

## The Japanese-Siamese Army of Yamada Nagamasa

By Michael Fredholm von Essen

In seventeenth-century Siam (now Thailand), although most wars were fought against neighbouring Burma, one of the most prominent sources of military inspiration was Japan. In fact, Japanese influence remained for centuries in the Siamese army. Even a perfunctory walk through the weapons gallery in the excellent Bangkok National Museum reveals that, among swords, the majority resemble either Chinese or Japanese types, while there are comparatively few that follow earlier Siamese (Fig. 1) or, for that matter, Burmese styles (known as *daab* and *dhia*, respectively). The Chinese influence is unsurprising, since there was a large Chinese population in Siam. When it comes to glaives, again most resemble Chinese types while a number are Siamese derivations of the Japanese *naginata*. Even Siamese regal and honorary swords, until the early nineteenth century, suggested strong Japanese influences (Fig. 2). Besides, as late as 1836, possibly even 1866, there still existed a special Siamese royal guard unit known as *Asa yipun* ("Japanese Guard"), consisting of a hundred men and two officers.<sup>1</sup> Since there were few contacts between Japan and Siam after 1639 when Tokugawa Japan established a policy of national seclusion which forbade overseas Japanese from returning and Japanese subjects from leaving, and no official relations between 1636 and 1887, the Japanese martial influences made its mark in Siam in a remarkably short time.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Japan was an advanced, outward-looking country. Previously preoccupied by internal warfare, it was—for the first time in many centuries—unified, strong, and technologically developed to a degree inferior to Europe only in certain sciences, such as shipbuilding and artillery. Japan was indeed technologically superior in some disciplines, including certain aspects of military science, such as the use of firearms, an import the Japanese had mastered very quickly. The Japanese were mature and self-confident in their dealings with foreign countries, and Japanese traders, mercenaries, and adventurers were a common sight in Southeast Asia. There were flourishing Japanese overseas colonies, especially in the Philippines, Siam, and Java. One Japanese merchant-adventurer, Yamada Nagamasa (c. 1590-1630), even managed to set himself up as a minor king in southern Siam. His name has since merged with

<sup>1</sup> 1836: Cesare Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya: Yamada Nagamasa, Japanese Warrior and Merchant in Early Seventeenth-Century Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2009), 63-4. 1866: Ian Heath, *Armies of the Nineteenth Century: Asia 4 – Burma and Indo-China* (Nottingham: Foundry Books, 2003), 141; which reports a Siamese chronicle mentioning a "group of Japanese soldiers carrying bows" as late as in this year.

myths and legends, yet the man for several years wielded considerable military and political power in Siam.<sup>2</sup>

### The Japanese Settlement in Ayutthaya

It is not known when the first Japanese soldiers appeared in the Siamese army, but the sources show that Japanese resident in the Siamese capital on the Chao Phraya River, Ayutthaya, was serving in the Siamese army by 1593, before official relations were established between the two countries. From 1601, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the ruler of Japan, sent emissaries and traders to various places in Southeast Asia, including Luzon (Philippines), Cochinchina (Vietnam), Cambodia, and Patani (present southern Thailand). Then, in 1604, a Japanese merchant named Yoemon was sent to Siam. The visit was successful, so it was followed in 1606 by an official letter from Tokugawa Ieyasu to the King of Siam, Ekathotsarot (r. 1605-1610). In these exchanges, the Japanese also sent suits of armour and swords as gifts and samples of trade opportunities. In return, the Japanese ruler hoped for muskets and gunpowder, which he had been informed was of good quality in Siam.<sup>3</sup> Soon a merchant named Arima Sugihiro was appointed as the first official headman of the Japanese community in Ayutthaya. In 1610, he followed by Kii Kyūtemon, who in 1616, accompanied the first Siamese embassy to Japan and knew Dutch and English merchants there, including the well-known William Adams.<sup>4</sup> By 1621, Yamada Nagamasa, the most renowned of the Japanese in Ayutthaya, had assumed this role. A letter from an English merchant mentions that Yamada Nagamasa also had armed men at his disposal, a group of forty men armed with muskets.<sup>5</sup> In 1624, an incident between the Spanish and Dutch ultimately caused the Siamese King Songtham (r. 1610-1628) to send his river fleet to attack two Spanish ships. The Japanese Guard, under Nagamasa, led the assault and captured the two ships.<sup>6</sup>

