To most modern scholars and observers, violence involving religious centers and ideologies is deeply disturbing. Such sentiments only increased following the events of 9/11, when religious beliefs became inexorably associated with terror acts. In fact, one scholar concluded, in conjunction with a conference on religion and violence in 2004, that “the modern period [is] particularly prone to religious violence in part because religion is a powerful resource to mobilize individuals and groups to do violence (whether physical or ideological violence) against modern states and political ideologies.”¹ In contrast to the common assumption that religions played a more prominent role in premodern societies, this is indeed a refreshing perspective. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder if a distinction between secular and religious violence can be sustained in a historical analysis. After all, many wars have been fought and conquests made in the name of religious ideals, whether in the modern or premodern eras. More importantly, one must ask why conflicts justified by religious rhetoric are perceived differently from those motivated by other beliefs. For instance, to what extent are the putative secular ideals of Western societies (i.e., democracy and freedom) substantially different from religious ones in times of war? Is it useful to talk about “religious wars” as a separate category, or “religious warriors” as a particular type of soldier? Are there, in other words, wars that are not ideologically justified, whether we perceive the rhetoric as religious or not?

The promise of rewards in the afterlife may obviously have inspired many commanders and soldiers, but, by the same token, some of the most aggressive and ambitious conquerors in history appear to have had little
use for religious rhetoric. What sets religious discourses apart from secular ones, it appears, is the discrepancy between religious precepts promoting peace and prohibiting the use of arms and the violent activities of many monastics, which has induced those who subscribe to the modern, and predominantly Western, notion of separate political and religious spheres to be critical of such forces. However, such criticism seems especially misplaced when applied to premodern societies, where the socio-political and ideological frameworks are different from those of our own, and where religions and religious institutions frequently occupied a more prominent place in state ceremonies and everyday life. For example, Europe’s Thirty-Year War (1618–1648), the military orders and crusaders of the Middle Ages, and the Moors of Spain invoke images of warriors eager to fight because of their religious beliefs. Of course, as has often been claimed, religions may simply have served as a smokescreen for personal ambitions and secular desires, or to use Karl Marx’s words, as “an opium of the people.” More significantly, however, the treatment of religious warriors may differ widely depending on the observer’s perspective, ranging from the idolization of crusading knights to the vilification of fighters from “outsider religions.” It seems, then, that blanket statements regarding religious rhetoric in violence and war deserve further scrutiny in order for us to better understand how religions affect the way wars and battles were fought in the past, our present day diplomacy and politics, and our reconstructions of the past. We need, in other words, to contextualize religious violence and consider it, not only from an ideological perspective, but also from a social and political vantage point. It is my hope that this study may contribute to such a correction by focusing on armed religious forces and on two images that have come to represent religious warriors in premodern Japan: the sōhei, or “monk-warrior,” a decidedly negative figure, and the mythical monk-warrior Benkei (?–1185), who has become the lone hero of this category because of his loyalty to the legendary and tragic warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189).

The sōhei have come to represent not only the secular power of temples in the premodern era but also the decline of the government from the late Heian age (794–1185). Indeed, a handful temples, most notably Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei just northeast of Kyoto, Onjōji in Ōtsu on the shore of Lake Biwa, Kōfukuji and Tōdaiji in Nara, Kōyasan and Negoroji in Kii Province south of the capital (see Map 2), remained powerful presences from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, when they were eventually subdued by the warlords of the Sengoku age (1467–1573). Yet whereas our understanding of the warrior class has progressed in the last two decades, little effort
has been made to examine just who the fighting servants of Buddha actually were, and why they remain such a visible part of Japanese culture even today. One of my own experiences may illustrate their continued currency.

When I first visited Kyoto in the summer of 1986, I was disappointed to find several of the best-known temples closed to visitors. Bewildered, I returned to my school outside Osaka, where I studied until I transferred to Kyoto University later that fall. It was only several years later that I found out what lay behind the unexpected temple closings. In 1985 the mayor of Kyoto wanted to raise revenues by assessing a tourist tax of ¥50 per adult and ¥30 per child on forty of Kyoto’s most popular cultural attractions. Of these, thirty-six were temples, whose monks and abbots responded that as tax-exempt institutions, their temples should not be subject to such impositions. Mayor Nishiyama was, however, determined to carry out his plan, and when negotiations broke down, several of the best-known temples, including Kiyomizudera and Ginkakuji, closed their gates in a time-proven method of protest. The mayor eventually won out, and tourists wishing to enjoy the cultural treasures of Kyoto thereafter encountered admission fees up to twice as high as those the previous year.

Although I vividly remember this first experience in Kyoto, I did not reflect on it much until years later when I read the press coverage of the protest. One might expect most journalists to be critical of new taxes on local tourist attractions, but it was in fact the protesting monks who were maligned for their actions. The temples’ resistance recalled images of rampaging monks of the past—one headline read, “Monk-Warriors [sōhei] Riot against the Old Capital’s New Tax,” while another stated “The Riots of Monk-Warriors Have Not Yet Ended.” One of the articles further claimed that “monk-warriors no longer exist but when one looks at the dispute over the ‘old capital tax,’ one realizes that Kyoto is a historical city still tied to its medieval heritage.” The photos accompanying these articles are even more telling, for they show, despite the strident headlines and texts referring to sōhei, rather peaceful-looking monks announcing their objections to the new tax.

