Oda Nobunaga

1534 - 1582

1534 - 1559

The Oda of Owari

Oda Nobunaga, as played by Ogata Naoto, in the NHK Taiga Drama 'Nobunaga, King of Zipangu'.

Nobunaga was born Oda Kippôshi, the second son of Oda Nobuhide (1508? -1549), a minor lord whose family once served the Shiba shugo. Nobuhide was a skilled warrior, and spent much of his time fighting the samurai of Mikawa and Mino. He also had enemies closer to home - the Oda were divided into two separate camps, with both vying for control of Owari's eight districts. Nobuhide's branch, of which he was one of three elders, was based at Kiyosu castle. The rival branch was to the north, in Iwakura Castle.

Many of Nobuhide's battles were fought in Mikawa, against the Matsudaira and the Imagawa clan. The latter were old and prestigious, rulers of Suruga and overlords of Tôtômi. The Matsudaira were as obscure as the Oda, and while not as splintered politically, they were slowly coming under the Imagawa's influence. The decade leading up to 1548 was dominated along the Mikawa-Owari border by the contention of three men - Oda Nobuhide, Matsudaira Hirotada, and Imagawa Yoshimoto. In 1542, Imagawa, supported by the Matsudaira, marched as far west as the Owari border, and was met by Oda Nobuhide and his younger brother Tsuda Nobumitsu at Azukizaka. In this bitter fight, the Oda emerged victorious, but not decisively. In 1548 Nobuhide attempted to arrange the defection of a certain Matsudaira Tadamoto of Mikawa away from Hirotada. Tadamoto, however, ended up being killed in the attempt, and Oda launched an attack on Okazaki, evidently to make up for the disappointment. Matsudaira Hirotada thus found himself in difficult straights, and called on Imagawa for assistance. Yoshimoto replied that he would be happy to help - so long as Hirotada was willing to send along his young son as a hostage. Hirotada had little choice, and shipped off 6-year old Takechiyo (the future Tokugawa Ieyasu) westward. En-route to Suruga, unfortunately, Oda loyalists intercepted the hostage party and made off with Takechiyo, taking the child to Nobuhide. Nobuhide immediately made use of his new card and demanded that Hirotada give up Okazaki in return for his son's life. Hirotada wisely refused, and Nobuhide, his bluff called, did no harm to the boy. Later in 1548, Imagawa and Oda met again in battle, and this time the Imagawa came out the winner. The following year Nobuhide died, leaving an Oda clan divided in every possible way.

Anxious to capitalize on the death of his rival, Imagawa Yoshimoto sent his uncle, the talented monk-general Sessai Choro, to attack Nobuhide's heir, Nobuhiro. Sessai besieged Nobuhiro in Anjo Castle, and sent word to Nobunaga that unless he wished to see his elder brother made to commit suicide, he would have to send back Takechiyo. Nobunaga could hardly refuse, and so Takechiyo ended up in Suruga, even though his father Hirotada had passed away that same year.

The progress of the next three years is hazy. By 1551, however, Nobunaga was the leader of his faction of the Oda and master of Kiyosu. His principal enemy (beyond his own family) was his father's nemesis, the Imagawa. Nobunaga's northern borders (not counting the area of Mino controlled by the Iwakura Oda) were more or less secured, at least: before his death, Nobuhide had arranged for the marriage of Nobunaga to Saitô Dosan's daughter. Saitô Toshimasa (Dosan) (1494-1556) was a colorful figure, a former oil-merchant (if tradition is to be believed) who supplanted the Tôki family of Mino.

Pausing for a monent, we see the young Nobunaga. He is estimated to have stood between 5'3" and 5'6" tall, and was a clear speaker with a strong prescence about him. He was considered a not unhandsome man, with a somewhat prominant nose and scarce beard. As a young man, Nobunaga was said to have been a brash and altogether rude

fellow whose behavior often bordered on the disgraceful. Supposedly, he even acted out as his father's funeral was being conducted at the Bansyô-ji. This popular view of Nobunaga's early days is in part substantiated by the suicide of Hirate Kiyohide (1493-1553), one of Nobuhide's old retainers tasked with helping Nobunaga rule. Hirade committed what was called *kanshi*, or remonstration through suicide. The old samurai wrote up a letter urging Nobunaga to change his ways and then slit his belly. His death is said to have had a dramatic effect on Nobunaga. He did mend his ways, and in time built the Seisyu-ji in Owari to honor his loyal retainer.

By 1558, Nobunaga had largely managed to unify his family, although he suffered the rebellion of two brothers in so doing. In 1556, Nobuhiro, his elder brother, had plotted with the new (and hostile) lord of Mino, Saitô Yoshitatsu, an act Nobunaga pardoned him for. The following year, his younger brother Nobuyuki conspired with Shibata Katsuie and Hayashi Michikatsu and, if the legend is true, Nobunaga's own mother. Nobunaga learned of the treason and had Nobuyuki killed. Shibata and Hayashi, on the other hand, were spared - perhaps sending a powerful message to any other members of the Oda family who were thinking treacherous thoughts.

