

Wakasa in the Early Modern Period: Utilizing Roads and Ports to Develop the Region

Overview

During Japan's early modern period (1568–1867), the lords who governed the Wakasa region made use of roads and ports to develop the lands under their jurisdiction to increase their wealth and power. They regulated trade and taxes, introduced new laws, and implemented projects that helped places like Kumagawa-juku post town and the port town of Obama grow into prosperous centers of trade.

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Provincial Governance

In 1587, Asano Nagamasa (1546–1611) was appointed to govern Wakasa Province. After conducting land surveys for taxation purposes, he issued a decree in 1589 that exempted Kumagawa-juku from a number of taxes. The area had been a trade and travel crossroads since long before that time, but the new policies were favorable to merchants, helping Kumagawa-juku develop into a thriving post town with numerous shipping agencies, porter stations, shops, and lodging facilities. As a result, traffic significantly increased on surrounding roads, such as the Kurihan Kaido, a major route between Kumagawa-juku and the port of Imazu on Lake Biwa. In 1595, the new governor of Wakasa Province Kinoshita Katsutoshi (1569–1649) issued a set of regulations for both commoners and officials, including strict laws against improper conduct, particularly bribery.

Ties to Powerful Figures

Many merchants in the port town of Obama held favor with Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the de facto leader of Japan at the end of the sixteenth century. Some of them were permitted to resell certain goods on behalf of the government at a profit, notable examples being Luzon pottery from the Philippines and rice collected by Hideyoshi as annual tribute. Additionally, relationships between members of the Toyotomi family and Obama merchants helped to improve the social status and economic standing of certain families in Obama.

Developing the Obama Domain

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, formalized a system of domains governed by daimyo lords.

He appointed Kyogoku Takatsugu (1563–1609) as the first lord of the newly established Obama domain. Kyogoku began construction of Obama Castle to replace the smaller Nochiseyama Castle and improve defenses and built a district for samurai residences around the new castle site. From 1634, the domain was governed by the Sakai family, who completed the construction of Obama Castle and helped Obama grow into an even more prosperous port town. The Sakai family oversaw maritime trade, supported merchant businesses, financed temples and shrines, and promoted the development of regional crafts such as Wakasa lacquerware.

Exhibition Items

The documents on display are related to the development of the Wakasa region in the early modern period of Japanese history. A replica of a picture scroll from the Edo period (1603–1867) depicts a bird's-eye view of Kumagawa-juku post town, which is notably similar to the town's present-day layout. The guardhouse that was used to monitor the movement of travelers and goods can be seen in the middle, near the fence at the entrance to the post town. A reproduction of the decree issued by Asano Nagamasa in 1589 after conducting land surveys exempts Kumagawa-juku from certain taxes. A hanging scroll exhibits a replica of the decree by Kinoshita Katsutoshi from 1595 that outlined rules for proper behavior.