These journalists may not enjoy the status of Japanese scholars, but little appears to separate the views of these two groups on premodern monastic warriors and religious violence. Where the military exploits and martial prowess of secular warriors are seen as valuable topics worthy of scholarly inquiry, monastic forces have been all but ignored, and where they have been treated, they have frequently been looked down upon. Consider, for example, that militarily powerful monasteries such as Enryakuji and Kōyasan both outlasted the combined Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336–
1573) shogunates, yet not a single study has looked at either of these complexes in their military capacity.

In Western academia, the neglect of monastic forces in important wars and transitions is nothing short of stunning. Not one scholar dealing with the Genpei War of 1180–1185 or the Hōgen Incident (1155–1156) leading up to it has mentioned the important role the forces of temples and shrines played. The authoritative Cambridge History of Japan: Volume 3, Medieval Japan, for example, does not contain a single reference to the armed forces of the temples.7 This is remarkable considering that the plotters in the failed coup of 1156 were surprised and beaten by forces loyal to Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127–1192, ruled 1155–1158) because they were waiting for reinforcements under the leadership of the monk-commander Shinjitsu (1086–?) of Kōfukuji. Moreover, when the forces of Kiso Yoshinaka (1154–1184) approached Kyoto to unseat the Taira in 1183, Yoshinaka’s first order of business before entering the capital was to secure the support of the monastic complex of Enryakuji.8

In volume 2 of The Cambridge History, which treats Heian Japan, Stanley Weinstein does in fact address the issue of religious factionalism in the tenth century, noting briefly violent clashes between temples or sections within the major monastic complexes. He is, however, laudably cautious about referring to the combating parties as monk-warriors and even more perceptively notes the difference between monastic protests and armed confrontations involving clerics.9 Nevertheless, the editors of The Cambridge History have in their index inexplicably but diligently applied the term sōhei to all references to armed confrontations or temple protests throughout the volume, even when their authors deliberately avoid making such references. Moreover, while numerous studies have been devoted to war chronicles such as the Heike monogatari (The Tale of the Heike), analyses of monastic warriors in such works are all but nonexistent. For example, “The Battle of the Bridge” chapter of the Heike monogatari features a worker-monk, who has barely been noted:10

“You must have heard of me long ago. See me now with your own eyes! Everyone at Miidera [Onjōji] knows me! I am the worker-monk Jōmyō Meishū [Jōmyō Myōshu] from Tsutsui, a warrior worth a thousand men. If any here consider themselves my equals, let them come forward. I’ll meet them!” He let fly a fast and furious barrage from his twenty-four-arrow quiver, which killed twelve men instantly and wounded eleven others. Then, with one arrow left, he sent the bow clattering away, untied and discarded...
the quiver, cast off his fur boots, and ran nimbly along a bridge beam in his bare feet. Others had feared to attempt the crossing: Jōmyō acted as though it were Ichijō or Nijō Avenue. He mowed down five enemies with his spear and was engaging a sixth when the blade snapped in the middle. He abandoned the weapon and fought with his sword. Hard-pressed by the enemy host, he slashed in every direction, using the zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragon-fly reverse, and waterwheel maneuvers. After cutting down eight men on the spot, he struck the helmet top of a ninth so hard that the blade snapped on the hilt rivet, slipped loose, and splashed into the river. Then he fought on desperately with a dirk as his sole resource.12

The general neglect of such accounts is in part grounded in the modern notion that religion and politics are and should be distinctively separate entities and that any influence on political and military matters of the state by religious institutions therefore is inappropriate and unworthy of academic scrutiny.13 But there is more to this problem than mere modern political ideology. There is in fact a long history of distortion and prejudice against monastic warriors that dates to the fourteenth century, gaining particular momentum from the eighteenth century and on. Intimately related to the rise and rule of the warrior class, this bias has conditioned and forged the image that later scholars have come to rely on. Specifically, the few serious studies that have focused on the sōhei as military figures have failed to recognize the difference between these constructs and the historical figures on which they were based. To further complicate matters, one monk-warrior, the aforementioned Benkei, has, in contrast to all other images and interpretations, been heralded as one of the greatest and most unselfish heroes in Japanese culture. According to later accounts, Benkei was a giant of a monk, who after having ravaged the Kyoto area as a rogue duelist, became the loyal servant of Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), whose exploits in the Genpei War and tragic fate thereafter have captured the imagination of generations of scholars and Japanese readers. In fact, an NHK Taiga dorama series launched in 2005 focuses on Yoshitsune, reflecting the tremendous popularity of both this tragic hero and his loyal monk companion.

It seems obvious, then, that a study on Japan’s monastic warriors is warranted, not only for their importance in Japanese history, but also because of a need to situate monastic warfare and violence, as well as images thereof, in their historical context. This study will address two sets of issues requir-
ing slightly different approaches to present a more balanced view of monastic warriors in Japan’s history. First, my historical inquiry will explore the figures that can best be described as monastic warriors in the late Heian and Kamakura eras, periods with which the sōhei image is most commonly connected. Who were those men, fighting in the name of temples and the Buddha? What was their relationship to members of the warrior class? And what were their distinguishing features? Second, there is the historiographical question of how and why monastic warriors became stereotyped as sōhei. How did monk robes and cowls, the long glaive (sometimes called a halberd) known as naginata, and clogs become the widely recognized attributes of the sōhei generally and the figure of Benkei as well? Can we find specific characters or groups within the monasteries that correspond to these images? When and why did such images come to represent monastic warriors?

