In the first chapter of *The Gods of the Sea*, Fynn Holm asks us to follow the whale as it makes its journey up the western side of the Japanese archipelago to the Sanriku coast in Tohoku. Holm’s purpose in narrativizing this journey is not to outline the experience of the whale per se but to follow the whale through history: to clarify a shift from what he terms the “cetosphere” to the “anthroposphere,” with each having its own economic, cultural, and social ways of relating to whales and their ecology.

Like Jakobina K. Arch’s *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan* (2018), Holm’s study takes aim at the idea, promoted by the Japanese government to counter the International Whaling Commission’s effort to curtail its whaling industry, that Japan has a coherent national “traditional whaling culture.” Arch’s rebuttal hinges on fidelity, arguing that whaling was composed of historically and locally distinct practices and technologies that bear no resemblance to contemporary industrial whaling. Holm, on the other hand, leaves open the possibility of continuity by focusing on the conflict between diverse whale-people cultures prior to the advent of industrial whaling. To do so, he shifts attention away from Arch’s western Japan—where the industry was most prominent—to the less explored “common cultural zone” of the Sanriku coast along the shores of present-day prefectures Miyagi, Iwate, and Aomori (p. 21).

For Holm, an overfocus on major whaling regions in central and western Japan has obscured the diversity of relationships that coastal communities had with whales, such as those found in the Seto Inland Sea, Hokuriku, or his Sanriku coast. These regions, he argues, did not actively hunt whales but nonetheless possessed unique whaling cultures. Using insights from environmental histories that offer more “nuanced accounts” of whale-human interactions, such as those by Nancy Shoemaker, Joshua Reid, and Bathsheba Demuth, Holm maintains that humans can and did have relationships with whales that did not reduce the interaction to a violent commercial transaction but rather were based on “ce-
remonal and moral care” (p. 4). In these communities, whales were viewed as supernatural beings that protected humans and their livelihoods, and although some did consume whale meat, these communities reciprocated by protecting whales from harm. Therefore, moral care reflected a sense of responsibility that integrated the environment into the community encompassing even the organisms not harvested. Holm terms these types of cultures as “whale people,” grouping them in with indigenous groups in the South Pacific. While Holm does not go as far as claim that the coastal people in his study are equivalent to indigenous communities (he claims that Sanriku is proof that these practices can be found even among what he terms “proto-industrial communities”), he says that the Sanriku coast contained communities that could be classified as “whale people” due to their holistic and nonviolent relationship with whales stemming from their belief in the animals as an incarnation of the god Ebisu.

The communities along the Sanriku coast may have consumed whales if they made their way to the near-coast—in this case, Holm says, it would be seen as a “gift” from the gods—but actively killing whales was discouraged as “morally wrong” and a potential harbinger of punishment from the gods (p. 7). Locals believed that killing whales would pollute the ocean with their blood and, since whales were thought to encourage other types of fish toward the shore and alert locals of the presence of fish schools, the absence of whales would mean a drought of other local sources of fish and flora. Over the course of the Edo period, Holm argues, this distinct whale-human relationship was challenged by “proto-industrial” whaling groups from western Japan looking to expand their whale-based fertilizer and oil industries. One interesting intervention that Holm develops briefly in chapter 2 but unfortunately does not expand on is the idea of whaling and fishing not as a separate sphere from the Edo period agricultural economy but as an integral part of its economic and environmental domain. Sendai became an essential port connecting Edo to fish fertilizer regions in Sanriku and Ezo that fed “cash crops in Western Japan” (p. 22). As a result, these differing whale cultures came into conflict, with Sanriku communities protesting against the slaughter of whales, using Ebisu as their pretext. Holm attempts to draw a line of continuity between this early modern protest and modern anti-whaling protests in the region—particularly the violent protest in Hachinohe in 1911—to argue for a breaking point in this locally specific whale-human worldview, the rise of industrial whaling, and the end of the cetosphere.

Holm’s effort to bring a true regional approach to English-language Japanese history is refreshing. Although some notable exceptions exist, the field is by and large dominated by studies of the Kansai, Kanto, and Koshin-etsu regions to the exclusion of others. Holm is right that this causes us to miss the heterogeneity of customs within Japan. However, while referencing the work of Tohoku scholars Nathan Hopson and Hidemichi Kawanishi, Holm states that interest in Tohoku was largely nonexistent before the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, ignoring the contribution of Japanese Tohoku studies scholars who have done important work asserting the importance and particularity of the region since well before the disaster. A glaring omission from Holm’s bibliography is the prolific Morioka and northern Sendai domain (present-day Iwate prefecture) scholar Mori Kahee who was one of the first to argue for the importance of the Sanriku coast fisheries in the commercialization of Japan.[1] And, although he cites the English-language translation of Amino Yoshihiko’s work, Rethinking Japanese History (2012), he does not reference Amino’s influential studies on Tohoku, which use the region to argue against the Nihonjinron discourse of Japanese cultural and linguistic homogeneity.[2] Additionally, while Holm’s treatment of regional difference is commendable, there are times when it feels that he homogenizes the region by switching back and
forth between examples from southern and northern Sanriku. This long stretch of coast is heterogeneous itself and possessed a multitude of different systems for managing coastal resources, which I do not feel receive enough attention from the author. Likewise, when Holm states he is discussing the customs of “western Japan,” he is mostly referring to the Kii Peninsula.