Siam already had a long history of hosting foreigners. In 1516, the Siamese had signed a treaty with the Portuguese to gain access to muskets. In 1534, King Chairacha (r. 1534-1547) had hired one hundred and twenty Portuguese soldiers, who took part in the war with Burma in 1539 and also trained the Siamese in the use and manufacture of firearms.<sup>7</sup> Communities of other foreigners too existed in

<sup>2</sup> Yamada Nagamasa was mentioned in several primary sources and documents, by Europeans who visited Siam and in the official correspondence exchanged between Siam and Japan. Siam dispatched embassies that reached Japan in 1616, 1621, 1623, 1625, 1626, 1629, 1630, and 1636. The two countries exchanged official correspondence between 1606 and 1636. Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 41-2, 62. Polenghi's book is the first comprehensive English-language study of Yamada Nagamasa and the Japanese in Siam.

<sup>3</sup> Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 14-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41. William Adams will be familiar to some as the hero of James Clavell's popular novel *Shōgun* (1975).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-8.

<sup>7</sup> Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Our Wars with the Burmese: Thai-Burmese Conflict 1539-1767* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), 12; Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 22-3.

Ayutthaya, on land outside the city walls assigned by the Siamese kings and under headmen of their own people recognised by the King of Siam. There was already a substantial Chinese community. The foreign communities were subject to Siamese law and in most cases regarded as subjects of the King of Siam.<sup>8</sup> By 1593, there were reportedly five hundred Japanese soldiers in Ayutthaya, serving in the Siamese army of King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605) and his brother Ekathotsarot (r. 1605-1610) under their own leader, a Japanese who held the Siamese title of Phra Senaphimuk.<sup>9</sup> By 1628, there were reportedly six or eight hundred Japanese soldiers in Ayutthaya, who formed part of a Japanese community of likely two or three thousand people. Between these two dates, a whole generation of Japanese-Siamese must have grown up, since many of the Japanese who arrived were unmarried and intermarriage between locals and new arrivals was common.<sup>10</sup> There were also some Christians among the Japanese. In Japan their persecution was already underway, but Siam remained tolerant. In 1645, there were reportedly 400 Japanese Christians in Ayutthaya.<sup>11</sup> In 1661, a Jesuit named Tommaso Valguarnera built a church that was opened to the Japanese in Ayutthaya, and in 1662, the Christian community reportedly counted 1,500 Japanese.<sup>12</sup>

In several Asian countries, the Japanese had long had a reputation as fierce warriors, freebooters, and indeed pirates (*wakô*). This reputation followed them to Siam, where they acquired political influence beyond what their small numbers may suggest. The Japanese-Siamese played decisive roles in several consecutive royal succession crises that ended in violence, in 1611, 1628-1630, and 1656.

### The Crisis of 1611

In November 1611, an incident took place in which a group of 280 Japanese, who had arrived by ship, successfully stormed the Royal Palace in Ayutthaya to extract revenge for their master, who apparently had been killed by a group of Siamese nobles. Having accomplished the death of the nobles, the Japanese forced the young King Songtham (r. 1610-1628) to sign a document in his own blood, promising them immunity. They then left the city. There is nothing to suggest that they previously had been residents of Ayutthaya. On the other hand, there were undoubtedly Japanese in the city at the time, and their role in the incident, if any, remains unknown.<sup>13</sup> King Songtham had not been the first heir-apparent, but the original choice, a son of King Ekathotsarot named Suthat, was executed shortly before his father's death, having been denounced for plotting rebellion by a courtier supported by the Ayutthaya Japanese.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 29, 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-9.

<sup>14</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 106.



Fig. 1. Siamese swords (*daab*), mid-Ayutthaya period (17th-18th century); Macao Museum of Art, History of Steel in Eastern Asia Exhibition (2006), nos. 256 and 257.