As just noted, Saitô Yoshitatsu was the new lord of Mino, having killed Dôsan at the Battle of Nagaragawa (1556), and he was no friend to the Oda. The Oda's forts in Mino were quickly reduced, and Nobunaga's attempts to make in-roads in that province were turned back. At the same time, Imagawa Yoshimoto was knocking on Owari's southeastern door, having all but absorbed Mikawa and the Matsudaira clan. Imagawa's army had lost some of it's potency with the death of Sessai Choro in 1555 but Yoshimoto could call on the services of a young and skillful ally - Matsudaira Motoyasu, a man whose fate would prove inter-twined with that of Nobunaga. In 1558, Motoyasu fought his first battle - at Nobunaga's expense. Oda had recently bribed Terabe Castle away from the Matsudaira, and Motoyasu, with the Imagawa's blessing, took it back, defeating a relief force sent by Nobunaga. The next year, Imagawa did a little horse-trading of his own, and lured Otaka castle away from the Oda. Nobunaga was furious, and had the fort surrounded. Soon, the garrison began to run out of food, and to lead a relief effort, Imagawa sent Matsudaira Motoyasu. Using a crafty bit of diversion, Motoyasu successfully provisioned Otaka - much to Nobunaga's chagrin.

1560

Okehazama

The following year, 1560, Imagawa Yoshimoto decided to make a decisive move to the west. His aim was to drive along the Tokaido coast, brushing aside the Oda and any who did not submit to the Imagawa army with the ultimate goal of occupying Kyoto. To this end Yoshimoto gathered perhaps 20,000 to 25,000 men from Suruga, Totomi, and Mikawa in June, leaving his son Ujizane to run things while he was off conquering. He included Matsudaira Motoyasu in the invasion force, and dispatched the Mikawa samurai to reduce the fort of Marume. Meanwhile, the rest of the

Imagawa host crossed in Owari and assaulted Washizu Castle. The commanders of the besieged forts (Sakuma Môrishige and Oda Genba) managed to get off letters of warning to Nobunaga in Kiyosu, and his retainers were divided on what course of action to take. Given the obvious disparity in numbers, it seemed logical to adopt a defensive posture, or even to capitulate. Nobunaga was for fighting. With all the brash and unpredictable élan he was to show throughout his career, he ordered a conch shell blown and the garrison of Kiyosu made ready for battle.

The next morning, while Marume and Washizu were going up in flames, Nobunaga led a handful of men out of the castle and headed in the direction of Imagawa's army. Along the way he was joined by enough ashigaru and samurai to make an attack credible-if not particularly wise. At ten to one odds, Nobunaga's chances seemed slim at best, although the priests at the Atsuta Shrine that he stopped at to pray for victory commented on how calm he appeared.

Meanwhile, Imagawa was celebrating the course of his campaign so far. Encamped in the Dengakuhazama gorge, Imagawa's army rested and enjoyed sake, their leader engrossed in the viewing of the heads taken at Marume and Washizu. Nobunaga, paused near the Imagawa's Narumi Fort, learned of the Imagawa's location from scouts, and played a stratagem. He had battle flags hoisted up from behind a hill, presenting the image to the Imagawa stationed inside Narumi that the Oda were resting nearby. In fact, Nobunaga slipped his men quietly away, leading them in the direction of the Dengakuhazama. At this critical point, a bit of good luck went Nobunaga's way. A summer thunderstorm broiled over and let loose with a torrential downpour, enabling Nobunaga to sneak up quite close to the Imagawa's position. When the rains abated, he gave the order to attack.

Such was the suddenness and ferocity of the attack; Imagawa assumed that a fight had broken out among his own men. His misconception was quickly righted by the appearance of Oda spearmen who succeded in taking the head of the lord of Suruga. Nobunaga's surprise attack worked beautifully, and once word spread of Yoshimoto's demise, the Imagawa army fled, utterly defeated. Matsudaira Motoyasu, resting his men in Marume, heard of the defeat and thought it best to return to Mikawa forthwith.

Nobunaga's stunning victory at Dengakuhazama (known to posterity by the name of nearby Okehazama village) changed the course of Japanese history. It had two immediate results. Firstly, it brought Oda Nobunaga national fame and removed a wolf from his back door. Secondly, it allowed Matsudaira Motoyasu to extricate himself from the Imagawa's clutches and establish Mikawa as an independent province. Both results were to have heady consequences in the years to come.

1561-1570

Nobunaga's ambition

In 1561, Saitô Yoshitatsu, who had continued to fend off advances by the Oda, passed away, probably of leprosy. This left his son, Tatsuoki, in command and Nobunaga was quick to take advantage of the new lord's weak character. By bribing away key Saito generals, Nobunaga was able to weaken the defenses of Mino and in 1567 he attacked Inabayama, the headquarters of the Saitô clan. According to tradition, the hill-top castle was brought down by Hashiba (Toyotomi) Hideyoshi, although this valuable Oda retainer does not begin appearing in written records until around 1576.

The following year, Nobunaga moved his capital to Inabayama and renamed the castle Gifu. Everything about the move was auspicious, and made possible by two alliances - one to Matsudaira Motoyasu, and another to Takeda Shingen of Kai and Shinano. The name Gifu was taken from the castle from which Wu Wang, ruler of the Chou, had set out in the 12th Century to unify China. Emperor Ogimachi sent a letter of congratulations and Nobunaga adopted the motto *Tenka Fubu*, or 'the realm covered in military glory' (or, alternatively, 'The nation under one sword'').

The only real opposition to his moves in Mino came from the Asai, who had declared war on the Saito at around the same time. Asai Nagamasa considered Mino at least partly his, and a small war quickly brewed up on the Ômi-Mino border. Nobunaga quickly arranged a peace and sealed an alliance by marrying his sister (O-ichi) off to Asai Nagamasa.

