

Ganryūjima Island

This tiny, uninhabited island is writ large in history, literature, and folklore for the deadly events that took place there. Martial artists and samurai enthusiasts from around the globe come to visit the site, just 250 meters off the coast, where the legendary warrior and philosopher Miyamoto Musashi (d. 1645) fought one of his most famous duels.

Prelude to a Duel

There are many different accounts of this fateful meeting between two master swordsmen. This much is known for sure: on a certain spring morning, Musashi faced his opponent, Sasaki Kojirō (dates unknown), on the beach in a duel to the death.

Kojirō, nicknamed “Ganryū,” was said to have been born in the province of Echizen (in what is now Fukui Prefecture). From childhood, Kojirō had received instruction in the Chūjō-ryū school of swordsmanship. Kojirō came to exceed his master’s ability with the long sword (*nodachi*), which became his favored weapon. He later opened a dojo to train students in his own style. On the day of the duel, Kojirō used a sword that was more than 90 centimeters in length, nicknamed the “laundry-drying pole” (*monohoshi-zao*). By this time, he was said to strike with such speed and precision that he could dispatch swallows in flight.

Musashi was born in Harima Province to sword expert Shinmen Muni, also called Munisai (dates unknown). Records suggest he was born in either 1582 or 1584, and it is known he fought his first duel at age thirteen. Very different in character and style from Kojirō, Musashi belonged to no school and had no master. He traveled constantly, seeking new opponents, and he was rough and eccentric. At age 28, Musashi learned of Kojirō’s skill and vowed to measure himself against the sword master. He communicated his intent to Kojirō’s lord, Hosokawa Tadaoki (1563–1646), with the help of Matsui Okinaga (1582–1661), a vassal of Lord Hosokawa. The duel was set.

Conflicting Stories

The story of the duel has been reinterpreted many times in the centuries since it took place. From version to version and century to century, details have been lost, added, or changed. Most versions of the story agree that Musashi arrived several hours late, which threw Kojirō into a rage. This has been interpreted as a deliberate ploy of Musashi’s to unsettle his opponent. A less favorable explanation is that Musashi misjudged the fierce and

complex tides, which made it difficult to land a rowboat on the island.

Some versions of the story state that Musashi fashioned a rough wooden sword from an oar, and Kojirō was infuriated to see his adversary wielding such a primitive weapon. One account describes Musashi smashing Kojirō's skull with this impromptu blade. Another account asserts that Musashi secretly brought his followers to the duel to tip the fight in his favor. Some records state that Kojirō was only eighteen when he lost his life, but other evidence suggests he might have been over fifty.

Outcome and Legacy

When these two masters finally faced each other, the exchange was over in moments. Voices roared across the open strand. Steel flashed. No doubt Kojirō employed his trademark *kosetsu* ("tiger-cutting") technique, which had defeated so many opponents before. Yet Kojirō's skills failed him, and he was quickly bested by the wandering, unkempt warrior. As Kojirō gasped his last breath on the sand, Musashi made a prompt exit, leaving behind another chapter in the legend of Japan's greatest swordsman.

Even four centuries later, the duel on Ganryūjima Island lives on in books, movies, manga, and in the public imagination. Musashi's legacy is enormous; his treatise on training and philosophy, *The Book of Five Rings* (*Go rin no sho*), remains a bestseller that inspires business leaders, martial artists, and legions of fans around the world. Despite his defeat, Sasaki Kojirō remains a highly respected figure. Some believe he was the greater swordsman, and that Musashi would never have won without resorting to mind games and trickery.

Visitors today are left to ponder the truth of this legendary encounter, which is immortalized by a pair of statues on the eastern side of the island.