

NINJA WEAPONS AND TOOLS

HISTORICAL WEAPONS OF THE NINJA

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The ninja of Japan have become mired with the brush of misunderstanding and their story is being rewritten by the continuation of misnomers. Antony Cummins, a postgraduate in the area of history and archaeology has formed the *Historical Ninjutsu Research Team* with the aim of translating and understanding the ninja or shinobi in their correct historical context. Therefore, here you will find the historical truth behind some of the most advanced tools and weapons of medieval Japan, items established and propagated by the ninja themselves.

While there are many ninja manuals in existence, only a few hold authority without question and out of these, three hold the title as being the core manuals left to us from the shinobi (original reading of ninja) of the past. These are the Bansenshukai, the Ninpiden and the Shoninki. Together these manuals deliver the message that the historical ninja were not shuriken throwing men leaping from tree to tree and disregarding the laws of physics, instead it tells us of an elite corps of professionals that conducted espionage and hard line guerrilla warfare, where torture, infiltration, demolitions and pre-emptive strikes were the order of the day. At the head of this military branch were the innovative weapons and tools that helped the ninja 'cause hell' among the enemy ranks.

The misnomers

The first thing one should set in concrete when considering the ninja is, those objects you believe to be ninja weapon are in fact not. This mistake comes in two guises. Firstly, the error that shuriken (throwing stars), chain weapons, sickles, blowpipes and hidden canes were created and used solely by the ninja. All of these weapons are not and never have been attributed to the ninja from a historical point of view. All of the above are well documented samurai weapons that were used within many of the martial schools of Japan and their history and genealogy can be easily traced through the history of conflict in Japan. For an extensive look at these weapons and their subcategories see *Classical Weaponry of Japan* by Serge Mol from Kodansha Publishing. Secondly, ninjutsu or the *art of the ninja* is not a martial art and ninja weapons are not considered to objects of hand to hand fighting. It is a common mistake to see the ninja and the samurai as separate classes, however, in the Sengoku or Warring Period in Japan the concept of a rigid hierarchy was not established, and

while the aristocracy and warrior elite did exist, social mobility was not restricted. This was also the height of the ninja and their golden years. Therefore, many of the ninja were in fact samurai, with the skills of the ninja and were at least considered to be part of the warrior cast. In short, one should consider the ninja as a warrior/samurai whose job was to do perform the arts of the ninja, no matter if he was a foot soldier or high ranking samurai, he was still a ninja.

Tools

It must be made clear that most ninja 'objects' were tools as they served as a function and were not primarily destructive, therefore, the ninja used a selection of tools to help him infiltrate the enemy or record the information he needed.

The 6 Basic Tools

The ninja had 6 primary tools which were considered to cover the basic requirements needed to perform ninjutsu tasks and were listed within the Shoninki ninja manual of 1681.

Amigasa 編笠

The deep and wide straw hat^o

The shinobi would use the deep braided hat to cover his face as headwear of this type was common, making it easier to blend into the background of a crowd and allowing him to move around without being recognised.

Kaginawa 鉤繩

The grappling hook

The grappling hook was considered a major tool and was used for climbing walls and castle foundations. Its exact weight and prong construction is unknown. However, the Ninpiden shows a larger form, which is used for taking down structures. Overall the manuals show many forms, leading to the conclusion that the size would depend on the individual.

Sekihitsu 石筆

A stone pencil

This was rolled clay formed into a "pencil shape" and was used to collect information or to mark trees and such. A shinobi was primarily an information gatherer, thus the need to record was paramount.

Kusuri 薬

Field medicine

If the agent became ill on his mission he may have to use the "worm-killer" medicine, as in feudal Japan it was thought that worms were the cause of all stomach illnesses. We do not know what medicines he took with him but it is understood that the shinobi had a great understanding of herb lore.

*Sanjaku tenugui*三尺手拭

A 90cm piece of cloth

This 90cm section of cloth was used to cover the head or face and was also used as a headband or an extra length of rope. It was kept around the waist or folded away in his kimono jacket.

A fire starting implement called an *Uchitake* 打竹

The *Uchitake* is a cylinder used as fire starter to commit arson, start a camp fire or light hand grenades. It consisted of perforated tubing which held treated vegetable matter that would slow burn and keep embers for up to a full day.

Torches

A ninja could tell if another person was a ninja by the way his torch burned and this was attributed to the fact that the shinobi had multiple ways of constructing travel torches. There can be found examples of torches for any situation needed, from hand held distance running torches to braziers to flames in the palm which ignite when the hand is open. Alongside this we see examples of and pine resin torches that can be separated and passed around as smaller light sources and water and wind proof versions. All in all, the ninja was a master at constructing portable fire and considered the art of torch construction to be of a high priority. Generally all torches followed the same construction, that was a core normally made from sections of wood or bamboo which was filled with flammable material which also held black powder, or that the black powder was a formed into a paste and inserted into bamboo to create weather proof torches. More “exotic” forms were light sources such as the “Palm Flaring Fire” which was a secret method of illumination and consisted of having a flammable compound in their hand that would flare upon opening, this was used to see if there were any people asleep within the room.

Coloured Rice

When in teams and scouting the mountains, the ninja would leave signs and signals in coloured rice. Each team member would be allotted a colour and they would work out an independent system of signals to help keep their communications secret.

