Fortress Kanto

The Kingmaker of Japan

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HIS 378W

25 April 2025

Though today the Kanto plain is unquestionably the heart of Japan, in centuries past it was not so. Ignoring the Kamakura period, spiritual and temporal power had essentially always centred on the Kinai, on the imperial capital of Kyoto and the commercial city of Osaka. The so-called "Warring States" period began understandably with a crisis in Kyoto and ended with the ultimate unification of Japan under Ieyasu Tokugawa – but this time, the capital was in Edo, which lay on the Kanto. The first two unifiers, Nobunaga Oda and Hideyoshi Toyotomi, had put special focus on the Kinai: if they did not make their capital there, they made a special effort to protect the region and what remained of the imperial institution. Meanwhile, the Kanto was under the rule of some warrior clan, the Hojo clan, and had little impact on the regions further west; even so, ten years after Ieyasu took control of the region, he became the man who finally united Japan. That the unifier who ultimately succeeded was based in an underdeveloped floodplain far from all the major population centres is astounding – the only reasonable conclusion is that the Kanto had an outsized influence on the unification of Japan. The nature of this influence, I argue, is its ability to retain and project power. **The Kanto was geographically blessed**, which made it an agriculturally significant region easily defended from unfriendly powers; in turn, **the Hojo clan united the region and developed a strong administration far before the rest of Japan**; **Ieyasu inherited and expanded this administration, using it to develop the region into an economic powerhouse**; at the same time, **the rest of Japan, especially the Kinai, was absolutely devastated by warfare**, severely hindering their ability to project power.

I do not claim that the Kanto single-handedly dominated all of Japan during the sixteenth century. That the Hojos were defeated and that Ieyasu spent so much time making allies proves otherwise. The truth is that Ieyasu very nearly lost at Sekigahara, and obviously

he was supported by his many allies and vassals.[1] Diplomacy was central in Japan, littered as it was with men who, with a bit of encouragement, could take to the field with thousands of soldiers and instantly change the tides of war, but these men could not have become singularly powerful without a sufficient powerbase. This is the crux of my argument: control of the Kanto had superseded control of the Kinai as a prerequisite for the unity of Japan.

Any argument about power in Japan must contend with the situation as it was seen by contemporaries. In the mid-1500s, the Jesuits considered the Kinai to be the most productive and prosperous region of Japan, while they derided the Kanto as a barren wasteland.[2] However, by 1590, when Hideyoshi defeated the Hojo clan, he regarded the Kanto as "one-third" of Japan.[3] If Hideyoshi meant size, population, or *kokudaka*, then he is objectively and wildly incorrect. This is therefore an exaggeration, but it is also unlikely that he wished to exaggerate too much the strength of his enemy in a private letter explicitly intended to reassure his household of certain victory. Thus, this figure is psychological: as far as Hideyoshi was concerned, this the Kanto's true productive and military strength, no matter what the real figures were, and such a disproportionally large estimate leaves little room for other regions. Perhaps Hideyoshi wanted to appear strong to his household, but this statement is extremely suspect and still reeks of fear – that he needed to bring the rest of Japan to bear against the remaining one-third, which presumably he did not need to do against Kyushu or the rest of Japan. The question, then, is what happened to the Kinai, his vaunted powerbase?

The Kinai faced extremely tumultuous times during the entire Warring States period, severely damaging its ability to sustain even itself. From 1467 to 1568, Kyoto had

[1] Morgan Pitelka, *Spectacular Accumulation: Material Culture, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Samurai Sociability* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 125.
[2] Joao Rodrigues, *João Rodrigues's Account of Sixteenth-Century Japan*, ed. Michael Cooper (London: Hakluyt Society, 2001), 106.
[3] Hideyoshi Toyotomi to Gosa, 13th day, 4th month, Tensho 18 (1590), in *101 Letters of Hideyoshi: The Private Correspondence of Toyotomi Hideyoshi*, trans. Adriana Boscaro (Tokyo: Sofia University, 1975), 37–38.