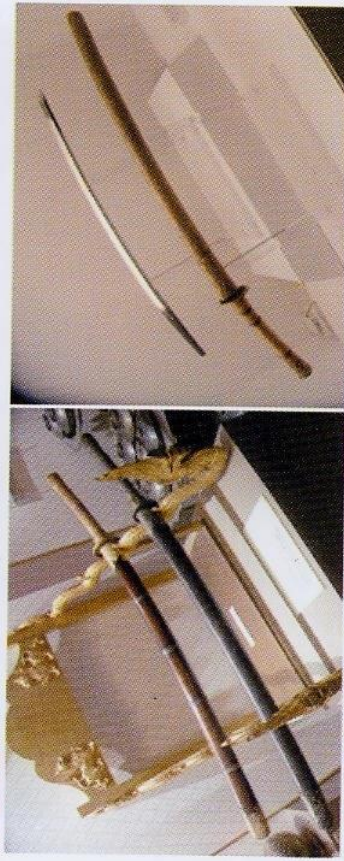


Fig. 2. (left) Early 19th-century Sword of the Commander-in-Chief (above), and (below) sword of *Chao Phraya* ("Minister," the highest rank) *Bodindecha* (Sing Singhaseni), Gallery of Thai History, National Museum, Bangkok; (right) Japanese blade and scabbard of a second early 19th-century sword of *Chao Phraya Bodindecha* (Sing Singhaseni), National Museum (Cat. No. T68), Bangkok.

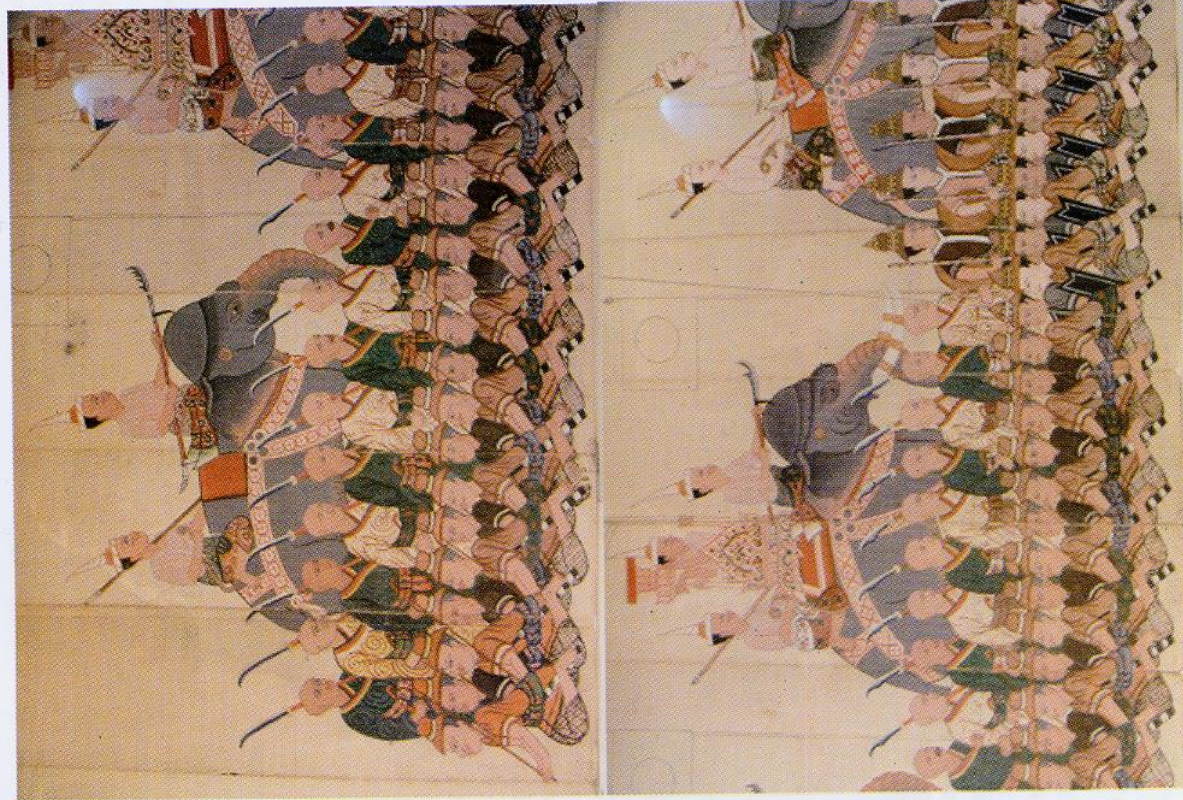


Fig. 3 Yamada Nagamasa's army as depicted in a temple in Ayutthaya. Copy from 1918, National Library, Bangkok.

