

The harsh living environment and food supply in ancient times: rice, wheat, beans

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Narratives about food in *Harima Fudoki*

There are several myths and legends in *Harima Fudoki* about food. The majority of them are tales about rice production, such as stories of offering oblations of boiled rice to deities, tales of the deities eating it, and legends about farming it and irrigation.

This does not mean that in ancient times the people of Harima were eating rice as their staple foodstuff every day. In fact it was quite the opposite: the only opportunities for the common people at the time to eat their fill of rice were limited to the regular village festivals in spring and autumn. It was only on such special holy days (*hare*) that they could eat and drink their fill, at a communal feast with rice to eat and the *sake* liquor that had been brewed from it to drink. The fact that there are so many tales about rice and rice growing in *Harima Fudoki* shows the longing and desire for rice, and their reverence for it, on the part of people who lived under harsh natural and social environments. So what *did* the common people in ancient Japan live on every day? I should like to explore this question using sources mostly other than those in *Harima Fudoki*.

Wheat and barley as foodstuffs to get through the summer scarcity

The reality was that there was no food as highly calorific as rice. People would eat anything they could obtain according to the season, at the mercy of agricultural harvests and foraging for what was growing wild. As far as cereal crops were concerned, it seems that wheat and barley (*mugi*) were highly valued, apart from foxtail millet (*awa*) and Japanese barnyard millet (*hie*). Six different types of wheat and barley are listed in Volume 17 of the 10th century *Wamyō Ruijūshō*, Japan's first encyclopaedia, as *mugi*, *ōmugi*, *komugi*, *muginokurumi*, *soba*, and *karasu mugi*.¹ Three of these—barley, wheat and buckwheat—were particularly favoured.

These cereals were planted in autumn as a winter crop and harvested in early summer, around May or June. This is the very time and season when food stockpiles are running low but a large quantity of rice is consumed to cope with the hard labour of rice transplanting. It was when people faced food shortages and they were most likely to starve. According to a source from the sixth month of Kōnin 10 (819), 'Last year the crops failed to ripen and the peasants are short of food. There will be famine this summer, for sure' (*Ruijū Sandaikyaku*, Vol. 19). For this reason the cultivation of those cereals was encouraged by the ancient Japanese state as a means of tiding over that season of hardship.

For example, a notice from the Grand Council of State in the eighth month of Yōrō 7 (723) says: 'In the Kinai and Seven Circuits² barley and wheat must be cultivated. ... The use of these cereals is most appropriate for the people. Nothing surpasses these for saving them from poverty' (*Ruijū Sandaikyaku*, Vol. 8). Another notice from the Grand Council of State appeared in the ninth month of Tenpyō Jingo 2 (766): 'Wheat and barley prevent death and save people from hardship. They are the best of the cereal crops. We should encourage all the farmers in the land to plant wheat and barley' (*ibid.*, Vol. 8). Likewise, in the sixth month of Jōwa 6 (839), the active cultivation of buckwheat was ordered, on the grounds that an advantage of buckwheat was that it had a short growing season, and 'it grows abundantly regardless of the soil fertility', so 'it assuaged famine' (*ibid.*, Vol. 8). In this way wheat and barley cereal crops that were harvested in summer served to tide people over through seasonal scarcity.

¹ Translator's note: In modern Japanese, *mugi* is a generic term that includes various cereal grass grains. *Ōmugi* is barley: *Hordeum vulgare*. *Komugi* is wheat, *Triticum*. *Muginokurumi* is unclear. *Soba* is buckwheat, *Fagopyrum esculentum*. *Karasu mugi* is common oats, *Avena fatua*.

² Translator's note: Kinai refers to the district around present-day Nara, Ōsaka and Kyōto. The 'Seven Circuits' refers to the seven main routes radiating out from there, in other words, the rest of the country.

