one element in such a way that it mimicked the standard depiction of another element. This style was rare before the Edo Period (1603–1868), but one example of mimicry is the mon of Kuroda Yoshitaka (1546–1604), which depicted wisteria in the shape resembling three tomoe swirls (*figure 20a*).<sup>SS36.9,53</sup> Variations on the standard nine stars arrangement were common, replacing all the stars (*figure 20b*) or just the middle one (*figure 20c*).

In addition to these obvious forms of variation, there were more subtle variations. Different branches of the same family would sometimes use closely-related mon that differed only by minor details. Similarly, the limited set of motifs from which crests were most commonly drawn meant that at times completely unrelated families would end up with almost identical mon by coincidence.<sup>Dower10</sup> Since there was no formal registration, exactly what constituted a different mon vs a different depiction of the same mon was unclear. Possibly the most notable minor charge variation is the addition of sword blades to flowers to create a more martial motif. Compare a flower square or rhombus without blades (*figure 20d*) to the same motif with blades added (*figure 20e*).

## 7 How were mon chosen?

There were a number of ways one could choose a mon. Some presumably just picked designs that they liked; at least, plenty have no obvious connection to their bearer. Some picked designs that referred to a **patron deity** (*figure 21a*) or their **family name**, such as Koide Yoshichika’s character-based mon, described above (*figure 8a*).

Some picked mon that relate to **stories about their ancestors**. For example, in the 14th century, the Chiba used a “star and crescent” mon (*figure 21b*) and other star-based designs, which was inspired by a legend from 931, when the Chiba were on the brink of defeat. The constellation of the Plough was bright in the night sky, so they prayed to Myomi Bosatsu, a deity associated with the Plough. As a result, the deity appeared to them in a vision, and they then emerged victorious.<sup>SH11</sup> Other such stories about heraldry are common, though it’s unclear if anyone used a story about themselves personally in their heraldry, rather than a story about an ancestor.<sup>SH11</sup>

Japanese devices occasionally used a type of **pun** (similar to Western heraldry’s “canting”) where part of the device refers like the person’s name, beyond just using a character. One example is Aoyama Tadanari (1551–1613), whose family name means “blue mountain”; his mon featured a blue character for mountain (‘yama’) on a white background, or vice versa (*figure 21c*).<sup>SH32OU2.15</sup> (This also is an example of the significance of color in mon.) A similar example is a Kuroda mon that used a black disc on white to refer to their name, which means “black field”.<sup>SS53</sup> Similarly, since many Japanese families are named after plants, some mon depicted a plant referred to in a clan name.<sup>Dower33</sup>

**Shrines, as could be expected, would often choose explicitly religious motifs for their mon**, with the tomoe comma design in particular being used by shrines dedicated to Hachiman, god of archery and war. Other shrines would use plant-based motifs, either to show patronage, as with the paulownia mon granted to shrines by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) when he ruled Japan as Shōgun, or due to symbolic connections, as with the sheaves of rice mon favored by shrines of Inari, god of rice.<sup>EoSshinmon</sup>

## 8 Researching Period Mon

There are three types of period sources we can use to reliably research mon: written accounts, paintings (mainly of battles), and, most usefully, compendia. There are two main compendia that were published before 1650: *Kenmon Shokamon* (見聞諸家紋),<sup>1</sup> published 1467–1470, and *O-umajirushi* (御馬印),<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup><http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2533035>

<sup>2</sup>I have an annotated translation available at <http://o-umajirushi.xavid.us/>; the original is available at [http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1288484?\\_\\_lang=en](http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1288484?__lang=en).

(21a) The first character of Bishamon-ten, Guardian of the North; 1578<sup>SH25</sup> (21b) 1455<sup>SH8</sup> (21c) Aoyama’s “blue mountain”<sup>OU2.15</sup>

published 1624–1644. Both of these compendia record the devices used in the preceding periods of conflict. They contain a wide variety of mon, providing many of the figures in this handout. I’ve also uploaded a scanned copy of *Ohatamoto Sōshirushizu* (御旗本惣印図; “Shogunal Vassals All Emblem Drawings”),<sup>3</sup> a book from circa 1634 available at the Library of Congress.

