

History and Culture of the Shiwaku Islands

The inhabitants of the Shiwaku islands have since ancient times depended on trade and maritime traffic in the Seto Inland Sea for their livelihood. Local seafarers who were experts in navigating the often-perilous currents of the Bisan-Seto Strait made a name for themselves throughout the Inland Sea region and beyond in the sixteenth century, when they became known as the Shiwaku Navy. These mariners were held in high regard by some of the most powerful warlords of the time, including Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), who hired Shiwaku sailors to captain their ships. This was a prestigious occupation that came with great responsibility, as the vessels were used to transport high-ranking officials and valuable goods such as rice, the means of payment for taxes at the time. The Shiwaku seafarers' contributions were recognized by the central government, which by the early seventeenth century granted the islands a form of autonomy not allowed to any other part of the realm.

By the 1720s, demand for the Shiwaku Navy's services had declined to the extent that the seafarers could no longer make a living on navigation alone. Many turned to shipbuilding, utilizing their knowledge of the sea to construct some of the most advanced vessels in Japan at the time. This industry flourished on the Shiwakus from the 1700s until the Meiji era (1868–1912), with some of the shipwrights expanding into general carpentry, building shrines, temples, and homes throughout Shikoku and in nearby areas on the main island of Honshu. Some of the religious structures erected by the Shiwaku carpenters are still standing in Kagawa and Okayama prefectures. The population of the islands began to age and decrease in the post-World War II period, but tourism is now offering new hope for the archipelago. Historical and cultural sites that remind visitors of the Shiwakus' heyday dot the islands, which offer a laid-back alternative to the more famous destinations in the Inland Sea region. The islands of Honjima and Takamishima are also co-hosts of the Setouchi Triennale art festival.