Sakubei: 'rope noodles'

There are extant sources on how such cereals were cooked and processed at the Court, such as a passage on the 'Method of making miscellaneous things' in the tenth century *Engishiki*, Vol. 33. A recipe appears for making *sakubei*, for the offerings at the O-Bon Festival at the 'Seven Temples'.³ It says, 'Mix 1 *koku* 5 *tō* of wheat flour' [270 litres] with '6 *tō* of rice flour' [108 litres] and '5 *shō* of salt' [9 litres], to make 675 bales of *sakubei*'.⁴

Sakubei was also called 'wheat rope' (*muginawa*) at that time. Given that it was produced in units of 'bales' [used for straw], it is thought that it was kneaded into 'ropes' like present-day dried udon noodles. So it seems that around the Nara Period they ground harvested wheat into flour and ate it in the form of udon-like noodles.

Beans

Apart from cereals, there were crops like soy beans, adzuki beans and sesame to tide people through the seasonal scarcity and stave off starvation. These were important sources of protein and fats, and could be kept a long while. In the fifth month of Jōwa 7 (840), the Grand Council of State once again urged that cereals be planted in all the provinces, and ordered that beans and sesame should also be cultivated, along with common millet, foxtail millet, barnyard millet and barley.⁵ The ancient Japanese state categorised these as items for support in years of failed rice harvests (*Ruijū Sandaikyaku*, Vol. 8).

There were several species of beans, and apart from whole soy beans and adzuki, they included soy beans for soy sauce making, beans for fodder, black-eyed peas and white beans. The details concerning regions where they were cultivated are unknown, but a list of provinces that were designated to return them as taxes in kind appears in the section on trade in miscellaneous goods in *Engishiki*, Vol. 23. In most cases these were tribute tax from provinces in the Kinki district or western Japan, including the provinces of Harima and Tanba.

Harima and Tanba still produce well-known brands of beans, and this historical source shows that production there goes back to ancient times. We should bear in mind, however, that for the common people in those days these were crops to prevent them from starving during the period of summer scarcity.

Harvest festivals for dry-field crops

With regard to beans, there are historical sources about them as offerings at Bon Festivals, albeit much later, in the *shōen* manors of Yamato and Kii Provinces in the fifteenth century. Along with *edamame* (soybeans) and black-eyed peas, others are recorded such as cucurbitaceous crops,⁶ eggplant, and *neimo* (potato sprouts). *Edamame* is thought refer to the green soy beans on the pod that we eat nowadays as an accompaniment to beer in the summer.

Scholar of medieval history Shigemitsu KIMURA has analysed these sources, and observed that most of the foodstuffs offered at O-Bon were in fact made from dry-field crops. The Bon Festival has hitherto been taken to be a Buddhist festival, but he posits that it has aspects suggesting that it was originally a harvest festival for dry-field crops. He explains O-Bon as a joyous festival for expressing gratitude for getting through the hard labour of the agricultural busy season, and making it through food scarcity and epidemics, thanks to the harvest of dry-field crops. This is a very instructive view, that requires reappraisal of the role that was played by dry-field crops that are harvested in the summer, such as beans, melons, eggplant and potatoes.

As seen above, it is clear that most of the dry-field crops that are grown as 'traditional' crops or 'local' vegetables throughout Hyōgo Prefecture nowadays were actually crops grown to stave off famine during seasonal scarcity in the ancient and medieval periods.

³ Translator's note: seven Buddhist temples in Kagawa Prefecture, Shikoku.

⁴ Translator's note: 1 *koku* = 10 *tō*, approximately 180 litres; 1 *tō* = 10 *shō*, 18 litres; 1 *shō* = 1.8 litres.

⁵ Translator's note: *kibi*, common millet, *Panicum Miliaceum*; *awa*, foxtail millet, *Setaria italica*; *hie*, barnyard millet, *Echinochloa esculenta*.

⁶ Translator's note: *uri* includes various cucurbitaceous plants such as melons, gourds, pumpkins, cucumbers, squash, etc.