



Japan 1543–75

Samurai

VERSUS

Ashigaru

Stephen Turnbull

COMBAT



Japan 1543–75

COMBAT
Samurai
VERSUS
Ashigaru

Stephen Turnbull



Illustrated by Johnny Shumate

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
THE OPPOSING SIDES	9
Status, recruitment and motivation • Command, control and organization Tactics • Weapons and equipment	
UEDAHARA	30
23 March 1548	
MIKATA GA HARA	42
25–26 January 1573	
NAGASHINO	54
28 June 1575	
ANALYSIS	72
AFTERMATH	76
BIBLIOGRAPHY	78
INDEX	80

Introduction

OPPOSITE

The theme of this book is the contrast between the proud and magnificent mounted samurai and the lowly ashigaru, and the appearance of the former is summed up in this illustration of Naitō Ienaga (1546–1600), shown here posed on a general's camp stool in a painting in Nobeoka Museum. Naitō Ienaga served Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) and is depicted here as a samurai archer like his noble ancestors with an ornate fur-covered quiver and a lacquered bow. His armour is nevertheless a practical battledress of the Sengoku Period. He has a sword and dagger at his belt. This painting sums up the idea of the elite samurai.

According to *Zōhyō Monogatari* (literally 'The Soldier's Tale'), 'When faced with an enemy on horseback the best course of action is to shoot the horse first and then the man. However, everything depends upon the timing; sometimes it is better to shoot the man and let the riderless horse run off into the enemy lines and create havoc' (Sasama 1968: 363). *Zōhyō Monogatari* is believed to have been compiled by a high-ranking samurai general during the peaceful Edo Period (1603–1868), probably sometime around 1649. The book is essentially a training manual for those officers who had command of the ashigaru (literally the 'light feet'), the foot soldiers in a contemporary Japanese army. The passage refers specifically to the deployment of organized ashigaru weapon squads against elite mounted samurai, the dramatic contrast in both weaponry and status that is the theme of this book.

Around 1640 the need for expert advice on how to deal with such a confrontation between troop types was taken for granted. In 1540, however, when wars were still being fought, providing such advice would have been seen as an insult to samurai pride, because the samurai regarded themselves not only as elite warriors but also as the only real warriors in Japan. The mounted samurai despised the foot soldiers against whom they were sometimes compelled to fight, and indeed many of the lower-class troops deployed at that time were still being casually recruited into an army by the prospect of loot and just as casually dismissed. They were contemptuously regarded as ill-disciplined mobs that could be dispersed as carelessly as they had once been recruited, so to a samurai the concept of 'mounted samurai versus ashigaru' in any serious confrontational sense would have been a ridiculous idea. It would require a military revolution to make the samurai change their minds, and this is the story of how that revolution happened when the unquestionable notion of samurai supremacy was seriously challenged.



The subsequent ‘mounted samurai versus ashigaru’ confrontations described in this book would become a collision of tactics, social attitudes and even Japanese culture itself. The three battles chosen as case studies took place against a backdrop of seemingly unending strife, because by the 1540s Japan had been a country at war with itself for almost 100 years. The central authority maintained for centuries by the Shogun – a position equivalent to that of a military dictator – had virtually collapsed, leaving the provinces of Japan as lawless places where rival warlords called daimyo (literally ‘big names’) engaged in a series of local civil wars. Later historians would call the era ‘The Age of Warring States’ (1467–1603). As time went by some daimyo inevitably prospered and grew stronger while others failed, a situation that became abundantly clear to the first European visitors to Japan who arrived from Portugal in 1543. The country may have been nominally united under the Shogun by the grace of the sacred emperor, a man who (the Portuguese quickly discovered) possessed even less political power than the Shogun, but in practical terms no one seemed able to control the leaders of the petty kingdoms with which the incoming merchants, missionaries and traders exclusively had to deal.