The Grappling Rod

By taking a grappling hook on a rope and fitting sections of bamboo spaced with coins, the shinobi would have a tool where he could pull on the loose rope and create a rigid pole, this was to help reach hand holds or edges above.

Rafts

The shinobi had various rafts that they used to float downstream so that they could use the rivers as a means of transport.

Ladders

The ninja had a wide selection of climbing ladders. From folding to extendable and from hooked to dismantling. Each of the ladders would help the ninja gain infiltration in various situations.

Listening Devices

Listening to conversation was a primary requirement for the ninja, be it in a conversation or while infiltrating, the ninja would construct aids to help the sound resonate and so that they could catch the vibrations. This could come in the form of ear trumpets or resonating Tubes.

Breaking & Entering Tools

A ninja was most certainly a thief and he needed to be skilled at infiltrating enemy complexes. To aid in this skill the shinobi had a series of tools that allowed him to enter traditional Japanese structures.

The simple saw was of major concern; with this the agent would open gun ports in castle walls and gain entry and from there would use other kinds of saws to open holes in buildings and lattice work. A drill was used to open up holes and peer inside or even to lock doors closed, stopping the watch leaving the guard room or someone from a neighbouring building coming to harass the ninja. If a warehouse was latched from the inside, the shinobi had a set of hooked keys that were used to probe the inside and unlock the door. Even the basic crow bar and hammer and chisel were part of the tool kit and were considered essential for gaining entrance to restricted areas.

Weapons

It could be said that one of the core elements in ninjutsu is the art of using black powder and fire as described above, however, this usage also included that of a destructive form. Black powder, for those who do not know, is a mixture of charcoal, potassium nitrate and sulphur and is used in conventional fire works and explosives. The shinobi used this powder to create a varied number of tools and weapons, from landmines and hand grenades to explosive rockets and long distance burning lights. Black powder was at the centre of the ninja's ingenuity and was a staple element of their skills. Fire was also of primary concern; it is highlighted across the manuals that a shinobi should always "carry fire with him". This could be in the form of a flint and steel or in the more elaborate method of conserving smouldering vegetation to be used at the next destination for creating fires. The key issue here is that a shinobi should never be without fire and this is representative of the ninja's need to cause arson and damage, destruction through fire. Further to this the ninja was required to have a good grounding in the construction and maintenance of defensive fires and be able to construct long burning watch fires as well as evade them.

The Hand Grenade

This explosive weapon was constructed from thin earthenware and packed with gunpowder and shrapnel. Its fuse construction is unknown; however it was to be

thrown into crowds of people or guards, effectively making it comparable to the modern nail bomb.

The Landmine

The shinobi used a box made of split bamboo and set up a pressure activated trigger that would ignite a charge when stepped upon.

Arson through black powder

While black powder has already been mentioned, it is noteworthy to point out here that the ninja would cause supreme damage by starting fires with compacted black powder. It was a common trick for teams of ninja to infiltrate a castle and simultaneously set fire to various building, which could result in the destruction of the castle or it's overrunning due to this fire diversion.

The Fire Arrow

Similar to the Chinese this was a bamboo shaft that held a cylinder which contained gunpowder. Once fired the arrow would rocket its way into a castle and start fires.

The Throwing Torch

This was a torch with a nail on the end, this was thrown in groups before a night attack and used for illumination and arson.

The Caltrop Train

Contra to popular belief the shinobi did not just throw caltrops in any direction. The ninja would tie caltrops to a string and trail it behind them. If they were to scatter them they would try to identify which direction they were likely to be chased in.

The False Wall

One shinobi method was to construct a false wall on a mountainside within the natural outline of a fortification. The ninja would support this wall with guide lines which would take its weight. When the enemy were climbing the wall the lines would have been cut and the soldiers would fall to their destruction.

False Reeds

To create a false sense of depth to a river the ninja would construct bundles of reeds which were tied together and then attach them to a line with a weight or stone. The aim was to anchor the reeds in place even if the water was deep. With enough reeds the river would look shallow and the mounted samurai would wade in to their destruction or they would waste time trying to find other routes.

The above is only a small amount of the collective tools used by the ninja and represents the level of their technology and understanding in a world where the bow and arrow, the spear and the sword were the supreme weapons. This shows us the amazing levels that the ninja achieved and we must celebrate their knowledge.

However, for a collector of military artefacts the ninja is truly a ghost in the shadows. Most of what they used, blew up, rotted away or was designed to be destroyed. Archaeologically it is as if the ninja never existed, it is only through their historical manuals that we know about them and their unique skills.

The Ninja Manual in English

“True Path of the Ninja”, is an instructional ninja manual written in 1681 by Natori Masatake and is considered to be the espionage teachings of the Natori-Ryu military science school which was attached to the Kishu-Tokugawa clan. The book is divided into four main sections and concentrates primarily on spying as it was a post warring periods manual. Therefore, it has limited uses for gunpowder and highly destructive weapons. The book includes:

The Introduction

This sets the standard for what it means to be a ninja and establishes the origins of the shinobi and their basic disguises.

The 1st Scroll

This first section of the manual deals with the tools and equipment needed for shinobi missions and how to construct them. Also it deals with travelling incognito and how to infiltrate in accordance with different teachings.

The 2nd Scroll

The second scroll of the manuscript deals with misdirection, ritual magic, metrology and physiognomy.

The 3rd Scroll

The third scroll of the document is a focus on the psychology of espionage and the art of lying with a keen interest on understanding truth and falsehoods in collected information.

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