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Abstract

In the year 1545, during the latter half of Japan‗s Sengoku Period or ―Age of Warring States‖, the minor *samurai* Ukida Naoie was assigned thirty men and a small fief in the province of Bizen. His task was to cultivate and defend this small corner of the province from the ambitious and power-hungry lords and bandits that abounded in the Sengoku Period, but Naoie set his sights higher. Given direct control over his thirty men, a mere garrison force of infantry, he used them to conquer and rule over neighboring fiefs in the province. His reputation and his army grew with each victory and before long, Naoie controlled more than a tenth of Bizen and over half of his original thirty men had castles and fiefs to call their own. Naoie himself ruled out of Okayama castle, which he had built for himself, and kept a tight rein on his subordinates through taxation and rotation of service. In 1577 Naoie, after taking over most of the neighboring Matsuda lord‗s forts and province, stormed his own lord‗s keep under flimsy pretenses and seized control of the now expanded Bizen.

Keywords

Japan, Sengoku Period, Age of Warring States, Ukida Naoie, ashigaru

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“100 Spears Worth 100 Pieces”: The Impact of Ashigaru *on Sengoku Jidai*[1]

Austin Clark

In the year 1545, during the latter half of Japan’s Sengoku Period or “Age of Warring States”, the minor *samurai* Ukida Naoie was assigned thirty men and a small fief in the province of Bizen. His task was to cultivate and defend this small corner of the province from the ambitious and power-hungry lords and bandits that abounded in the Sengoku Period, but Naoie set his sights higher. Given direct control over his thirty men, a mere garrison force of infantry, he used them to conquer and rule over neighboring fiefs in the province. His reputation and his army grew with each victory and before long, Naoie controlled more than a tenth of

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[1] “The Seventeen-Article Injunction of Asakura Toshikage, c. 1480,” in David J. Lu, “From Civil Wars to Unification,” in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 176.

Bizen and over half of his original thirty men had castles and fiefs to call their own. Naoie himself ruled out of Okayama castle, which he had built for himself, and kept a tight rein on his subordinates through taxation and rotation of service. In 1577 Naoie, after taking over most of the neighboring Matsuda lord's forts and province, stormed his own lord's keep under flimsy pretenses and seized control of the now expanded Bizen.[2]

Ukida Naoie's bloody and meteoritic rise to power in the space of just thirty years was similar to that of several, eventually more well known *daimyo*, or Japanese feudal lords. Oda Nobunaga especially would write a similar story, albeit on a larger scale, expanding from his inherited Owari

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[2] John Whitney Hall, "Foundations of the Modern Japanese Daimyo," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, No. 2 (May 1961): 323-325.

province in south-central Japan to unite most of the main Japanese island of Honshū.[3] This move would propel him into history as the first of Japan's great unifiers, three individuals who would overcome long odds to consolidate their power and pull Japan out of the tumultuous Sengoku Period. The other two, following almost immediately on the heels of Nobunaga, were Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, who would complete the centralization of power and control set in motion by their predecessor. Yet the enormous power and influence this trio of unifiers wielded did not materialize overnight and its genesis is somewhat obscure, even if the legacy it left is not.

The turmoil of the Sengoku Period gave birth to the centralized power Ukida Naoie would

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[3] Stephen Turnbull, *The Samurai: A Military History*, (Surrey, England: Japan Library, 1996), 132-135.

tinker with and all three of the unifiers would come to enjoy. As a period of constant and chaotic warfare, Sengoku stormed the walls of well-established tradition and forged quite literally in the heat of battle a new dominant military force that would shape the social order of the next 350 years and give brilliant men like Nobunaga and Hideyoshi the means to come to power. The localized nature of the Sengoku Period fighting and the increasing role of technology established the infantryman as the decisive force on the battlefield, toppling the mounted *samurai* out of dominance and giving the ambitious *daimyo* who controlled them unprecedented power. The leaders who recognized this social shift and founded their influence in a large corps of disciplined, professional infantry

would emerge victorious and found their shogunal power in these ideas.

The dominance of infantry on the battlefield by the end of the Sengoku Period was absolute. A look at the muster rolls for the *daimyo* Gotō Sumiharu in 1592, part of Hideyoshi's ill-fated invasion of Korea, reveals that 90% of his force was made up of infantry; out of 220 men only 27 were *samurai* on horses.[4] Takeda Shingen, a *daimyo* who became known for his use of an exceptional amount of cavalry, as well as his skill in using them, had a ratio of approximately two infantrymen to every horseman in his army. By 1590, when Hideyoshi was firmly in control and just finishing his unification of Japan, he ordered troops from the Daté household and asked that they be supplied

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[4] Stephen Turnbull, *Samurai Invasion: Japan's Korean War 1592-1598*, (London: Cassell & Co, 2002), 44.

with only thirty horses.[5] At the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the battle in which Tokugawa Ieyasu would take control of Japan from Hideyoshi's heir and lead it into centuries of peace, about 85,000 men were involved on each side.[6] Added together 170,000 men fought on the small plain at Sekigahara, many times more than could be mustered simply from the elite seven to eight percent of a warrior society.

The meaning of the term "Sengoku Period" itself speaks eloquently to the situation in which the infantry suddenly found themselves prominent:

> The aggregation of private wars…became combined into a simple struggle for survival with

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[5] Delmer M. Brown, "The Impact of Firearms on Japanese Warfare, 1543-98," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 7, No. 3 (May, 1948): 244.

[6] Michael Haskew, Christer Jorgensen, Chris McNab, Eric Niderost and Rob S. Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World AD 1200-1860: Equipment, Combat Skills and Tactics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 164.

