

Guns in Early Modern Japan

The latter half of the sixteenth century was marked by widespread military conflict. The Ashikaga shogunate (1336–1573) had collapsed, and regional daimyos struggled to protect or expand their territory. It was the perfect environment for the spread of new weapons, and when European matchlock muskets were introduced in the 1540s, they brought about a sweeping shift in the methods of warfare.

Japanese smiths were soon able to reproduce the European weapons, and they added their own improvements. Japanese gunsmiths quickly began making matchlock muskets (also known as arquebuses) by the thousands. Matchlocks were gradually supplanted by newer designs in the West, but in Japan they continued to be the dominant firearm for more than three centuries.

Guns found their way into Japan through Tanegashima, a small island south of Kyushu that had long been a transit point for traders and smugglers. These events are described in a document called the *Teppōki* (literally, “Gun Chronicle”), which was completed in the early seventeenth century. In 1543, a ship carrying Portuguese traders sought refuge on Tanegashima during a storm. The Portuguese were given an audience with the island’s lord, Tokitaka (1528–1579), and they demonstrated the use of matchlock muskets they had brought with them. Lord Tokitaka immediately purchased two of the guns and ordered a local sword maker, Yaita Kinbei (1502–1570), to replicate them. Yaita became Japan’s first gunsmith, and *tanegashima* became a generic term for “matchlock musket.”

Guns played an important role in the civil wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which culminated in the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). War came to an end under the new shogunal government, and strict limits were placed on travel and trade. The shogunate also imposed tight restrictions on the manufacture and possession of weapons, including firearms.

Gunsmiths continued to supply the shogunate with weapons, but Japan did not develop the transformative innovations (such as flintlocks, percussion caps, and breech-loading cartridges) that revolutionized firearms in the West. Instead, gunsmiths in Japan continued to refine the designs of muzzle-loading matchlock muskets, which remained the sole type of handheld firearm until 1854.