Nobunaga's ambition was given a powerful stimulant with the arrival of Ashikaga Yoshiaki at Gifu in 1567. The brother of the late shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiteru, murdered in 1565, Yoshiaki had spent the intervening years seeking out a patron. Yoshiteru's assassins - the Miyoshi and Matsunaga clans - had seen fit to legitimize their domination of Kyoto politics by naming the 2-year old Ashikaga Yoshihide as Yoshiteru's successor. When Yoshiaki heard the news, he gave up a Buddhist priesthood and fled with Hosokawa Fujitaka, both out of fear for his own life and in the hopes he would find a warlord strong enough to set things right in Kyôto. That he was the logical choice to follow Yoshiteru was clear…finding a Daimyô that would do something about it proved difficult. In his search, he approached the Takeda of Wakasa (not to be confused with the Takeda of Kai), the Uesugi of Echigo, and the Asakura of Echizen. The last seemed the most promising, in terms of military strength relative to a proximity to the capital, and indeed, Asakura Yoshikage promised to help. But Yoshikage stalled and in the end admitted that he was powerless to assist Yoshiaki's nomadic party.

Then Yoshiaki turned to Oda Nobunaga, who fairly jumped at the opportunity. In fact, he had expressed a desire in late 1565 to do just what Yoshiaki was asking, and it may be that Yoshiaki had been leery of approaching this young upstart to begin with. Uesugi and Asakura, after all, were names that carried quite a bit of prestige along with them. But, by 1567, Yoshiaki had evidently decided that beggars couldn't be choosers.

In 1568 Nobunaga's army marched westward in Yoshiaki's name, brushing aside the Rokkaku of southern Omi and putting to flight Miyoshi and Matsunaga. Matsunaga Hisahide promptly submitted (for which he was confirmed Daimyô of Yamato) while the Miyoshi withdrew to Settsu. In the ninth month Nobunaga entered Kyoto and within three weeks Yoshiaki was installed as the fifteenth Ashikaga shogun with the approval of Emperor Ogimachi. The mutually beneficial relationship of Yoshiaki and Nobunaga had thus far borne sweet fruit. In time, it would grow quite sour, foreshadowed by Nobunaga's refusal to accept the position of Kanrei, or deputy shogun, even when the Emperor himself requested he do so in 1569 . Nobunaga seemed determined to exist in a sort of political limbo, and expressed little interest in any orthodox rank or titles, including, as we shall see, that of shogun. That Nobunaga was the real ruler in Kyoto was the only part of the equation that lacked any sort of ambiguity.

1570-1573

Resistance

It was hardly surprising that the Daimyô who lived outside Nobunaga's sphere of influence would become quite agitated by the developments in Kyoto. Naturally, upheaval in Kyoto was nothing new - but Nobunaga was. He was quite unlike any of the various Miyoshi, Hosokawa, or Hatakeyama contenders of the past. Those lords, the Hosokawa Sumimoto's and Miyoshi Motonaga's of 1500-1565, had struggled for personal gain and prestige. Nobunaga seemed different. Certainly, he aimed for personal gain and prestige as well, but the sort of gain he desired was most different. By 1568, it is safe to say that Nobunaga aimed to rule all of Japan. Of course, this particular wish was hardly unique among the Daimyô - in point of fact, it is quite misleading to say that Nobunaga somehow possessed a vision denied his contemporaries. Rather, Nobunaga was in the right place at the right time and presented with the right window. The other great warlords of his day (some arguably greater as men go), Môri Motonari, Takeda Shingen, Uesugi Kenshin, and Hôjô Ujiyasu were all far removed from the capital, and in the case of the last three, unable to move due to the ambitions of their neighbors. The key was location. By taking Kyoto, Nobunaga positioned himself nicely in the center of Japan, which could be called the nation's 'soft under-belly'. While Nobunaga would face an implacable enemy in the Ikko-ikki that dwelled just beyond the Kinai, the weakness of the Daimyô within that region allowed him to build, by 1573, a considerable power-base. This is not to say, of course, that Nobunaga lacked the talents usually ascribed to him. But it is perhaps inaccurate to describe him as something other than a 'sengoku Daimyô'. He was rather the ultimate expression of the 'sengoku-Daimyô'. His power was based almost solely on the point of a sword, and as he grew in power, so did his use for diplomacy diminish. He kept a tight rein on his retainers, and was ruthless to his opponents, especially those who proved especially troublesome to him. His campaigns would be long and hard-fought as his reputation for cruelty grew. Few of his enemies had any illusion about what surrender would mean.

In early 1570, Nobunaga was presented with the first real challenge to his rise. Perhaps in an effort to feel out opposition, Nobunaga had evidently pressed Yoshiaki to request all the local Daimyô to come to Kyôto and attend a certain banquet. One of those who presence was requested was none other than Asakura Yoshikage, the very Daimyô who had frittered his own chance to champion Yoshiaki. Suspecting that Nobunaga was behind the 'invitation', Yoshikage refused, an act Nobunaga declared disloyal to both the shogun and the emperor. With this pretext well in hand, Nobunaga raised an army and marched on Echizen. Initially, all went well for the attackers, with the Asakura revealing their rather lack-luster leadership abilities. By March Nobunaga, supported by Tokugawa Ieyasu (the former Matsudaira Motoyasu), had penetrated Echizen's southern approaches and was moving on Yoshikage's capital (Ichijo-no-tani). Just then, Oda received startling news. His brother-in-law, Asai Nagamasa, had suddenly switched sides and gathered troops to help the Asakura. In fact, Nagamasa's change of heart was probably not as great a surprise as one might think. The Asai and Asakura had been allies for decades, and a single marriage - even if it included the Daimyô of the clan - was not enough to nullify such a long friendship.