Secondary sources that include period mon include the *Daibukan* (大武鑑; “Great Book of Heraldry”), which is available from the NDL<sup>4</sup>; through the right half of page 55, as numbered there, is period. It is a compilation of earlier secondary sources, including the *Kamakura Bukan* (鎌倉武鑑),<sup>5</sup> covering 1185–1333, and the *Ashikaga-ke Bukan* (足利家武鑑),<sup>6</sup> covering 1336–1573 (sharing many mon with *Kenmon Shokamon*).

There are also modern compendia of mon, but ones in English and most of the ones in Japanese lack specific dates and citations and focus mainly on mon as they were standardized later in the Edo Period (1603–1868) or as they’re used today, and thus aren’t good resources for period practice. The compendia cited at the end of this handout have at least some information about when motifs were used and thus can be somewhat useful.

## 9 Battlefield Heraldry Beyond Banners

Mon were not only used on banners on the battlefield. They might also be used on curtains around a camp (e.g., *figure 22a*) or on surcoats called jinbaori worn over armor (e.g., *figure 22b*).

In addition, while mon are the type of Japanese heraldry most directly comparable to European coats of arms and badges, there were other types of heraldry that were just as important for battlefield identification. Helmets and three-dimensional objects were recorded in heraldic compendia like *O-umajirushi* alongside banners.

Samurai would sometimes wear distinctive identifying helmets that could be quite elaborate. While the more extreme ones like in *figure 22c* were probably only worn in processions, not in battle, they may have been carried on poles for heraldic purposes in battle. Simpler identifying helmets were worn in battle.

Large three-dimensional objects of various types were often used on battlefields as standards and devices, having the advantage of being easily visible from a distance regardless of angle or wind conditions. These might be representations of everyday objects (e.g., *figure 23a*) or more abstract designs (e.g., *figure 23b*). The most commonly used of these are the fukinuki (e.g., *figure 23c*), a sort of wind sock, and the horo (e.g., *figure 23d*), a canopy on a framework designed to inflate as its bearer rides.

## 10 Mon in the SCA

While mon may be registered as devices or badges in the SCA, and many mon-style devices are currently registered, the SCA heraldic rules default to a generic European standard, and thus it is not always obvious how to register authentic mon in the SCA.

<sup>3</sup><http://fireflies.xavid.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Ohatamoto-S%C5%8Dshirushizu.pdf>  
<sup>4</sup><http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1015270>  
<sup>5</sup>[http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko01/bunko01\\_01827/index.html](http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko01/bunko01_01827/index.html)  
<sup>6</sup>[http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko20/bunko20\\_00368\\_0007/index.html](http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko20/bunko20_00368_0007/index.html)

(22a) 1634<sup>OS3</sup> (22b) 1634<sup>OS15</sup> (22c) 1600<sup>R:H</sup> (22d) 1643<sup>OU2.13</sup>

(23a) 1644<sup>OU2.21</sup> (23b) 1644<sup>OU2.15</sup> (23c) 1644<sup>OU2.5</sup> (23d) 1644<sup>OU2.5</sup>



(24a)<sup>OU1.14</sup> (24b)<sup>OU3.1</sup> (24c)<sup>OU6.29</sup> (24d)<sup>OU1.24</sup> (24e)<sup>OU2.16</sup> (24f)<sup>OU1.12</sup> (24g)<sup>OU2.9</sup> (24h)<sup>OU2.32</sup>

## 10.1 Ways to Register Mon

First, under SENA (the “new rules”), there are two main ways to register a device, and mon can be registered under either. The common way of registering devices are the Core Style Rules (SENA A.1.A.1<sup>7</sup>), based on the heraldry of Western Europe. **Devices that are not registrable under Core Style but follow period examples can still be registered under the Individually Attested Patterns rules** (SENA A.4<sup>8</sup>). You can also think of these two methods as the “easy” way and the “hard” way.

**Under the Core Style Rules, you can register any device that fits into the framework of the default SCA heraldic rules, with at most one element from outside the European default**, called a Step from Period Practice (SFPP). While these are optimized for European usage, since most mon are simple and use a single charge, you can often have that charge be your SFPP and otherwise have a device compatible with European standards. This method of registration doesn’t require you to have extensive documentation, which makes it relatively straightforward. You do generally need to provide evidence that your SFPP is an element used in non-European armory or a plant or animal known to pre-1600 Europe, but unlike when using the Individually Attested Patterns rules, a single example is sufficient.