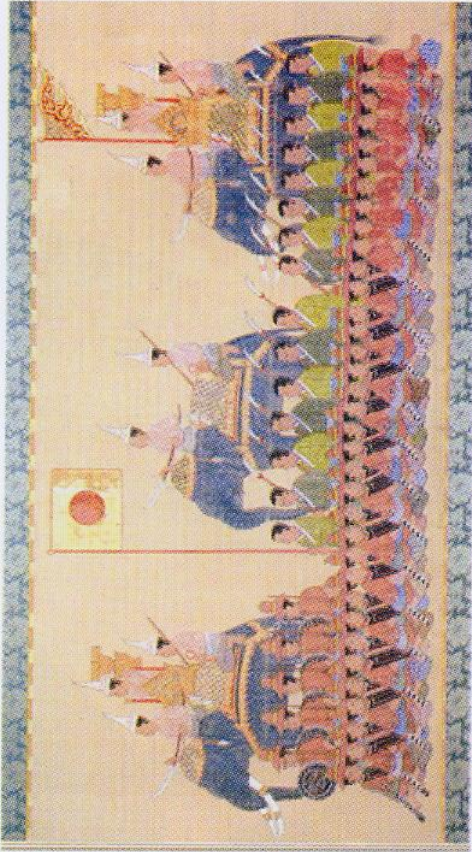
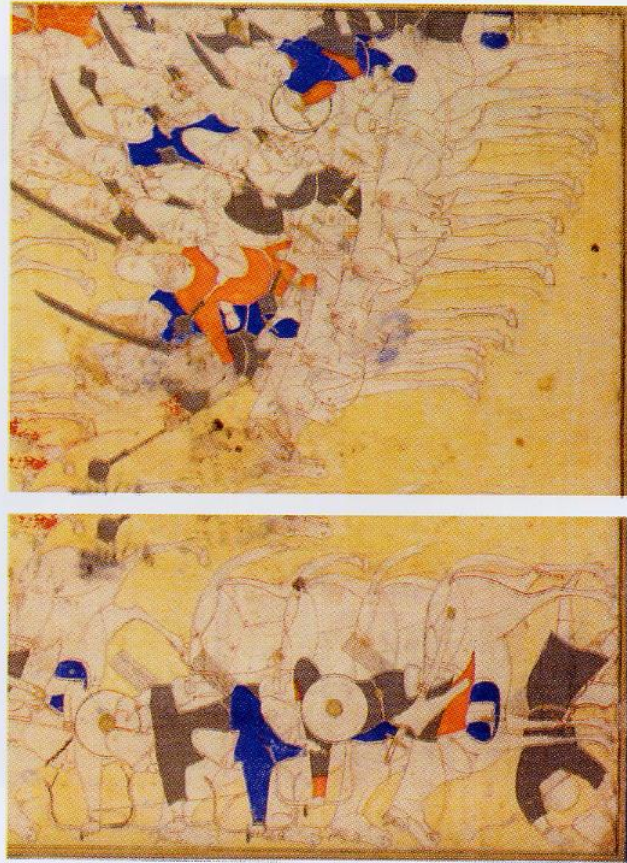


Fig. 4 The same painting, as copied by Japanese historian Miki Sakaé. Now in Seigen Shrine in Shizuoka, Japan.



Nomad Horse Archers

Nomad Cavalry

Little else is known about the 1611 incident, which may or not have been connected to the royal succession. Interestingly, a young Yamada Nagamasa either was a new arrival in Ayutthaya at the time, or arrived soon afterwards, since a son, known as Oin, was born there by his Siamese spouse not much later.<sup>15</sup> The incident may have influenced Yamada Nagamasa's views of Siamese politics.

Yamada Nizaemon Nagamasa was probably born in c. 1590 in Sumpu (present Shizuoka) in Japan, possibly as the son of a rural samurai (*jizamurai*) although little is known of his parents.<sup>16</sup> Having settled in the Siamese capital Ayutthaya, by 1621 he had become the leader of the Japanese community there. He engaged in trade and assisted in maintaining diplomatic relations between Japan and Siam. Yamada Nagamasa is believed to have led a Japanese force in battle for King Songtham, although little is known of this, since he was reportedly promoted to the official title Okya Senaphimuk, Okya being an exalted Siamese rank higher than that of Phra, the former title of the headman of the Ayutthaya Japanese.