Referencing the work of Amino and Mori might have also helped Holm clarify his conception of “proto-industrialization” and the relationship of whaling to broader commercial development in the region's fisheries. English-language studies on Japan's economy have been rare in recent years, and I certainly do not blame Holm for using “proto-industry” as a descriptive device since it has been the dominant way of writing about the Edo period economy in past studies. But the term is not without controversy and, in the absence of a clarification, comes across as vague and teleological. What does Holm mean by “proto-industrial”? How did this proto-industry differ from Sanriku commercial endeavors like the sardine trade highlighted by Holm? If he makes the argument later in the book—along the lines of Arch—that industrial fishing marked a break from past ways of whaling and the end of the cetosphere, were the Edo period fisheries truly a predecessor of this industry? Proto-industry in whaling, he argues, developed in the Kii Peninsula very early in the Edo period, and Holm's work implies that it brought the first signs of trouble to the cetosphere, but how does this proto-industry relate to the industry that finally broke the cetosphere, if at all? Do different areas experience the collapse of the cetosphere at differing tempos? The attention Holm gives to space could have also been given to time. As Mori demonstrated, the region was a well-known provider for Edo's export trade in seafood goods (tawaramono). While Holm periodically references this trade, I would have appreciated a fuller treatment of how these competing fishery practices came into conflict with whaling. The way that this industry fit into the logic of the Edo period economic system is largely missing. A way into this might be to give readers a more robust explanation about the role and pressures of tribute and tax on the communities vis-à-vis commercial and subsistence fishing.

I find Holm's arguments that regionally specific moral arguments and a fear of environmental pollution influenced local reactions to whaling in the Sanriku context convincing. However, Holm's effort to connect the 1677 protests—which explicitly mentioned supernatural reasons for opposing whaling—with his final example of the 1911 anti-whaling revolt in Hachinohe has some inconsistencies, and Holm often presents examples that contradict his own evidence. In chapter 4, Holm offers us another example of a late Edo period opposition to whaling brought by a district headman in the Ogatsu Peninsula but admits that in this instance the opposition was not to the practice of whaling but to the technologies the whalers wished to employ. Later, when he describes the Hachinohe incident, he notes that only one fisher directly involved in the riot brings up the Ebisu curse as a means to oppose whaling. On the contrary, it is only in post-incident descriptions by nonparticipants that the supernatural becomes an explanation, and in this context, Holm characterizes it as a way to diminish the concerns of those involved as irrational. Furthermore, at the end of the chapter, he admits that the Hachinohe incident was not unique and that anti-whaling protests broke out all throughout Japan “even in regions with a long whaling tradition” (p. 166). He clarifies this by stating that these incidents do not reflect a conflict between western Japanese and eastern Japanese whaling cultures but against “the industrial methods that caused largescale coastal pollution” (p. 166). But when coastal fisheries still accounted for 95 percent of output even in 1912, their resistance seems less like a plea to protect whales or as a premodern economy coming into conflict with a modern industry than a way to preserve one of the community's most important industries.[3] Moreover, though it is beyond his
study, with the gradual spread of motorized boats around the same time, Iwate fishers readily dropped sardines in favor of tuna hunting and with it their concern for whales. Only areas unable to take advantage of new technologies continued to rely on and be rooted in the sardine ecology. In this context, we could say that one's moral responsibility to whales extended only as far as one's dependence on sardines. That, as Holm reveals, the fishers gave up their protest when the whaling company agreed to proactively integrate the locals into the industry gives further credence to this point.

Needless to say, it is a difficult task to construct an argument over a large span of historical time, and Holm can be forgiven for a few inconsistencies or omissions. His study is equally ambitious in design and argument and offers fertile ideas for both Japanese and environmental history. Holm's book does what every good book should do, which is to think imaginatively with history in ways that lead readers toward productive new questions.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Mori Kahee, “Sanriku higashi kaigan ni okeru Nagasaki tawaramono seisan no kenkyū,” *Shakai keizai shigaku* 9, no. 6 (1939): 628-41.


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