> rapidly changing alliances, triumphs and disasters, that was to last for over a century. Borrowing an expression from the Chinese, the years for 1490 to 1600 are called the 'Sengoku-Jidai,' which is best translated as 'the Age of the Country at War.' It was war on a scale vaster and more terrible than Japan had yet experienced.[7]

The "war on a scale vaster and more terrible" was, by and large, due to infantry involvement. The reason is twofold. In 1568, while the Sengoku infighting raged in many ways its hottest, Japan had a population of a staggering 10 million people, spread over three main islands.[8] These islands were, in turn, covered by mountains, with geographically youthful bedrock peaks covering 80% of Japan's surface. The remaining portion was made up primarily of uniformly flat

[7] Turnbull, *The Samurai: A Military History*, 116.
[8] Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan*, (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1993), 11.

lowlands, the three largest of which came to house the majority of Japan's population.[9] The geographical closeness of the islands translated into localized and dense fighting. The plain of Kawanakajima, one of the few open plains nestled between several mountain ranges and rivers, witnessed no less than five battles between 1553 and 1564, strong testimony to how Japan's geography influenced its wars.[10]

Historically, however, this influence had not always held true. In past wars, Japanese armies relied on the elite, mounted *samurai* horse archers who would respond quickly to a threat across any

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[9] Ibid., 5.

[10] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 269.

portion of the islands.[11] The system had evolved out of eight and ninth century conflicts with the Emishi, the "barbarians" who inhabited northern Japan, when their light, mobile and hard hitting cavalry wrecked one Japanese expedition after another.[12] The tradition was further refined after the Mongol invasions of the 1200's showed the need for less cumbersome armor and the utility of the close-combat oriented spear or *naginata*.[13] With the coming of the Sengoku Period, the close, violent fighting that resulted would dramatically change the way the Japanese looked at war.

This closeness, when combined with Japan's comparatively immense population, turned infantry

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[11] Arnold Blumberg, "Between the 15th and early 17th centuries, mounted samurai ruled Japan's battlefields," *Military History* 28 (December 2004).

[12] Paul Varley, *Warriors of Japan as Portrayed in the War Tales* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 3-5.

[13] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 91.

into a natural and easily available fighting force. *Daimyo*, the feudal Japanese lords whose constant and varied bids for power perpetuated the civil war, were ever vigilant for ways to gain the upper hand. Japan’s geography and large population made it easy to recruit, concentrate, and fight with masses of foot soldiers. Initially these *ashigaru*, literally meaning “light feet” because of their tendency to loot the battlefields and towns in the manner of more modern “footpads,” were almost mercenary in nature, fighting for the spoils they could steal and having little loyalty, often drifting off to tend crops or even to switch sides if the opportunities for bounty looked more promising. To compound issues, they were almost to a man poorly trained and ill-disciplined, making their only real value the

numbers in which they were available.[14] By the end of the Sengoku Period, these issues would largely be solved and the lowly *ashigaru* would change the face of Japanese society, not only by virtue of their numbers but of the increasing role of technology in warfare.

The increases, improvements, and innovations made in Japanese warfare technology during the Sengoku Period were to have their most profound effect on the infantry. Up until this time weapons, armor, and technological advances associated with war had been reserved exclusively for the upper class and mounted *samurai* who were doing the majority of the fighting. With infantry rapidly becoming a major factor at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was only logical that those

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[14] Stephen Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 84-85.

advances, and newer ones spurred on by the near constant fighting, would be applied to them eventually. These technological advances would have the effect of not only making infantry more and more of a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield, but also of instilling a sense of discipline and uniformity among the "*ashigaru*".

Perhaps the best example for the creation of uniformity and effectiveness among the ranks of *ashigaru* is the evolution of their armor. The first *ashigaru* simply brought whatever armor he owned, often none, to the battlefield, and looted what more he could take after the battle.[15] As the century wore on and more and more *daimyo* recognized the impact their infantry were having on the battlefield, they began to issue them what is known as *okashi*

[15] Ibid., 85-86.

gusoku, “loan armor,” which consisted chiefly of a breastplate (*dô*) and a short armored skirt (*kusazuri*).[16] This armor was fairly cheap and easy to make thanks largely to changes brought on by heavy campaigning, namely the simplification of the lacing that held individual strips of armor together. Typical Japanese armor of the time, such as the *dô*, were made from overlapping strips of iron, laced tightly together, that would provide surprisingly great freedom of movement. As demand became higher and campaigns lasted longer, the lacing was loosened and more strategically placed, making it both cheaper and easier to tolerate on the march.[17] It was the *ashigaru* who benefited most from these changes, as *daimyo*

[16] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 40-41.

[17] Turnbull, *The Samurai: A Military History,* 126.

were more willing and able to provide volunteers with suits of the reliable *okashi gusoku*.

While this minute example shows that the *daimyo* were slowly beginning to care enough about *ashigaru* to supply them, for good reason as will be discussed later, it also meant that the *daimyo* themselves had more control over the army and the individual infantrymen. Armor issued by *daimyo* was uniform in make and color and often had the *mon*, or personal heraldry of the *daimyo*, painted somewhere on it.[18] Some leaders even went to the extreme of having their entire force's armor and weapons being a uniform color, such as Il Naomasa's "Red Devils," who were clad entirely in shades of red.[19] While instances of this extreme are uncommon, the uniformity of the issued armor

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[18] Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 86.
[19] Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook* , 44.

worked to unify and identify the army on the battlefield. Armor played a key role in helping to change the *ashigaru* from a scarcely armed rabble to a uniform and identifiable fighting force, helping to bring it together under the control of the *daimyo*.

