Campaign

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Kawanakajima 1553–64

Samurai power struggle

Stephen Turnbull • Illustrated by Wayne Reynolds

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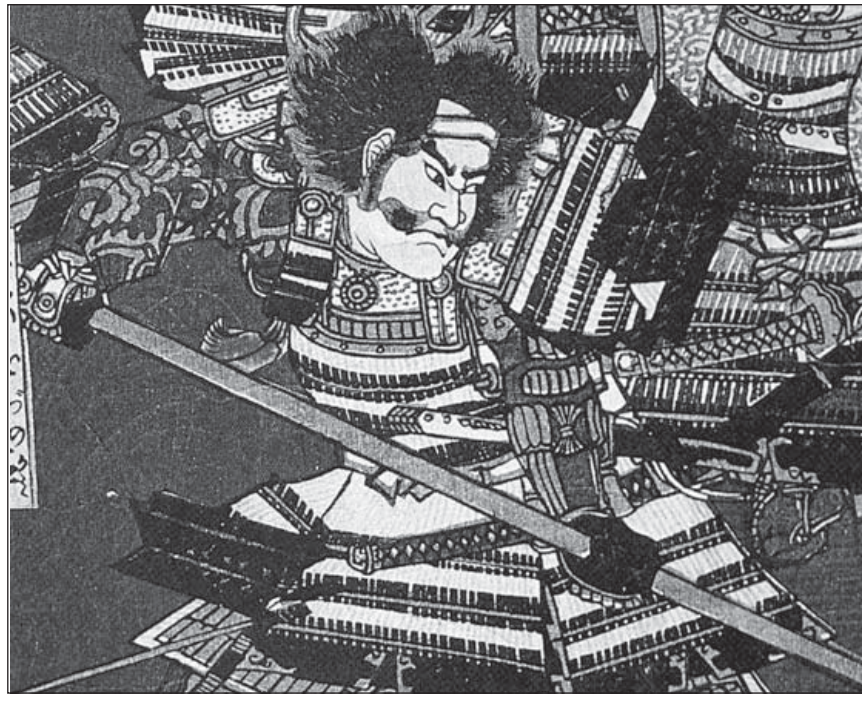

Stephen Turnbull • Illustrated by Wayne Reynolds

Series editor Lee Johnson • *Consultant editor* David G Chandler

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法性院大僧正信玄

INTRODUCTION

The romance of Kawanakajima

The story of the five battles of Kawanakajima, fought between the same armies in the same place over a period of 11 years, is one of the most cherished tales in Japanese military history, commemorated for centuries through epic literature, vivid woodblock prints and exciting movies.

The popular version of the story tells of a place deep in the heart of Japan's highest mountains where two rivers join to form a fertile plain called Kawanakajima ('the island within the river'). Here the two great samurai clans of Takeda and Uesugi fought each other five times on a battlefield that marked the border between their territories. Not only were the armies the same, the same commanders led them at each battle. They were the rival *daimyo* (warlords) Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin.

In addition to this intriguing notion of five battles on one battlefield, Kawanakajima has also become the epitome of Japanese chivalry and romance: the archetypal clash of samurai arms. At its most extreme this view even denies that there were any casualties at the Kawanakajima battles, which are seen only as a series of 'friendly fixtures' characterised by posturing and pomp. In this scenario the Kawanakajima conflicts may be dismissed as mock warfare or a game of chess played with real soldiers; an irrelevant but stirring tale of bloodless battles and gentle jousting.

I hope to destroy forever the myth that Kawanakajima involved nothing but mock battles. It is certainly true that in some of the encounters the two armies disengaged without the struggle becoming an all-out fight to the death. However, those casualties and wounds suffered were real enough.

With regard to the other aspects of the myth, there were indeed two great commanders. Each battle was fought between Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin, both individuals who loom large in Japanese history. There are strong veins of chivalry and romance, but these elements have to be seen in the context of some of the best-authenticated accounts of savagery in samurai history. In marked contrast to the tales of samurai glory, for example, the records of Kawanakajima contain strong evidence of cruelty to civilians; a topic otherwise hard to find in accounts of samurai warfare.