At any rate, Nobunaga was placed in a bit of a tricky spot by Nagamasa's defection, but with the stout Tokugawa

troops and wiles of Hashiba Hideyoshi at his disposal, he managed to extricate himself back to Kyoto without great loss. He wasted little time in taking issue with Nagamasa. In July he moved on the Asai's stronghold - Odani Castle - combining his levied troops with a sizable contingent of Tokugawa men for a total of 28,000 soldiers. Asai Nagamasa and Asakura Kagetake marched out to meet this host, and with their combined 20,000-man army, faced Nobunaga at the Anegawa River. The battle was hotly contested on the part of the Asai, but resulted in a victory for Nobunaga and Ieyasu. It was by no means decisive, but Anegawa represented a turning point in Nobunaga's career, in that while Okehazama may have been a fluke and the Saito and Rokkaku hardly impressive, Nobunaga was a man to be taken seriously.

But Asai and Asakura proved tenacious opponents. Later in 1570, they led another combined army along the coast of Lake Biwa and defeated an Oda army near Otsu, killing one of Nobunaga's own brothers, Nobuharu. In a significant development, the warrior-monks of Mt Hiei lent their support to the Asai and Asakura, a fatal error, as Nobunaga would ruthlessly prove in late 1571. In the meantime, Nobunaga found Ikko and warrior-monk resistance to his expansion stiffening at every turn. In Kwatchi, the warrior-monks of the Ishiyama Honganji fortress, well equipped with firearms, assisted the Miyoshi in their struggle against the Oda. In Ise, the Ikko-ikki of the Nagashima area openly defied Nobunaga and would cause him considerable difficulty until he dealt with them in 1574. An early struggle with the *Ikko* of Ise had already claimed the life of Nobunaga's brother Nobuoki (1569) and a preliminary assault in May of 1571 on Nagashima developed into a complete and costly fiasco.

By 1571 Nobunaga's position, while not in grave danger, was becoming a difficult one. Now actively arrayed against him were the Asai, Asakura, and Miyoshi clans, supported by Ikko and warrior monks from the Honganji, Enryakuji (of Mt. Hiei), Negoroji, and Nagashima. The Honganji proved the most formidable: head priest Kennyo Kosa and the Honganji's fanatical adherents were destined to hold out for a decade, in time supported by the Môri clan.

At the same time, there is some evidence that the shogun was busy conspiring against his former patron, sending out letters to the Môri of Western Japan, and to the Takeda, Uesugi, and Hôjô of Eastern Japan. Evidently Yoshiaki had become frustrated with Nobunaga's heavy-handedness, which only increased with the passage of time. By 1571 Oda had imposed a multitude of regulations and constraints on Yoshiaki's administration (chiefly outlined in two documents issued in 1569 and 1570) that all but reduced the shogun to a puppet.

Yoshiaki's best hope seemed to rest on the powerful Takeda Shingen of Kai, who by this point had taken control of Suruga and was pressing Oda's staunch ally, Tokugawa Ieyasu. While historians continue to debate just how deep Yoshiaki's schemes went, surviving documents and correspondence does lead one to believe that Shingen was seen by most as the greatest threat to Nobunaga and that Yoshiaki was proactive in getting the Takeda involved in the anti-Oda alliance.

Nobunaga, hardly willing to allow his enemies time to strangle him, responded with an act of brutality so unusual that even his own generals were shocked. In later 1571, Nobunaga's troops surrounded Mt. Hiei and proceeded to work their way up the mountainside, killing any and all found in their path. By the next day, the once sprawling Enryakuji complex was reduced to ashes and thousands lay dead. The centuries old power of Mt. Hiei had been broken, and Nobunaga was afforded a little breathing room. An attempt to repeat this success at Nagashima, however, ended in failure, and Nobunaga was forced to hold off on further efforts to reduce this stronghold while the Takeda threatened.

In 1572 Takeda Shingen stepped up his forays into Tokugawa's land, and Ieyasu requested military assistance. Nobunaga, despite the aid he had himself gotten from Ieyasu in the past, hesitated (he was, after all, still technically allied to Shingen). Ieyasu's response was to hint that there was little that might otherwise stop the Tokugawa from

actually joining the Takeda - a scenario that would put the Oda in a most precarious position. Wisely, Nobunaga agreed to help as much as his own situation allowed.

In the winter of 1572, Takeda led a large army down from Shinano into Totomi and threatened Ieyasu's headquarters at Hamamatsu. Nobunaga sent a few thousand men under three generals of mixed quality - not enough to stave off the defeat that followed but enough to eliminate any pretext of civility that may have existed between Nobunaga and Shingen. At the same time, Takeda troops actually penetrated Mino, and captured the imposing Iwamura Castle - an embarrassing event that no doubt made Oda furious.

Fortune was destined to smile on Nobunaga in 1573, however. By that May, Takeda Shingen was dead. While the specifics of his passing remain something of a mystery, the loss of Shingen would ultimately prove fatal to the Takeda clan and a boon for Nobunaga. The timing certainly could not have proved worse for Ashikaga Yoshiaki, who in March had fortified Nijo Castle and dispatched letters to Nobunaga's enemies, urging them onward. While Shingen threatened, Nobunaga had been unable to respond to the shogun's defiance, save for making a few good will overtures to Yoshiaki.

