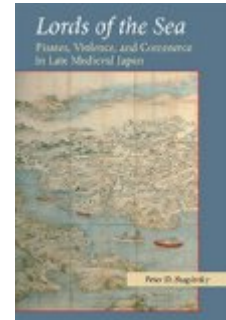


**Peter D. Shapinsky.** *Lords of the Sea: Pirates, Violence, and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan.* Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies Publications, University of Michigan, 2014. Maps. xiii + 327 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-929280-81-0.



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In this meticulously researched book, Peter D. Shapinsky calls new attention to pirates, an important but surprisingly understudied topic of medieval Japanese history. Pirates were not marginal figures: their depredations contributed to the collapse of Korea's Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), forced the Ming to repeatedly send diplomatic envoys to Japan seeking pirate suppression, and led early European missionaries to travel in fear. Within the Japanese isles, pirates managed littoral estates, facilitated commerce, and/or became the maritime equivalent of *sengoku daimyō* (land-based regional warlords). Shapinsky shines needed light on these figures, whom he calls “sea lords” rather than pirates. Given that the word “pirate” in English calls to mind Blackbeard (or Jack Sparrow), Shapinsky is wise in choosing an alternative. As he demonstrates, late medieval Japanese sea lords were not merely searching for treasure or raiding other ships. Instead, they were thoroughly embedded in economic and political networks, balancing between autonomy and patronage, and powerful enough to turn the tide in

some of the most important conflicts of the late sixteenth century.

Rather than one overarching argument, the book makes a number of smaller, though noteworthy, points that are laid out in the introduction. Some explain how the figures who eventually emerged as sea lords came to prominence: they were, in Shapinsky's view, the products of the shift to an increasingly monetized, commercial economy; they took advantage of weak Japanese central government authority and a Ming Chinese government that turned away from the oceans after the mid-fifteenth century; and they gained income and rights by providing “protection” and successfully bargaining with competing sources of patronage. Other points address the sources: by studying sea lords from a “waterline perspective,” he uncovers significant biases in land-based elites' writings, and even in the sources that they wrote themselves. While explicating these points in the six chapters that follow, Shapinsky provides information on a wide range of topics, from life at sea and naval battle tactics to ship design and the

ways in which sea lord families negotiated with warlords, such as the Ōuchi and, later, Oda Nobunaga.

Chapter 1 examines discursive narratives about pirates and the sea, cataloguing how people who lived on the water were often depicted as an unfathomable “Other,” incapable of understanding human emotions and operating outside the realm of government authorities. Chapter 2 turns to the ways in which local lordship emerged in tandem with the increasing commercialization of the medieval economy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Those whom we might call pirates often began by working within the estate (*shōen*) system, helping proprietors manage and collect dues from littoral properties. But as estates (Yugeshima, an island *shōen* famous for salt production, being one example) became involved in commercial markets, such ambitious figures as Ben no Bō Shōyo took advantage of their local contacts and greater knowledge of Inland Sea conditions to increase their wealth and power.[1] By the fifteenth century, incipient sea lords were able to pass their positions on to heirs and start charging fees for “protection,” ensuring the safe passage of ships, goods, and people through the Inland Sea.

The Noshima Murakami, a major sea lord family active in the sixteenth-century Inland Sea, are the topic of chapter 3. It includes colorful descriptions of coastal fortifications and the largest class of warship, the *atakebune* (which Shapinsky refers to as “sea castles” and “dreadnoughts,” respectively), but historians might find most intriguing his claim that the Noshima Murakami became powerful enough to “transcend patronage” since most accounts do not portray them as having been so autonomous (p. 106). Chapter 4 will appeal to those with an interest in military matters; it breaks down naval strategy and battle tactics, including a detailed analysis of engagements fought near the Kizu River that led to the downfall of Ishiyama Honganji. Of greater interest to me

was the author’s attack on claims that innovation originated in great men (Nobunaga) or foreign technology (European firearms). Shapinsky instead argues persuasively that the sea lords themselves introduced innovations in naval strategy.

