

Tsunuga Salt: The Only Salt Left Uncursed

Overview

For centuries, the Tsunuga area along Wakasa Bay (present-day Tsuruga) was known for producing high-quality salt. Moreover, at one point it was regarded as the only salt that was safe for the emperor to eat. According to an ancient tale, political intrigue and unrequited love in the capital led a vengeful minister to curse all the salt in Japan. Fortunately, as he was casting the curse, he forgot to mention Tsunuga, so the salt produced there was considered spared, making Tsunuga an even more valuable source of salt for the court and the nobility of the capital.

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According to *Nihon shoki*, an eighth-century chronicle of Japanese history, the powerful, high-ranking minister Heguri no Matori (d. 498) tried to usurp power and reign over the country after the death of Emperor Ninken (449–498), the legendary 24th emperor. Matori claimed to be acting on behalf of the late emperor's young son, the future Emperor Buretsu (489–507), and lived in a grand palace commissioned for the heir.

As Buretsu grew up, he began courting Kagehime, a secret lover of Matori's son Heguri no Shibi. When she reluctantly agreed to a meeting for fear of what might happen if she denied the advances of the prince, Matori was ordered to provide horses for Buretsu. The minister accepted the order, mockingly saying, "For whom else are the palace horses kept? Of course, his orders shall be obeyed," but deliberately delayed them.

Despite the setback, Buretsu eventually approached Kagehime at a poetry reading event. Shibi tried to intervene, but was ordered to step aside. The two young men exchanged poems, concealing threats and insults in metaphor. When Shibi refused to stand down, Buretsu used his next verse to declare his love directly to Kagehime, but Shibi responded that his was the only love she required.

Buretsu realized then that Shibi and Kagehime were already a couple. Remembering the incident with the horses and enraged by the disrespect, Buretsu had Shibi executed and arranged for Matori to be killed. Filled with resentment, Matori cursed all the salt in the sea as a final act of revenge before his death, expecting that the cursed salt would eventually reach the emperor's table. He listed the names of countless places, but

apparently forgot to mention the Tsunuga area, and it was therefore believed that only salt from Tsunuga was safe for consumption by the emperor.

It is unlikely that events took place exactly as the ancient story suggests, but it provides an interesting explanation as to why Tsunuga salt was highly valued. The tale also highlights the connection between Wakasa Bay and the capital, showing how happenings at the court and among the nobility could influence the reputation and consumption of goods from a comparatively small, far-off coastal region.

Exhibition Items

On display are artifacts and replicas of objects related to Tsunuga salt production. Notable items include ancient pottery found at the Matsubara salt production site and a replica of one of the wooden shipping tags that marked salt supplies from Tsunuga to the capital in Heijokyo (present-day Nara). An enlarged reproduction of one of the *Nihon shoki* pages telling the story of Tsunuga salt, as well as a photo of the Matsubara site, can be seen in the information panels.