



Cummins, Antony, *In search of the ninja: the historical truth of ninjutsu*. Stroud, Gloucestershire, The History Press, 2012 ISBN 9780752480930

This is a fairly straight chronological history of ninja, looking at their origins, who and what they were, their activities chiefly in the Sengoku period, their “skill sets”, ninja manuals, and whether they exist today.

Cummins and his team, like Zoughari, used mostly primary sources, the ninja manuals such as the *Shoninki*, *Bansenshukai* and the *Ninpiden* chiefly but also others which are not so well known. Unlike Zoughari, he doesn't use the war tales so much. He acknowledges that most of these were written in the 17th century but then traces their origins and examines to show how they do still have worth as sources.

The strengths of this book are that Cummins does not just accept things, he questions them and researches them or even tests them. For example he has a laboratory test the ingredients of the ninja sleep drug and found that indeed, it would work and analysed the ingredients of the ninja “food pill” and found that it would have been nutritious for someone of that era (smaller than we are and more athletic). He also examines the infamous “water spiders” and concludes (as have others) they were not a kind of shoe to wade over the water surface but were meant to be sat astride and paddled along.

The translations or part or all of the ninja manuals are another plus as are the illustrations (which do actually illustrate ninja-related things). His view of what ninjas were will doubtless upset people who see them as super-acrobats with almost supernatural skills or those for whom ninjutsu is a specific martial art. Rather, he sees them as people of their time, who developed a particular set of skills to enable them to operate successfully as spies (for the most part, with only the occasional assassination) and that they were of samurai class so their fighting skills would be based on the house-styles of their clans or families rather than being a discrete “ninja fighting style”.

Once you get past the opening chapters, where he plainly has an axe to grind and a trumpet to blow (claiming, for example, that there has been no academic research on ninjas – so what are Turnbull and Zoughari?), the text settles down. His style is readable and flows well (much improved from those booklets he wrote published by WordClay some years ago). The text is extensively footnoted (proper footnote, not extra material) and the bibliography is mainly of primary Japanese sources. The bibliography of secondary sources is rather more general and diffuse, however.

There are some minor whinges of course – the section on kanji for the various words for ninjas is a bit otiose if you know the language and confusing if you don't. I get the impression that he himself does not read Japanese and has had some of these points explained but got it a bit garbled.. He seems to talk himself round in a circle. There also bits in other chapters which seem self-contradictory.

It also should be noted that the works he uses were written by either Koga or Iga ninja, with the occasional reference to the Negoro ninja. There is nothing on the Fuma ninja and he does not really mention them as he might have when, for example, discussing the vexed (at least for him) question of ninja hierarchy (*jonin*, *chunin*, *genin*) as the Fuma are often used in Japanese works, at least, to illustrate that not all ninja followed this ranking system, in fact the Fuma had a completely different set up. The Fuma are interesting for another reason in that they appear to have been one of or part of those racial sub-groups like the *Sanka* so again operated outside the dominant paradigm. Ninja are a bit more than farmers or samurai of Iga and Koga.

But I would place this book alongside Turnbull and Zoughari as most authoritative. It just edges out Turnbull in its use of the ninja sources and edges out Zoughir because it is far better written.