In chapter 5, the author correctly diagnoses another historiographical problem: sharp distinctions between scholars who study domestic issues and Inland Sea pirates (*kaizoku*) as opposed to those who study foreign relations and the “Japanese pirates” (*wakō*) who plagued the Chinese and Korean coasts. His research attempts to show (with only moderate success) that Inland Sea pirates were connected to patrons and networks that extended overseas as well. The final chapter, perhaps the book’s strongest, documents the demise of sea lords as Hideyoshi brought the country under his sway. Once Hideyoshi became hegemon, sea lords could no longer play competing land-based warlords against each other. Their acceptance of positions as vassals made them vulnerable to the same policies that reduced other warlords to dependent status. They were ordered to destroy their sea castles and relocate to distant territories, severing their connections to the Inland Sea.

*Lords of the Sea* makes a number of important contributions. It is the first book-length monograph on this topic in English, and it covers the topic thoroughly, placing Japanese pirates in an appropriate late medieval/early modern context that will be useful to scholars studying other parts of the world. The research draws on an impressive list of primary materials, making this volume the obvious starting point for any future research into piracy in Japan. But surely the book’s greatest strength lies in its treatment of sources, revealing how various biases have led to obfuscation of sea lords and their roles in late medieval Japan. Shapinsky demonstrates convincingly that most premodern sources assumed the propriety of land-based authority—something he labels “terracentrism”—and that they overlooked or

mischaracterized the actions of others, including those on the water.[2] He also chronicles how, in the seventeenth century, sea lords themselves were eager to construct new histories that showed their families to have always been loyal vassals, so they “stripped out late medieval, maritime autonomy and nonwarrior livelihoods from the historical record” (p. 256). Examples such as these illustrate how the historical record can, if not examined critically, hide as much as it reveals.

Although there is much to praise in *Lords of the Sea*, greater clarity and context would have helped readers to better understand the complicated politics of the period. For example, in the discussion of shifting alliances in the 1540s and 1550s, the multiplicity of characters and the frequency with which they changed sides or formed new (often short-lived) coalitions make the narrative difficult to follow. This issue is not unique to Shapinsky’s work; many studies of sixteenth-century Japan share this problem, challenging scholars to make sense out of turmoil. He attempts to aid the reader in a few instances by including maps, though these are of limited utility: Yugesima does not stand out in the map on page 72, and a close-up of the Kizu River region would have made the map on page 158 more useful. In addition, while the level of detail throughout the book is impressive, at times it is not clear how the material relates to larger arguments. Finally, one wonders how the author views other pirates (such as the Matsura of northwestern Kyushu) and earlier time periods (such as the pirates who plagued the Korean coast in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). It is, of course, fine that this study focuses on Inland Sea pirates in the late medieval era, but a few paragraphs explaining the author’s thoughts on the relationship between those earlier pirates and the objects of his study would have made the book stronger.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the book achieves many of its goals and raises some interesting questions. Were sea lords truly powerful

enough to transcend patronage? Even the author has some doubts. It seems that they could only operate autonomously during a few decades when land-based warlords were competing with each other. Given that sea lords relied on patrons’ resources to construct additional ships, and that they were converted into minor (rather than major) vassals, their level of autonomy is a worthy topic for further consideration—and just one of the many stimulating issues raised in *Lords of the Sea*. Through his detailed research, effective integration of scholarship that addresses piracy in other parts of the world, and careful questioning of the hidden biases in primary sources, Shapinsky has produced a fine book that is sure to be of interest to specialists of medieval, early modern, and maritime studies.

#### Notes

[1]. In the end, complaints about Shōyo led to his being labeled a “pirate” and deprived of his post in a process that seems strikingly similar to other authorities labeling land-based troublemakers as “*akutō*.” See, for example, Ōyama Kyōhei, “The Decline of the *Shōen* System,” in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 3, *Medieval Japan*, ed. Kozo Yamamura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 268-269.

[2]. Shapinsky’s “terracentrism” is quite similar to Amino Yoshihiko’s “agrarian fundamentalism” and my own discussion of a medieval bias toward preserving records of land transactions rather than monetary ones. Amino Yoshihiko, *Rethinking Japanese History*, trans. Alan Christy (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies Publications, University of Michigan, 2012), 24-25, 100-104; and Ethan Isaac Segal, *Coins, Trade, and the State: Economic Growth in Early Medieval Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), 12-13.

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