

The Hatakeyama Family and the Siege of Nanao Castle

Infighting and betrayals plagued the history of the Noto branch of the Hatakeyama family. The family was originally from Kyoto and governed the Noto Province (modern-day Noto Peninsula) from 1391 until Nanao Castle fell in 1577. Over the course of their rule, Hatakeyama control was challenged by their retainers, and they eventually lost their grip on power. Power struggles and conflicting allegiances among the retainers culminated in the formation of a council of seven, and ultimately led to the fall of Nanao Castle and the end of Hatakeyama family rule of Noto.

Building a mountain fortress

Hatakeyama Yoshifusa (1491–1545) became the seventh head of the Noto-Hatakeyama family in 1515, and Noto flourished under his rule. Yoshifusa succeeded in quelling dissent within the Hatakeyama family and built up its military forces. He constructed Nanao Castle as his principal residence, invited scholars from Kyoto to visit and lecture, and encouraged artisans and merchants to move to Nanao, creating a thriving town at the base of the castle. Yoshifusa also controlled the shipping trade in Nanao Bay and Toyama Bay and contributed to the development of the Hodatsu gold mine south of Nanao. Nanao and the Hatakeyama family enjoyed significant prosperity and stability under Yoshifusa's rule, until his death at age 55.

An uneasy alliance

Hatakeyama Yoshitaka (1556–1576) was the eleventh head of the Noto-Hatakeyama family, coming to power after the sudden death in 1574 of his elder brother. There is speculation that his elder brother was assassinated by a retainer. Yoshitaka was still a teenager when he was installed as the new head of the family, and a council of seven senior retainers held the real power.

From the mid-sixteenth century, the Hatakeyama family governed Noto Province with their senior retainers including the Yusa family and Cho family, who had large walled compounds within the castle grounds. These families were constantly jockeying for power, creating an uneasy alliance. Yusa Tsugumitsu (d. 1581) was a general from the Suzu area of Noto Province who rose to lead the group of seven senior retainers. Outside of the Hatakeyama family, Tsugumitsu's loyalties lay with the Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), a powerful warlord leader from Echigo Province (modern-day Niigata Prefecture). Uesugi Kenshin opposed Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) who, after defeating

the ruling Ashikaga shogunate in 1573, was on a campaign to unite Japan under his rule. While Tsugumitsu supported the Uesugi, his brother-in-law, senior vassal Cho Tsugutsura (–1577) supported Oda Nobunaga, and a power struggle ensued.

A family under siege

In the late sixteenth century, two powerful warlords dominated the country, conquering the territories in their path. To the west was Oda Nobunaga and to the east was Uesugi Kenshin. It was not clear which side the Hatakeyama family supported, as the family was essentially under the control of retainers of rival allegiances. Uesugi Kenshin decided to attack Nanao Castle in 1576 with around 20,000 troops, laying siege for two months, but failing to breach the castle.

Within the castle walls, an epidemic broke out, and the eleventh lord Hatakeyama Yoshitaka died, at age 20. His young son Hatakeyama Haruomaru (1572–1577) was installed as the new leader, though the real authority was held by Cho Tsugutsura, who had risen to the position of head retainer. Uesugi Kenshin returned in 1577 in a second attempt to capture Nanao Castle. The castle held out under siege for almost a year, while Tsugutsura sent a request to Oda Nobunaga for help.

The enemy within

Cho Tsugutsura compelled the residents of Nanao to join the Hatakeyama family garrison to defend the castle, but an epidemic weakened the defenders. Even the infant Haruomaru succumbed and died. It is believed that on September 15, 1577, Yusa Tsugumitsu and his allies staged a revolt within the castle, killing Cho Tsugutsura and many of his family, and opening the castle gates to Uesugi Kenshin and his forces. The fragile rule of the Hatakeyama family came to an end.

Uesugi Kenshin gave control of the castle and the province of Noto to Yusa Tsugumitsu. The following year, Uesugi Kenshin died suddenly (likely from ill health), and Oda Nobunaga invaded Noto. It is said that Tsugumitsu and his son surrendered to Nobunaga but were executed for their part in orchestrating the assassination of the Cho family.