

## **Kuki Yoshitaka's Naval Prowess**

Toba's history and culture are inextricably linked to the sea. One of the city's most significant historical figures, Kuki Yoshitaka (1542–1600), earned his reputation as the finest naval general of the Warring States Period (1467–1568).

Yoshitaka was born in Shima, the second son of the master of Tashiro Castle (in present-day Toba). Little is known about his childhood. The Kuki family was one of several rival gangs of pirates vying for dominance of the area. Eventually, they were forced to abandon their seat of power, and around 1570, Yoshitaka pledged service to Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), a powerful warlord attempting to unify the country by force.

Yoshitaka greatly contributed to Nobunaga's campaign by providing naval support in many battles. He constructed six enormous iron-plated ships armed with cannons. In a noteworthy skirmish, these floating fortresses sank the opposing fleet, and set up a blockade that led to the surrender of the rival forces. For his service, Yoshitaka was named lord of the Toba area.

Following the death of Nobunaga, Yoshitaka supported his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), who made him commander of the naval forces and lord of Shima. Hideyoshi ordered him to construct a new fleet for a 1592 invasion of Korea, and was so impressed with the resulting flagship that he named it *Nippon Maru*, a vessel worthy of representing the entire country. Under Hideyoshi's auspices, Yoshitaka constructed Toba Castle, completing it in 1594.

Yoshitaka eventually retired and transferred control of the Kuki family to his son, Moritaka (1573–1632). Later, however, father and son were forced into conflict during the pivotal Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Yoshitaka continued to fight for Toyotomi loyalists, while Moritaka joined the rival forces of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). Some historians believe this was a deliberate decision made to ensure the survival of the family regardless of which side claimed victory.

The Tokugawa forces emerged victorious, and Yoshitaka retreated from Toba Castle to the nearby island of Toshijima. Moritaka petitioned Ieyasu for his father's life, and Yoshitaka was granted clemency. Before word could reach the elder Kuki, however, Yoshitaka committed seppuku (ritual suicide by disembowelment). His remains are interred on the island of Toshijima.