The weapons of the *ashigaru* played a very similar, but much more visible, role in establishing discipline and making them a deadly force on the battlefield. Often simple technological innovations and regulations in weaponry had a massive battlefield and social impact. For example, the *yumi*, or the Japanese bow. Originally a weapon of the elite *samurai*, horse archers par excellence even into the Sengoku Period, the bow gradually found its way into the hands the infantry for a variety of reasons. Bitter military defeats in the Mongol invasions had taught the Japanese the power of

massed bow-fire, where many hundreds of arrows launched were more effective than single, well aimed ones.[20] This factor had been taken into account before the Age of Warring States and the first mention of *ashigaru* in Japanese history comes out of the battles during the Nanbokuchō Wars in the 14th century, where hundreds of *shashu no ashigaru*, "infantry shooters," were employed.[21] With the infantry becoming more numerous on the battlefields of the Sengoku Period, it was only a small step in logic to arm them with bows to achieve powerful massed volleys.

It was these volleys that the *yumi* excelled at delivering. Though it was initially a weapon of the *samurai*, the bow was fairly easy to make and

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[20] Blumberg, "Between the 15th and early 17th centuries, mounted samurai ruled Japan's battlefields," 78.

[21] Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 84.

powerful, consisting of a strip of hardwood between two strips of bamboo, held together and treated with glue and a close binding.[22] This layered construction made them individually powerful weapons, comparable to European longbows, and were augmented by a staggering variety of arrows made for any situation, from cutting armor to emitting a shrill whistling noise used for signaling and intimidation.[23] Additionally, bows helped instill discipline in the *ashigaru* due to the amount of skill required to be an archer. *Ashigaru* chosen or volunteering to be archers would necessarily undergo periods of training, or help train other *ashigaru*, which would give them a previously unheard of amount of professionalism, a trend that

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[22] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 50.

[23] Turnbull, *The Samurai: A Military History,* 22.

continued in the use of the arquebus. Putting bows in the hands of the *ashigaru* also had the profound effect of breaking down varying social boundaries. After all, the bow had traditionally been the exclusive province of the mounted *samurai* and giving a weapon with such distinguished connotations to the lower class is one prime example as to how the battlefield was changing the way the Japanese viewed their society.

Another important weapon in the development of the *ashigaru* was the spear. Consistently overlooked, not only in Japanese military history, in favor gunpowder weapons and flashier developments, the simple *nagae yari* had an equally large impact on the use of infantry. For one, it was cheaper and easier to use than almost any other weapon, ideal for quickly arming large bodies

of men. And, above every other weapon, the spear favors larger numbers of troops with little training, as the basic use of the weapon is abundantly clear: stick the sharp end into the enemy. As a result, most Sengoku Period armies had a large percentage of spearmen in their ranks, often as high as 70%.[24] Armies of the Hōjō clan, who controlled the powerful Kantō region, had spearmen regularly make up 50% of their armies and Oda Nobunaga, the first great unifier, led forces that comprised of at least 27%.[25]

These two factors made spears integral to the success not only of *ashigaru*, but to the *daimyo* who led them. While in its basic conception the spear is an easy weapon to use, spears favor their

[24] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 42.
[25] Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 103.

wielders working in close formation and the introduction of drill and discipline to the ranks of spearmen in this regard would increase their battlefield effectiveness many times over. The *Zōhyō Monogatari*, a guide to infantry tactics penned in 1649 by prominent *samurai* Matsudaira Nobuoki, says of the *ashigaru* spearmen:

> Unlike samurai spearmen, where spears are thought of as only for single combat, here many are of one mind, with spear points moving together, keeping a rhythm. When one or two meet it is find to fight individually, but when spears are used en masse there must be coordination and timing, with no exception.[26]

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[26] "*Zōhyō Monogatari,*" in Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook* , 184. Note that the year, 1649, is almost half a century after the end of Sengoku Jidai. The author is in a unique position of observing the final outcome of Sengoku Period *ashigaru* tactics and integration, yet the only real firsthand experience he may have had would be helping put down the Shimabara Rebellion a decade prior in 1638.

The fact that such a section was written about spear drill and tactics after the Sengoku Period speaks well to their developing effectiveness during it. It should come as no surprise to find that the first *daimyo* to introduce truly disciplined spear units was Oda Nobunaga, who relied greatly on them in most of his engagements and especially at Nagashino, a battle more known for his use of the arquebus.[27] He made his spears uniformly longer than any of his opponents (5.6 meters), a detail that, when combined with his spearmen's superior discipline, made his cheaply outfitted *ashigaru* a true menace on the battlefield. This success set the precedent for spear length becoming a major factor, so much so that when the *daimyo* Hōjō Ujimasa mustered hastily to defend his domain from

[27] Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 103.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Nobunaga's successor, he would decree "a spear…is useless if it is shorter than two *ken* (twelve feet)."[28]

Yet the weapon to produce the most visible and sweeping changes to infantry warfare was to be the arquebus, an early handgun introduced by the Portuguese during the Sengoku Period. Unlike the bow and spear the arquebus had a host of initial problems to contend with; the ammunition and black powder it used could not yet be easily mass produced and it had a cripplingly short range and slow rate of fire compared to its *yumi* counterpart.[29] However, the tremendous power of the arquebus,

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[28] "Compulsory Military Service Decreed by Hōjō Ujimasa, 1587," in David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 186.

