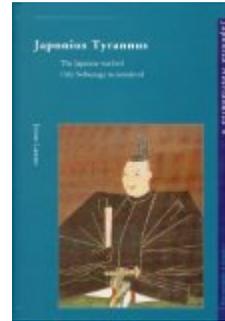


Jeroen Lamers. *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered*. Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000. 280 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-74822-22-0.

Reviewed by Suzanne Gay (East Asian Studies Program, Oberlin College)
Published on H-Japan (July, 2001)



A New Biography of Oda Nobunaga

A New Biography of Oda Nobunaga

Jeroen Lamers has written a biography of Oda Nobunaga, the sixteenth century warrior who was the first of the so-called three great unifiers of early modern Japan. The study focuses particularly on the policies and actions of Nobunaga during the years of his national ascendancy, 1568-82. Mr. Lamers has consulted a wide range of contemporary sources: in addition to numerous official documents, these include the Shincho Kyou-ki by Oota Gyuuichi, Nobunaga's first chronicler, the Jesuit records, and diaries like the Kanemi Kyou-ki and Tokit-sugu Kyou-ki. Mr. Lamers has also taken full measure of the works of Japanese and western historians in his treatment of this important figure.

This monograph contributes in several important ways to the literature on Nobunaga and sixteenth century Japan. First, it is the only thorough treatment of Nobunaga's career and achievements in a western language. Although we have read about Nobunaga, or at least Nobunaga's policies, in the context of the Sengoku period and are aware of his main achievements, it tends to be mainly as a forerunner to Hideyoshi and Ieyasu that he is remembered. In a full treatment of his life his achievements are better appreciated not only for what came after him but for what he achieved in his own times. Second, we can better appreciate Nobunaga's genius as a military and especially political tactician when we see the tremendous odds against which he struggled all his adult life, besieged by enemies on all sides. Although the Japanese political scene fell into disarray once

Nobunaga was assassinated, his policies and campaigns had indeed unified great portions of the country by the time Hideyoshi took control. In his drive to take Kyoto and in his decision to settle in Azuchi, near but not in the ancient capital, Nobunaga defined himself as a national leader and not simply as the head of a coalition of warriors. Finally, by giving close attention to the years 1568 through 1573, Mr. Lamers shows the Muromachi shogunate under the active leadership of the last shogun, Yoshiaki, to have been much more vital and politically significant even immediately prior to its demise than is usually thought.

Mr. Lamers approaches the story of Nobunaga's life primarily as a series of scholarly debates which he presents, analyzes and, often, dismisses in whole or in part. He then puts forth his own revisionist conclusions, some of which are persuasive and carefully considered, and certainly demonstrate familiarity with both Japanese and western scholarship. Nevertheless, this approach, however valid it may be in a dissertation, imparts a pedantic quality to a biography and detracts from what should be the narrative thrust of Nobunaga's life. Some of the scholarly judgments, moreover, come across as excessively dismissive. Asao Naohiro's thinking on the concept of tenka, for instance, should not be dismissed out of hand (p. 128) simply because the author is determined to refute the theory of Nobunaga's self-deification. It is quite possible, it seems to me, that Nobunaga had the intellectual capacity, not to mention political shrewdness, to apply concepts of statehood to his rule. Mr. Lamers, however, seems determined to portray him at

all costs as a pragmatist.

Mr. Lamers has extensively mined contemporary Jesuit writings in his study. These are valuable if biased sources, as he reminds the reader frequently: they record events that corroborate Japanese sources and they contain some descriptions of Japanese life not found elsewhere, but their interpretation of events is often self-interested. Unfortunately, Mr. Lamers too frequently gets sidetracked into a determination to undermine these sources, and in the process the narrative of Nobunaga's life is relegated to the wings: for instance, the author attacks at length the Jesuits' portrayal of Nobunaga as a supporter of Christianity, and later refutes Luis Frois' assertion of Nobunaga's self-deification. Nobunaga's relationship with the Jesuits was indeed one part of his consolidation of power and isolation of certain enemies. The author might have analyzed it to explicate aspects of Nobunaga's character germane to his hold on power: his shrewdness, his fascination with the unknown and the exotic, and at the same time his prudence. Instead, Mr. Lamers gets caught up in showing the Jesuits to be vain and misguided in their belief that Nobunaga supported them. (This argument, incidentally, turns out to be a non-starter: some of the sources cited show in fact a very accurate and sober Jesuit understanding of Nobunaga's motives in granting them favorable treatment.) Ultimately, the space devoted to critiquing the Jesuit sources is disproportionate to this relatively minor aspect of Nobunaga's life.

