

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GUNPOWDER

The inventor of gunpowder and his place in history are lost in the mists of time. What we know for certain is that gunpowder was known to the Chinese in the early years of the 13th Century. What is doubtful is the supposition that they used it as a propulsive medium in cannons. To support this statement one only has to consider the fact that from this period of time we have many fragile ceramic vases surviving yet to date not one solid metal cannon can be traced to Chinese ancestry. The earliest authenticated cannon known to exist was unearthed at a place called Loshult in Sweden and it has been dated to the late 14th Century. It is seen here at the right.

The next thing we know for sure is that somehow the knowledge spread to Europe in the early years of the 13th Century. There exists a manuscript dated 1326 written by one Walter Milemete entitled “De officiis regum” and currently in the library of Christ Church, Oxford showing a Moorish looking man in the act of firing a vase shaped gun that appears to be firing an arrow.



The next thing we know with certainty is that one Roger Bacon, the Franciscan friar for Ilchester, wrote a manuscript of eleven volumes entitled *De Secretis Operibus Artis et Naturae et de Nullitate Magiae* in about 1260. In this manuscript he gives the recipe for gunpowder but uses an anagram to describe some portions of it.

The recipe is as follows:

“Sed tamen sal petrae LURO VOPO VIR CAN UTRIET sulphuris; et sic facies tonitruum et coruscationem, si scias artificium”

This translated gives:

“Take saltpetre LURO VOPO VIR CAN UTRIET, and Sulphur, and with such a mixture you can make thunder and lightning.

Historians have rearranged the anagram to read R. VII. PART. V. NOV. CORUL. V. ET.

Now we know that in those times “Novellae coruli” was young hazelwood. We know that this wood made the best charcoal. So now we have:

“Take salpetre R(ecipe) VII part(es) V Nov(ellae) Corul(i), v et sulphuris.”

Putting this into English this becomes:

“Seven parts of saltpetre, 5 of young hazelwood and 5 of Sulphur.”

And as any schoolboy will tell you “That is the formula for gunpowder”.

We know for sure that the Republic of Venice ordered on February 11th 1326, iron bullets and metal cannon for defence purposes, because it is shown in their historical records.

So there we have it, gunpowder was known in the mid 13th Century, both in China and Europe. Guns were certainly known in Europe in the middle of the 14th Century but more than that we do not know with any certainty.