The other observation which the Portuguese would have made very early on in their relations with Japan was that the fighting between these rival daimyo seemed to be conducted by armies of elite warriors called samurai. Most samurai rode horses, carried long spears and wore elaborate armour that looked very strange to anyone accustomed to the smooth iron plates worn by Europe’s own noble knights. The more astute Portuguese observers might also have noted that in addition to these splendid warriors a daimyo’s army would

ABOVE RIGHT

The first ashigaru to be used in daimyo armies were casually recruited and poorly armed, as shown by this representative group in a detail from *Ehon Toyotomi Kunkaki*. Only one ashigaru has a proper spear. His companion has a spear made out of a piece of cut bamboo. A third ashigaru has an improvised weapon made by tying a sickle to a pole. All three ashigaru have swords at their belts but are otherwise without any defensive armour or weaponry.

The campaigns of Takeda Shingen and Takeda Katsuyori, 1548, 1572 and 1575

MAP KEY

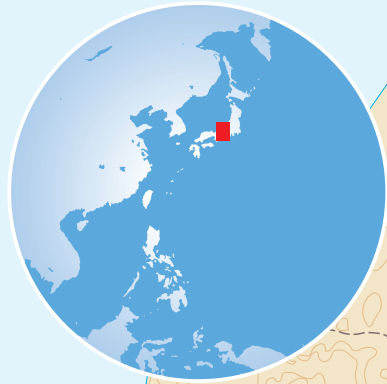
The three 'samurai versus ashigaru' conflicts described in this book were important milestones in the strategic ambitions of the Takeda family. Each of the three battles was the culmination of a particular military campaign conducted by the Takeda as part of a programme to extend their influence beyond their landlocked home province of Kai (modern-day Yamanashi Prefecture), which was looked down upon and defended by huge mountains including the famous Mount Fuji. The provinces through which the competing armies marched were dominated by these mountains, now known as the Japan Alps, which are separated from the Pacific Coast by a comparatively narrow strip of flat land. In 1540 the mountains could only be crossed in two ways: by a few long-established mountain passes or by taking more tortuous routes that followed the flow of a number of rivers. The location of the Takeda headquarters at Tsutsujigasaki

(modern-day Kōfu City) and the presence of hostile enemies to the east therefore required the Takeda armies to begin all three campaigns by marching north. In 1548 Takeda Shingen carried on northwards to confront Murakami Yoshikiyo, who was based at the castle of Katsurao, at Uedahara. In 1572 and 1575 the Takeda armies swung round to the south-west from the area of Lake Suwa to threaten the territories of Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu. The 1572 advance eventually split into four separate movements. Nobunaga's key positions were Gifu in Mino Province and Kiyosu in Owari Province. The Tokugawa targets were Ieyasu's Hamamatsu Castle in Tōtōmi Province and his son Nobuyasu's Okazaki Castle in Mikawa Province. Other battles and castles indicated here, such as Takatenjin and Kawanakajima, played a role in separate conflicts involving the Takeda and are described in the text.

probably include many foot soldiers, although they were a very mixed bag. Some were lucky enough to serve on a long-term basis as servants, labourers, grooms and weapon-carriers for their betters. Others were the inadequately protected and poorly disciplined ashigaru. Some daimyo, however – the more successful ones, as future events would demonstrate – had begun to organize their ashigaru in disciplined fighting units, retaining them in their service beyond any immediate campaign and even entrusting them with the traditional samurai weapons of bows and spears with which to bring down enemy samurai from their horses.

