

The Ox-Tethering Stone

About 500 meters south of Matsumoto Castle, a rock draped with paper *shide* streamers stands on a street corner. This rock is called the “Ox-tethering Stone,” a name that alludes to a legend surrounding two famous warlords.

In 1550, Matsumoto was conquered by Takeda Shingen (1521–1573), ruler of Kai Province (now Yamanashi Prefecture) and one of the most renowned warlords of the Warring States period (1467–1600). Shingen’s conquest brought him into conflict with Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578), who ruled Echigo Province (now Niigata Prefecture) to the north. These two fearsome leaders were called the “Tiger of Kai” and the “Dragon of Echigo,” and they developed a fierce rivalry. The two clashed many times over the subsequent decades, but neither warlord was victorious. Through their prolonged struggle, Shingen and Kenshin developed deep mutual respect, and Kenshin is even said to have wept when Shingen died.

During the 1560s, Shingen was also at war with two provinces to the south. These enemies conspired to block trade routes that connected Shingen’s landlocked territories with the coast. At the time, salt and seafood were crucial parts of a farmer’s grain-based diet, and cutting off access to these staples was an effective way to weaken Shingen’s forces.

Although Kenshin could have taken advantage of his weakened enemy, it is said that he instead sent oxen carrying loads of salt to Matsumoto. Supposedly, those oxen were tied to a rock near the central crossroad, and Kenshin’s gift was the origin of the salt market that developed there.

In truth, this legend only appeared toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), and the salt market had existed since long before. Nonetheless, the story has been repeated as an illustration of the respect the two warlords had for each other, and the expression “giving salt to an enemy” is still used today.