The Takeda clan had endeavored to keep Shingen's death a secret, but it seems likely that Nobunaga at least intuited the truth. With all of the furious determination he would become famous for, Nobunaga turned on his remaining enemies in the Chubu region. On 3 May he surrounded Kyoto and caught Yoshiaki unprepared, forcing the shogun to negotiate. An uneasy truce was arranged through the intercession of the Emperor, one that neither side expected to hold for long. In the meantime, Nobunaga took charge of operations against the Nagashima Ikko stronghold and led an army there in July. He was defeated in a sharp struggle and forced to retreat, an embarrassing setback that may have helped goad Yoshiaki into rebelling again in the first week of August. Leaving Mizubuchi Fujihide in charge of Nijo, Yoshiaki barricaded himself in a fort astride the Uji River. His intention evidently was to hold off Nobunaga long enough for the Asai, Asakura, and Honganji to fall on Oda from behind. In fact, Yoshiaki's position was strong - but in the event not strong enough. Realizing the danger inherent in Yoshiaki's recalcitrance, Nobunaga acted swiftly. He assaulted Yoshiaki's stronghold and by 18 August had breached the fort's outer defenses. Yoshiaki sued for peace and pleaded for his life - a request Nobunaga granted. Instead, Yoshiaki was exiled, the last of the Ashikaga shoguns. From now until his death, Nobunaga would act as the defacto Shôgun.

Yoshiaki was barely on the road to refuge in the western provinces when Nobunaga marched north against the Asai and Asakura. He threatened Odani Castle, then ambushed and defeated the Asakura army dutifully dispatched in relief. Leaving a force to mask Odani, Nobunaga chased the fleeing Asakura into Echizen, easily capturing Ichijo-ga-tani. Asakura Yoshikage had abandoned his castle and ended up committing suicide in a temple on 16 September. Nobunaga then returned to Omi and surrounded Odani. Asai Nagamasa died a much less pathetic death then his ally Yoshikage, and made the honorable gesture of returning Nobunaga's sister and her children before committing suicide.

With the Asai and Asakura gone, and the Takeda for the moment quiet, Nobunaga was free to inflict vengeance on the Ikko of Nagashima. Supported by the naval strength of Kûki Yoshitaka of Shima, Nobunaga blockaded Nagashima and captured its outlaying forts. During the August of 1574 the Oda forced the Ikko within the walls of their main fortifications and essentially imprisoned them there. The Nagashima complex was then set alight, and as many as 20,000 men, women, and children were massacred. This was not to be the last of Nobunaga's blood baths, but in many ways it was the most shocking, though not nearly as well known as his destruction of Mt. Hiei.

Within one year, Nobunaga's borders and military clout had grown substantiality, enough to allow him to conduct three initiatives at once: the continued siege of the Honganji, a war of extermination aimed at the Ikko of Echizen and

Kaga, and a showdown with the Takeda. The last would culminate in the bloody struggle at Nagashino.

Nobunaga the Ruler

In early 1574, Nobunaga was promoted to the junior third rank (*ju sanmi*) and made a court advisor (*sangi*); court appointments would continue to be lavished on a near-yearly basis, perhaps in the hopes of placating him. By February 1578 the court had made him *Daijo daijin*, or Grand Minister of State - the highest post that could be given. Yet if the court had hoped that exalted titles would woo Nobunaga, they were to be mistaken. In May of 1574 Nobunaga resigned his titles, pleading unfinished work in the provinces, and stepped up a campaign to force Emperor Ogimachi into retirement. That Nobunaga did not succeed in having Ogimachi removed goes some way towards demonstrating that there was a limit to his power - although what exactly acted as a check on his ambitions is a matter of scholarly debate. Suffice it to say that Nobunaga was in every other way tantamount to a shogun in the lands he controlled. That he did not actually take the title of shogun is generally explained by his not being of Minamoto blood, which is misleading and possibly quite off the mark. A worthwhile discussion of this issue would likely require a careful examination of the rank of Shôgun taken in its greater historical context - beyond the scope of this writing. Let it be said that in all probability Nobunaga could well have taken the title, at least after 1582, but died without saying much on the business himself.

Nobunaga's entry into Kyôto presented him with a situation very different from that which he had come. While Kyôto had come a long way since the dark days of the Ônin War, it was still in relative disrepair, with it's population subject to myriad tollbooths along the roadways and hills infested with bandits. Nobunaga's responsibilities increased exponentially, both militarily and politically after 1568. His first order of business, and that arguably most important to him, was to establish an economic power base and maximize the potential wealth of the Kinai. Among his many measures were included the abolition of tollbooths (perhaps partially as a PR move on his part, as the action was quite popular with the common people) and a series of cadastral surveys in Yamato, Yamashiro, Ômi, and Ise. Nobunaga moved to control the minting and exchange of coins, and brought the merchant city of Sakai under his influence, which in time proved to be worth it's weight in gold. He used his gathering wealth to compensate for the generally poor quality of his common soldiery by buying as many rifles as he could get his hands on-and building his own when the arms factory at Kunimoto (Omi) fell into his hands after 1573.

Culturally Nobunaga was also active. An avid student of the tea ceremony and poetry (if not an exceptional poet) he collected tea items from near and far, and held tea and poetry gatherings with such learned and cultured men as Hosokawa Fujitaka, Imai Sokyu, and Sen no Rikyu. In the same vein he encouraged the giving of tea items and other objects as a reward for exceptional service, as opposed to the traditional grant of land, and the reward of a tea item from Nobunaga's hand was felt to be an exceptional honor (regardless of whether the receiver was much of a tea man himself!).