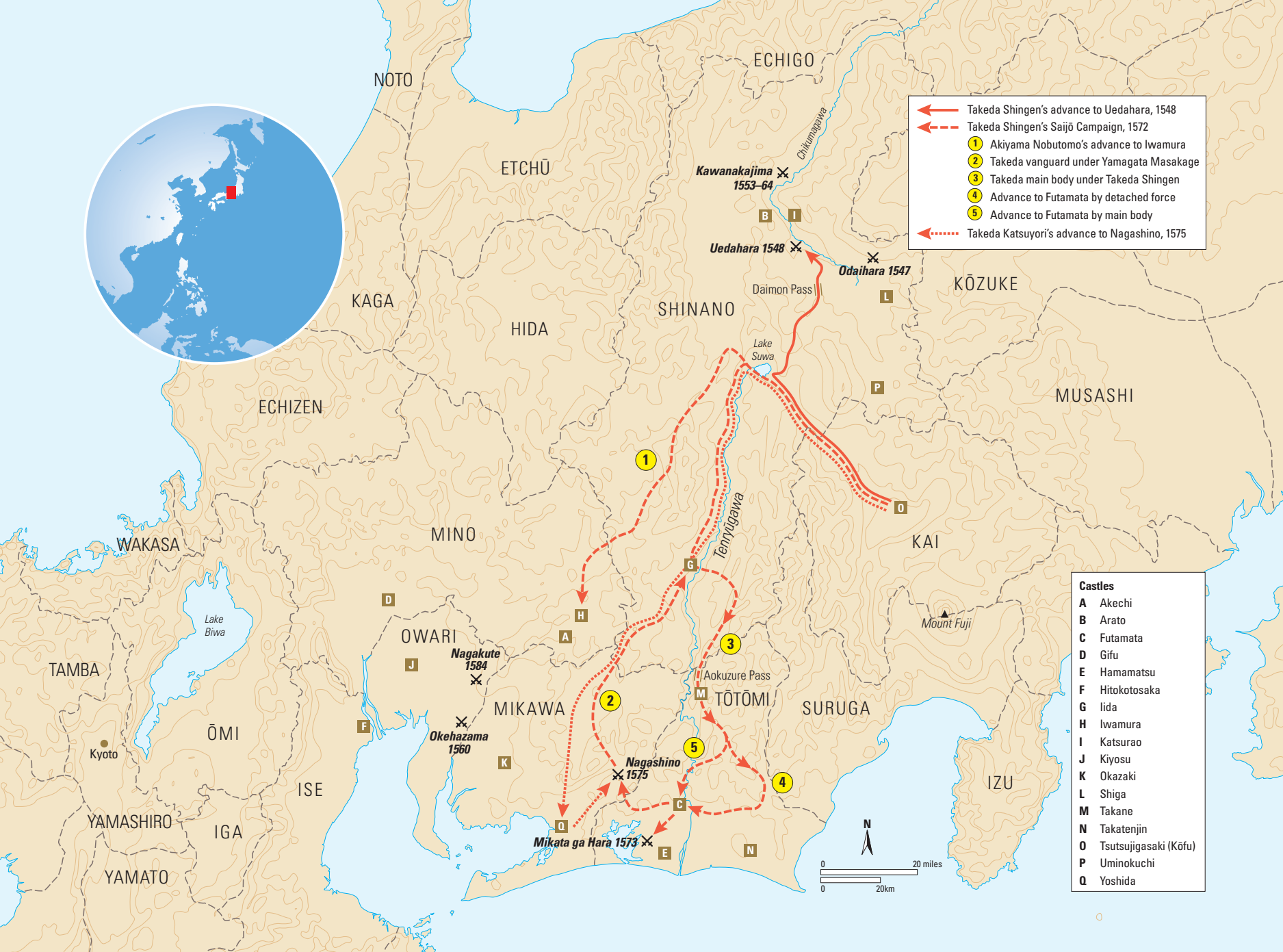
This positive attitude towards ashigaru was a vision of the future for Japanese warfare in which the newly arrived Portuguese merchants would play an unexpected role, because in 1543 they had brought with them some matchlock muskets, a type of firearm also called an arquebus. The Shimazu daimyo of Satsuma Province (modern-day Kagoshima Prefecture) where the Portuguese first landed had immediately appreciated the implication of these weapons, which were far superior to the simple Chinese handguns then being used in Japan. Within a few years daimyo elsewhere in Japan would be deploying home-produced Japanese matchlock muskets on battlefields and during castle attacks and using them to good effect. This study traces how that important development came about and how it helped disciplined foot soldiers to confront mounted samurai.

Three key battles fought by the Takeda family – one of Japan's greatest samurai clans – illustrate the shift in thinking that brought about Japan's infantry revolution. The elite mounted warriors of the Takeda fought under their illustrious leader Takeda Shingen Harunobu and provide the best examples in Japanese history of classic mounted samurai warfare, although quite early on in his career Shingen (the Buddhist name by which he is commonly known) had begun to appreciate the potential of disciplined ashigaru. That realization was given shocking confirmation in the first case