Given that this study ranges over several historical eras and deals with two different themes—one constructive, the other deconstructive—I have attempted to organize it so the chapters can be read more or less independently, with the exception of chapters 3 and 4, which are best read together and in order. Accordingly, for those interested in the modern historiographical context of this study and the interpretations against which I am arguing, the survey below should prove helpful. Other readers may want to proceed to chapter 2, which provides a chronographic analysis of religious violence in Japan from its introduction in the sixth century to the fourteenth century, tracing it also to China. It argues that armed confrontations and incidents were part of the societies into which the Buddhist schools were introduced and thus were never disassociated from them; the emergence of monastic warriors in organized bands must be seen in conjunction with the general militarization of society rather than the decline of Buddhism or certain monasteries. The next chapter deals with monks who were actually involved in armed battles and skirmishes in the Heian and Kamakura eras. These clerics came from a range of places and classes in society, and most were involved in mid-level administration and menial duties within the monastic complexes, but none seem to match the sōhei stereotype. They were drawn into the factional struggles of the capital by their noble monk-commanders, who are the focus of chapter 4. In contrast to the warriors and armed menial workers who rarely left records of their own and therefore remain anonymous, a range of documents, diary entries, and temple records make it possible to reconstruct substantial parts of the monk-commanders’ lives. The episodes recounted in this chapter flesh out the issues that prompted armed conflicts both between monasteries and be-
tween factional groups within them. Finally, chapter 5 focuses on the construction of the sōhei and Benkei images, which developed along different trajectories from the fourteenth century. The anonymous monk-warrior representation can be traced to late Kamakura picture scrolls, where it appears to be only one among many images of monastic forces. The image of Benkei, in contrast, has its origins in literary and theatrical works but came to borrow several characteristics from the visual arts as stylized images became more common. It is when the warrior class came to dominate politics and culture from the Muromachi age (1336–1572) that we detect an increasing preference for the monk-warrior image; this seems to reflect a desire to separate the “pure warrior” (whom we refer to as “samurai” in the West) from men fighting for religious institutions. By the Tokugawa age (1600–1868) the monk-warrior image had become firmly entrenched in Japanese culture, and when the term sōhei was first used for this figure in the early eighteenth century, it set a precedent that would be followed by scholars into the modern age.15

A Modern Historiography of Monastic Forces in Pre-Tokugawa Japan

Although monastic warriors play only the smallest role in studies of the warrior class, they have not gone unnoticed. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, one of the first to note the presence of sōhei in Japanese history was Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827–1910), who stated that monk-warriors first emerged in Japan under the leadership of Tendai head abbot Ryōgen (912–985), but he went no further in explaining exactly how or why.16 Several textbooks in the Meiji era (1868–1912) similarly blamed Ryōgen for putting Heian Buddhism on the wrong path, tending toward what intellectuals at that time regarded as exercising undue influence on politics. Some of these works even included dramatic illustrations of fearsome monk-warriors to underscore these clerics’ unique character.17 In his Nihon bukkyō shiyo (A History of Japanese Buddhism, 1901), Sakaino Tetsu (also known as Sakaino Kōyō, 1871–1933) displayed his dislike for monastic forces in a chapter entitled “The Infestation of the Monk-Warriors” (Sōhei no bakko), where he claimed that this category of cleric had arisen from the influx of warrior-retainers accompanying Heian-era nobles into the monasteries; yet in the end he singled out temples such as Kōfukuji and Enryakuji for criticism for their failure to control their clergies.18 A few years later, the military section of the 1906 encyclopedia Kōji ruien contained almost thirty
pages on the sōhei. Without offering any criteria, it simply labeled sōhei as “clerical warriors” (hosshi musha), asserting and reinforcing the notion of their distinct character.

By the 1920s a debate emerged concerning the origins of the sōhei, beginning with Takasu Baikei (1880–1948), who criticized the Buddhist establishment for allowing this group to emerge within its communities. Like so many before him, he put much of the blame on Ryōgen, under whose tenure struggles had erupted within the Tendai School, between the Enryakuji and Onjōji (Miidera) factions. In Takasu’s view, it was the monks’ desire for worldly possessions, caused by an increasing number of nobles’ sons and warrior families taking Buddhist vows, that led to militarization. Shortly thereafter Takeoka Katsuya (1893–1958) published an article in which he claimed the sōhei could be traced back as early as in the Nara age (710–784). He nevertheless concluded that it was not until the inset period (1086–1185), when the monk-warrior became one of the pillars of medieval society, that the sōhei reached its mature form. Öya Tokujō’s (1882–1950) chapter “Sōhei ron” (An Essay on Monk-Warriors) in his Nihon bukkyō shi no kenkyū (A Study of the History of Japanese Buddhism) published in 1928–1929, offered yet another perspective on the sōhei. Öya distinguished between individual monks who armed themselves and the groups of armed monks that he claimed constituted the sōhei. He concluded that it was commoners taking Buddhist vows without state sanction to evade paying taxes that caused not only the breakdown of the Buddhist hierarchies, but also brought arms into the monasteries. Öya dated the emergence of the sōhei to the first half of the Heian age, pointing to the lack of governmental response to an increasingly unstable situation in the provinces, which in turn precipitated the sudden increase of armed-servants-turned-monks. Rather than looking to individual armed monks, Öya concluded that the marker of the sōhei phenomenon was the emergence of organized forces within monastic complexes in the mid-to-late Heian age, a development that could be more precisely dated to the tenth century. Both Takeoka and Öya located the impetus for militarization within the monastic complexes themselves, and Öya even labeled Heian society as one based on “mistaken beliefs,” which seems more to reflect his modern expectations of religion’s role in society than its actual historical role. The emergence of sōhei was, according to this view, an upshot of the “secularization” of Buddhism.

