

Origins of the Saba Kaido Trade Routes

Saba Kaido (“Mackerel Road”) is the popular name of the branching network of trade routes that connected the Sea of Japan and the ancient capital of Kyoto. The name came into use sometime in the Edo period (1603–1867), but the routes themselves have a history of more than a thousand years, which is demonstrated by archaeological findings and ancient shipping records.

Archaeological Discoveries in Ancient Burial Mounds

Many keyhole-shaped burial mounds (*kofun*) are located along the roads that run through the Wakasa region. The Kaminaka area is particularly well known for the fifth- and sixth-century mounds found there. Grave goods discovered during excavations include items from mainland Asia, indicating that overseas trade already occurred at the ports along the Sea of Japan and that established trade routes leading to the capital facilitated transportation of goods inland. Some of the burial mounds have been tentatively identified as related to the Kashiwade no Omi, a clan that was tasked with supplying foodstuffs from Wakasa to the emperor and his court.

Wakasa Province Supplying Food to the Court

The shipments of food were made because Wakasa Province was once a *miketsukuni*, a province that paid some of its taxes in the form of food for the emperor’s court. Wooden shipping tags from Wakasa were found 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. The tags include information about the district the shipment came from, the tax payment it was for, and the type of food it contained. Examples of inscriptions that are still legible include salt and seafood such as mussels and sea bream. Thus, long before the Saba Kaido trade routes became famous for mackerel, other valuable food products were transported from Wakasa along the same roads all the way to Nara and later Kyoto.