SENA recognizes that not all period devices fit under the default rules, and also allows registration using **Individually Attested Patterns**. When using these rules, all elements used, both charges and arrangement, must be from the same general time and place, and the device must be still expressible in blazon, the language of Western heraldry. **For every element not in the core style rules, either three closely matching examples or six examples of comparable complexity must be included. All examples must be pre-1650 examples from different families.** While many books of mon are readily available, they generally contain many post-1650 mon and often do not contain usage dates, so finding good examples can be a considerable amount of work.

## 10.2 Mon vs Devices

A device, in the SCA, is a heraldic design that represents a particular individual or group. While a mon could easily be used as a Japanese-style device, a single mon is not the only design that could be considered a “device”. Since different members of a clan or different divisions of an army might use the same mon but distinct banners, you could consider a “device” an overall banner design. As discussed above, samurai banners might have multiple mon or other graphical elements in addition to the mon, or even no mon at all.

We have examples of banners with a variety of designs, including:

- 2, 3, or 5 copies of the same mon in the same color on a solid background (*figures 24a, 24b*)
- two different mon, possibly in different colors, on a solid background (*figure 24c*)
- two copies of the same mon in different colors on a divided background
- mon with text passages (often slogans or prayers)
- mon with simple or complex-line stripes (*figures 24d, 24e, 24f, 24g*) (Stripes were a common means for distinguishing units of the same army.<sup>SH24</sup>)
- mon with background changes (*figure 24h*)

Devices of this sort could be registered in the same way as single mon designs. Note, however, that using multiple Japanese elements may make a device no longer fall under the Core Style Rules, requiring Individually Attested Pattern examples for registration.

## 10.3 Color

The modern view of mon as color-free designs has lead to some confusion with mon registration in the SCA, since SCA devices always include color. However, in period practice, mon were depicted on banners with specific contrasting foreground and background colors. Thus, registering mon using two specific contrasting colors reflects how mon were used for identification in period.

Mon can be used with different color combinations, either for different uses by the same individual or by different individuals. For SCA use, it might make sense to register multiple color variations for different members of the same clan.

Conveniently, the colors used in Japanese heraldry, as discussed above, were generally the same set used in Western heraldry: mostly the five “lucky colors” of yellow (or gold), blue, red, white, and black, plus occasionally purple. In terms of color combinations, while many banners followed the SCA-standard “rule of tincture” that defines what colors contrast, some did not: black on red and red on black are common<sup>SHC</sup>, and I have also seen red on blue<sup>SHC4</sup> and black on green<sup>SHH13</sup>. Registrations of these color schemes would need to use the Individually Attested Patterns rules.

It should be noted that an individual might not always use the colors of their banner when displaying their mon on other items, such as armor or clothing, so authentic usage would not require using your registered colors in all cases.

<sup>7</sup><http://heraldry.sca.org/sena.html#A1A1>

<sup>8</sup><http://heraldry.sca.org/sena.html#A4>

## 10.4 Restricted Charges

Since there was no formal registration of mon in the SCA period, samurai could generally pick any mon they wished. There were a few motifs that were, however, effectively reserved in period. The most well known is the sixteen-petaled chrysanthemum (“kiku”) mon used by the Emperor (*figure 4a*), with variations used by other members of the imperial family.<sup>SH6</sup> While people outside the imperial line, such as Kusunoki Masashige (*figure 18c*), did use a chrysanthemum variation, this was an Imperial gift<sup>SH13</sup>, so such usage in the SCA might be presumptuous.

A similar restriction was in place for the paulownia (“kiri”) mon given to the Ashikaga clan by Emperor Godaigo when they effectively ruled Japan (*figure 4c*). While the Ashikaga bestowed the right to use the paulownia to powerful supporters, the motif is strongly associated in period with imperial and shōgun favor, and thus its usage might also be presumptuous.<sup>Dower68</sup>

The swastika, while a Buddhist symbol in Japan used in period mon, is forbidden in the SCA for obvious reasons.