These early treatments notwithstanding, it was Tsuji Zennosuke (1877–1955) who became the guiding light for generations of scholars in Japan with his Nihon bukkyō shi no kenkyū, first published in 1931. Tsuji’s study presented an assumption that the emergence of the sōhei signaled a turn-
ing point for Buddhism in Japan, and, like many of his successors, Tsuji was committed to finding an explanation for that emergence within the monasteries themselves. He found what he called the decline of the monastic bureaucracy already evident in the eighth century, when factional struggles of the imperial court spilled over into the religious world. He blamed in particular the failures of the ordination system, since ordinary people and nobles could claim status as monks for a variety of reasons, whether to escape taxes, punishments, or simply to make a career.25

In earlier scholarship, then, the emergence of the sōhei was synonymous with a perceived decline of Buddhism, and the dating of its origin became for many scholars an important means to discover how, why, and above all, just when religious institutions went wrong. Indeed, the sōhei debate in published monographs and articles centered almost entirely on these issues and can accordingly be classified by the period scholars have pointed to for the emergence of this group—the Nara period, the tenth century, the late Heian age (the insei era, 1086–1185), or the Kamakura period. In the first category, we find only a small cohort of scholars, including Tsuji Zennosuke, who saw the origins of the sōhei in the pre-Heian period, when a few isolated violent incidents occurred. Specifically, he pointed to the breakdown of the ordination system and to sporadic evidence of religious violence that can be found in later sources. Unfortunately, no sources indicate any direct relation between the increase of privately “ordained” monks and the few incidents of violence that we find in the seventh and eighth centuries. Tsuji noted a reference to monks and novices in the war against Emi no Oshikatsu (Fujiwara no Nakamaro, 706–764) in the 760s (see chapter 2) in Ōmi Province, close to the capital area.26 He concluded that it was these figures who foreshadowed the emergence of organized armed monastics and found in them the origins of the sōhei.27

Another important member of this group was Hioki Shōichi (1904–1960), one of the best-known sōhei scholars and the first one to devote an entire work to monastic warriors in his main opus, Nihon sōhei kenkyū (A Study of Japan’s Monk-Warriors), published in 1934. Like Tsuji, he focused on the use of weapons among monks and asserted that monk-warriors represented a response to the decline of the bureaucratic state and its administrative and penal codes (ritsuryō); he also added that the need for private protection grew with the increasing number of estates coming under direct control of temples in the Heian era, which allowed the sōhei to assume a more important place in Japanese society.28 Hioki saw continuity in developments from the Nara to the Heian age, but he also pointed to armed confrontations between Enryakuji and Onjōji—the first major fight taking
place in 1081—as the earliest appearance of warriors bands within the temples. These warriors were not primarily monks but rather local managers of temple estates who, of their own accord, put on monk’s robes to fight for their master-temple.29

In contrast to Tsuji and Hioki, scholars of the second category followed Ōya by arguing that the tenth century was the crucial juncture for the sōhei’s emergence. Ignoring the early and isolated incidents caused by violent individuals, these scholars defined the sōhei, as Katsuno Ryūshin (1899–1969) put it in his 1955 work Sōhei, as “groups of monks with arms.” Katsuno pointed to two sources in particular—an edict of twenty-six articles authored by Ryōgen in 970 and the 914 memorandum submitted to the court by Miyoshi Kiyoyuki (both are treated in chapter 2).30 Contesting the position of previous scholars, moreover, Katsuno asserted that armed monastics were not in fact monks but rather servants of the temple who regularly performed various menial tasks while holding novice status within their monastic communities.32 Other scholars, such as Murayama Shūichi (b. 1914) and Hirabayashi Moritoku (b. 1933), have agreed with Ōya and Katsuno, pointing to other events in the tenth century that indicate the emergence of monk-warriors. The former saw Ryōgen’s takeover of Gionsha and the forcible separation of Onjōji from Enryakuji as evidence that the abbot must have resorted to using armed monks, despite his prohibitions against them.32 Hirabayashi cites a brawl between Kōfukuji and Tōdaiji in 968, when armed men from both complexes faced off over a small piece of land in Nara, in support of his interpretation.33

Hiraoka Jōkai (b. 1923), who has written extensively on Buddhist institutions, belongs to a third cohort that views the late Heian age as the starting point of the sōhei. Like Hioki, he views the lower-level menial workers as the class that spurred the arming of the clergy, but he has also noted that the process continued into the Kamakura age, when the various categories of residents within the monasteries—scholar-monks, worker-monks, cart carriers, hamlet residents, and shrine servants—came together to form armed bands.34 Unlike Katsuno, Hiraoka sees the organization of armed monastic forces coming to fruition in the late Heian age under the leadership of noble monks who dominated ranking monk offices from the late eleventh century. The onus was thus placed on aristocrats rather than commoners, since the noble abbots’ leadership over the various workers, shrine servants, and residents of temple estates made it possible for them to gather and direct armed forces from within their communities.35