been conquered seven times, and no government survived for long.[4] The result was a drastic decline in living standards and courtly authority: not only did the powerless emperor and shogun live in dilapidated residences in disrepair, but so too did the common citizens and nobles, and little of ancient Kyoto remained by the time of Oda's conquest.[5] Even after Nobunaga captured Kyoto in 1568, the city was still occasionally attacked (and burned down by Nobunaga), and his control was always threatened by the independence of Osaka (conquered only in 1580).[6] If major administrative exertion marks true political control, then Kyoto was only really under Nobunaga's rule from 1573, when the last Ashikaga was deposed and a governor was installed in Kyoto.[7] Altogether, this is a very short timeframe. With the Kinai having spent a grand total of less than a decade under his control, and with much of that time being spent at war, Nobunaga could not possibly have had the time for economic development. Incidentally, while destroying the Pure Land sect was definitely beneficial to his power play, Nobunaga had also destroyed one of the few institutions that was capable of inviting trade (sorely needed for reconstruction) from across Japan.[8] Thus, by the end of Nobunaga's life in 1582, the Kinai remained merely the desecrated corpse of a once-venerable institution and farmland.

To his credit, Hideyoshi did much to restore the Kinai, but his actions were insufficient. He suffered from many of the same issues that Nobunaga did: he was constantly on campaign and simply did not have the time or attention to focus on development. Until 1587, he was still subjugating rebellious provinces while complaining about white hairs, and

[4] Mary Elizabeth Berry, *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 46–47.
[5] Rodrigues, *João Rodrigues's Account*, 164.
[6] Gyuichi Ota, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, trans. J.S.A. Elisonas and J.P. Lamers (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 128, 184, 374.
[7] Ibid, 190.
[8] Ibid, 210.

he would still have to conquer the Kanto in 1590.[9] With only eight years left to live, Hideyoshi finally felt ready to look inwards and develop Japan, but then he moved to Kyushu and began a disastrous war in Korea.[10] Hideyoshi may have controlled the Kinai for longer than Nobunaga, but his attentions were far more widespread. Excepting his most famous reforms, which are out of the scope of my research and are more sociopolitical in nature, Hideyoshi is most notable for supporting free trade and constructing castles. Contrastingly, Nobunaga never had the time or power to institute any major reforms and mostly left his conquered regions as they were.[11] Perhaps Nobunaga believed that, as long as it remained at peace, the Kinai would recover without his guiding hand. The truth is, however, that intensive governmental investment was necessary to stave off the long decline of the region. Kyoto, as previously explained, had long been declining, but Osaka grew (ironically in part due to labourers leaving Kyoto for Osaka) as long as Hideyoshi continued to fund construction, but fell into recession afterwards.[12] Though the Kinai had once been Japan's breadbasket and most prosperous region, when Hideyoshi died in 1598, it was not. Osaka Castle may have stood as one of the greatest fortifications ever built, but it was a reminder of the constant fighting across all of Japan that had brought her to her knees – fighting which the Kanto had largely avoided.

The story of the Kanto begins with its geographical blessings. It is by far Japan's largest flatland and is surrounded by mountains on all sides; any conquering army would have to brave the terrain or march through the easily defended Hakone Pass.[13] The Kanto also

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[9] Toyotomi to Maa, Tensho 11 (1583), in *101 Letters of Hideyoshi*, 11; Toyotomi to Iwa, 11th day, 8th month, Tensho 13 (1585), in *101 Letters of Hideyoshi*, 22; Toyotomi to Kita-no-Mandokoro, 29th day, 5th month, Tensho 15 (1587), in *101 Letters of Hideyoshi*, 30–31.
[10] Toyotomi to Gosa; Toyotomi to Kita-no-Mandokoro, 9th day, 8th month, Bunroku 2 (1593).
[11] Osamu Wakita and James L. McClain, "The Commercial and Urban Policies of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi," in *Japan Before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth, 1500 to 1650*, ed. John Whitney Hall, Keiji Nagahara, and Kozo Yamamura (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 228–230, 243.
[12] Ibid, 243–244.
[13] Glenn Thomas Trewartha, *Japan: A Physical, Cultural, and Regional Geography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1945), 436, 467.