Westerners fascinated Nobunaga and he showed a high degree of tolerance for their activities, to the extent that he is sometimes referred to mistakenly as a Christian. The chances that Nobunaga planned to convert are probably nonexistent - rather, the Jesuits fulfilled two uses for Nobunaga: 1) they provided him with some of the novelties and

artifacts he habitually collected and probably added to his sense of power (the Jesuits tended to see Nobunaga as the real ruler of Japan - a distinction he could not have but enjoyed) and, 2), they acted as a foil to his Buddhist enemies, if only to increase their frustration. Much has always been made in western works of Nobunaga's relationship with the Jesuits - it is possible, however, that he saw them as merely useful and somewhat amusing diversions. Far more important to Nobunaga were his own retainers, and yet he does not come across as a particularly trustworthy leader. Few if any samurai entered his inner circle of top retainers after 1568. Even those top men he did employ were moved about from place to place, and often treated with at least some modicum of coldness. In 1580, after the fall of the Ishiyama Honganji, Nobunaga summarily dismissed and allowed to die in exile one of his oldest retainers - Sakuma Nobumôri, for alleged incompetence of command. He is recorded as teasing Hideyoshi with the nickname 'Saru', or Monkey, and deriding Akechi Mitsuhide for his poetic ability (actually considered rather good) and his hairline. There are other, more outrageous recordings, but, as always in Sengoku tales, it is sometimes difficult to discern where truth ends and hyperbole begins. For all that, it is likely that Nobunaga would not have been nearly as successful as he was had he been afraid to delegate. Shibata Katsuie, for instance, was dispatched to subdue the Hokuriku and with a few notable exceptions, Nobunaga left him to it for the better part of a decade. When Nobunaga decided to launch a campaign into the Chugoku region, he sent Hideyoshi and Akechi to lead the armies, never once commanding troops there himself.

In 1578 Azuchi Castle was completed in Ômi province and stood as the most impressive castle ever built in Japan. Lavishly decorated and immensely expensive, Azuchi was meant not so much for defense but as a way of clearly illustrating his power to the nation. He went to great lengths to draw merchants and citizens to Azuchi's accompanying town, and probably saw it becoming the long-term capital of the Oda hegemony - in whatever form it took.

While in certain ways a sengoku Daimyô on a grand scale, Nobunaga was a tireless ruler and worked for years to create a military and economic super-state within the slowly widening borders of his realm. The success of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and by extension Tokugawa Ieyasu rests largely on the shoulders of the work Oda Nobunaga did before 1582.

In 1575, of course, there was still much work to be done…

1575

Nagashino

The Battle of Nagashino, 1575

The loss of Shingen in 1573 had ostensibly only slowed the Takeda war machine. The following year Takeda Katsuyori, Shingen's heir, pulled off a strategic coup with the capture of Taketenjin Castle in Totomi. Tokugawa Ieyasu, whose efforts to relieve Taketenjin failed, had his hands full with Katsuyori; while not the ruler his father had been, Katsuyori was brave and was not lacking in aggression. Combined with the skilled Takeda army and the late Shingen's experienced cadre of captains, Katsuyori's indomitable spirit made him a formidable foe

In May 1575 Katsuyori hatched a plot whereby one of Ieyasu's retainers would betray his lord and open the gates of Hamamatsu Castle to the approaching Takeda army. Katsuyori was halfway to Hamamatsu before he learned that the plot had been uncovered and Ieyasu alerted. Perhaps as a consolation prize, Katsuyori turned his attentions to Nagashino Castle, a fort held by a certain Okudaira Sadamasa. When direct attack failed to reduce the garrison, Katsuyori settled in for a siege and attempted to mine the walls. Nagashino may well have fallen had it not been for a brave member of the garrison, Torii Sune'emon, who slipped through the Takeda lines and delivered a message to Ieyasu explaining the castle's predicament. Ieyasu sent Torii back to let Nagashino know that he had no intention of abandoning him, but he was captured and crucified by the Takeda in the attempt.

Tokugawa was determined to rescue Nagashino, but lacked the manpower to do so alone. Nobunaga, on the other hand, was hesitant, perhaps reluctant to take so many of his men and leaders so far from the Kyôto area. In frustration, Ieyasu once again played his trump card - he threatened to join the Takeda and attack Oda as part of their vanguard! Faced with this rather unpleasant prospect, Nobunaga changed his mind and agreed to throw his full weight into the effort. Moving quickly, he gathered an army of some 30,000 men, to be commanded by some of his best commanders, including Shibata Katsuie, Hashiba Hideyoshi, and Takigawa Kazumasu. Tokugawa brought about 8,000 men of his own, tough Mikawa men whose skill would once again more than make up for their relative lack in numbers. Perhaps most importantly, Nobunaga arranged to deal with the vaunted Takeda cavalry by bringing along a sizable contingent of riflemen (around 3,000) and logs to throw up a palisade for protection.

In late June, the Oda and Tokugawa forces converged on Nagashino, putting Katsuyori in a difficult spot. Nagashino Castle, bolstered by Torii's brave sacrifice, was holding firm, leaving the weary Takeda army outnumbered AND without a base from which to conduct operations from. The older - and wiser - Takeda retainers urged Katsuyori to either retreat or make one last push to take the castle. Unfortunately for them and the Takeda clan, Katsuyori chose to do neither - he ordered preparations for an all-out attack on the Oda and Tokugawa army massed just to their west. The attack, in retrospect, was almost bound to fail - even had Nobunaga left most of his guns at home and dispensed with his palisade building. The Takeda were tired from weeks in the field in poor weather, outnumbered almost three to one, and faced with attacking over ground broken by foliage, dips, and a stream. It has been said that Katsuyori planned to attack in the hopes that rain would render Nobunaga's guns useless, but this apologetic excuse seems unlikely. In truth, Nagashino seems to have simply been a tremendous mistake on the part of an impetuous

