

## Agricultural Estates in Wakasa

### Overview

From the twelfth to the mid-sixteenth century, the Wakasa region was the location of many *shoen* estates, which were private, partially tax-exempt agricultural landholdings granted to large shrines and temples, nobles, and samurai families. Since the proprietors were often based in the old capitals of Nara and Kyoto, the estates were administered by local representatives who ensured that the farmers produced enough food to send a set amount as payment in lieu of taxes. The connections between the *shoen* and the landholders became one of the routes that brought high-quality craft items, religious traditions, and festival culture from the capital region to Wakasa.

### Learn More

#### *Shoen Estates and Their Administration*

Wakasa has long been known as a fertile region with access to the sea, which made it a very desirable location to have a *shoen* estate. In the past, most land in Japan was considered the property of the emperor, and taxes were paid to the court. However, *shoen* lands were exempt from some of the taxes imposed by the central government and were managed by proprietors that were often located in distant places, usually through a *daikan* representative living in the area. The farmers who worked the land sent rice or other goods as payment to the *shoen* landholders rather than the court.

#### *Cultural Exchange through Connections with Proprietors*

The number of active *shoen* estates in Wakasa was particularly large between the second half of the twelfth century and the first half of the fifteenth century. Their proprietors were very influential religious institutions and court nobility. According to historical records, these included Toji Temple and Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto, Todaiji Temple and Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara, and members of the emperor's household, such as the Fushimi no Miya family branch. Through these connections, some aspects of culture from the capital were transmitted to the *shoen* in the form of Buddhist statues, religious traditions, and art objects. Prominent examples in Wakasa are the *dengaku* folk music and O no Mai ritual dances, which are performed at spring festivals as offerings to the deities. Most of the *dengaku* and O no Mai traditions preserved at local shrines were originally dedicated to deities of the land at the *shoen* estates.

#### *Decline of the Shoen System*

The *shoen* system began to weaken in the mid-fifteenth century and gradually disappeared, as individual samurai lords strengthened their control over domain lands and the country entered the Warring States period (1467–1615). However, the memory of the *shoen* is reflected in the modern-day Wakasa region in the names of districts and neighborhoods that were once part of such estates.

### **Exhibition Items**

This section includes objects and replicas of historical documents related to the *shoen* estates that once existed in the Wakasa region. A letter from Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), the founder of the Kamakura shogunate, recognizes the Nishizu Estate as property of Kyoto's Jingoji Temple and warns the administrators of the estate not to defy him. A fourteenth-century copy of a land ownership registry from 1265 lists information about holdings in the Wakasa region at that time. One display focuses on the Tara Estate that belonged to Toji Temple in Kyoto. A map, estimated to date to 1461, illustrates how the land was divided between farmers and what irrigation systems were in place. A letter to Toji from the estate residents shows what steps were taken when problems arose in relation to *shoen* management. The letter is dated 1334 and bears an oath to the deities that the contents are true. It contains allegations of unfair treatment on the part of the temple-appointed administrator, and the complainants have “signed” beneath their names with simple circular marks in ink.