Ōshima Yukio (b. 1937) has concurred with this notion, concluding that the tenth century set in motion developments that became the founda-
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tion for the emergence of monastic forces. Specifically, the spread of private estates gave rise to more competition in which the use of military force became essential, as, in his view, members of the lower echelons of the clergy primarily involved in menial work started using tools and arms already available to them. The tenth century marked a change from the peaceful resolution of disputes between temples to increased reliance on violence. By the late twelfth century, the occasional skirmishes had been replaced by large-scale confrontations, which Ōshima believes signaled the transition into an age of sōhei violence.36 The main difference between the Nara and the two Heian interpretations here lies in how they gauge the acts of individuals versus those of the group. In Tsuji’s view, the emergence of violence involving individual monks is sufficient to signal the beginning of the sōhei phenomenon; but to Hiraoka, Ōya, Katsuno, and Ōshima it is the collective use of force and endorsement of that use by the temple communities that marks the sōhei’s emergence.

A fourth interpretation was developed by Hirata Toshiharu (1911–1996), who located the first sōhei in the late Kamakura age. His view hinges on yet another interpretation of just what constituted the sōhei, which he defined as ordained monks who arm themselves as a group.37 Hirata focused on the activities of the group as a defining characteristic, and, writing in the early 1960s, he compared the clergy movements (daishu undō) to political movements (seiji undō) and the democratic movements (minshū shugi undō) of his own period.38 Instead of seeing instances of religious violence in the late Heian as defining a new stage of development within the monastic centers, he saw them as reflections of the general political developments in which secular warriors, not monks, became involved in temple disputes. Those carrying arms within the temples—monastic workers and warriors serving as administrators on the private estates (shōen)—should, according to Hirata, be characterized as merely precursors to the sōhei, which he defined more strictly as monks who also trained as warriors.39 For Hirata, two developments in the late Kamakura age set it apart from religious violence in the Heian. First, he asserted that the use of weapons had become widespread among the clergy beginning in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Second, force of arms had become more common for resolving conflicts within all major monasteries and among monks. In short, the de facto transformation of monks into professional warriors is what signaled the emergence of the sōhei in late medieval society.40

Another helpful way to categorize sōhei studies, as suggested by Kinugawa Satoshi, is to look at how scholars have interpreted the causes behind the emergence of monastic forces. The first interpretation, represented by
Ōya and many of the early scholars, argues that the decline of the imperial bureaucratic state was the immediate factor behind unsanctioned ordinations of commoners, who entered the monastic complexes without the acknowledgement of the state. The second explanation looks to the other end of the social spectrum, namely to the influx of nobles who, owing to their pedigrees, contacts in the imperial court, and financial resources, came to dominate all ranking monk offices beginning in the late Heian. Regarding this second group, moreover, Kinugawa pointed to three scenarios. One, as suggested by Sakaino, was that the sōhei were warrior-retainers of noble monks who accompanied their masters into the monasteries. Another scenario involved the noble monks bringing with them the factional disputes of the imperial court, which meant armed personnel were critical to sustain these struggles—a phenomenon that Tsuji in particular had pointed out. The final scenario showed militarization to be a result of class conflict between the noble monks and the lower ranks within the monasteries. Taking a Marxist view, scholars represented by Tamamuro Taijō (1902–1966) pointed to the conflicting interests of commoners, who had entered the monasteries to form bands based on loyalty, and of nobles’ sons, who took Buddhist vows for financial reasons. Kinugawa’s third explanation viewed the private estates that emerged in the mid-Heian as the foundation of the monastic forces. According to this view, first presented by Hosokawa Kameichi (1905–1962) in 1931, temples and nobles alike employed warriors to safeguard the assets of these private estates, where the warriors also served as administrators. Ōshima, who argues for the origins of the sōhei in the tenth century, also pointed to competition for estates, emphasizing the causal relationship between that competition and increasing disputes between various temples, and between temples and local landlords. Hirata similarly concluded that as warfare became more prevalent and force of arms was deemed critical to securing property and boundaries, military might became accepted within monasteries just as it was in society and politics in general. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, monasteries used arms to not only protect their assets but also to resist the warrior aristocracy and its growing influence. The monasteries had, in other words, become militarized.

In the final analysis, the problem with all these interpretations is not only the different criteria used for explaining militarization of the temples, but more importantly, these scholars’ desire to determine a single category of historical actor that corresponds to the phenomenon of the sōhei. First, as should be obvious from the preceding survey, modern classifications of secular and religious violence do not readily apply to the complexity of the monastic communities in premodern Japan. For instance, the numerous at-
tempts to label one group as monks and others as purely secular servants do not adequately account for the range of clerics within the temple complexes. Second, since the term sōhei was itself an invention of later observers, any attempt to match it to much earlier historical figures is bound to be problematic. Kuroda Toshio (1926–1993), one of the most influential historians of the postwar era, was less wedded to modern notions about the role of religion than any of his predecessors. The emergence of armed monks was not simply a curiosity but an integral part of a major transition that marked the end of the ancient era (kodai) and the beginning of the middle ages. This transition was a drawn-out process lasting from the late tenth to the twelfth centuries, which involved steady growth in the number of monks and the emergence of independent monastic centers. Kuroda refused to see armed clerics as a group separate from their social and political contexts, claiming instead that “someone who uses arms when necessary, even a monk, must be considered a warrior [bushi].” Thus pointing to their similarities, Kuroda stated that armed monks and warriors were twins born from the same social developments.45