[29] An experienced gunner could load, prime and fire in about 15 seconds. However, most ashigaru would not be experienced gunners and averaged around two to three shots a minute. Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook*, 137-138.

commonly called a matchlock because of its system of firing, outweighed these disadvantages. It fired an 8mm caliber bullet, which could easily punch through even the best made suit of armor, instantly killing or maiming the wearer who would normally be almost immune to bow fire.[30] Such weakness could also be mitigated by mixing bowmen into the arquebus formations. Most often appearing in a ratio of five archers to ten gunners, bowmen could shoot faster than their cumbersomely armed companions and thus maintain, to a reasonable degree, the rate of fire of the handgun formation while the arqubuses were bring reloaded. This combination had become so effective and such standard practice by the end of the Sengoku Period that this integration was recommended in the *Zōhyō*

[30] Ibid., 137.

Monogatari, the previously mentioned guide to using *ashigaru*.[31] Given the power of the matchlock, the means available to limit its weaknesses, and its sheer efficacy, it is no surprise that a general writing back to his province requesting reinforcements during Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea asked to "have them bring as many guns as possible, for no other equipment is needed. Give strict orders that all men, even *samurai*, carry guns."[32]

The arquebus had one key feature above its ability to turn men quickly into soldiers through ease of use and constant drill, in that it was usable almost exclusively by infantry. With its lengthy loading procedure, awkward size, and tremendous

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[31]Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 129.

[32] Brown, "The Impact of Firearms on Japanese Warfare, 1543-98," 241.

recoil, the matchlock was not a weapon for the mounted soldier. Thus, in order to take full advantage of the potential of these weapons, as many *daimyo* attempted to do, they had to rely on infantry as their handgun arm. Given the large proportion of infantry already in *daimyo* armies, finding these men posed no significant problem, so it was to the *ashigaru* that the matchlock conferred its powerful battlefield advantages. It was universally easier to use than a bow, which required much practice and a large amount of natural skill to fire accurately. Loading and firing a matchlock could be taught in a day and steady drill could turn men into professionals in the course of one campaign season. Better yet, there was almost no "skill," per se, involved; the procedure was simply a series of steps to push shot down the barrel, fill the

pan with powder, and light the match to fire it, presumably in the direction of the enemy. The need for this constant drill also provided an easy means to turn a rabble of unskilled men into a standing army, working in tandem with the *okashi gusoku* loan armor to instill in the previously footloose men a sense of unit pride and an incentive to stay.

Despite its disadvantage of being expensive and more difficult to produce, the arquebus began to be fielded in increasing numbers, adding to their effectiveness and slowly transforming Sengoku Period fighting. Battles began to become large scale maneuvers of infantry units rather than mad dashes into the enemy line for a chance at glory. The nature of the handgun and its battlefield use, concentrated volleys using multiple lines of gunners to try and keep up a steady fire, led the way in the concept and

eventual creation of units of infantry, and even cavalry.[33] Soldiers would be grouped in large formations depending on which sort of weapon they held - bow, spear or arquebus - and used on the battlefield in groups to try and gain a tactical advantage. Perhaps no battle demonstrates this tactic better than the one that propelled Oda Nobunaga, the first of the great unifiers, to national prominence: Nagashino.

The Battle of Nagashino itself is mostly represented in history books, films, and art prints as the slaughter of masses of *samurai* cavalry by the humble but powerful arquebus. While the arquebus certainly had a major role to play in the battle, examination of the details reveal that it is more Oda Nobunaga's consummate use of combined arms and

[33] Ibid., 244-245.

dependence on infantry that won the day.

Nagashino was at once both a battle and a siege, fought in 1575 outside the fortress of Nagashino which the invading army of Takeda Katsuyori was attempting to wrestle from the neighboring Tokugawa control. Katsuyori was the son and heir to the more famous Takeda Shingen, who was a well known and much feared commander of cavalry, of which he possessed a large amount, especially during the infantry-conscious Sengoku Jidai. He would pass both his skills as a leader and his imperial ambitions onto his son, who, during the Nagashino campaign, attempted to fulfill his father's dream of capturing Kyoto. To do so he had to go through the territories of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the later shogun, and Oda Nobunaga, with whom he had established a firm and mutually beneficial

alliance in the recent years. When Nagashino, a key fortress in the Tokugawa interior, came under siege, a desperate series of actions brought both the main army of Ieyasu and a large relief force from Nobunaga.[34]

The battle was set up along a series of marshy and rolling ridges just out of sight of the fortress of Nagashino, which was then under attack. Katsuyori, upon hearing of the relief forces heading towards the castle, decided to meet them in open battle in order to use his cavalry, superior in both training and numbers, most effectively. Nobunaga, whose army made up the bulk of the relief force, anticipated this move and drew up his army, predominately infantry, accordingly.[35] He knew the

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[34] Stephen Turnbull, *Nagashino 1575* (Oxford: Osprey History, 2000), 7-12.

[35] Ibid., 48-64.

strength of handguns, having fought against them in the hands of Buddhist monks and local alliances known as *ikki*, and he planned to use these weapons to their full potential.[36]

To help guard against Katsuyori's fearsome cavalry, he created a running line of palisades behind which he placed his and Ieyasu's 3,000 gunners. Each palisade intentionally fronted rough terrain and was broken periodically every few hundred feet, creating natural points of attack for Katsuyori and an easy corridor of counterattack for himself. As another precaution, and a sign of just how much value he put on the arquebus troops, he had his personal bodyguard, the most elite *samurai* in the army, dismount and take control of the separate matchlock units. This move not only

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[36] Ibid., 19 and Brown, "The Impact of Firearms on Japanese Warfare, 1543-98," 238.

strengthened the line, but gave the *ashigaru* an enormous shot of discipline, making sure they would keep courageous and steady. Behind this odd mix of troops he held his spearmen and many dismounted *samurai* to support or counter any significant breakthrough Katsuyori might achieve.[37] With these preparations made, he awaited the Takeda onslaught.