benefits from a warm, wet climate conducive to agriculture and wide, navigable rivers (a rarity in Japan), suitable for irrigation and shipping.[14] Altogether, the portion of the Kanto which Ieyasu received in 1590 was worth about 2,4 million *koku*—more than one-eighth of the total taxed land in Japan (15,8 million *koku*)—while Hideyoshi personally controlled about 2 million *koku* (with the Kinai accounting for roughly one-third of that).[15] These figures belie the true agricultural strength of the Kanto, as they undervalue the Musashi moor, upon which Edo lay. Musashi dominates the Kanto landscape but is largely infertile due to soil quality and flooding, which combine to reduce the amount of nutrients in the soil while simultaneously retaining too much water even for rice.[16] Any reasonable measure of productivity would score Musashi moor poorly, but that would be misleading: after all, waters can be diverted and drained, but a superior climate cannot be conjured out of nothing. In contrast, the other major population centres of Japan, which are mostly elongated coastal plains, lie roughly in a line between the Kinai and the Kanto and have long histories of settlement.[17] This, despite appearances, was actually problematic: while the Kinai may have been the most fertile and intensively farmed region in all of Japan, it is also extremely tiny, meaning that it had little potential for growth beyond the 650.000 *koku* that it was worth.[18] Furthermore, constant warfare caused famines across these agricultural plains, but, as can be expected from its defensibility, the Kanto was significantly less prone to invasion.[19] Generally speaking, the story of destruction in the Kinai is the story of all Japan. Famines were not localised to large urban centres and neither was fighting. The fact remains that any warlord who wished to conquer Japan would have needed an army and a source of revenue,

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[14] Robert Burnett Hall, "Agricultural Regions of Asia. Part VII--The Japanese Empire," *Economic Geography* 10, no. 4 (1934): 337, https://doi.org/10.2307/140659.
[15] Yosoburo Takekoshi, *The Economic Aspects of the History of the Civilization of Japan*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), 416, 418, 421.
[16] Ibid, 468–470.
[17] Trewartha, *Japan*, 175.
[18] Hall, "Agricultural Regions of Asia," 341.
[19] Rodrigues, *João Rodrigues's Account*, 106.

and any warlord opposing him would have sought to destroy that revenue. To be sure, Japan had other power centres: for example, Nobunaga and Ieyasu were both originally based in the Tokai, while the powerful Ouchi clan was based in Chugoku. The difference lies largely in scale; again, the Kanto was by far the largest agricultural region in Japan, and most of Japan is simply too mountainous (Chugoku and Kyushu, for example) to support the kind of armies that Ieyasu would raise. The greatest problem with the Kanto, as far as dismissive contemporaries were concerned, was its emptiness and isolation, but these qualities would actually work in its favour: the lords of the Kanto could grow in strength with impunity, until they were too powerful to ignore any longer.

As a necessary aside, while the importance of rice to the Japanese economy is relatively self-evident, it is still worth proving just how pervasive it was, especially in the Kanto. In fact, there was only a single, unproductive gold mine in the entire region at the time, which immediately devalues specie.[20] While silver and gold were highly valued throughout Japan, no peasant would have been able to acquire silver or gold, so even when taxes were paid in coins, they were actually paid in copper.[21] By Hideyoshi's time, all land and taxes were valued only in rice, which eased the burden of taxation (as otherwise the peasants would have had to sell their rice for coins).[22] From Hideyoshi onwards, rice essentially becomes a form of currency in addition to its other duties, such as feeding armies and paying stipends and wages.[23] Thus, the control of rice through taxation is functionally equivalent to expanding the monetary supply, thereby compensating for the lack of specie in regions without mines, such as the Kanto.

In 1491, a hitherto unknown clan appeared in Izu province and laid the foundation for the regime that would unite Japan. By 1552, sixteen years before Oda

[20] Takekoshi, *The Economic Aspects*, 416.
[21] Ibid, 407, 430.
[22] Ibid, 432–433.
[23] Ibid, 409–410; Naohiro Asao, "The sixteenth-century unification," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 4, *Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65.

Nobunaga marched on Kyoto, the Kanto was convincingly under the grip of the so-called Hojo clan, and they held on to the region until 1590. In other words, they had four decades to innovate and secure control while famines and warfare scoured the provinces around them, which was a decades-long process of subordinating local leaders (many of which were left behind by the retreating Uesugis) or replacing them with loyal vassals.[24] Many reforms associated with Hideyoshi (cadastral surveys, taxation in rice) were actually implemented by the Hojos long before Hideyoshi ever took power, with the most important being the slow transition of legitimate land ownership from warrior-vassals to villages. To achieve this, the Hojos transferred tax collection responsibilities from retainers to villages in 1550 and completely surveyed their holdings in 1559. No other contemporary clan achieved this level of administrative control until the ascendance of Hideyoshi and Ieyasu.[25] Hideyoshi, who only ruled for some sixteen years, may have been a statesman, but the Hojos reaped the benefits of time and isolation. In fact, while frontier warfare continued for some years, the Hojos quite deftly defended their borders and never faced any serious resistance in their core territory, which only expanded over the years, thus producing ever greater returns on tax revenue and manpower.[26] Despite all these benefits, the Hojo had one major flaw: they were not known to engage in major public works. Some roadbuilding took place, but bridges crossing the Ara and Tama rivers, which mark the boundaries of Musashi moor, would have to wait for Ieyasu's rule.[27] In other words, whatever regional economy existed was likely hampered by the lack of infrastructure, and this would extend to military control as well. When Hideyoshi invaded in 1590, he found it quite easy to capture most of the Hojos' castles