#### The Crises of 1628-1630

Upon the death of King Songtham in 1628, Yamada Nagamasa commanded six or eight hundred Japanese soldiers and held a high position at court. Before the king died in December 1628, he made Yamada Nagamasa promise to secure the throne for the king's fifteen-year-old son, the future King Chettha (r. 1628-1629). However, the dying king also subordinated Yamada Nagamasa to Phraya Sri Worawong who had been chosen as regent. As soon as the old king was dead, the latter was promoted to the rank of Chao Phraya Kalahom, a title that at least in the nineteenth century indicated the Minister of War or Commander-in-Chief and likely had the same meaning in the seventeenth century. Europeans referred to him as the Kalahom.<sup>17</sup> The regent immediately embarked upon the systematic killing of nobles the loyalty of whom he distrusted. The Kalahom then persuaded Yamada Nagamasa to dispose of King Songtham's brother, Sri Sin. Whether by the Kalahom's persuasion or because of a conviction that Sri Sin was a threat to a young king, Yamada Nagamasa moved against the latter. Acting as an *agent provocateur*, Yamada Nagamasa made Sri Sin believe that he would join him in rebellion, then turned on Sri Sin and slaughtered his men. However, the Kalahom then moved against the young king, having him assassinated by a group of Japanese from the Japanese Guard. Whether Yamada Nagamasa was involved in the incident remains unclear; after the murder of the young king he refused to meet the Kalahom and may have prepared his forces for battle against those of his treacherous superior. However, an agreement was eventually reached in which the Kalahom again was appointed regent, this time for a younger son of the late King

<sup>15</sup> Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> The regent was also known under the title Chao Phraya Sri Suriyawong.

Songtham, an unfortunate and ultimately short-lived prince who after the coronation became known as King Athittayawong (r. 1629).<sup>18</sup>

The Kalahom then appointed Yamada Nagamasa King of Ligor (present Nakhon Si Thammarat in southern Thailand), a tributary of Ayutthaya in the remote south. Yamada Nagamasa's reasons for accepting can only be guessed at. With the military forces at his disposal, he could presumably have taken sole power in Ayutthaya, had he wanted to. However, he did not move to usurp the throne, either out of a sense of loyalty to the old king or because he did not want a civil war. Yamada Nagamasa was technically a Siamese subject. He held a high rank, yet was unrelated to the royal family. The Kingdom of Ligor was a new opportunity, a fresh start, and Yamada Nagamasa took it. However, he first had to gain control over Ligor, which currently was in the hands of somebody else. In August or September 1629, Yamada Nagamasa left Ayutthaya. With him followed three hundred of his Japanese soldiers and three to four thousand Siamese troops under his control. The campaign against Ligor was soon over. By January 1630, Yamada Nagamasa had taken control over his new domain. By then, however, the Kalahom had also had the young King Athittayawong killed and himself crowned as King Prasat Thong (r. 1629-1656).<sup>19</sup>

In probably February or March 1630, further strife took place in Ayutthaya. King Prasat Thong attempted to seize a Japanese ship and its cargo. The new headman of the Japanese in Ayutthaya, Iwakura Heyemon, opposed the move. The argument over ownership ended in violence. In the ensuing struggle, the Japanese settlement was burnt down by the King's soldiers. As a result, most of the Japanese evacuated, shipping out to Japan or Cambodia, which already was the home of another Japanese settlement.<sup>20</sup>

These were political events, not acts of interracial warfare. Many Japanese-Siamese remained in Ayutthaya, and some eventually joined Prasat Thong's army. Already in 1632, the existence of a Japanese settlement in Ayutthaya was again recorded.<sup>21</sup>

As for Yamada Nagamasa, he died in Ligor in probably April or May 1630, likely from poison administered with the medicine Yamada Nagamasa received to heal a wound sustained in battle. There were several suspects; however, the exact circumstances of his death remain unclear.<sup>22</sup>

Nagamasa's teenage son Oin remained in Ligor for a while, then chose to sail with the other Japanese to Cambodia. When the King of Cambodia in late 1630 sent his navy to attack Siam, the Japanese in Cambodia joined his forces. In 1633, Cambodia and Siam agreed to end the war. This did not restore relations with

<sup>18</sup> Polenghi, *Samurai of Ayutthaya*, 52-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-8.

