

Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582)

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INTRODUCTION

Oda Nobunaga was among the most controversial Daimyos (warlord) and a key player in the unification of 16th century Japan.¹ Nobunaga's suppression of Buddhist clans and nickname of "Demon King" has tarnished his image in the annals of history, nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Nobunaga was a brilliant general who conquered more than half of Japan.

EARLY LIFE

Oda Nobunaga was born on 23 June 1534 in Nagoya Castle, Owari Province, and was given the infant name Kipposhi.² He was the second son of Oda Nobuhide, who was warlord and magistrate of lower Owari Province. Nobunaga was proficient in horse riding, archery, swordsmanship and spear fighting, and was notable for not following traditional Japanese manners. In his teenage years, Nobunaga also became fond of the newly-introduced *Tanegashima* (Japanese matchlock arquebus based on imported Portuguese firearms) and this later inspired him to emphasise firearms in his military tactics.³

In 1549, a political marriage was arranged for Nobunaga, who married Saito Nou, daughter of the

Saito clan leader, in order to forge peace between the two clans. In 1551, Nobunaga's father Nobuhide died of an unexpected illness and Nobunaga was appointed to be his successor. When Nobunaga responded to his father's death by throwing ceremonial incense at the altar,⁴ many of the clan advisors and generals felt that Nobunaga was incapable compared to his well-mannered brother Nobuyuki.

Upon Nobuhide's death, the Oda clan was wracked by infighting. Eventually, Nobunaga's uncle Nobutomo murdered the *Shugo* (imperial governor) of Owari and attempted to replace Nobunaga as the leader of the Oda clan.⁵ Knowing himself to be at a disadvantage, Nobunaga persuaded another uncle, Nobumitsu, to aid him in murdering Nobutomo and taking control of Kiyosu Castle, which became Nobunaga's base for the next ten years.

In order to strengthen his power, Nobunaga made allies with the neighboring Imagawa clan of Suruga Province and Kira clan of Mikawa province to ensure the safety of Owari's borders. Nobuyuki rebelled in 1556 with a few generals who had been loyal to Nobuhide. He was later defeated by Nobunaga in the Battle of Ino. Nobunaga spared Nobuyuki's life

at the request of their mother, Tsuchida Gozen. However, in the following year, Noboyuki rebelled again and this time Nobunaga executed Noboyuki himself. In 1559, Nobunaga unified the Owari province and eliminated all threats to his power.

BATTLE OF OKEHAZAMA

The battle of Okehazama was Nobunaga's first important military victory and showed his strategic talents in war. The battle occurred in May 1560 in Dengaku Hazam, Owari Province. A powerful warlord and old ally of the Oda clan, Imagawa Yoshimoto decided to invade Nobunaga's territory using the excuse of marching on Kyoto to revive the Ashikaga Shogunate's power.⁶ Yoshimoto had an army of 25,000 men with other allies such as the Matsudaira clan of Mikawa province whereas Nobunaga was only able to rally 3,000 troops to fight the battle. In order to raise his men's morale, Nobunaga performed his favorite Atsumori dance for his troops and prayed for victory. Despite the suggestion of Nobunaga's advisor and generals to remain passive or even surrender, Nobunaga insisted on launching a frontal attack even though he had a smaller army because he believed that this was his only chance to surprise Yoshimoto's army and maintain morale among his men.

A capable and careful strategist, Nobunaga sent scouts to inspect different routes into Owari province in order to locate the perfect for an ambush. His

scouts reported that Yoshimoto's troops were resting at Dengaku-hazama, which was a narrow gorge geographically perfect for Nobunaga's surprise assault. On a night when Yoshimoto's army was celebrating their upcoming victory, Nobunaga set up an array of flags and dummy troops made of straw and spare helmets to give the impression of a large number of soldiers attacking, while Nobunaga and his real troops took up position behind the camp. A sudden thunderstorm forced Yoshimoto's troops to seek shelter and Nobunaga struck directly at the enemy leader's tent. The ambush was so sudden that Yoshimoto initially thought that quarrelling had broken out among his own troops. Realising his mistake too late, Yoshimoto was struck down as he emerged from his tent and the Oda were victorious.⁷

TENKA FUBU

After the victory in Okehazama, Nobunaga's fame as a commander spread. He became increasingly influential through the conquest of different clans using various methods. For example, Nobunaga gained control of the Mino province by taking advantage of the ineptitude of his father-in-law's grandson, Saito Tatsuoki, and convincing Tatsuoki's advisors to abandon their master.

After taking over Mino, Nobunaga renamed the original Inabayama Castle, "Gifu" after the legendary Mount Qi of China

where the Zhou Dynasty started, indicating his ambition to conquer all of Japan. Nobunaga adopted the personal slogan *Tenka Fubu*: "all the world by force of arms."⁸ From 1564 onwards, Nobunaga made plans to march on Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan.⁹

In 1568, Nobunaga received a request from Ashikaga Yoshiaki, brother of the murdered 13th Ashikaga Shogun, to assist him in regaining the Shogunate. Seeing this as an opportunity to enter Kyoto, Nobunaga agreed to help. Nobunaga reached Kyoto in a short period of time, drove out the opposing forces and their figurehead Shogun and replaced him with Yoshiaki.¹⁰ Nobunaga refused the post of *Kanrei* (Deputy Commander) from the new Shogun and continued to expand his influence.¹¹ Dissatisfied with being just another puppet, Ashikaga Yoshiaki secretly formed an alliance of opposing *Daimyos* against the Oda clan.

A major force in the anti-Nobunaga alliance were the Buddhist *sohei* (warrior monks), from the nearby Enryaku-ji monastery, a significant holy site. In 1571, Nobunaga burnt down the monastery and killed several thousand monks, women and children, alienating many in Japan.

