UNIT 8: MODERNISATION AND WESTERNISATION

Portuguese visitors

In 1543, a Portuguese ship involved in the China trade was blown off-course during a storm. The sailors on board accidentally became the first European visitors to Japan. The Japanese called them nanban. Given the warlike nature of the period, the Japanese were greatly interested in the guns the Portuguese carried and the local daimyo ordered his swordsman to make copies. The daimyo then asked the Portuguese for shooting lessons. The introduction of guns to Japan had a profound effect. The guns did not need the same high degree of training as the sword to be useful and the new weapon would shift the balance of power between the warring daimyo. In 1575, during the Battle of Nagashino, Oda Nobunaga used over 1000 guns to defeat a samurai cavalry charge on the plains of Shitaragahara and secure victory. The arrival of this Western invention would continue to have a significant impact on events in Japan.

As well as knowledge of a new weapon, the Portuguese also introduced trade and Christianity to Japan. In 1549, the first missionaries arrived. Initially they used paintings of Christ, the Madonna and Jesus to help them communicate, as they found the Japanese language very difficult to learn. This inability to speak Japanese, and the European practice of eating with their fingers rather than with chopsticks, convinced most Japanese that the new visitors were ignorant barbarians.

An exception was João Rodrigues (1561–1633), who was sent to Japan as a 15 year old to become a Jesuit priest. He had a natural ability with languages and within a short time could speak Japanese fluently. Nicknamed the ‘interpreter’, he produced a Japanese grammar guide and dictionary that helped many other Europeans to communicate. When the first missionaries returned to Europe, they took stories of the distinct Japanese culture and its ceremonies. In the early 1600s, Luís Fróis (1532–97) from Portugal wrote the Historia de Japan and Europeans were amazed by his tales of this densely populated exotic country ruled by warrior samurai.

nanban  Southern barbarians
swordsmith  Person who makes swords out of iron by heating and reshaping them over a fire.

This scene depicting Portuguese ships carrying ‘nanban’ foreigners arriving in Japan is a detail from a 17th-century Japanese folding screen.
More visitors

In 1600, a Dutch ship that had also been blown off-course and damaged in a storm drifted into Kyūshū harbour. For the Japanese, the light-skinned Dutch were obviously different to the Portuguese and they called them 'Kōmō' or 'Red Hair'. Aboard the ship was William Adams, the ship's pilot, who became the first Englishman to reach Japan. The ship also had nineteen bronze cannons, 5000 cannonballs and 500 muskets. A daimyo, Tokugawa Ieyasu, learnt of the ship's arrival and seized the cannon and the pilot. William Adams then provided the daimyo's men with vital training. The cannon and guns were used to gain victory in the battle of Sekigahara and Tokugawa Ieyasu became the new shogun. His success had been secured, at least in part, by the arrival of the Dutch ship and her cargo of weapons.

Source BB

A Japanese red seal ship used for Asian trade, 18th century, unknown artist. The Tokugawa Shogunate issued red-sealed permits to a few merchants who were interested in foreign trade. The shogun's seal authorised the mission and guaranteed protection against pirates and other nations who might attack it.
Source 8C  Japanese red seal trade in the early 17th century, based on the *Histoire du Japon* by Michel Vié

Continuing influence

Despite the introduction of sakoku, or the ‘closed country’ policy, Japanese interest in the West remained. While most Europeans were excluded from Japan, the ban on trade and influence was not complete. Japan still sought to learn from and understand Europeans. The Englishman William Adams remained in Japan and became a trusted advisor to the shogun. He received the great honour of being made a samurai and was given the right to wear the two samurai swords.

Some trade also continued. The Dutch were allowed to operate a trading post in Nagasaki. Through this limited contact, the Japanese maintained a study of European science which they called rangaku. They received information and books, as well as samples and demonstrations of new inventions such as clocks and hot air balloons. This enabled Japan to maintain some awareness of Western developments, although this awareness would prove inadequate when confronted by the American fleet under Perry in the 1850s.

Knowledge and understanding

1. Explain how the first Europeans came to visit the islands of Japan.
2. How did the Portuguese arrival influence Japanese history?
3. How did Europeans try to explain their religion to the Japanese? Why did they use this method?
4. The first Christian missionaries to arrive in Japan did not understand the language. Make a list of key Japanese words and find the symbols (kanji) they would need to know to explain themselves to the Japanese.
5. Carefully study source 8B and give three differences between European and Japanese ships.
6. What were the two major influences on the rule of Japan that arrived on the first Dutch ship?

Explanation and communication

7. Using the computer and a program such as Inspiration, create a diagram illustrating the influence of the West on Japan.
8. Research William Adams and create a blog of his life.