

The Gods of the Sea

Japan is often imagined as a nation with a long history of whaling. In this innovative new study, Fynn Holm argues that for centuries some regions in early modern Japan did not engage in whaling. In fact, they were actively opposed to it, even resorting to violence when whales were killed. Resistance against whaling was widespread especially in the Northeast among the Japanese fishermen who worshiped whales as the incarnation of Ebisu, the god of the sea. Holm argues that human interactions with whales were much more diverse than the basic hunter–prey relationship, as cetaceans played a pivotal role in proto-industrial fisheries. The advent of industrial whaling in the early twentieth century, however, destroyed this centuries-long equilibrium between humans and whales. In its place, communities in northeast Japan invented a new whaling tradition, which has almost completely eclipsed older forms of human–whale interactions. This title is also available as Open Access.

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The Gods of the Sea

*Whales and Coastal Communities in Northeast
Japan, c.1600–2019*

Fynn Holm

University of Tübingen



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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Note on the Text</i>	ix
Introduction	1
Part I Living with Whales, 1600–1850	
1 The Whale Pilgrimage	19
2 The Beached God	39
3 Bringing Sardines to the Shore	62
4 Establishing Whaling in the North	82
Part II Destroying the Cetosphere, 1850–2019	
5 The Whaling Empire	109
6 The First Whaling Town	128
7 Burning Down the Whaling Station	148
8 Washing Away the Past	169
Epilogue	188
<i>Bibliography</i>	192
<i>Index</i>	213

Figures

1.1	Map of the Sanriku Coast in northeastern Honshu in the Early Modern Period	page 22
1.2	Map of Early Modern Japan with ocean currents and the ‘perturbed region’	24
2.1	Whale stone and Ebisu statue at Nishinomiya Shrine, Same-ura. Photograph by the author.	40
3.1	Map of the Oshika Peninsula in the Early Modern Period	65
3.2	Scene of harpoon whaling on the Ayukai Whale Scroll (ca. 1700). Courtesy of Ayukai Ayako.	72
4.1	Net whaling operation in western Japan, <i>Geishikō</i> . Courtesy of the National Diet Library of Japan.	86
6.1	Scene of Ayukawa with whaling station on the right side and the factory ship <i>Michail</i> in the open sea. Photo taken by Roy Chapman Andrews in 1910. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.	129
6.2	Flensing a whale with onlookers at the new Tōyō Hogeï whaling station in Ayukawa. Photo taken by Roy Chapman Andrews in 1910. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.	130
7.1	Map of the Hachinohe region (ca. 1912)	149
8.1	Whaling festival in Ayukawa in the 1950s. Photograph by Kanoi Seisuke.	178

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Note on the Text

Japanese names are given with the surname first, followed by the personal name. Following conventions in the field, after the first appearance I use the personal or artistic name for individuals who lived in the early modern period (1600–1867). For example, Ōtsuki Heisen is later referred to in the text as Heisen. For individuals living in the modern period (1867–present), however, I continue to use their last names after the first appearance, for example, Kishinouye Kamakichi is referred to as Kishinouye.

The value of monetary units varied greatly over the course of the early modern period. I use the following measurements:

- 1 *ryō* (gold coin) = ca. 60 *monme* (silver coins) = ca. 4,000 *mon* (copper coins)
- 1 *kanme* (measurement unit of 3.75 kg silver) = ca. 1,000 *monme* (silver coins)
- 1 *koku* (180 l of rice or 5 bushels, amount of rice that can supposedly feed one adult for one year and is worth around 1 *ryō*)
- 1 *ri* = ca. 3.9 km