This was not an entirely new view, since a few scholars before Kuroda had in fact pointed to members of the warrior class, often referred to as “secular warriors” (zokuhei), as constituting the bulk of the monastic forces. Already in the 1920s Takeoka Katsuya saw the emergence of the sōhei as parallel to the rise of the warrior class during the insei era, 1086–1185, and Hirata emphatically argued that the sōhei of the Heian age were actually secular warriors.46 Nevertheless, what sets Kuroda apart from his predecessors and colleagues was his refusal to refer to monk-warriors as sōhei, pointing out for the first time that this term did not appear in Japanese sources until 1715, when it was used in a Confucian work. Accordingly, he concluded, it would be inappropriate to use the term for such warriors in the medieval age. Hirata had expressed similar sentiments when he acknowledged the term’s inappropriateness for the armed clergy of that time, but he simply replaced sōhei with akusō (evil monks), who, in his view, were the historical equivalent.47

Kuroda’s observations represented a watershed for the field of history and for the application of a more stringent source criticism. And indeed, recent scholarship offers a more nuanced understanding by recognizing the limitations of queries directed at identifying the sōhei. Mikawa Kei, for example, acknowledges the challenges associated with the term in his recent work on Go-Shirakawa, noting that “because it is problematic to use a term with a negative image to discuss history objectively, [the term sōhei] is rarely used recently in the academic world.”48 Going a step further, Kinugawa
Satoshi concludes that Kuroda’s *Jisha seiryoku: Mō hitotsu no chūsei shakai* (The Secular Power of Temples and Shrines: Another Medieval Society, 1980) essentially discouraged further research on monastic warriors, so convincingly did it demonstrate *sōhei* to be a construct that reflected a particular consciousness within the warrior class of the Tokugawa age.

Kinugawa’s claims notwithstanding, a few studies have in fact dealt with monastic forces in the last two and a half decades since Kuroda’s study. What is remarkable, however, is that even though today’s scholars are by and large aware of the anachronism and the mischaracterization it entails, they have been unable to disassociate the image of the *sōhei* from the monastic forces they claim to examine. For example, Takeuchi Rizō (1907–1997), one of the most eminent scholars and editors of source compilations at the University of Tokyo, indiscriminately used the term in a survey history reprinted in 1980. Similarly, Tsunoda Bun’ei refers to the general clergy (*daishu*) as *sōhei* in a work from 1977. More recent works show the same tendency, and one must therefore conclude that despite Kuroda’s fame among historians, his ideas regarding the *sōhei* may not have gained the general acceptance one might expect. It is difficult to assess why, but one possible explanation might lie in the tendency and desire of Japanese scholars to focus on the unique features of their own history. Hiraoka Jōkai, for instance, considered the *sōhei* unique to Japanese society, a kind of medieval religious equivalent of “the Japanese people theory” (*Nihonjin ron*), which asserts the uniqueness of Japanese character in explaining a number of cultural traits. Hiraoka’s version might best be called “the monk-warrior theory” (*sōhei ron*).

In the end, however, the identification debate has yet to subside because the term has taken on a life of its own and is easily recognized by Japanese readers and historians. For example, Seita Yoshihide mentions monk-warriors several times in his 1995 work on the legal structures of medieval temples without acknowledging its obvious anachronism and the problems associated with the term. Furthermore, he identifies the *sōhei* as monastic workers (*dōshu*) but provides no explanation of when they were armed, where they came from, or where they received their training. Watanabe Morimichi in a fairly recent work entitled *Sōhei seisuiki* (A Record of the Rise and Fall of Monk-Warriors, 1984) also adheres to the traditional view, using literary and artistic sources without any measure of critical analysis. In his opinion, the *sōhei* emerged first in Nara because of a need to protect the treasures and the structures of the monastic complexes, whereas at Enryakuji, it was internal strife over the head abbotship that caused
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Monks to arm themselves. These armed temple residents were not primarily monks, however, but workers and servants, who worked in administration and armed themselves to be able to protect the temple properties and to perform their duties.54 Finally, the most recent work, a 2003 republication of Hioki’s work, with additional details and explanation of source quotations prepared by his son, suggests that little progress has been made in the past fifty years. To mention just one error on the very opening page, the author offers a quote from the battle scene with Jōmyō Myōshu as “Onjōji’s sōhei, Jōmyō Myōshu of Tsutsui.”55 That the term sōhei does not appear in the literary text he quotes does not seem to bother him, and so the sōhei image is perpetuated even in this very recent publication.

