

The Tale of the Heike

We learn about the early medieval time period in Japanese history from the 'war tales'. These stories are a mixture of fact and fiction.

The Tale of the Heike is one of the stories of the Kamakura era. This tale tells of battles between the Taira clan and Minamoto clan at the end of the 12th century. It was written in the 14th century, 200 years later and tells a heroic story which reflects the values and ideals of the twelfth-century samurai.

An excerpt from *The Tale of the Heike*

[Minomoto Yorimasa has just lost the battle of the Uji River].

Yorimasa summoned [his servant] Tonau and ordered: "Strike off my head."

Tonau could not bring himself to do this while his master was still alive. He wept bitterly. "How can I do that, my lord?" he replied. "I can do so only after you have committed suicide."

"I understand," said Yorimasa. He turned to the west, joined his palms, and chanted a prayer ten times in a loud voice. Then he composed this poem:

*"Like a fossil tree
Which has borne not one blossom
Sad has been my life
Sadder still to end my days
Leaving no fruit behind me."*

Having spoken these lines, he thrust the point of his sword into his belly, bowed his face to the ground as the blade pierced him through, and died. Tonau took up his master's head and, weeping, fastened it to a stone. Then, evading the enemy, he made his way to the river and sank it in a deep place.

Heiki Monogatari: Battle Scenes from the Tale of Heiki



Battle scenes from the Tale of Heike (Heike Monogatari). Early 17th century.

Look at this detailed painting here:

[https://tools.wmflabs.org/zoomviewer/index.php?f=Battle scenes from the Tale of Heike \(Heike Monogatari\) - Google Art Project.jpg&flash=no](https://tools.wmflabs.org/zoomviewer/index.php?f=Battle%20scenes%20from%20the%20Tale%20of%20Heike%20(Heike%20Monogatari)%20-%20Google%20Art%20Project.jpg&flash=no)