Resource-rich Islands of Exile for Nobles

The Oki Islands appear in Japanese school textbooks as the land Emperor Gozasho and Emperor Gotoba were exiled to in the Middle Ages. Oki is also where the poet Ono no Takeda, whose poem was featured in the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu (One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each) Anthology, was exiled to. In a span of about 900 years, from ancient times to the Middle Ages, many residents of the capital were exiled to Oki.

At the time, those sentenced to exile in Oki were upper-class people, such as nobles or high-level Shinto priests. Oki was distant enough from the capital to serve as a place of exile, but it also possessed a bustling economy and plentiful food resources, so upper-class exiles could live without difficulty or suffering. In current times, some may see isolated islands as inconvenient, but back in times when there were no roads or cars, compared to a mainland surrounded by land routes, islands surrounded by sea routes were actually much more convenient.

The Oki Islands were utilized for exile because they had bountiful nature and were located the right distance away from the capital. Furthermore, with a long history of human activity, the culture and exchange that developed on Oki was rich and extensive enough to guarantee good living conditions for exiles.

Connected through Obsidian, Ancient Izumo and Prehistoric Oki

Oki’s history as a locality of obsidian, a rock known for its use in stone tools, goes far back into ancient times. Historic remains are limited, but we know that tools made from Oki obsidian were transported to the mainland Honshū Island at least 30 thousand years ago. In times without metal goods, tools made with obsidian, a volcanic glass, were treated as precious materials for bladed tools and weapons. Oki obsidian was traded as far out as Niigata Prefecture in the east, Yamaguchi Prefecture in the west, and Shikoku’s regions on the side of the Seto Inland Sea in the south. This is because Oki was the only place with high-quality obsidian, and obsidian excavations overlap with distributions of bronze goods from ancient Izumo and tombs. Located in the open sea of the San’in region, a region home to the Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine and Fudō (ancient reports about the provinces) that is full of the mysteries of Japan’s ancient history, Oki holds within its shores mysteries from even more distant prehistoric times. 30 thousand years ago, Oki was a peninsula connected to mainland Japan. Oki then became islands, and much of the land that once formed the peninsula currently sits at the bottom of the Sea of Japan as the Oki Strait.

An Example of the Crop Rotation of Makihata Farming

Barley
Millet
Beans
Pasture

The Tricks to Living on an Island

Nature and history aren’t the only things influenced by geology. We can catch glimpses of their culture that originated from Oki’s unique features and terrain within seemingly ordinary, period-typical townscapes. Through observing the boarded fences built in a village on the west coast of Dōgo Island to prevent winter winds and waves from damaging houses, the town layouts that utilized the land to suit different terrains, and the self-sufficient makihata farming method that effectively produced crops, even with poor soil, we can picture how these places looked in the past and how they changed throughout the sessions.

In particular, the makihata farming method, which was implemented until the 1970s, was deeply connected to the natural topography of Oki. The method combines livestock grazing with the cultivation of barley, beans, and millet. The livestock function as effective farming tools, barley as a staple food, and the hardy crop millet as emergency food stores for years with bad weather. The trick to preventing the depletion of nutrients in soil in order to continue effectively utilizing the land is beans. When you add in beans to the crop rotation not only can you harvest them for food, but you can also use them to enrich the soil.

The Oki Islands for Future Generations

Take only pictures, leave only footprints. Please help protect the Oki Islands for future generations.
Discover Connections

The Oki Islands are located in the Sea of Japan. Due to their geographical isolation, the unique traits and records of Earth’s history can be seen in the geological heritage here, and from this geological activity we can learn about how the formation of the land connects to Oki’s scenery, geography, culture, and history.

The story of Oki’s land is made up of three main components: geology, unique ecosystem, and lifestyle and traditions. Shaped by an isolated island environment in the Sea of Japan, born from the formation of the Japanese Archipelago and volcanic activity, and connected to the historically rich San’in Region, the story of the land that came to life here on Oki can’t be heard anywhere else in the world.

Geoparks are areas with activities that utilize geological heritage with geology and geographical features of prehistoric life to tell the story of the earth. The Oki Islands are a UNESCO Global Geopark because we can explain the unique story of the land here. We say with confidence that there is no story like Oki’s in the entire world.

Landforms Created by Volcanoes

The geography of the Oki Islands was shaped by volcanic activity, and many of the elevated above-ground landforms are composed of lava. Oki’s isolated environment and the creation of the Dōgo and Dōzen island groups go back to volcanic activity that occurred from two volcanoes. The Dōzen Islands with their inner sea compose a caldera landscape, and Dōgo Island, with low elevation in its interior region, was once a volcano.

Main Distribution of Lava

Because the lifestyle and traditions shaped by the geographical environment of isolated islands, marine organisms, and fishing industry on Oki are included in the Geopark, as the map illustrates, the Geopark territory extends out 1 kilometer from the shores into the sea to encompass a total area of 673.5 ㎢ (land area: 346.0 ㎢, sea area: 327.5 ㎢).

Breathtaking Scenery

The coasts of Oki are part of the Daisen-Oki National Park and include several nationally designated Natural Monuments and Places of Scenic Beauty. A characteristic part of the scenery, Oki’s strangely-shaped rocks, formed from geological features such as dikes and faults, are shaped by winter north-westerly winds and rough waves. If you come in summer, while you won’t be able to see the rough waves themselves, if you observe and analyse the coastal scenery, you will be able to feel their influence. Therefore, we can understand how these strangely-shaped rocks came to be through the coastal scenery.

History of the Oki Islands

The Oki Islands

255 million years ago

Supercontinent Pangaea

Formation of the Sea of Japan

250 million years ago

Supercontinent Pangaea

Formation of the Oki Islands, Oki Grenv

18 million years ago

Formation of a scale between the Japanese Archipelago and the Korean peninsula

Volcanic Activity

Oki During Glacial Ages

Bretaeking Scenery

Abundant Fishing Grounds

Fishing, one of the main industries in Oki, is deeply connected to the nature here. Although located in the Sea of Japan, two wide, flat continental shelves extend out to Oki, and these areas serve as year-round fishing grounds for squid and winter fishing grounds for snow crab.

In winter, while the rough waves and wind shape Oki’s eroded, rocky coasts, fishermen catch abalone and turban shell. There are many rocky fishing spots, and locals enjoy the unique food culture built upon the animal life found around the rocky shores.

Furthermore, bays, carved from volcanic terrain and characterized by beautiful clear water and calm surfaces, are also utilized for aquaculture. Nishinoshima Island was the first region in Japan to successfully start a rock oyster aquaculture business.

Fishing grounds are also important in Oki history and tradition. In ancient times (538-1185) Oki was a miketsukuni, a territory designated for royal provisions, and its marine products played vital roles in many official imperial court rituals. In the Edo period (1603-1868), Oki became a production area for goods exported through Nagasaki (sawara mon; goods in straw bags), and in the Meiji period Oki dried squid dominated the top ranks in national product exhibitions. Even now about forty percent of Shimane Prefecture’s fishing haul comes from Oki.