There is also the question of the authenticity of the remarkable notion of five battles fought on one battlefield. Unlike Japan's three battles of Uji in 1180, 1184 and 1221, which were fought on one battlefield because they were all contests for control of the Uji bridge, the battles of Kawanakajima did not have a single focussed objective. They were fought at five different locations within the Kawanakajima area called Fuse, Saigawa, Uenohara, Hachimanbara and Shiozaki. To complicate matters further, an examination of the list of battlefields generates more than five

OPPOSITE **Takeda Shingen depicted in a particularly fierce mode in a scroll in the Watanabe Museum, Tottori. He is usually shown wearing this helmet with a horsehair plume. Note also his Buddhist monk's *kesa* (scarf).**

battles! The battle of Fuse in 1553 is conventionally regarded as the first battle of Kawanakajima, but can only be understood in the context of the battles of Hachiman (of which there were two), fought just to the south of the Kawanakajima plain during the same year. The battle of Saigawa (the second battle of Kawanakajima) in 1555 was an indecisive standoff almost overshadowed by the nearby siege of Asahiyama. The third encounter, the battle of Uenohara in 1557, was fought further away from Kawanakajima than any other of the five and took place after the bitter siege of Katsurayama castle. The succession of events that included the fifth battle finished with another standoff when almost no fighting took place at all. It may even be possible to label another encounter in 1568 as the sixth battle of Kawanakajima. In fact only the fourth battle at Hachimanbara in 1561 was fought in the heart of Kawanakajima. This great battle overshadows the others as the culmination of the struggle, so that to many historians it is *the* 'Battle of Kawanakajima'. It is the fourth battle of Kawanakajima at Hachimanbara that is the main focus of this book.

Thus one could argue that there was in fact only one battle of Kawanakajima: equally by using a different counting system the number of separate engagements could be as high as eight. This is not quite the end of the matter, because if we define the battles by their general location in the Kawanakajima area and do not limit them to Takeda/Uesugi encounters, then the battles fought there in 1181, 1335 and 1399 should possibly be included, giving 11 battles of Kawanakajima – surely a world record!

Uesugi Kenshin is seen here in a very contemplative mood, as shown in a print by Yoshitoshi. Uesugi Kenshin's adoption of the life of a Buddhist monk was expressed in ways that stood in marked contrast to that of Shingen. Kenshin never married, and appears to have remained celibate all his life.

I have taken the approach of viewing Kawanakajima 1553–64 as five separate but related campaigns fought over a period of 11 years against a common strategic background. The catalyst for the long struggle was Takeda Shingen's desire to conquer Shinano province. Kawanakajima lay practically on the border between Shinano and the province of Echigo. Echigo was the territory of Uesugi Kenshin, who was determined to stop his neighbour in his tracks.

Kawanakajima 1553–64 represents a transitional period in samurai warfare, and for this reason alone the five campaigns repay careful study. They encapsulate a shift from a time when firearms were scarce to an age when they were plentiful, and from an age when campaigns were cut short by the demands of agriculture to a time when virtually professional armies of samurai did nothing but fight.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT

Japan in the Sengoku Period

The rivalry between the families of Takeda and Uesugi that found such memorable expression at Kawanakajima was in principle little different from many other conflicts that raged in various areas of Japan during the 16th century. This was Japan's *Sengoku Jidai* – the 'Age of Warring States' – an era of confusion and warfare that takes its name from the similar 'Warring States Period' of Ancient China.

Japan was no stranger to war, and the combatants of the Sengoku Period often looked back to the time of their ancestors to find parallels and precursors to their own deeds of heroism. Many of these folk memories were focussed on the Gempei War, the great 12th-century civil war, from which one clan, the Minamoto, had emerged victorious to seize the reins of government. The divine emperor was relegated to the status of a figurehead, and from 1192 real power in Japan was in the hands of the *Shogun*, the military dictator from the samurai class.

The power of the Shogun waxed and waned as centuries passed. The Minamoto dynasty of Shoguns lasted only three generations, and a doomed attempt at imperial restoration during the 14th century merely replaced the Minamoto's successors with another dynasty of Shoguns, the Ashikaga. The Ashikaga family proved much more successful at governing Japan, until a cataclysmic event in Japanese politics proved to be beyond even their control.

The great challenge came in 1467 when the Onin War, another fierce civil war, broke out. Much of the fighting took place within Kyoto, Japan's capital city, causing widespread damage to property and to the reputation of the Shogun. The spread of the fighting to the provinces proved yet more alarming, forcing the Shogun's provincial deputies to choose sides, and within a couple of decades the apparatus of central government seemed in tatters. The Shogun was openly defied in his capital, while beyond Kyoto the system of taxation upon which his government depended became increasingly meaningless. The powerful landowners or daimyo (literally 'great names') began to take control of their own affairs, as much for self-defence as self-interest. Some had once been provincial governors.

The battlefield of Kawanakajima looking across the plain from Saijosan. The modern city of Nagano lies in the distance. The Chikumagawa flows in the foreground.