Few scholars outside Japan have addressed armed conflicts involving religious institutions, but when they have, they have added little to the Japanese discussion except further unreflective support for the sōhei stereotype. The most extensive treatment to date is G. Rénondeau’s “Histoire des Moines Guerriers du Japon,” published about half a century ago.56 Largely unknown among American researchers, this work is, as the title suggests, merely a narrative of violent religious incidents. In fact, Rénondeau’s work is void of original research and analysis of historical sources, and merely follows the work of Japanese researchers. The case is no different for the few references we have in English-language works. George Sansom, convinced that religious institutions had no business affecting politics, heavily criticized Buddhist temples in the pre-1600 era for not providing the moral leadership he expected of them. While claiming that the “monastic armies were a remarkable feature of mediaeval life in Japan,” he concludes that armed men were primarily recruited by temples to protect their estates, and that the “unscrupulous use” of divine threats preying on the fears of nobles in the capital only reflected the weakness of the court and the failure of the religious community to live up to its moral duties.57 Neil McMullin also noted the problems associated with the sōhei image, citing Kuroda’s revealing studies in a footnote. Nevertheless, he continued to use the term throughout his study on Buddhism and the state in the sixteenth century, and it is perhaps not surprising that his remarks therefore appear to have gone unnoticed by other scholars.58 George Perkins, for example, in his translation of Masu kagami (The Clear View Mirror), insists on equating the Japanese term for clergy (daishu) with sōhei, a fundamental mistake that reflects not only a poor understanding of monastic organizations but also a grave error in interpreting the historical circumstances and role of religious institutions therein.59 Since translations of premodern literary
works have tended to take a similar approach, he is, however, in good company: these include Helen McCullough’s translation of the *Heike monogatari* and William R. Wilson’s work on the *Hōgen monogatari*.60

The prevalence of this view of the *sōhei* can be further supported if one includes unpublished works. One particularly troublesome account is provided by the anthropologist Wayne van Horn, who claims that the medieval religious orders in Japan and Europe (specifically the Teutonic Knights and the Hospitallers) “have more than a superficial resemblance to one another and may provide an important key to understanding the evolution of feudal societies into premodern states.”61 While a comparison of the knightly European monastic orders and monastic armies in Japan may certainly be illuminating and useful, this paper’s faults include a dangerous degree of circular reasoning: It begins with the assumption that both Japan and Europe have a feudal stage in common, and then proceeds to delineate this societal configuration by comparing religious military orders, which have already been defined as one of the characteristics of feudal societies. Only one recent study, a master’s thesis, attempts to summarize the state of the field, but like all other works in English, it relies largely on secondary works and cannot approach the depth possible only through primary research.62

This consistent focus on the stereotype of the *sōhei* has undoubtedly constrained the studies of religious institutions and their armed forces. The endless quest to identify the group or groups that constituted *sōhei* in the premodern age has led to useless attempts to reconcile the image with what can be found in the sources. While these studies have uncovered ample material that concerns clashes and confrontations involving monastic warriors, they lack explanatory power because the definition of the *sōhei*, which depends on the scholar’s own preferences, must dictate which temple warriors and commanders are or are not included. This obsession can lead to mind-boggling constructs, as in Hirata Tōshiharu’s work, where he describes the monks involved in a clash as “monk-warrior-like evil monks” (*sōhetteki akusō*) or refers to their emergence as “the *sōhei*-fication of evil monks” (*akusō no sōheika*).63 Needless to say, the use of anachronistic terms—which impart no precise meaning and misrepresent crucial aspects of the past—to sustain a paradigm that interprets or judges a past society through the lens of modern ideas should be unacceptable to all historians.

A second and equally serious flaw in the majority of Japanese studies on monk-warriors is the tendency to rely on later pictorial sources as accurate descriptions of the events they portray. Lacking a social analysis of the art works themselves—who they were created by, and for whom—many Japanese scholars have simply treated them as reliable illustrations.
As I show in chapter 5, however, those representations cannot be taken at face value. Perhaps the most misleading use of these sources has involved their depictions of the “forceful protests” (gōso) staged by temples to voice their displeasure with decisions made at the imperial court. Several of the early scholars mentioned above devoted considerable attention to the gōso without questioning the claims later inserted by artists and other observers. For example, Tsuji asserted that as competition between various schools became more intense in the Heian age, military means were used in appeals. He then proceeds to describe the protests and appeals of the clergies, shrine servants, and monk-warriors of the temples and shrines. As a result, the participation of monk-warriors in the demonstrations now appears to be an “unquestioned fact,” even though there is no indication in contemporary sources that armed monks actually took part in such protests.

The most striking example of confusion around monk-warrior involvement in temple protests can be found in Katsuno’s Sōhei, where he devotes a good two-thirds of his account to protests rather than to armed conflicts. His extensive treatment of the Kōfukuji protests, amounting to forty pages in his short book, stands out as being particularly misplaced, for while he calls these events “monk-warrior protests,” he never explains the exact relationship between the occasion of the protests and the sōhei. Astoundingly, Katsuno failed to note that the participants in these protests were generally unarmed, which casts no little doubt on his working premise. Elsewhere Kageyama Haruki (1916–1985), whose works focused mainly on Enryakuji, treated the armed clerics and protests as all but indistinguishable in his article entitled “The History of the Sōhei and the Gōso.” And Hirata’s major study, Sōhei to bushi—which implies an important connection between the monk-warriors and the warrior class in general—is more than half devoted to matters unrelated to armed conflict, and his comparison of the protests and clergy to the popular rights movements of the postwar era never arrives at an explanation of sōhei involvement in such activities.

