

Ports of Call for Kitamaebune Ships: Obama and Tsuruga

Overview

Kitamaebune (“north-bound ships”) were trading ships that sailed the coastal route between Osaka and Hokkaido from the mid-Edo period (1603–1867) to the early Showa period (1926–1945). They traveled from the Seto Inland Sea to the Sea of Japan and back, calling at various ports to buy and sell local products, such as herring and kelp from the north and clothing, sake, and salt from the west. Maritime trade stimulated the development of port towns, brought prosperity to merchants operating shipping businesses, and greatly contributed to cultural exchange around the country.

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Kitamaebune Ships

In the Wakasa region, the ships now commonly referred to as *kitamaebune* were called *sengokubune*, *omawari*, and *bezaisen*. The *kitamaebune* ships carried goods on both outbound and return journeys, trading at every stop, which ensured higher profits compared to vessels that transported cargo from Osaka to Edo (present-day Tokyo) along the Pacific coast, which made the return trips with empty holds.

Prosperity through Maritime Trade

Both Obama and Tsuruga were important ports of call for the *kitamaebune* ships, as they were located at a midway point of the route along the Sea of Japan and were relatively close to Kyoto, the capital at the time. This allowed ships to unload in Obama or Tsuruga so that goods could be transported over land to Kyoto. The *kitamaebune* were essential to the development of the two towns, bringing food, merchandise, and news from distant regions, stimulating the trade-based economy, and conveying aspects of various cultures from across Japan to each port of call. Tsuruga, in particular, flourished due to the number of ships entering the port, with the peak of activity recorded in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Development of Alternative Routes and Means of Transport

Before long, the so-called westward route that passed through the Kanmon Straits between the islands of Honshu and Kyushu and allowed direct access to Osaka through the Seto Inland Sea was pioneered and soon proved more convenient. As a result, the partially overland trading route through Tsuruga, Obama, Lake Biwa, Otsu (present-day Shiga Prefecture), and Kyoto became less popular. With the subsequent development of

railways and other means of transport, the use of the *kitamaebune* ships gradually declined.

Exhibition Items

The most eye-catching exhibit is a replica of an elaborate model of a *kitamaebune* ship, the original of which is kept at Hachiman Jinja Shrine in Obama. Specially crafted models of ships were regarded as sacred vessels for the spirit of Funadama, a guardian deity believed to grant safety at sea. This variation of Funadama worship is particular to Obama, while in other regions objects representing the deity were traditionally mounted on the masts of the actual ships.

Other items on display include a compass from the mid-nineteenth century that uses the characters for the Chinese zodiac signs to indicate directions, a wooden tablet that served as proof of passage for ships, and a reproduction of a crewmember's diary from an Obama domain *kitamaebune*. The large Wakasa tile figure of a *shachihoko*, a mythical creature with the head of a tiger and the body of a fish, and Wakasa agate carvings of a hen with three chicks exemplify some of the goods that were shipped from the region during the *kitamaebune* trade period.