CENTRAL JAPAN, 1542
SEA OF JAPAN
Kasugayama
ECHIGO
UESUGI
(YAMANOUCHI BRANCH)
Itoigawa
Chikumagawa
Toyama
ETCHU
Saigawa
Kawanakajima
KŌZUKE
UESUGI
(OGIGAYATSU BRANCH)
MURAKAMI
Umayabashi
OGASAWARA
Fukashi
(Matsumoto)
Takayama
HIDA
SHINANO
Lake
Suwa
Musashi-
Matsuyama
SUWA
MUSASHI
HOJO
Takato
TAKATO
Edo
(Tokyo)
Kofu
KAI
TAKEDA
MINO
KISO
SAGAMI
HOJO
Tokaido 'East Sea Road'
Odawara
SURUGA
IMAGAWA
MIKAWA
IMAGAWA
Okazaki
TOTOMI
IMAGAWA
Sumpu
IZU
HOJO
Kakegawa
Hamamatsu
N
Province boundary
Major castle
Provincial capital
HOJO Major clan (Daimyo)
0 25 miles
0 25 km
PACIFIC OCEAN

A mounted samurai of c. 1530, dressed in armour that would have been seen on the field of Kawanakajima. He carries a *naginata*, which was seen less often in a horseman's hands than a straight spear.

Some, like Takeda Shingen, hailed from ancient aristocratic families. Many, like Uesugi Kenshin, however, were highly skilled military opportunists. Such daimyo seized power through usurpation, murder, warfare or marriage – indeed by any means that would safeguard their positions and their livelihoods. This manifested itself in the form of *yamashiro* (mountain castles) atop hundreds of Japan's mountains. The daimyo used chains of these simple fortresses to control and guard their provinces from optimistic tax collectors and aggressive rivals.

The warlords of central Japan

In the centre of Japan's main island of Honshu lay the territories of some the most influential daimyo who fought each other in a bewildering array of alliances and rivalries during the first half of the 16th century. The Hojo family occupied the Kanto, the area around modern Tokyo. Beyond the Hakone mountains to the west along the Tokaido Road on the Pacific coast lay the lands of their rivals the Imagawa. Within the Imagawa territories the great Fujigawa (Fuji River) entered the sea. Upstream beyond the massive bulk of Mount Fuji was Takeda territory. This was the province of Kai (now Yamanashi Prefecture), which was mountainous and landlocked but had fertile soil and a long warrior tradition. North of Takeda-controlled Kai was the roof of Japan: Shinano province, also called Shinshu from the Chinese reading of the word.

During the early Sengoku Period Shinano province was not dominated by a single daimyo like Kai's Takeda. Instead a handful of minor lords such as Suwa, Ogasawara, Murakami and Takato farmed and defended their own jealously guarded lands. Shinano was also landlocked with just one province between it and the Sea of Japan. This was Echigo, corresponding to today's Niigata Prefecture. Echigo was ruled by the Uesugi, and was also home of the Nagao family, whose most famous son was to change his name to Uesugi when he took over their territories.

Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin fought each other in the area called Kawanakajima. It lay in the north of Shinano, the province that was the 'buffer state' between the two rivals.

CHRONOLOGY

1521: Birth of Takeda Shingen
1530: Birth of Uesugi Kenshin
1536: The siege of Umi no kuchi, Shingen's first experience of battle
1541: Shingen deposes his father when he discovers plans to disinherit him
1542: Shingen's invasion of Shinano begins with a move against the Suwa area
1547: The siege of Shiga and the battle of Odaihara allow Shingen to occupy more Shinano territory, and also illustrate his ruthlessness
1548: The battle of Uedahara provides a temporary setback when Shingen is defeated by Murakami Yoshikiyo
1553: With the fall of Katsurao castle Murakami Yoshikiyo flees to Echigo and joins Kenshin.
The first battle of Kawanakajima is fought, consisting of a series of skirmishes at Hachiman and Fuse
1555: Shingen reinforces his castle at Asahiyama, which is then attacked by Kenshin.
The second battle of Kawanakajima becomes a long stalemate across the Saigawa
1557: The bitter siege of Katsurayama opens hostilities for the third battle of Kawanakajima.
An indecisive third battle is fought at Uenohara
1560: The battle of Okehazama destroys Imagawa Yoshimoto and elevates Oda Nobunaga, thus altering the balance of power
1561: Kenshin's siege of Odawara intimidates Shingen.
The fourth battle of Kawanakajima
25 September: Kenshin advances to Saijosan
9 October: Shingen makes plans to surprise him
16 October: Kenshin makes the first move and recrosses the river
17 October: Kenshin surprises Shingen at Hachimanbara. A single combat is fought between Kenshin and Shingen. The detached Takeda force descend from Saijosan to save the day
1564: The fifth battle of Kawanakajima is fought at Shiozaki
1568: A notional 'sixth battle of Kawanakajima' takes place near Lake Nojiri.
Oda Nobunaga deposes the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshiaki and occupies Kyoto, making the Takeda/Uesugi conflict largely irrelevant
1572: Shingen defeats Tokugawa Ieyasu at the battle of Mikata ga Hara
1573: The death of Takeda Shingen at Noda
1575: The Takeda are defeated at the battle of Nagashino
1577: Kenshin beats Oda Nobunaga at the battle of Tedorigawa
1578: Death of Uesugi Kenshin