At six o'clock on the morning of June 28th, Katsuyori dutifully gave the order to charge against Nobunaga's line. The action was not as idiotic as it sounds. The Takeda had four *samurai* to every three of Nobunaga's gunners and though he was well aware of the power of the handgun, having seen his father use them in numerous siege operations, he was counting on a rainstorm the night before to

[37] Turnbull, *Nagashino 1575,* 48-64.

have rendered the powder and matches used for firing them useless. Even if they had not been turned into metal-augmented firewood by the downpour, they would only be able to get off one shot before his faster and more skilled mounted *samurai* were on top of them. So that morning, 4,500 horsemen charged into the teeth of Nobunaga's arquebuses.[38]

This charge was exactly what Nobunaga had been expecting and, to a degree, hoping for. In preparation, he had lined his gunners three ranks deep, so once the first rank had discharged their weapon, the second could step forwards and do so, then step back and let the third do the same. By the time the third rank had pulled the trigger, the first rank would ideally have reloaded and would be

[38] Ibid., 65-66.

ready to fire again. Nobunga had used this trick before, with success, but had never implemented it on such a scale. As it stood the tactic had the desired effect, the *ashigaru* having kept their powder and matches dry, and all Katsuyori could do was watch in horror as three volleys in a previously unbelievable succession tore his *samurai* apart. As the morning progressed, however, the Takeda managed to get to grips with Nobunaga's army, especially once Katsuyori committed his infantry and reserves, including his own personal guard. Nobunaga's right flank in particular, which was not protected by the palisade or any form of fence, became the scene of close and bloody hand-to-hand combat.[39]

[39] Ibid., 68-78.

Hours later, Nobunaga gave the signal to fall back to a second line of fences prepared at the same time as the main palisades. Once disengaged, Katsuyori began to move his army back to regroup and possibly consider retreating. Nobunaga did not give him a chance. Once it was clear the Takeda were falling back, he had his *samurai* mount and give pursuit, wreaking havoc on Katsuyori's disorganized army. While Katsuyori and most of his high command escaped, it became obvious by nightfall that Nobunaga had carried the day. The Takeda withdrew back into their home province.[40]

In light of such a brief description, it is easy to see the temptation of writing Nagashino off as being won solely by the use of firearms. As mentioned before, an examination of the details

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[40] Ibid., 79-80.

reveals Nobunaga's genius in the use of combined arms tactics and his recognition of the power of infantry. If Nagashino had truly been a battle won by firepower mowing down cavalry, it would not have had several of the key features it did, such as its grueling length, over eight hours, or any prearranged fall back action by Nobunaga. Notably, much of the decisive damage from a strategic standpoint was done not by the gunners in the opening hours, but by the mounted *samurai* and the light-footed *ashigaru* during the twilight as they systematically destroyed the Takeda rearguard and large formations of panicked troops.[41]

If it was not the use of firearms that decided the battle, then it was unquestionably Nobunaga's previously stated genius at combined arms and

[41] Ibid., 72.

dependence on infantry. Nobunaga was wise enough to take into consideration most, if not all, of the factors previously discussed in relation to weaponry and dominance of infantry. He made sure that his men were armed correctly and superiorly, and also made sure there were more of them than the enemy. Nobunaga's force on its own, disregarding his Tokugawa allies, numbered 30,000 men, twice that of Katsuyori's army.[42]

Tactically, he took full advantage of the infantry's capabilities and newfound flexibility. Homogenization of units by weapon types allowed him to deploy a strong front of purely arquebus troops, supported by units more suited for close combat, such as his well disciplined, effective, and numerous *ashigaru* spearmen. Indeed, it was in

[42] Ibid., 20.

these spearmen where a large portion of his advantage lay. Accepting the fact that the Takeda cavalry would probably reach his lines despite his innovative use of handguns, he set up his line of battle to give him an advantage wherever they broke through. By creating gaps in a staggered line of palisades, he effectively directed the focal point of the Takeda charge, right into the waiting spear ends of his *ashigaru*.

The flexibility and ease of control specialization offered also allowed him to pull back, replace, and redeploy units quickly, a characteristic that proved invaluable when the *samurai* did manage to force a hole in the line. Enemy cavalry under Obata Masamori did at one point manage to breach the line of palisades during a lull in the firing, only to be bloodily repulsed as the gunners

fell back to make room for the spearmen and dismounted *samurai* to come up.[43] Numerous other breakthroughs were also repelled by the ability of Nobunaga to set up a flank assault on the breaching forces, thanks to the deadly combination of *ashigaru* discipline, unit continuity, and the staggered line of palisades. At the end of the day, this flexibility also proved decisive as Nobunaga was able to react almost instantly to the retreating Takeda army, the disciplined and homogonous makeup of the units allowing him to keep them together and, in some instances, turn them on the spot to pursue the enemy. He also successfully employed his mounted *samurai* at this point, unleashing speed, martial prowess, and hunger for glory at just the right moment to make an impact.

[43] Ibid., 57.

Nagashino is an excellent example of how Nobunga's military power and political dominance was derived from the infantry. With this newfound emphasis on the *ashigaru*, the *samurai* suddenly found themselves in a clumsy situation, one that they would need to adapt to in order to survive. Their inferiors were beginning to take over their previous role, that of the protector and warrior of Japan, and their superiors, their *daimyo* lords, were beginning to strengthen their control over the battlefield. The *samurai*, while the elite, were no longer the sole arbiters on the field of battle. The technological edge, discipline, and sheer numbers of the *ashigaru* combined to reduce the mounted *samurai* from the dominant military force to a mere officer class over the course of the Sengoku Period, diluting their claims to prestige and allowing the

daimyo to control and benefit from war. The *samurai* were forced into their new role by both sides of the social scale, each side deriving its power directly from the newfound dominance of the infantry. From the bottom, smaller local *samurai* would be able to gain power and retainers, unit commanders, and even *ashigaru* would be able to ascend the social ladder, redefining the role of the *samurai* class as a whole. From the top, the need for centralized control to use the power of the infantry would give the *daimyo* unprecedented control over the *samurai*, allowing these local lords, rather than the warrior ideal of Japan, to take the proverbial reins of Japan's future.