As I argued in The Gates of Power, these demonstrations were not intended to become violent, nor were the protesters prepared to engage in armed confrontations. Rather, the main thrust of the protests was the invocation of local deities, the kami, which often exerted enough pressure on nobles in Kyoto to interrupt governmental activities or even to induce a judgment in favor of the protesting temple. In point of fact, the contrast between the level of violence in these protests and battles involving monastic forces is nothing short of striking, as is many historians’ failure to note it. It is only in this light that one can understand George Sansom’s apparent confusion as he claims that the “military capacity of these monastic armies
was not very great” yet repeatedly insists on their importance. It never occurred to Sansom, despite the written record, that the clerics involved in protests were in fact not well armed and therefore could easily be bested by court warriors. But in times of strife, monastic fighters were as sought after by feuding factions as other warriors.

Japanese scholars, falling prey to the habit of recycling images and quotes from other works, seem to accept the image of “sōhei protests” even today. Just to mention a few examples, Seita Toshihide claims in a recent book that those who were armed during the protests, whether dressed in monk attire or not, as shown in picture scrolls, were sōhei. The eminent historian Gomi Fumihiko explicitly asserts that later picture scrolls accurately depict armed monks as participants in the gōso. Japanese scholars of a later generation have unfortunately not progressed much beyond these constructs. Mikawa Kei, for example, simply repeats what previous scholars have stated, reaching the identical conclusion when he claims that the gōso and the sōhei were essentially inseparable. Kinugawa similarly claims that those who participated in the protests wore armor and swords even though he acknowledges that pressure was exerted mainly by the invocation of local deities. Ōshima, who sees most of the sōhei emerging from the lower echelons of the monasteries, claims that the protests were yet another opportunity for these classes to make their voices heard, and he therefore assumes that they were also armed on those occasions. In point of fact, Ōshima is correct in identifying the protesters, but one is hard pressed to find any evidence of armed warriors or monk-warriors. Finally, Watanabe inexplicably uses the Heike monogatari account of a demonstration that took place in 1177 as an example of activity by military forces.

Watanabe’s use of a literary account, which ironically does not indicate that the protesters were armed, typifies the lack of source criticism in studies of the temple protests. This observation must sound absurd to most Western scholars who have worked in Japan, since the field of komon-jogaku—the field of diplomatics (in its original sense, “the study of historical documents”)—is central to history departments in Japan. However, despite an almost unmatched commitment to source criticism and the use of original and contemporary documents, an astonishing number of unreliable and/or embellished literary and artistic sources have remained the foundation for interpretations of the “secularization” of religious institutions. Hirata, for example, relies heavily on the anecdotal Konjaku monogatari, believed to have been written in the twelfth century, to demonstrate changes that supposedly took place in the monastic communities. Given
these tendencies, it is not difficult to imagine where the articles linking the monastic tax protests in Kyoto with the sōhei drew their inspiration.

Another problem is the tendency to interpret monastic militarization, whether it took place in the Nara period or in the Kamakura age, as a result of a decline of Buddhism itself. Overlooking social and political developments in society in general, many scholars have instead chosen to look for its origins within the monasteries. Even Hirata, with his emphasis on the Kamakura age, begins his treatment with a substantial description of the status and role of Buddhism from the pre-Nara age. And his use of terms such as “secularization of the temples” and “decline of the ordination system” reveals his preconceived notions that Buddhism in Japan at one point or another enjoyed a pure phase without any political involvement or influence and that the “medieval age” was, due to its lack of central control, a step back from the preceding age.

One way of understanding Japanese scholars’ attempts to discredit armed monastic forces is to point to the implicit modern bias of the scholarship, according to which religion and politics must not be mixed. However, this bias extended to other less visible areas as well. In terms of approaches to the field of history, the works of Japanese scholars reveal a heavy emphasis on institutional history, in which religious violence is characterized, narrated, and analyzed in terms of monasteries. Thus, for example, violence between the Tendai siblings and neighbors, Enryakuji and Onjōji, or between the Tendai branch Tōnomine and Kōfukuji in Yamato Province, is seen as a result of the decline of those institutions, or as competition over religious leadership or land. While such narratives provide a context for the specific conflict in question, they do not consider why violence was used in the first place. It is commonly assumed that degenerate religious institutions resorted to armed solutions by default. However, from the perspective of world history, a number of cases come to mind where religious institutions did not arm themselves in similar contexts.

Explanations focusing only on the origins of individual armed conflicts without reference to other non-religious developments are not helpful in the larger context, nor is a quantification of the number of battles involving certain institutions. The social setting is frequently left out, which is even more surprising if one considers that most historical analyses of the last half century or so have taken a Marxist approach. However, such analyses have been framed by the most conservative and restrictive perspectives of that school, remaining bogged down in class struggle. The clergy is seen as one easily defined and constrained class thus hampering a socially grounded explanation of the emergence of warriors within the monasteries. The goal
of this study therefore is to explore and analyze, above all, the contexts in which religious institutions and their supporters, whether monks, menial workers, secular warriors, or any other group, used arms as a means to resolve conflicts. Although the historical terminology in the sources will be carefully considered in characterizing these religious forces, it is not my intention to allow specific terms to limit the scope of this study. In addition, by surveying cases of violence over a span of several centuries, from the earliest recorded instances in the sixth century to those in the fourteenth, and by also touching upon armed religious forces in China and Korea, I hope to situate religious violence in the East Asian Buddhist world within its proper milieu. Finally, by tracing the emergence and use of the images that became Benkei and the stereotypical sōhei, I hope to offer an explanation of their rise and continued prominence in contemporary Japan.