Japan. By then Japan was in the process of closing its borders, and contacts and trade between Siam and Japan did not recover.<sup>23</sup>

#### The Crisis of 1656

The lost trade opportunities in Japan did not prevent the Japanese in Ayutthaya from influencing events in their adopted country, or country of birth as it then was for many of them. Upon the death of King Prasat Thong in 1656, another turbulent succession crisis took place. Several Japanese were involved in the coup that soon brought King Narai (r. 1656-1688) to the throne, among them Antonio Zenzaemon who was in all probability a Christian. He was by no means the last Japanese in Ayutthaya. Several individuals with Japanese names remain in the records from the second half of the seventeenth century, including one Ursula Yamada who quite possibly might have been a Christian descendant of Yamada Nagamasa or his son Oin, although surviving records are too brief to prove or disprove the point. Yet, with the assimilation of the remaining Japanese into the Siamese population, the Japanese settlement eventually disappeared. By 1718, the old Japanese settlement was no longer recognisable as Japanese in character and only remained as a place name (*ban jipuin*, "Japanese village").<sup>24</sup>

#### The Japanese-Siamese Soldiers

So what did the Japanese soldiers in Siam look like?

By 1593, the reportedly five hundred Japanese soldiers (*asa jipuin*, "Japanese Guard") in Ayutthaya who served in the Siamese army of King Naresuan against the Burmese did so under their own leader, a Japanese but one who held the Siamese title Phra Senaphimuk. He commanded his men in the Siamese style, mounted on a bull elephant named Phop Trai.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that at least the Japanese commander wore Siamese insignia and possibly Siamese court dress. Still, the Japanese soldiers would not have left a lasting legacy in the Siamese military system unless they were armed in the Japanese manner.

The continued use of Japanese dress and arms is, in fact, suggested by the seventeenth-century fresco depicting Yamada Nagamasa's army (Figs. 3-4) on a wall within Wat Yom, a temple in Ayutthaya. The painting has been tentatively dated to 1681. The temple has since been destroyed but prior to this the painting was copied, first in 1918 in a Thai manuscript and then by the Japanese historian Miki Sakae in 1939. The two copies are similar, yet not identical. The painting suggests that officers were mounted on elephants in the Siamese manner and also dressed in Siamese court style. However, in addition the fresco showed distinct units of what must have been Japanese soldiers. Wearing neither headgear (which

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

all Siamese soldiers and officials wore) nor armour, they were dressed in recognisably Japanese kimonos of various hues and carried polearms which although some looked more Chinese than Japanese in style, no doubt were meant to be Japanese *naginatas*.

In addition to the Japanese *naginata* units, the fresco also showed distinct units of Siamese infantry, either with Siamese-style swords (*daab*) and rectangular black shields of thick buffalo hide or with spears and round shields.<sup>26</sup> All Siamese soldiers in the fresco wore the characteristic short jacket in various hues of red and red hats made of woven reeds and wood then customarily used by Siamese soldiers.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the fresco showed a sprinkling of flags, presumably made of silk as this was customary in Siam. Among them were both Siamese flags and the Japanese flag, the crimson *hinomaru* ("sun disc") on white, the use of which indeed has remained in Japan into the present. The appearance of the *hinomaru* is easily explained, since it had been in use in Japan for several centuries and, moreover, was the flag sent by the Tokugawa Shogunate on official foreign trade and diplomatic missions. The use of this flag suggests that the Japanese-Siamese under Yamada Nagamasa retained their distinct Japanese identity, despite being subjects under the Siamese kings. In the fresco, the Japanese flag was, unsurprisingly, carried by a man in the *naginata* unit.

Little else is known about the appearance of the Japanese-Siamese soldiers. A few other paintings purporting to show Yamada Nagamasa have survived too, as copies of old originals or indeed as copies of old copies. However, none of these paintings, including a well-known portrait of Yamada Nagamasa in a much later Western dress, are credible depictions of seventeenth-century Japanese-Siamese.

As a curiosity, several films have been made about the life of Yamada Nagamasa, yet none of them can be said to depict anything like the real Yamada Nagamasa. First came the *Ôja no ken Yamada Nagamasa* ("The King's Sword, Yamada Nagamasa," 1959), shot in Thailand but with Japanese actors. This film depicts Yamada Nagamasa as a classic Japanese tragic hero. A more recent film is *Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya* (2010), which judging from its trailers is a martial arts action film.

[Readers will find a small illustrated article by Rob Morgan on the subject of Nagamasa's warship on page 51 of this issue. Ed.]

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient South-East Asian Warfare* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1952); or the series on Siamese warfare published by Michael P. Anastasiadis in the *Arquebustier* in 1984-1987.

<sup>27</sup> For a near-contemporary description of Siamese soldiers by a Persian, see, e.g., Alan Danskin, "Iran and Siam in the Later 17th Century," *Arquebustier* 22: 5; citing Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, *The Ship of Sulaiman* [Safina 'i Sulaimani] (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), translated by John O'Kane.