

Agriculture in Japan during the late Medieval period.

Geography

The Japanese Archipelago includes thousands of islands that cover a total area of approximately 364 thousand square kilometers. The four main islands, from north to south, are Ezo (current day Hokkaido), Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. Ezo was sparsely populated during the late 1500's. The Korean peninsula is the closest point on the Asian mainland to Japan.

Japan's climate is shaped by Asian-Pacific monsoon cycles, which bring heavy rains from the Pacific during the summer and fall, followed by icy winds and snow from North Asia during the winter. Overall the climate is sub-tropical in the south and cool temperate in the north with four seasons.

The islands of Japan are largely mountainous with 73% of the land being mountains. Less than 10 % of the land is level enough for agriculture and considered arable. Because of the steepness of the mountains, rivers are swift and shallow, meaning that there are almost no navigable inland waterways.

Located along the Pacific Ring of Fire, Japan has a number of hydrothermal features such as geysers, hot springs and volcanoes. It also suffers frequent earthquakes and tsunamis.

As an island chain with a coast line of 29 thousand kilometers, fishing is a major part of Japanese food production, its people have always taken advantage of the abundant seafood supply and the currents that converge offshore offer the local fishermen fertile and varied fishing grounds.

The estimated population during this time period is about 22 million.

Rice

The main crop of medieval Japan was rice; it was so important that the primary measure of a fief was not the land area but how much rice it produced. A koku, or the amount of rice needed to sustain one man for one year, roughly about 180 liters or 5 bushels, was the standard unit of commerce. The basic measure of rice field production was the cho, or about 2.5 acres of land,

which could produce on average about 10 koku of rice and required the effort of about 4 or 5 people.

Rice production was based on the wet cultivation method that was imported from the mainland of Asia to Japan. The growing of rice followed a set pattern every year. It began with the preparation and seeding of a nursery bed, the sprouting rice seeds could be more easily monitored and protected from pests while the main fields were prepared for use. The fields were ploughed by horse, oxen, or manpower then enriched with manure, and flooded with water. The seedling plants were transplanted in the fields, quite often by the women of the village. For the villagers who relied on rice as their most important crop, this was often accompanied with a festive spirit. To assist in using as much land as possible terrace farming was often done to augment the larger fields and provide for unregulated fields that farmers could hide from their local administrators.

Except for weeding and pest control, the growing of rice is not very manpower intensive at this point. Harvest times in the fall were often associated with festivals and celebrations.

Rice paddies were not exclusively used to grow rice, in areas that had longer growing seasons farmers also grew wheat, barley or millet in the fields. Prior to planting the rice the farmers would burn off the old crops and then plough under the remains.

Rice was the all-important commodity, it was the tax payment and could be used in a verity of ways from being boiled, cooked into a paste or fermented into sake.

Other crops

Dry fields were often on ground that was too hilly for rice production but would support other crops consisting of grains and vegetables. The grains grown were wheat, barley, rape (for the oil), buckwheat and millet. Ironically, many farmers ate millet as opposed to rice.

Small vegetables patches would be located near houses and cared for by individual families. The vegetables that were grown included turnips, potatoes, radishes, cucumbers, beans, chestnuts, onions, eggplants, cabbage and yams.

Often farming villages also had scattered fruit trees planted around the village. The type of fruit tree that were available was determined by the local climate. They included plums, apricots, peaches, apples, persimmons and oranges. Tea was also grown in villages with bushes scattered around the areas.

Animals

The sea provided several types of seaweed along with abalone, carp, bonito, mullet, sole, trout, tuna, eel, octopus, shrimp, jellyfish, and clams. Fish was the major source of protein to the Japanese people.

Beef and horse were never eaten except in dire emergency such as extended droughts or by the besieged defenders of a castle. Buddhist religion prohibited the taking of a life but farmers often added water fowl and eggs to their diet.

Samurai, though Buddhist, often supplemented their diet with wild pig, deer and water fowl. Hunting was a favored pastime for many of the powerful daimyo of the late medieval period.

Favorite foods

Although, the traditional Japanese diet consisted of rice, millet, buckwheat, potatoes and many types of vegetables as well as fish, roe, seaweed, soybean products, eggs, fowl, beans, fruits and nuts. Common drinks included water, tea and sake and plum brandy.

Popular foods included:

Dango or sweet rice-floor dumplings filled with every thing from roasted nuts to sweet red beans past. There are and estimated seven million different kinds of dango.

Umeboshi, or pickled plums, which today we call Japanese Salt plums.

Soba or buckwheat noodles. There is a vast array of different ways to prepare soba. It was a very common meal for travelers at the little stalls along the main roads.

Udon or wheat floor noodles in a broth were also popular.

Rice cakes or Senbei are usually cooked by being baked or grilled, traditionally over charcoal. While being prepared they may be brushed with a flavoring sauce and can range from savory to sweet.

Miso soup, which can contain anything from kelp, dried sardines, tuna or mushrooms. Miso is a traditional Japanese seasoning produced by fermenting soybeans with salt and the fungus.