[24] David Spafford, *A Sense of Place: The Political Landscape in Late Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 241–244.
[25] Michael P. Birt, "Samurai in Passage: The Transformation of the Sixteenth-Century Kanto," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 374, 382–383, 395–396, https://doi.org/10.2307/132565.
[26] Spafford, *A Sense of Place*, 242.
[27] Kanagawa Prefectural Government, *The History of Kanagawa* (Yokohama: Kanagawa Prefectural Government, 1985), 109–110; James L. McClain and John M. Merriman, "Edo and Paris: Cities and Power," in *Edo and Paris: Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era*, ed. James L. McClain, John M. Merriman, and Kaoru Ugawa (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 11.

before he took Odawara.[28] Ignoring Hideyoshi's superiority in numbers and the fact that the Hojos outright chose not to fight back, there are many possible explanations for this eventuality —inability to communicate between castles, inability to send soldiers to where they were most needed, inability to provision castles in a timely manner—which all to some degree hinge on difficulties in transport. It was rather unfortunate that the Hojos chose the absolute southwest of the Kanto for their capital: it was much too easy to cut them off from their supply lines.[29] For all the clan achieved in governance, the Hojos never truly used their impressive regime to invest in victory. With their defeat came their replacement with Ieyasu, who would not make the same mistake. The consequences would be immense: in ten years, Ieyasu became the national hegemon, while the Toyotomi clan was consigned to history. Ieyasu had inherited the apparatus that made the Hojos so powerful and was able to use it to harness the latent potential of the Musashi moor and the Kanto as a whole.

Ieyasu's governance of the Kanto was eased by co-opting the Hojos' administration, while also expanding it to form a more perfect extractive machine. Despite appearances, Ieyasu's move to the Kanto could very easily have been bungled: by changing domains on such short notice, he and his vassals would lose their long-established ties to the land, which would force them to establish order over an unfamiliar, rebellious territory and could drive rifts between lord and vassal.[30] However, Ieyasu, ever the diplomat, quickly adopted the Hojos' former vassals, who had mostly survived the end of their overlords and remained local strongmen, and used their expertise for land management and resource extraction.[31] Essentially, the hard work of bending the public to governmental authority had already been done by the Hojos, and Ieyasu inherited that popular acceptance as well as the Hojos' servants. This made it possible for Ieyasu to personal own and extract immense value from

[28] Toyotomi to Kita-no-Mandokoro, Tensho 18 (1590), in *101 Letters of Hideyoshi*, 40–41.
[29] Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 94–95.
[30] John Whitney Hall, "The bakuhan system," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 4, 137–138.
[31] Kanagawa, *The History of Kanagawa*, 117, 122; Hall, "The bakuhan system," 140.

the land he controlled. For example, in Sagami province, Ieyasu controlled over half of the land while his direct vassals controlled the remainder, which was atypically high for the time.[32] Naturally, whatever policies Ieyasu undertook would have spread outwards from his personal land, while Ieyasu's bannermen followed their master's lead in the fiefs they controlled by conducting cadastral surveys, thus streamlining administration and enhancing Ieyasu's fiscal power.[33] Thus, when Hideyoshi finally enshrined the villages and peasants as the legitimate landholders, the rest of Japan revolted, but the Kanto, long accustomed to intrusive authority, remained peaceful.[34] This slow transition of power from vassal to village had, as shown previously, been long underway under the Hojos, but it was completed under Ieyasu. It certainly also helped that, at a time when many lords were being forced to send their armies to Korea, Ieyasu was able to avoid involvement and continue building up his strength due to his distance from the fighting.[35] Even at a time when Japan was no longer at war with itself, the Kanto benefitted from non-involvement abroad when other regions did not, and Ieyasu spent that space and time wisely.