- Takeda Shingen's advance to Uedahara, 1548
- Takeda Shingen's Saijō Campaign, 1572
- 1 Akiyama Nobutomo's advance to Iwamura
- 2 Takeda vanguard under Yamagata Masakage
- 3 Takeda main body under Takeda Shingen
- 4 Advance to Futamata by detached force
- 5 Advance to Futamata by main body
- Takeda Katsuyori's advance to Nagashino, 1575

- Castles**
- A Akechi
 - B Arato
 - C Futamata
 - D Gifu
 - E Hamamatsu
 - F Hitokotosaka
 - G Iida
 - H Iwamura
 - I Katsurao
 - J Kiyosu
 - K Okazaki
 - L Shiga
 - M Takane
 - N Takatenjin
 - O Tsutsujigasaki (Kōfu)
 - P Uminokuchi
 - Q Yoshida





A beautiful example of an ornate *teppō* (matchlock musket or arquebus). Introduced into Japan by the Portuguese in 1543, matchlock muskets would revolutionize Japanese warfare when they were deployed correctly, and that required a sensible use of the lower-class ashigaru, who could be trained to fire them in massive and disciplined volleys.

study in this book: the battle of Uedahara in 1548, when mounted samurai from the Takeda suffered a reversal against the ashigaru spearmen and archers of the Murakami clan. All that either side had then in the way of firearms were a handful of simple Chinese handguns that may not even have been used. In the second case study, the battle of Mikata ga Hara in 1573, Shingen's horsemen faced squads of ashigaru armed with European-style firearms alongside archers and spearmen, although the battlefield environment prevented them from being used effectively. Instead, Mikata ga Hara became the last triumph of Shingen's mounted samurai against disordered ashigaru. The situation then changed dramatically in the year 1575 when, ironically, it would be the Takeda's greatest enemy – an up-and-coming young daimyo called Oda Nobunaga – who would show Japan how to deploy lower-class troops in the most effective manner. The mounted samurai of the Takeda under Shingen's son and heir Takeda Katsuyori were defeated at the ensuing battle of Nagashino where the disciplined firepower and defensive spears of lowly ashigaru played a key role.

Modern reproductions of the fences used by Oda Nobunaga's matchlock musketeers at Nagashino, looking from within them across the valley where the Takeda horsemen charged in 1575. The fields are full of young rice plants. The three battles examined in this book were fought on flat plains containing fertile paddy fields that would be used otherwise for producing rice, and the men who grew the food for the samurai were the same men who would fight for and against them as ashigaru. Rice is cultivated in carefully maintained paddy fields that require intensive work, so the usual campaigning season for Japanese warfare began once the harvest had been gathered and the cooler winds had allowed the fields to dry out and harden. This was the environment in which samurai fought ashigaru: their enemies on the battlefield but the producers of the food that everyone needed.



The Opposing Sides

STATUS, RECRUITMENT AND MOTIVATION

The samurai

In social terms the samurai cherished an ideal of themselves as a landowning military aristocracy who could leave the business of farming to others, although it would not be until around the 1590s that it became the norm for a member of the samurai class to be defined solely as someone who did nothing but fight. Otherwise they were mainly *jizamurai* (samurai of the land) who combined the roles of warrior and owner of a smallholding and would not be too proud to get their hands dirty in a paddy field. It would be personal opportunity or promotion gained by bravery on the battlefield that enabled a *jizamurai* to move closer to the ideal of the perfect mounted warrior who had the wealth and connections to live exclusively as a military gentleman: a status that was then really only enjoyed by a daimyo's family members or his long-standing hereditary retainers.

On the battlefield these proud elite samurai were the knights of Old Japan, and just like the European knights they placed a huge emphasis on tradition and precedence when it came to waging war. Their imaginations were fed by numerous heroic tales of their ancestors, whose exploits had grown considerably in the telling. These almost legendary figures had been noble mounted archers with close imperial connections, who – so the stories related – fought only with worthy opponents whom they would challenge to single combat in the midst of a battle. If victorious they would take their enemy's head; if defeated they would commit honourable suicide. It is true that instances of *ikki uchi* (single horseman fighting) still occurred during the Sengoku Period, but they now tended only to be curtain-raisers to a battle or a siege, where a successful challenge in view of everyone could greatly influence morale. When the armies actually clashed something approaching mass cavalry deployment was the norm for samurai warfare.