**Medieval Wakasa Bay: A Cultural Crossroads**

**Overview**

Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, Wakasa Bay was an important gateway on the coast of the Sea of Japan that served as a relay point between the capital and destinations both in Japan and mainland Asia. Food, fine art, religious objects, and other goods were traded through large ports like Obama and Tsuruga, and the accompanying increase in travel contributed to the sharing of ideas and cultural exchange.

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*Shipping Food, Works of Art, and Exotic Animals*

The northern sea routes from Wakasa Bay reached as far as Hokkaido, while southwestern routes stretched to Kyushu and the Korean Peninsula. Cargo was not limited to food products and everyday items, but also included statues, paintings, sutras, ceramics, and other valuables. Of particular note is a large ship that came to the Obama port in 1408 with several animals not endemic to Japan. One of them was an elephant, the first on record to enter the country, which was later presented to Ashikaga Yoshimochi (1386–1428), the fourth Ashikaga shogun.

*Trade Connections within Japan and with Other Countries*

Many precious objects arriving at the ports were sent on to other destinations, but some were preserved by influential families and temples in the Wakasa region. In 1422, Hagaji Temple in Obama received an ornate Lotus Sutra that was a 1325 copy of a highly treasured sutra from the Korean kingdom of Goryeo (918–1392). The temple also benefited from trade relationships within Japan, as Abe Yasusue, a lord of the northeastern Tohoku region, provided financing for the reconstruction of the main hall in 1447.

*Christianity in the Wakasa Bay Area*

Among the many people whose ideas and beliefs were brought to Japan through the ports of Wakasa Bay were Christian missionaries. In 1560, the Society of Jesus (also known as the Jesuits) baptized a man from Wakasa who went by the name Yohoken Paulo (d. 1596). In 1580, Paulo and his son Toin Vicente (1540–1609) were admitted as new members of the Society. The two made valuable translations of religious texts and greatly contributed to early Christian missionary work in Japan.

**Exhibition Items**

This section includes items illustrating the diversity of goods and cultural phenomena that passed through Wakasa Bay. A thirteenth-century Buddhist statue from China depicts Karura, a birdlike protector deity adopted from Hindu lore. In 1990, the statue was found washed up on the shore in Obama; it was wrapped in the tattered vermilion cloth upon which it is placed in the glass case.

A reprint of a 1471 map from the Korean Peninsula includes a label for Obama, showing that the port was recognized abroad. A copy of another document specifies that the ship that brought the very first elephant to Japan in 1408 also carried peacocks, sambar deer, cockatoos, and other exotic animals.

A replica of the Lotus Sutra donated to Hagaji Temple in 1422 is notable for the very fine details of illustrations and for the costly materials such as silver and gold paint used on dark blue paper. Another exhibit is a reprinted edition of a text detailing the lives of Christian saints, titled *Sanctos no gosagveo no vchi nvqigaqi* (Excerpts from the Acts of the Saints), that Jesuit converts Yohoken Paulo and Toin Vicente translated into Japanese; note that the translated text uses Latin script.

The white porcelain figure holding an infant depicts Kannon, the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion. It was made in China in the sixteenth century and is the only one of its kind in Wakasa. Though Kannon holding a child is a common Buddhist theme, some Japanese Christians worshipped such statues as Maria Kannon due to the visual and symbolic resemblance to Mary, the mother of Jesus in Christian theology.