When Ieyasu entered the Kanto in 1590, the region's lack of development, related to its isolation from the rest of Japan, was a major barrier that he deftly overcame and turned into strength. Thus, in his first years there, he devoted much of his energy to building and fortifying Edo, which would become a new centre of power to command the plains. This consisted of building walls, draining swamps, digging moats and waterways, and clearing land. Since moors are naturally quite deficient in forests and stone, Ieyasu ordered the construction of bridges and canals to transport the necessary resources from other provinces in the Kanto.[36] This created a regional transportation network centred around Edo, which was roughly in the centre of the Kanto. In fact, the choice of Edo as

[32] Kanagawa, *The History of Kanagawa*, 123-124
[33] Ibid, 144
[34] Ibid, 124–125.
[35] Hall, "The bakuhan system," 141.
[36] McClain and Merriman, "Edo and Paris," 11; Kanagawa, *The History of Kanagawa*, 121-122.

domanial capital reflects a different nature of power than that held by the Hojos: while Ieyasu could project his power both northwards and southwards in roughly equidistant paths, the Hojos, from Odawara, had no choice but to extend their reach over further and further distances northwards and eastwards.[37] Again, this was an issue that contributed to the Hojos' demise, but Ieyasu had a far stronger hold over his land and retainers than the Hojos ever did, with ambitions to match. Thus, Ieyasu's new capital drew in thousands of peasants and artisans seeking new opportunities, which created a veritable economic boon: from 1590 to 1600, the population of Edo grew from around 100 to about 20.000, which is incredible given the ongoing decline of the Kinai. This was a massive undertaking which naturally required immense funding, but Ieyasu happened to control the largest rice producing region in Japan, which funded his activities. Furthermore, all this work felling trees, draining swamps, and building canals had exposed arable land that could be cultivated for more wealth; in other words, investing in Edo was a positive-feedback loop.[38] One figure describes the result perfectly: when it came time to fight for national leadership in 1600, Ieyasu raised 43.000 men from the Kanto and personally led 30.000, but the next strongest warlord only brought with him 10.000.[39] Indeed, the battle was fought with many more men, with nearly 200.000 taking part, so Ieyasu obviously could not have won it alone, but he needed to arm, feed, and pay the lion's share of the soldiers taking part, as well as his allies and vassals, who were marching into an uncertain death with him.[40] Ieyasu was, without a question, the richest and most powerful man in Japan, and he would not have been so successful without his lucky transfer to the Kanto and his feverish efforts to develop it.

Looking back on Tokyo today, it is almost inconceivable that it used to be a pathetic, rustic fishing village. Indeed, travellers to the Kanto long spoke of Musashi moor as an

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[37] Spafford, *A Sense of Place*, 244–245.
[38] McClain and Merriman, "Edo and Paris," 14; Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 66–69.
[39] Pitelka, *Spectacular Accumulation*, 120-121.
[40] Hall, "The bakuhan system," 144.

untamed wilderness away from civilisation; they could never have imagined that the world's largest city would take root in that empty grassland.[41] Still, during the Warring States period, the lords of Japan clearly saw the region's potential for domination. Hideyoshi saw the Kanto as a spectre, haunting his life's work until it was finally conquered. The Hojos saw it as an impregnable fortress, capable of protecting the independence of their upstart clan. Ieyasu saw it as a perfect powerbase, drawing upon his decades of experience in diplomacy and administration to transform it into a springboard for unification. Ieyasu's transfer to the Kanto in 1590 was both a curse and a blessing; a lesser lord may have been overthrown by the disgruntled Hojo vassals who survived their master's fall, but Ieyasu took this stroke of luck and never looked back. With the mountains around him and the distance between him and the Kinai, he never had to fear any enemy. With the size of the region, even despite Musashi's infertility, he was able to extract immense value and fund improvements which would connect the regional economy, expose arable land in Musahsi, and create an economic boom. Ieyasu was not as brilliant a general as Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, who conquered their way through the Kinai and all of Japan, but he did not have to be. While Kyoto and Osaka burned, the wild Musashi remained unconquered. The final battle at Sekigahara was the final death knell of an old Japan and the harbinger of a new Japan, and it reflected what a century of warfare had made clear: the Kanto was Japan's kingmaker, and it made Ieyasu shogun.

[41] Spafford, *A Sense of Place*, 46.

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