Samurai, especially during Sengoku, was by no means a definite term. While it is typically, and ideally, used to describe Japan's mounted archer

elite who were responsible for defending the island and winning personal glory on the battlefield, it could describe any man from those who met this ideal down to a simple village headmen, whose only similarity to their heroic brethren was that they served the same lord and could be called on for military service. These lower *samurai*, called village *samurai* or *ji-samurai*, would find themselves in positions of unexpected power and influence during the Sengoku Period.[44] As de facto leaders in their community due to their status and comparative wealth, they became an important link from the *daimyo* to the village, where most of the recruits for infantry service were drawn from. In return for their services mustering and organizing

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[44] Michael P. Birt, "Samurai in Passage: The Transformation of the Sixteenth Century Kanto," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11, No. 2 (Summer 1985): 376-377 and Turnbull, *Warriors of Medieval Japan*, 26-28.

recruits the *ji-samurai* were in an ideal position not only to lead on the battlefield, but to demand privilege from their superiors in return for their services.[45]

Thus, many of these lower *samurai* rose rapidly in military rank and wealth, expanding the ideas and sensibilities of the *samurai* class as a whole. Not only did they very visibly lack horses, an essential ingredient for the ideal *samurai*, but they could be employed as unit leaders, whose role was not to charge onto the field in search of glory, but to stay with their men to coordinate them with other units on the battlefield, interpret orders from the *daimyo*, and ensure that they were kept under control. Privilege and ascension in the *samurai* class did not have to take the form of battlefield glory, or

[45] Birt, "Samurai in Passage," 377-378.

even anything to do with war. Often times the rewards of the *ji-samurai* would be land, money, or simply more duties to attend to. There was also the distinct possibility of being promoted to a *daimyo*'s household or personal staff and retainers, great honors not necessarily involving military duty. This mobility started to distort the image of what a *samurai* truly was, by having increasing numbers of rising *samurai* occupying administrative or practical jobs not necessarily on the battlefield or in pursuit of personal honor. All these factors began to change, from the bottom up, the way the *samurai* functioned on the battlefield and, as a social group, gave a new meaning to what it meant to be a *samurai*.

In addition, promotion to the *samurai* rank was not unheard of. Skilled or brave unit leaders,

especially those of higher rank such as *ashigaru kashira* (captain of *ashigaru*), had the very real means to be promoted to *samurai*. This new status was often designated by taking a surname and the number of surnamed *ashigaru kashira* and *ashigaru ko gashira* on many, particularly late, Sengoku Period muster rolls and casualty lists indicates that this practice, while perhaps exceptional, was far from rare.[46] These newer *samurai* would have much the same effect as the *ji-samurai* on the definition of the *samurai* class as a whole. With different responsibilities, skills, and levels of wealth, the newly promoted *samurai* would change the very definition of the word. *Samurai* were no longer the heroic ideal, charging out to meet the foe in personal combat, relying on the bow and spear.

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[46] Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook*, 145-146.

They were now to be an officer class, a social rather than warrior elite who helped the *daimyo* campaign and command in battle, not win it on the strength of their own arms. Nobunaga displayed at least a temporary awareness of this fact at Nagashino, notably when he appointed members of his own bodyguard to command the arquebus gunners on the front line. These *samurai* were, most likely to their frustration, denied the opportunity to gain personal glory or charge into the enemy, but in turn ruled the *ashigaru* with an iron fist, keeping them disciplined, steady and most importantly, close together, making it easier to withstand the Takeda cavalry charge.

If the role of the *samurai* was being squeezed and adapted from below by those rising through the ranks, then it was also being redefined from above, in some instances with no pretext of

subtlety. This change came from the *daimyo*, the lords whom the *samurai* served and were ostensibly loyal to, and who were now making the most of the Sengoku Period turmoil to improve their position. Technically, they were *samurai* in and of themselves as the shogunate was a military regime and thus its officials were all of military rank, and their official title of *shugo-daimyo* reflected this. Historically, they exercised very little actual control over battlefield events and acted more as a military governor of their province, seeing that civil affairs were carried out while the *samurai* warriors sought renown on the battlefield.[47] This idea began to change with the onset of Sengoku Jidai, as *daimyo* began to have a more invested interest in battlefield happenings as the course of one battle could see

[47] Hall, "Foundations of the Modern Japanese Daimyo," 320.

them forced out of office, overthrown by retainers, or suddenly propelled into prominence. *Daimyo* thus began to exercise more control over individual battles and the *samurai* below them though several different means, almost all of which have their roots in the predominance of the *ashigaru*.