As the subtitle suggests, Mr. Lamers is at pains to challenge the standard view of Nobunaga as a cruel and brutal tyrant. Again, he implicates the Jesuits as the original culprits, with the label sticking even in the most recent scholarship on Nobunaga. To refute this, Mr. Lamers presents events as they may have appeared to Nobunaga and argues, often persuasively, that the actions he took were (simply) those of a pragmatic, decisive, non-ideological, and extremely ambitious warrior. Perhaps so, but in the end there are enough cases of massive slaughter, deliberate disgrace and humiliation of less worthy vassals, ruthless treatment of enemies, and, to put it mildly, iconoclastic treatment of Buddhist groups that the original label remains quite apt. But after all, brutality was widespread in the sixteenth century, and not only in Japan. Yet is this the best yardstick by which to assess Nobunaga? By focusing so heavily on brutality Mr. Lamers places central emphasis on a moral evaluation of Nobunaga's character, in the process missing other standards by which to consider his place in history. In his conclusion, which is too mild consid-

ering the weight of the story he has just told, Lamers ends by merely saying that "the best adjectives to characterize Nobunaga's rule and personality are not "callous and brutal" but "pragmatic and ruthless" (p. 232). Surely there is more that could be said of the career and contributions of this brilliant military and political tactician. Mr. Lamers points out that the treatment of Nobunaga by early modern Japanese chroniclers and historians in the early modern period is a huge topic requiring a separate study. Nonetheless, a summary, at least, of the early modern Japanese writings on Nobunaga would have balanced the attention given to Jesuit writings, and perhaps helped better define a historical niche for Nobunaga.

Nobunaga's reputation as a cruel and ruthless warrior rests in part on his treatment, audacious for its times, of institutional Buddhism. In 1571 his forces attacked and burned Enryakuji, the great Tendai monastery on Mt. Hiei, and slaughtered its thousands of monks. This study portrays the event as payback for Enryakuji's monks joining forces opposed to Nobunaga in earlier conflicts—"a matter of restoring his military credibility and saving his personal honor" (p. 76). While allowing that this was an unprecedented act of sacrilege, however, Mr. Lamers does not convey Enryakuji's powerful position in the medieval economy and religion, and thus somewhat underrates the importance of the event. Quite simply, no earlier ruler could have even contemplated such a move. By sacking Enryakuji, Nobunaga obliterated one of the foundations of the medieval order. His other "encounter" with Buddhism was his long struggle against the well-organized and persistent forces of the Honganji. It is true that these forces lacked the monastic character of the monks at Hiei, but ascribing Nobunaga's motives in this campaign partly to a loathing for "farmers" is less than satisfying, especially given the carnage at Nagashima. Nobunaga had a clear vision of the religious obstacles that stood in his way, and he pursued them relentlessly.

Finally, one comes away from this study with a much greater appreciation for Nobunaga's achievements, but without much of a sense of Nobunaga as a person. Pre-modern sources are, of course, notoriously intractable about shedding light on individuals, and Mr. Lamers eschews at the outset a psychohistorical approach. Nevertheless, more discussion of Nobunaga's character and times would have yielded a fuller portrait of him without requiring a foray into psychoanalysis. For instance, one wonders about the sixteenth century warrior family and its ethos: was it unusual for a younger brother to overshadow the eldest son, as Nobunaga did? And

was Nobunaga unusual in sometimes favoring collateral relatives over his own sons? The case of Nobunaga's first marriage, dissolved over inter-familial politics, cries out for some discussion of marriage practices. The role in the Araki Crisis of the Christian daimyo with their high regard for loyalty offers an opportunity to dis-

cuss this virtue in the context of late sixteenth century Japanese warrior society. Despite some missed opportunities, however, Mr. Lamers has produced a comprehensive and illuminating account of Nobunaga's career and policies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Suzanne Gay. Review of Lamers, Jeroen, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5303>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.