## 10.5 Other Relevant Rules

**While many historical Japanese banners consisted solely of a single Japanese character or a longer Japanese phrase or sentence, such devices cannot be registered in the SCA,** as “their registration might limit someone from using their initials or a written version of their name or motto” (see SENA A.3.E.3<sup>9</sup>.) Furthermore, even when Japanese characters are combined with other elements, such as the rings and enclosures found on historical banners, **all characters, in any alphabet, are considered identical for purposes of conflict checking.** (See “Constantina von Ravenna” in the May 2008 LoAR<sup>10</sup>.) This means that Japanese mon that use different characters will often conflict, especially given the simplicity of authentic mon. This issue could potentially be reduced if those who register such devices submit Blanket Permission to Conflict for devices that do not use the identical character. (See III.C in the Administrative Handbook<sup>11</sup>.)

## 11 Meta

I am Kihō, a wandering poet who presently abides in the Barony of Carolingia. I welcome questions, feedback, corrections, and requests for assistance assembling sources for use with the Individually Attested Patterns Rules. I may be contacted at [kihough@mit.edu](mailto:kihough@mit.edu). I have a blog where I discuss period Japan, <http://fireflies.xavid.us/>, and a database where I’m gradually compiling period Japanese heraldry from various sources, <http://mon.xavid.us/>.

The most up-to-date version of this handout can be found at

<http://mon.xavid.us/Introduction%20to%20Japanese%20Crests.pdf>.

Feel free to use, modify, or distribute this handout under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported<sup>12</sup>. Basically, you can distribute it freely as long as you give me credit and allow others to distribute any changes you make under the same terms. (The mon images themselves are, of course, in the Public Domain.)

Research for this class was conducted at the Library of Congress and was facilitated by the staff of the Asian Reading Room.

## 12 Sources Cited

AB Ashikagake Bukan (足利家武鑑; “House Ashikaga Book of Heraldry”). [http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/bunko20/bunko20\\_00368/bunko20\\_00368\\_0007/bunko20\\_00368\\_0007.html](http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/bunko20/bunko20_00368/bunko20_00368_0007/bunko20_00368_0007.html)

Dower John W. Dower. *The Elements of Japanese Design: A Handbook of Family Crests, Heraldry & Symbolism*. Shambhala Publications, 1990.

EoS *Encyclopedia of Shinto*. [http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbTop.do?class\\_name=col\\_eos](http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/dbTop.do?class_name=col_eos)

eM e-Museum: National Treasures & Important Cultural Properties of National Museums, Japan. <http://www.emuseum.jp/>

EO Obershaw, Eric. Photographs. <http://www.jcastle.info/>

FCoJ *Family Crests of Japan*. Stone Bridge Press, 2007.

KS *Kenmon Shokamon* (見聞諸家紋; “Various Observed Family Crests”). 1467–1470. <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2533035>

KnJ Takasawa Hitoshi (高澤等). *Kamon no Jiten* (家紋の事典; “Family Crest Encyclopedia”). Tōkyō-dō Shuppan, 2008.

Oribe Miyeko Murase, Ed. *Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003.

OS *Ohatamoto sōshirushizu* (御旗本惣印図; “Shogunal Vassals All Emblem Drawings”). Library of Congress. 1634. <http://fireflies.xavid.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Ohatamoto-S%C5%8Dshirushizu.pdf>

OU *O-umajirushi* (御馬印; “Honorable Battle Standards”). National Diet Library, Japan. 1624–1644. [http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1288484?\\_lang=en](http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1288484?_lang=en)

R:N “Arrival of a Portuguese ship”. Rijksmuseum. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/AK-RAK-1968-1-B>

R:B “Japans lakkistje”. Rijksmuseum. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/NG-KOG-F6-5A,4>

R:H “Helm in de vorm van een hofhoed”. Rijksmuseum. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/AK-RAK-2009-2,0>

SH Stephen Turnbull. *Samurai Heraldry*. Osprey Publishing, 2002.

SS Stephen Turnbull. *The Samurai Sourcebook*. Cassel & Co, 2000.

WC Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

<sup>9</sup><http://heraldry.sca.org/laurel/sena.html#A3E3>

<sup>10</sup><http://heraldry.sca.org/loar/2008/05/08-051ar.html#141>

<sup>11</sup><http://heraldry.sca.org/admin.html#III.C>

<sup>12</sup><http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>