Battles between *samurai* armies have often been compared to battles in medieval Europe, where the paradigm of a knight and his retainers on the battlefield reigned supreme. Perhaps a more fitting comparison is between the *samurai* and the Homeric heroes of the Trojan War. Combat for *samurai* was much more of a ritualized, individual affair than a knightly charge, and the retainers and rabble of infantry would, at the onset of a battle, demurely keep back and let the two individual

heroes fight it out for supremacy.[48] This kind of ritualized single combat is devoid of central control, or indeed any real scheme for winning the battle, making it difficult for a *daimyo*, with his renewed interest in the fighting, to exert influence. The shift of battlefield dominance to the infantry changed this. As noted before, infantry armies were large and worked best when segregated based on weaponry, in effect creating different "branches" of the army and different units within those branches, all of which needed some sort of central coordination to work effectively. *Samurai*, with their individualized combat routines and emphasis on personal heroism, were in no position to take that role. The *daimyo*, already nominally the head of

[48] William Wayne Farris, *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500-1300* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 298.

state and the one man of power presumably more interested in winning effectively than being first into battle, was in an ideal position to assume the mantle of command. The infantry, in effect, created a need for centralized command and control, one that allowed the *daimyo*, or anyone who felt like seizing the title, to benefit greatly.

Once this basic relationship was established, the *daimyo* could take steps to not only increase their power, but also to rein in the *samurai* both politically and militarily. With the coming of larger and larger armies, one method of control adopted by the *daimyo* was that of battlefield formations. While they continued to evolve throughout the Sengoku Period, the formations were almost universally based on old Chinese concepts, with modification for some distinctly Japanese features, such as the

large body of arquebus troops.[49] Two things are exceptional about the battle formations: the integration of infantry and the way in which they facilitated centralized coordination. The first is notable because battle formations were rarely cavalry-centric and made good use of the specialization, a feature almost exclusive to infantry, to work and win the day. For example, the *koyaku* (yoke) formation puts up a strong frontage of gunners and archers supported by spearmen, with a large force of dismounted *samurai* in an arrow shaped reserve.[50] The placement and overlap of these units allowed them to provide mutual support,

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[49] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 24-26 and Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook* , 175-176.

[50] Haskew, Jorgensen, McNab, Niderost and Rice, *Fighting Techniques of the Oriental World*, 25-27.

something only possible with the advent of the specialized infantry unit.

The way in which they facilitated centralized coordination is most important when the *daimyo*'s ability to control the battlefield is taken into account. Not only did having every man in a set place make setting up and executing predefined maneuvers infinitely easier, but the amount of drill and discipline that goes into being able to make such formations work helps to turn the previously footloose *ashigaru* into a loyal fighting force.[51] It also allowed for a good deal of battlefield control over the *samurai*, who have been organized into specialized units and made to follow orders, even if it goes against their ideals. In the case of the *koyaku* especially, the *samurai* are held in reserve and not

[51] Turnbull, *The Samurai Sourcebook*, 175.

in front of the formation, the place where any self-respecting and competitive *samurai* hero should be!

This centralized power the infantry gave to the *daimyo* also began to manifest itself in the socio-political areas of Japanese life. *Daimyo* began to exercise stricter control in the form of "house codes" and "house precepts" aimed at governing their domains, populace, and especially *samurai*. Many of the articles in the codes are aimed particularly at demolishing *samurai* battlefield independence and putting them in a subordinate and contained role. For example, Article 26 of the Yūki House Code:

> Article 26: Wherever it may be to, you must not gallop forth as a lone rider without receiving orders from the Yūki. But when

> summoned by the Yūki, you must not be tardy.[52]

Or, even more strongly worded, Articles 67 and 72:

> Article 67: To gallop forth heedlessly and without thought because you hear the sound of the conch shell from the main fort that signals taking to the field is quite unpardonable. If the shell sounds, you should go to a village and quickly dispatch some underling or servant to the main fort and have him inquire into where you should go. Only then should you gallop forth…
> Article 72: Men of the horse units should obviously not join an outside group, nor should they join a different group within the Yūki house…The horse units should always act in conjunction with ten or twenty other riders and not mingle with other groups.[53]

The *daimyo* here mean to rein in as best they can the battle-eager *samurai*. Notice especially the discouragement of riding out alone and the

[52] "The Yūki House Code," in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore De Bary, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 424.
[53] Ibid., 424-425.

emphasis on staying within a unit. Both these concepts helped the *daimyo* to exercise more control over their subjects, who had previously been dominant in the arts and strategy of war and may not take kindly to being simply ordered into formation. Using the ideas of honor that underlay almost all codes created by feudal lords and the *samurai*'s strong virtue and ideal of loyalty, the *daimyo* began to fundamentally change the definition of the *samurai* class from above, even as they sought greater control and power for themselves. Just as they elevated *ji-samurai* and unit commanders to dilute the image of the warrior class, so to they also compressed them into elite fighting units or put them in commands subordinate to themselves on the battlefield. Being a *samurai* during Sengoku Japan slowly began to mean being

a member of the officer caste, one who was above the foot soldiers and other members of the same class, but who was ultimately subordinate to the *daimyo* and certainly not in charge of his own individual actions or glory on the battlefield.

It is worth reiterating that this power exerted by the *daimyo* over the *samurai* was made possible by the need for centralized control created by the numbers, specialization, and increasing professionalism of the infantry. The most prominent and powerful *daimyo* did not construct their power around a large base of mounted *samurai* supporters; they instead made sure that their infantry were well supplied, numerous, and under their direct control. Oda Nobunaga, a man of previously recognized military capacity, invested his money at the outset of the military campaign season of 1549 not in

samurai katana and horses, but in 500 matchlock guns with which to equip his infantry.[54] House codes, in addition to keeping a tight hold on the *samurai*, supported the arming of multiple infantrymen over a single *samurai*, such as in the famous article from Asakura Toshikage:

> 4. Do not excessively covet swords made by famous masters. Even if you own a sword or dagger worth 10,000 pieces, it can be overcome by 100 spears each worth 100 pieces. Therefore, use the 10,000 pieces to procure 100 spears, and arm 100 men with them. You can in this manner defend yourself in time of war.[55]

While this code was written early in the Sengoku Period, it demonstrates that at least some

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[54] Brown, "The Impact of Firearms on Japanese Warfare, 1543-98," 238.