commander. These judgments aside, the battle progressed poorly for the Takeda from the first. On the night of 27 June, the day before the actual battle, Sakai Tadatsugu led a raid into the Takeda camp and killed one of Shingen's surviving brothers, Takeda Nobuzane. When day broke, any possible Takeda hopes for rain were dashed by the rays of a bright morning sun. Nonetheless, Katsuyori gave the order to attack, sending nearly 10,000 of his troops across the Shidarahara against 38,000 troops established on superior ground and entrenched with wooden palisades. Matchlock fire produced the first casualties, and likely served to further disrupt formations already strained by the difficult terrain. In a scene vaguely reminiscent of Gettysburg, the Takeda vanguard managed to reach the enemy lines and even cut into their ranks before being thrown back by counterattacks led by fresh, eager troops. On the northern flank, Baba Nobuharu's Takeda contingent managed to capture some of the high ground, and held their integrity together well. To his immediate south, however, Baba's comrades fared much worse. Yamagata Masakage and Naito Masatoyo, two of the greatest Takeda generals, were killed in the melee, the former by a bullet and the latter by enemy spears. With the Takeda wavering, Nobunaga ordered a general pile-on, sending his ashigaru pouring out from behind the palisades. The battle had devolved into butchery, and Katsuyori added to the fiasco by sending in his reserves, which did little but add to the casualty list and encourage the Nagashino garrison to mount a sally. Finally, after hours of bitter struggle, Katsuyori was convinced to retreat by Baba Nobuharu, who covered his master's flight until he and his men were themselves killed. Katsuyori left as many as 10,000 of his men dead at Nagashino. 28 June 1575 was Nobunaga's greatest achievement, a victory as tactically decisive as Okehazama and ultimately of great strategic significance. The victory at Nagashino all but secured his eastern flank and allowed him to throw his weight into the siege of the Honganji and consolidate his recent gains. Takeda Katsuyori was beaten but not vanquished, and would continue to harass Tokugawa, yet, as a regional power, the Takeda were broken.

Nobunaga returned to Kyoto and prepared for new battles and new enemies.

1576 - 1580

The reduction of the Takeda made Nobunaga's dream of conquering Japan seem more and more plausible, although there were three enemies who were close enough to take active issue with his designs…

1) The Honganji. The Ishiyama Honganji stronghold proved no less formidable then before Nagashino. In June 1576 he dispatched Harada Naomasa with an army to attack the Honganji-an effort that ended in failure and the loss of Harada's life. Nobunaga responded by personally leading an attack that succeeded in taking quite a few heads but saw Nobunaga wounded in the course of the fighting. Realizing that a direct assault on the heavily defended fortress would prove extraordinarily costly even if it succeded at all, Nobunaga decided to change tactics. He began reducing the Ishiyama Honganji's satellites, crushing the Saiga monto of Kii and weakening the warrior monks of the Negoroji. The Honganji itself held firm, drawing support from two powerful clans sympathetic to its cause - the Uesugi of Echigo and the Môri of Western Honshu.

2) The Uesugi. Uesugi Kenshin and Oda Nobunaga had maintained a wary relationship into 1576. For a time, Kenshin had cooperated with Nobunaga against the Takeda, but lost interest in their alliance after Nagashino. Two factors contributed to the rising tension between the two clans. Firstly, Nobunaga was gradually expanding deeper into the

Hokuriku, a region Kenshin considered within the Uesugi sphere of influence. Secondly, ground was broken on Azuchi Castle in the spring of 1576, and Nobunaga made little secret that he planned to make his new capital the grandest castle ever built. Kenshin took this, or at least chose to take this, as a threatening gesture-after all, Azuchi would block any move by Kenshin into the Kinai Region and act as a staging area for attacks into the Hokuriku. Kenshin's response was to step up his own expansion. He had already taken Etchu and in1577 attacked Noto, a province that Nobunaga had already made some political investment in. Nobunaga responded by leading a large army into Kaga and met Kenshin's army at the Tedori River. Kenshin proved himself to be as wily a foe as his old enemy Shingen, and lured Nobunaga into making a frontal assault across the Tedori at night. In a hard-fought struggle, the Oda forces were defeated and Nobunaga was forced to retreat south. Kenshin returned to Echigo and made plans to return the following spring, this time to destroy Nobunaga. Unfortunately, time deserted Kenshin just as it had Shingen, when he was at the height of his power and in a position to thwart Nobunaga's ambitions. In fact, Kenshin's death on 13 April 1578 was so fortuitous for Nobunaga that rumors of assassination began circulating almost immediately. In actuality, it appears more likely that Kenshin died from natural causes - he was supposedly quite ill even as he prepared for the coming campaign season. Regardless of the circumstances of his death, Kenshin's passing triggered a bitter civil war within the Uesugi and made Nobunaga's life that much easier. Over the next four years Oda forces under Shibata Katsuie, Maeda Toshiie, and Sassa Narimasa would pick away at the Uesugi's holdings, until they were at the borders of Echigo.

3) The Môri. In terms of sheer lands under their rule, the Môri were one of Japan's most impressive clans. From humble beginnings under Môri Motonari, the Môri had expanded to control much of the Chugoku region, and now watched Nobunaga's expansion with dismay. Motonari had been an early critic of Nobunaga and when he died in 1571 his successor, Môri Terumoto, carried on the Môri's budding opposition. The Ishiyama Honganji proved a convenient place to oppose Nobunaga. In 1576 Nobunaga diverted the naval forces of Kûki Yoshitaka to the waters off Settsu and proceeded with a naval blockade of the Honganji, assisted by the Atagi of Awaji Island. The Môri responded by mobilizing their first rate navy, which was commanded by the Murakami family: men who, like the Kûki, had cut their teeth in piracy. Sailing east, the Môri brushed aside Atagi Nobuyasu's forces off Awaji and proceeded to defeat Kuki Yoshitaka's ships at the 1st Battle of Kizugawaguchi. The Honganji's supply line was opened and supplies were funneled in via sea transport, making Nobunaga's efforts at blockade on land moot. Realizing that the Honganji would have to be isolated if he ever hoped to capture it, Nobunaga tasked Kûki with devising naval vessels that would offset the Môri's numerical superiority. Yoshitaka dutifully went back to Shima and in 1578 unveiled six massive, heavily armed warships some have fancied were equipped with armored plates. These formed the core of a fleet that sailed back into the Inland Sea and drove off the Môri at the 2nd Battle of Kizugawaguchi. The next year, Môri Terumoto made another abortive attempt to lift the naval blockade but failed. By that point, the Môri were faced with a crisis of their own: Nobunaga's generals were marching west. Akechi Mitsuhide was charged with conquering Tamba and then advancing along the northern coast of the Chugoku. Toyotomi (Hashiba) Hideyoshi entered Harima and began a number of sieges that would ultimately open the gates to the Môri's hinterland.

