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Japanese whaling regularly appears in the news today, but there has been surprisingly little written in English about the subject from a historical perspective. Jakobina Arch’s *Bringing Whales Ashore* takes a giant stride toward remedying that gap. Perhaps even more importantly from an environmental history standpoint, she sets out a template for reconceptualizing the history of Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868) through the lens of the sea. While whales and whaling history are the main topics, throughout her book Arch reminds the reader to consider Japan as a “collection of islands” (p. 17) that are not independent and isolated but are connected through the sea and its denizens. To fully understand terrestrial history, we must be sure that we also understand the influence of the maritime world.

Arch’s effectiveness in reaching this goal of a more robust historical understanding comes in part from her interdisciplinary approach to the topic. She begins by considering whales through a scientific lens, describing the whales’ biological categorizations, migration patterns, and preferred natural habitats. She then moves the story to the coast, reminding the reader that “whaling was the mechanism by which the animals were brought out of the marine environment and into that of the people” (p. 41). Here the focus is more on labor practices and organization, examining the mechanics of forming whaling groups and the evolution of whaling-related technologies. Then the tale moves still further inland, noting how the wide range of whale products—far beyond simply whale meat and oil—were used in the cities and towns, and who benefited economically from the sale of those items. The final two chapters explore the less tangible manifestations of whales in Tokugawa Japan, considering how people studied and depicted the animals as well as how they tried to reconcile the spiritual nature of whales. Arch deftly incorporates scientific, historical, economic, religious, and cultural analyses into this environmental history of whales in Japan, providing a far more comprehensive picture than any of these single trajectories alone could accomplish.
The approaches introduced in this book should have a multifaceted impact on environmental and historical studies. While environmental history is becoming more of a focus within the greater field of Japanese studies, much more needs to be done. This work challenges the claims within Japan today that modern whaling preserves long-standing cultural practices and therefore should be maintained, demonstrating that those “long-standing” practices are largely recently invented traditions (p. 4). She also pointedly notes that the current prevailing perception of early modern Japanese whaling as a sustainable practice was almost certainly incorrect. Through her analysis of changes in migration patterns, whaling groups’ locations and technologies, and whaling practices, she concludes that even in the early modern era whales were likely overfished and thus the industry as a whole did not have a sustainable model in Japan.

Arch is clearly aware that her book will rightly be of interest to a wide audience, and not necessarily only historians of Japan. Her writing is elegant, deftly introducing the salient aspects of Tokugawa Japan’s sociopolitical history that impacted the overall understanding of the matters at hand, but without getting so deeply into the weeds that it would be off-putting for nonspecialists. All this makes it extremely accessible and relevant for those interested in more general environmental studies.

Arch’s study also exhorts historians to rethink how to approach Japanese history. She notes that whaling did not “fit well into the farming-centered status system of the Tokugawa” (p. 77). While she states this as a reminder of why whalers sometimes occupied a liminal space in Tokugawa society, we can also read this statement as a greater signifier of why this story of whaling has remained untold for so long. The farming-centered status system that developed from a rice-based economy greatly influenced not only the Tokugawa period but the centuries that preceded it. Historians have typically focused on that economic trajectory, which in turn shapes the stories that have been told in most scholarship on Japan. *Bringing Whales Ashore* reminds the reader that focusing overmuch on only one side of the story tells an incomplete tale. Understanding that Tokugawa farming does not happen in a vacuum but relies on whales for fertilizer, or that whaling could be an off-season occupation for farmers, or that whale parts were used in making cotton-processing equipment reinforces the connections between the ecosystems of land and sea.

Although not meant as a criticism of Arch’s work, I did find myself wishing, as I often do in reading historical monographs, that more historians took advantage of the body of archaeological literature available. While Arch’s book is certainly groundbreaking and sorely needed in the field of Japanese studies in particular, which has been far too terrestrially focused for far too long, her approach is reminiscent of one introduced to maritime archaeologists as far back as 1992. That year, Christer Westerdahl published a then-groundbreaking article for maritime archaeology in the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, entitled simply “The Maritime Cultural Landscape.” Most maritime archaeologists had up to that point focused on shipwrecks and the study of ship construction or shipboard life. Westerdahl outlined a more holistic path for maritime archaeological studies, defining the maritime cultural landscape as “human utilization ... of maritime space by boat: settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping and its attendant subcultures, such as pilotage, lighthouse, and seamark maintenance.”[1] He included the cognitive landscape as well as the physical in his theorizations of the concept. Though she does not use this terminology, Arch’s work is an example of the maritime cultural landscape of whaling in Japan, including the considerations of offshore fishing and coastal processing, shipping whale products locally along the coast and further inland and tracing their usage, and the subcultures surrounding the religious and scientific...
treatments of whales. While it is possible that there have been few if any archaeological excavations of whaling communities in Japan, it would be interesting to address archaeological evidence further in future studies.

I am grateful to Arch for this contribution to the historiography of early modern Japan. It should become a model of an interdisciplinary approach to environmental history and, I hope, an inspiration to other historians to look beyond just the land or the sea to find ways in which the two are connected. And I applaud her ability to distill complex histories into an eminently readable volume without compromising the scholarship therein.

Note

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