[55] "The Seventeen-Article Injunction of Asakura Toshikage, c. 1480," in David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 176.

daimyo grasped the importance of the *ashigaru* over mounted *samurai* in maintaining their power. Once the correlation between the infantryman and the newfound military influence of the *daimyo* was fully comprehended, they understandably took measures to secure and solidify it. One previously discussed method was through armor, the *okashi gusoku*, “loan armor,” which they could use to standardize the quality and appearance of their army. Another notable way of doing so, that also conveniently undermined traditional *samurai* power, was of direct recruitment of *ashigaru* from the villages. Traditionally, *samurai* had been required to bring men from the area which they ruled, who were then loosely organized and employed. By going straight to the source, so to speak, the *daimyo* cut the *samurai* middleman out

of the picture and increased his own influence over the infantry units.[56] This practice also had the side-effect of increasing the importance of the *ji-samurai* as mentioned earlier who, as a result of interest in recruitment from their villages, had more contact and political clout with their *daimyo* lords.

The man who perhaps best understood this correlation and took the most dramatic steps to protect it was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the second great unifier of Japan himself. Having come to power after the death of Nobunaga, he proceeded during the later decades of the 16th century to unify all of Japan under his control through a series of military and social maneuvers that rivaled Nobunaga's in mastery. Even before he had conquered the entire island, he refined and created an efficient standing

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[56] Birt, "Samurai in Passage," 378-379.

army, which depended almost solely on him for its supplies, arms, and equipment. He managed this task by setting up centralized government storage systems and military contracts, which made virtually all those under his command rely on his will in order to conduct military operations.[57]

His masterstrokes in securing power came, however, in 1588 and 1591, when he issued two separate, but mutually supportive, edicts that changed the structure of Japan for well over two and half centuries. 1588 saw the implementation of the infamous "Sword Hunt" Edict, which made it forbidden for farmers "to have in their possession any swords, short swords, bows, spears, firearms, or

[57] David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 173.

other types of weapons."[58] The weapons collected from this mass confiscation ostensibly went to the creation of a gigantic statue of Buddha, but most probably went into state armories to prepare for the invasion of Korea launched in 1592.[59] In one stroke, Hideyoshi had essentially created a military class in Japan. By disarming the farmers and commoners, the only weapons left in the state were those wielded by the soldiers in the standing armies, which included previously recruited *ashigaru*. In 1591, the class realities that had developed because of the Sword Hunt were solidified in law when Hideyoshi issued the Separation Edict, which decreed that any man attempting to leave his social

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[58] "Collection of Swords, 1588," in David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 191.

[59] Turnbull, *Samurai Invasion: Japan's Korean War 1592-1598*, 31.

class would be "punished accordingly" and his village or master could be "regarded as committing a culpable offense."[60] By creating punishments for leaving one's station in life, warrior, farmer, commoner, or merchant, Hideyoshi in effect created a government enforced class system, one that would have huge ramifications for the *ashigaru* and the *samurai*.

Since *ashigaru* were now locked into the military, they officially formed a lower class of *samurai*. Hideyoshi's edict had simply legalized and solidified the system that had already been developed: the assimilation of the *ashigaru* and, to a degree, *daimyo* into the *samurai* class and the accompanying redefinition. The term "*samurai*"

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[60] "Edict on Change of Status," in David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 194.

now referred essentially to any fighting man rather than the heroic ideal. What had developed throughout the Sengoku Period was essentially a larger warrior class with very real social mobility; *ashigaru* could become unit leaders, unit leaders could become *samurai*, and *samurai* could become anything from the lord of a local province to a *daimyo*. Having risen from the ranks himself, though never having quite attained the *samurai* class, Hideyoshi must have been fully aware of the system that was developing and simply took the dramatic step to implement it on a legal and national level in order to protect his own power. He would have little to worry about from upstart *samurai* now that they had officially become an officer class and only had the power to move up or down in the system, rather than out through

demonstrations of personal prowess on the battlefield. Hideyoshi's rise and the power system he left in place for the Tokugawa shoguns was engendered and supported by the rising star of the *ashigaru* footman. It simply took a leader, or multiple leaders, who knew how to use them and who recognized their power to truly change the face of Japan.

St. Francis Xavier's simplistic observation of them in 1550 was perhaps truer than any concept the Japanese had of their own warriors at the time: "They are excellent archers and fight on foot, although there are horses in the country."[61] As a foreigner observing the warfare of Sengoku Jidai, he picked up on two things quickly: the martial skill

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[61] "St. Francis Xavier's View of Japanese, c. 1550," in David J. Lu, "From Civil Wars to Unification," in *Japan: A Documentary History*, 171-201 (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 198.

of the Japanese and the prevalence of the *ashigaru*. The use of horses is casually dismissed, something it would take a great man of Japan another twenty five years to even consider doing. Yet such a simple observation cuts to the heart of it. It was the infantryman, the lowly light-foot, who had the power to change Japan. Geography and technology conspired to put it into his hands and allowed able leaders such as Oda Nobunaga to win decisive victories with ingenious tactics. That same power was lent to Toyotomi Hideyoshi who would bring to a head all the change that had been over a century in the making and would redefined not only what it meant to be a *samurai*, but what it meant to be a warrior in medieval Japan. As Asakura Sōteki wrote in his house precepts "call the warrior a dog, call him a beast: winning is his business," an attitude

that would shape Japan and give the *ashigaru* the necessary influence to do so.[62]

[62] "House Precepts in the Sengoku Age," in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore De Bary, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 428.