

THE UNIFIERS

The Muromachi period, which had brought the shugo daimyō, the regional warrior chieftains, to prominence, also came to witness their demise. The constant warfare of the 15th and early 16th centuries, and the absence of any strong central authority to which they could turn for protection, made them vulnerable not only to each other, but also to the actions of their subordinates.

Few of the major shugo daimyō survived this weeding-out as they were replaced by more effective and ruthless subordinates. These were the so-called sengoku daimyō, the daimyō of the period of civil war. The process by which these supposedly-loyal vassals came to overthrow their lords was so common that Japanese scholars have a word for it gekokuujō, or inferiors prevailing over superiors.

It was a process which lasted right through the 16th century, and can be seen at work in the careers of each of the three men who, one after the other, took Japan to the threshold of unification and the creation of a central government stronger than anything Japan had ever seen. **Oda Nobunaga** (1534 - 1582), the first of the unifiers, was one of these sengoku daimyō. The Oda family had originally served the Shiba, a family of shugo daimyō. Nobunaga's father helped destroy them and seize the wealthiest part of their domain, that part closest to the capital. Nobunaga made the most of his inherited advantages, and, in a series of brilliant campaigns against his rivals, took control of Kyoto and brought the tottering Ashikaga bakufu to the ground. At his death in 1582, after an attack by one of his own trusted vassals, he had already gained control of 32 of Japan's 66 provinces.

Loyalty should have dictated that one of his two sons succeed him, but they were thrust aside by yet another former vassal, **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** (1536-1598), a man with no samurai lineage and no personal fighting skills, but a brilliant administrator. Hideyoshi unified Japan, invaded Korea, and helped reshape Japanese society, but when he died his empire, too, was usurped by a former vassal, **Tokugawa Ieyasu** (1542-1616), the third, and final, unifier.

All three unifiers had therefore much in common. All were beneficiaries of, and willing participants in, gekokuujō. All espoused similar policies. All of them, too, faced the same set of circumstances, opportunities, and problems. Warfare was changing, thanks to the introduction of firearms, used to such effect in battles like that at **Nagashino** in 1575. It was also much more expensive, and involved far greater forces, and the use of mass tactics. This provided the incentive for treaties and cooperation, leading to the creation of large warrior federations as a prelude to unification.

At the same time, the activities of missionaries and merchants from Portugal and Spain, accompanied by the threat of conquistador intervention in Japan's internal affairs, gave Japan's warriors a further incentive to settle their differences and unify under a central authority.