

Wakasa Province: Supplying Food for the Emperor

Overview

From approximately the eighth to the tenth century, Wakasa Province functioned as a *miketsukuni*, a region designated to pay certain taxes and tributes in the form of food that would be served to the imperial family and members of the court. Wakasa was renowned for salt and various types of seafood. Wooden shipping tags and relevant historical records reveal how select coastal provinces helped meet the needs of the nobility in the capital and what kinds of food were served to the emperor and the court during that time.

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Miketsukuni: Designated Food Provinces

In the Nara period (710–794), food products provided to the court were gathered from several designated provinces called *miketsukuni* (“food provinces”). They were chosen based on access to the sea, variety of available foodstuffs, and proximity to the capital so that the food could be delivered without spoiling. The *Man'yōshū*, an eighth-century poetry collection, specifically mentions three *miketsukuni*: Awaji Province (Awaji Island in present-day Hyogo Prefecture), Ise Province, and Shima Province (both in present-day Mie Prefecture).

Wakasa as a Provider of Food for the Court

No extant documents explicitly name Wakasa Province as a *miketsukuni*, but several historical findings suggest that it was considered as such. Most notably, wooden tablets called *mokkan* that served as shipping tags for goods sent from Wakasa were discovered during excavations of Fujiwarakyo (the capital in 694–710) and Heijokyo (the capital in 710–740 and in 745–784) in present-day Nara Prefecture. Writing on the tablets included information such as the origin of the shipment, the tax being paid, the taxpayer, and the type of food. Ancient records from Todaiji Temple in Nara mention Wakasa alongside the three formally designated *miketsukuni* as “provinces that pay tribute each month in rare foods.”

Records of Taxes Paid with Food in the Engishiki

Detailed information about Wakasa Province paying taxes and tributes in salt and seafood appears in the *Engishiki*, a compilation of customs and official procedures from the early tenth century. Specific goods that were accepted as payments included salt, sea

bream, mussels, Japanese pilchard, sea urchins, abalone, sea squirt, squid, sea cucumbers, and seaweed. The fact that Wakasa was listed in the *Engishiki* as a payer of both taxes and tributes is regarded as further proof of the province's status as a *miketsukuni*.

Exhibition Items

This exhibit provides an example of what a typical meal in the palace of the emperor may have looked like in the eighth century. Ancient documents describe the emperor sitting on a low bench in front of a vermilion lacquered table, using chopsticks and silver spoons to eat food served in silver bowls. Four smaller containers were used for seasonings: *hishio* (a precursor of miso and soy sauce), salt, vinegar, and sake. Based on this, researchers believe that the food was likely served plain and then seasoned according to taste.