1580 opened with the Honganji completely isolated and now rapidly running low on supplies. Finally, faced with Nobunaga's seemingly endless energy and determination as well as starvation, the Honganji looked for a peaceful solution. The court stepped in (persuaded by Nobunaga) and requested that Kennyo Kosa and the commander of the Honganji garrison, Shimotsuma Nakayuki, honorably surrender. In August the Honganji came to terms, and threw open their gates. Somewhat surprisingly, Nobunaga spared all of the surviving defenders - even Kosa and Shimotsuma. After over a decade of bloodshed, Nobunaga had subdued the last of the great *ikko* bastions and cleared the way for an eventual rise to national hegemony.

One more difficulty remained to be dealt with in Nobunaga's backyard: Iga province. Small, mountainous and

strategically unimportant, Iga and its rustic warrior houses had been spared Nobunaga's attentions for over a decade. Then in 1579 Oda Nobuo, Nobunaga's 2nd son, sent in an invasion force under Takigawa Kazumasu to bring the province under Oda control. The operation was a fiasco and prompted Nobuo to lead an army into Iga himself. This campaign (October 1579) was a near-disaster as well, and earned Nobuo no small amount of criticism from his father. Of course, Nobunaga had little choice but to avenge this embarrassment to the Oda name, although other matters delayed him from doing so until 1581. In October of that year, an army of some 44,000 men descended on Iga and brutally quelled the independent-minded samurai there.

When 1582 began, Nobunaga found himself in a suitable position to finish off the Takeda clan once and for all. Massing all of his available forces (anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 men), Nobunaga made for Katsuyori's still considerable territories. Supported by Tokugawa Ieyasu and the Hôjô clan, Nobunaga easily broke into Shinano and Kai, whose people had lost all confidence in their daimyo. Katsuyori himself, all but abandoned by his men, committed suicide in the shadow of the Temmoku-zan. Of all the Oda's samurai enemies, Nobunaga seems to have despised the Takeda most of all, and gloated shamelessly over Katsuyori's head.

On 21 May Nobunaga returned to Azuchi Castle and was greeted by an imperial court that promised him new titles including, if he wanted it, that of *shôgun*. Nobunaga gave no answer, nor would he ever. Already, Akechi Mitsuhide was plotting against him; within two months Nobunaga would be dead.

The Death of Nobunaga

As mentioned earlier, Nobunaga was said to have treated his retainers haughtily, and this seems to have been nowhere more the case than with Akechi Mitsuhide. A relatively late addition to Nobunaga's inner circle, Mitsuhide was a talented general and poet, perhaps provoking his lord's jealousy as a result of the latter. The best-known story regarding the rift between the two men and just unusual enough to be true occurred in 1577. In that year, Akechi had been tasked with subduing Tamba, and in the course of his campaign besieged the castle of the Hatano clan. Akechi succeded in securing the bloodless surrender of Hatano Hideharu and brought him before Nobunaga. To Akechi's shock, Nobunaga (for reasons unknown) ordered Hatano and his brother executed. The Hatano retainers blamed Akechi for the betrayal and in revenge kidnapped and brutally murdered Akechi's mother (who lived on the Akechi lands in nearby Omi). Unsurprisingly, this whole business did not sit so well with Mitsuhide, although there is no real hint of his actively plotting until 1582. In that year, Nobunaga returned from his conquest of the Takeda clan in time for news of a crisis in the west. Hideyoshi was investing Takamatsu castle, but faced with the arrival of the main Môri army requested reinforcements. Nobunaga responded by speeding a large contingent of his personal troops westward while he himself entertained court nobles at the Honnoji in Kyôto on 20 June. He awoke the following morning in the Honnoji to find that during the night Akechi Mitsuhide had the temple surrounded. Raising an army on the pretext of going to Hideyoshi's aid, Mitsuhide had taken a detour into Kyôto and now called for Nobunaga's head. As Nobunaga had only a small personal guard in attendance on the morning of 21 June, the outcome was a forgone conclusion, and he died, either in the blaze that was started in the course of the fighting or by his own hand. Soon afterwards, Oda Hidetada was surrounded at Nijo and killed. 11 days after that, Akechi Mitsuhide would himself be killed, defeated by Hideyoshi at the Battle of Yamazaki.

Oda Nobunaga died one of most interesting and controversial figures in Japanese history who continues to inspire debate among scholars and enthusiasts of the Sengoku Period. Was he the tyrant so often portrayed in the history books, as his wholesale slaughter of religious adherents might indicate? Was there a method to his madness, where terror was a weapon he felt needed to be used were he ever to achieve his goals? Did he really believe himself a deity, as the contemporary observer Luis Frois recorded? How much further might he have gone had his career not been cut short?

Regardless of these questions and their possible answers, Oda Nobunaga, like Taira Kiyomori (his supposed antecedent), lives on in history as a complicated man who changed Japan forever.

by F.W. Seal