SAMPLE ARTICLE:

…gunpowder recreated from medieval formulas produced an explosive force nearly equal to that of its modern manufactured counterpart. Smith said that the efficacy of the mixture of charcoal, saltpeter, and sulfur used by the gunners of Edward III's armies as they rampaged across France in the 14th century astonished researchers, who discovered it by chance as they compared the results of experiments with replica medieval guns using modern gunpowder to those of its 700-year-old predecessor.

Motivated by the discovery, the researchers decided to attempt to recreate the gunpowder formula used by Edward's gunners with the less pure ingredients that were available at the time, rather than modern materials. To that end, they harvested raw sulfur from the hills of Iceland, burned alder wood in the ground to create wood ash/charcoal, and extracted saltpeter (calcium nitrate) in the medieval fashion from a dung pit under a chicken house in a recreated medieval village in southern Denmark.

After mixing the components in traditional wooden bowls, the researchers packed the medieval gunpowder into a replica Loshult gun (a small, Swedish, 14th-century canon) and fired lead balls as far as 3,100 feet, reaching speeds up to about 655 feet per second, compared to a distance of 3,600 feet for modern gunpowder. They also simulated attacks on ships at sea by firing larger guns packed with the medieval mixture, stones and cast iron balls at thick wooden walls and found that stones made fist-sized holes in the simulated hull and cast iron balls blasted holes much larger than the balls themselves.

Surviving medieval recipes call for the mixture to be put under pressure by stomping by foot for at least 20, but preferably 30, hours to mix the constituents but, according to Smith, even with very little preparation and mixing time, the results were "unbelievably effective." The researchers now plan to experiment with different ratios of the ingredients to recreate how gunpowder formulas might have been improved upon during the first few centuries after its discovery.

- Judith Kane,

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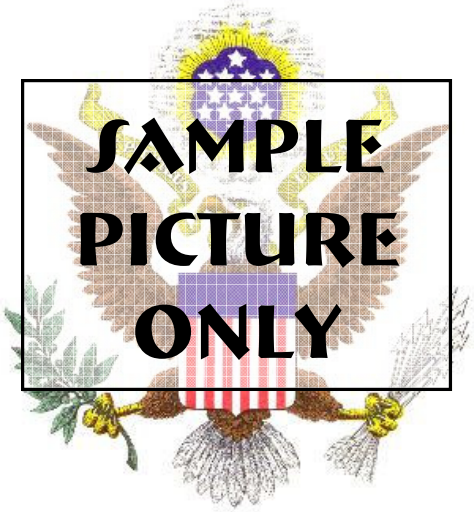

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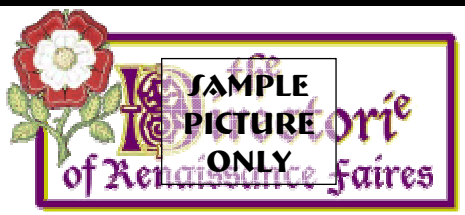

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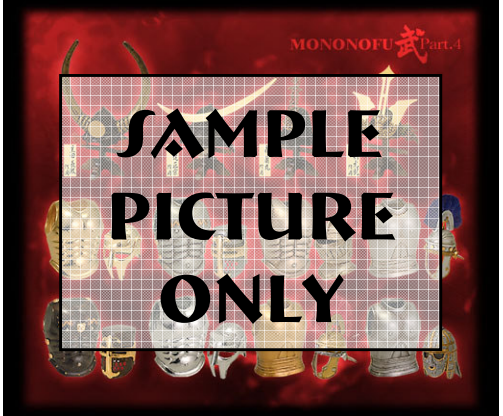

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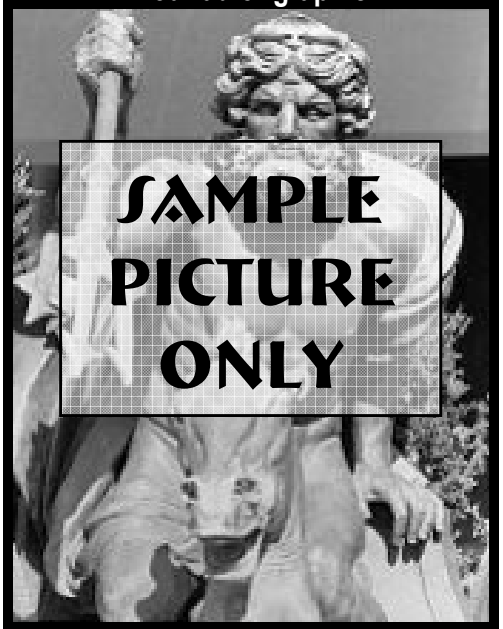

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