After conquering many provinces, Nobunaga was in control of almost half of Japan and people saw Takeda Shingen as the last hope for stopping his expansion.

Takeda Shingen was one of the strongest *daimyo* of 16th century Japan and famous for his fearsome cavalry.¹² Nevertheless, Shingen died unexpectedly and his less talented successor was defeated by Nobunaga at Nagashino. Nobunaga had compensated for the slow reloading time of the powerful *Tangeshima* by building barricades and staggering volleys of gunfire to create a continuous hail of bullets. Unable to overrun the gunners, the Takeda cavalry suffered heavy casualties and fled. Eventually, Nobunaga conquered the Takeda clan in 1582.

INCIDENT AT HONNO-JI AND DEATH


In 1582, Nobunaga ordered one of his generals, Mitsuhide Akechi, to assist his favored general Hashiba Hideyoshi in western Honshu while he himself prepared for an invasion of Shikoku. Nobunaga stayed at a temple in Kyoto called Honno-Ji guarded by only a few dozen servants and bodyguards since it was in his territory and it was considered safe. Mitsuhide Akechi took the opportunity to surround the temple with his troops.¹³ Nobunaga's bodyguards were soon overwhelmed and the temple set ablaze. Trapped, Nobunaga decided to commit *seppuku* (ritual suicide through disembowelment) in one of the inner rooms.¹⁴

The cause of Mitsuhide's "betrayal" is controversial. It has been proposed that Mitsuhide heard a rumor that Nobunaga

would confiscate Mitsuhide's fief and grant it to his own page, Mori Ranmaru.¹⁵ Other motives include revenge for Nobunaga's numerous insults and derisive treatment of Mitsuhide, or Mitsuhide's jealousy as Nobunaga had shown greater favor towards Hideyoshi.

Nonetheless, just eleven days after the coup at Honnō-ji, Mitsuhide was killed at the Battle of Yamazaki and his army was defeated by Hideyoshi, who eventually became heir to Nobunaga's legacy. He is more widely known as Toyotomi Hideyoshi. At the time of Nobunaga's death, he was in control of more than half of the provinces in Japan, most of which were in the Kyoto region.

CONCLUSION

Nobunaga will always be remembered in Japan as one of the most brutal figures of the Sengoku (Warring States) period but is also recognized as one of Japan's greatest strategists. Nobunaga was the first of three great unifiers of Japan at the end of the 16th century.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Nobunaga was well on his way to the complete conquest and unification of Japan when he committed seppuku. He was the pioneer who built a solid foundation for his successors, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who completed the unification of the country, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, who eventually founded the Tokugawa Shogunate that provided stable rule over Japan for the next 250 years.¹⁷ 

Endnotes

1. Daimyo were the powerful territorial lords in pre-modern Japan (10th century-mid 19th century) who ruled most of the country from their vast, hereditary land holdings.
2. Jansen, Marius (2000). *The Making of Modern Japan*, 11.
3. Tanegashima was a type of matchlock firearm introduced to Japan through the Portuguese in 1543.
4. Okanoya, Shigezane (2007) [Translation based on 1943 edition published by Iwanami Shoten, Japan. First published in 1871.]. Dykstra, Andrew; Dykstra, Yoshiko, eds. *Meishōgenkōroku* [Shogun and Samurai - Tales of Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu] (PDF). translated by Andrew and Yoshiko Dykstra from the original Japanese. Retrieved 2010-07-21. Tale 3 - His Extraordinary Appearance
5. Shugo was a title translated as governor; it was given to certain officials in feudal Japanto oversee a province's operation.
6. A shogun is the head of a hereditary military governor (Shogunate) of Japan during 1192 to 1867. The Ashikaga Shogunate was the weakest shogunate compared to the other ones established due to the fact that it had lack of direct territories, thus shoguns depended heavily on the loyalty of the daimyo that held the military power locally.
7. Weston, Mark. "Oda Nobunaga: The Warrior Who United Half of Japan." *Giants of Japan: The Lives of Japan's Greatest Men and Women*. New York: Kodansha International, 2002. 140-45. Print.

8. Seal, F.W. "Oda Nobunaga".
9. Kyoto in old times meant "the seat of imperial palace" or "capital". From 1192 to 1867, sovereignty of the state was exercised by the shoguns or the advisors as Emperor only had great symbolic authority but little political power.
10. Gifu City Walking Map. Gifu Lively City Public Corporation, 2007.
11. Kanrei was a high political post in feudal Japan; it is usually translated as Shogun's Deputy.
12. Shingen Takeda was a pre-eminent daimyo from Kai province that had exceptional military prestige skills. In 1572, he was the only daimyo with necessary power and tactical skill to stop Nobunaga Oda from unifying Japan.
13. Saito, Hisho. A History of Japan. p. 130.
14. Seppuku is a form of Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment. Seppuku was originally reserved only for samurai to honor their own code. Seppuku was either used voluntarily by samurai to die with honour rather than fall into their enemies or a form of punishment for samurai who had committed serious offenses and brought shame to themselves.
15. Beasley, W. G. (August 31, 2000). "The Unifiers". The Japanese Experience: A Short History of Japan. University of California Press. p. 123. ISBN 978-0-520-22560-2.
16. The Sengoku period (1467-1573) is the period in Japanese history marked by social upheaval, political intrigue and constant military conflict that also known as the Warring States period. It came to an end when all political power was unified under the Tokugawa shogunate.
17. The Tokugawa shogunate was the last feudal Japanese military government which existed between 1603 and 1868. The heads of government were the shoguns and each was a member of the Tokugawa clan. Tokugawa Ieyasu was the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate who eventually succeeded Nobunaga Oda and Toyotomi Hideyoshi and unified Japan.