

Kamikaze – The Divine Winds that Saved Japan

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During the 13th century, the Mongols, led by Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, attempted two major invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 AD. However, on both occasions, a massive typhoon (tropical cyclone) obliterated the Mongol fleet, forcing the attackers to abandon their plans and fortuitously saving Japan from foreign conquest. The Japanese believed the typhoons had been sent from the gods to protect them from their enemies and called them Kamikaze ('divine wind').

Following the conquest of China in 1230 and Korea in 1231, Kublai Khan became the first emperor of Mongolia and renamed it the Yuan Dynasty, meaning 'first beginning'. Japan was just 100 miles away, and feared an invasion, and they had reason to. Between 1267 and 1274, Kublai Khan sent numerous messages to the Emperor of Japan demanding that he submit to the Mongols or face invasion. However, the messengers were blocked by Japan's shogun, the real power behind the throne, and they never reached the Emperor.

Kublai Khan became furious that he never received a reply from the Emperor, who he referred to as 'ruler of a small country', and he vowed to invade Japan. The Mongols set to work on building an enormous fleet of warships and recruited thousands of warriors from China and Korea.

The First Mongol Invasion of Japan

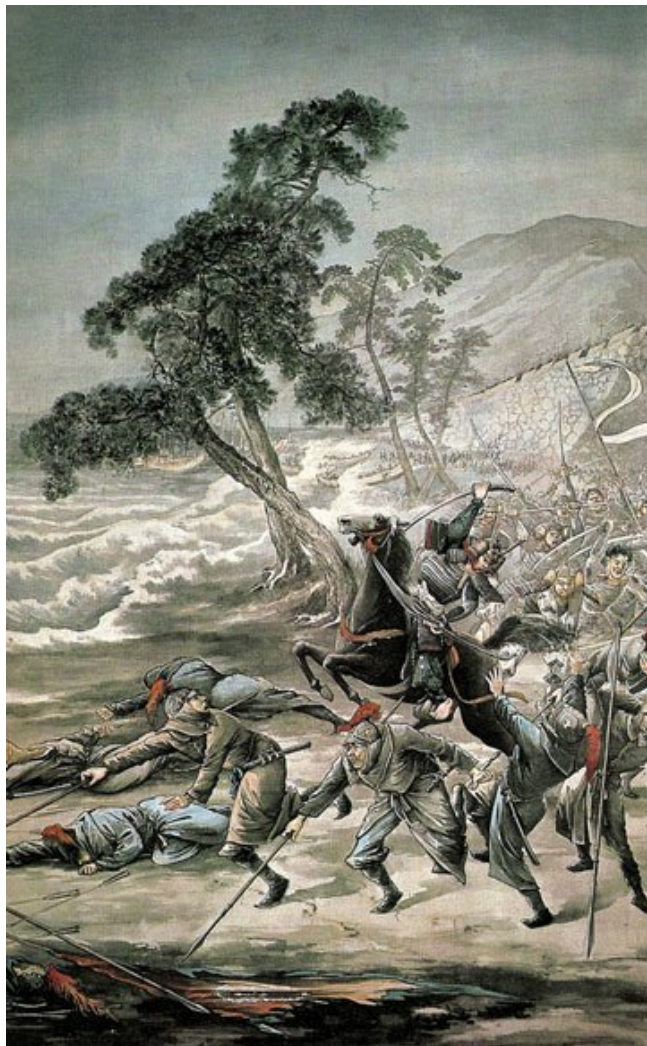
In the Autumn of 1274, the Mongols launched their first invasion on Japan, which has become known as the Battle of Bun'ei. An estimated 500 to 900 vessels and 40,000 warriors, mostly ethnic Chinese and Koreans reached the shores of Hakata Bay where the two forces met. The Mongols devastated the Japanese forces who began to retreat. However, fearing the Japanese were getting ready to return

with reinforcements, the Mongols retreated to their ships. That night, the typhoon struck as the ships lay at anchor in Hakata Bay. By daybreak, only a few ships remained. The rest were destroyed, taking the lives of thousands of Mongols with them.

The Second Mongol Invasion of Japan

While the Japanese had a lucky escape in 1274, it was not over yet. The Mongols were now more determined than ever to conquer Japan. They worked hard to rebuilt their fleet and recruit greater numbers of warriors. Meanwhile, Japan built two metre high walls to protect themselves from future attacks.

Seven years later, the Mongols returned with an enormous fleet of 4,400 ships and an estimated 70,000 to 140,000 soldiers. One set of forces set out from Korea, while another set sail from southern China, converging near Hakata Bay in August, 1281. Unable to find any suitable landing beaches due to the walls, the fleet stayed afloat for months and depleted their supplies as they searched for an area to land. On August 15, the Mongols prepared to launch their assault on the much smaller Japanese forces defending the island. However, once again, a massive typhoon hit, wrecking the Mongol fleet and once again foiling the invasion attempt.



The Second Mongol Invasion of Japan – the Mongols who survived the typhoon were slaughtered by Japanese samurai warriors at the water's edge. Credit: Yado Issho

Contemporary Japanese accounts indicate that over 4,000 ships were destroyed and 80 percent of the soldiers either drowned or were killed by samurai on the beaches in what became one of the largest and most disastrous attempts at a naval invasion in history. The Mongols never attacked Japan again.

Raijin and the Divine Wind

According to Japanese legend, the Kamikaze (divine wind) was created by Raijin, god of lightning, thunder, and storms, to protect Japan against the Mongols. One of the oldest Japanese deities, Raijin is an original Shinto god, also known as kaminari (from kami “spirit” or “deity” and nari “thunder”). He is typically depicted as a demon-looking spirit beating drums to create thunder. Another variations of the legend, says that the Kamikaze typhoons were created by Fujin (the wind god).



Fūjin-raijin-zu by Tawaraya Sōtatsu. Raijin is shown on the left and Fujin on the right. Image source: Wikipedia

Kamikaze as Metaphor

As many would be aware, the term ‘kamikaze’ was later used in World War II to refer to the Japanese suicide pilots who deliberately crashed their planes into enemy targets, usually ships. The metaphor meant that the pilots were to be the ‘divine wind’ that would once again sweep their enemy from the seas. The kamikaze pilots did much damage to the US fleet, at the price of about 2,000 of their most dedicated, but apparently expendable youth. The kamikaze movement evolved out of desperation when it became evident that Japan was going to lose the war. The word ‘kamikaze’ has become incorporated into everyday English usage to refer to someone who takes great risk with little concern for their own safety.



Japanese Kamikaze Pilot. Image source .

Considering the timing of the two typhoons, which exactly coincided with the two attempted invasions of Japan, it is easy to see why these massive storms were viewed as gifts from the gods. If it were not for the two 'kamikaze' typhoons, it is highly likely that Japan would have been conquered by the Mongols, creating what would have been a very different future.

Answer the following questions with evidence from the text:

1. Why was Kublai Khan angry with Japan's emperor?
2. Why did the Mongols return to their ships in their first invasion?
3. What was the main cause of the Mongol's defeat in their second invasion?
4. How has the word "Kamikaze" been used in modern times?