
Book Review: *Land, Power, and the Sacred*

Janet R. Goodwin and Joan R. Piggott, eds. *Land, Power, and the Sacred: The Estate System in Medieval Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2018. 570 pages. ISBN 978-0824872939. \$64.95.

Land, Power, and the Sacred is a welcome introduction to a topic that has not received its due attention by English-writing historians for far too long, and it does it in an inspiring and informative way. While the medieval Japanese estate system has been discussed extensively by Japanese historians, very few scholars in the West have taken on the task of discussing the estate system in detail, so the publication of this important anthology is cause for celebration. As the introductory and first chapters, as well as the last historiographical chapter of the volume all suggest, the paucity of research or teaching material on the Japanese estate system might be due to the fact that it has often been seen as boring and unengaging, buried deep in dry tax ledgers and land surveys. Outside the contexts of political maneuvers of the elite and the land struggles of the emerging warrior class, the estate system has languished for many years. This anthology edited by Janet R. Goodwin and Joan R. Piggott does an amazing job at filling this gap by providing overarching arguments about the estate system as an historiographical concept as well as close studies of individual estates. It is a thorough and hermeneutic study that is weakened only by the obvious challenges of being within an anthology where the relations between micro-level findings are picked up and used for more generalizing arguments only with difficulty.

The anthology is the physical product of a conference held at University of Southern California in 2012 on various aspects of the premodern Japanese estates as well as of the collaborative efforts of a group of scholars and graduate students at USC working on the Ōbe estate and its connection to the monk Chōgen. This focus is carried over into the anthology, where 8 out of the 18 chapters are centered on this particular estate. While it can be problematic to use one estate as a template for the entire estate system (if we can even talk of one system at all) with all the regional and temporal variations and particularities, the close-up on Ōbe allows the editors and individual authors to illustrate many of the intricacies that made the estate system into a system.

Among the authors of the chapters we find both Japanese and Western historians, with many young scholars among them. The chapters are all of high quality and kept in a largely jargon-free language that makes them very enjoyable and informative, even for non-specialists.

Journal of Medieval Worlds, Vol. 1, Number 3, pp. 119–124. Electronic ISSN: 2574-3988 © 2019 The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jmw.2019.130009>

The volume is divided into an introduction by Janet Goodwin, who makes a compelling case for the importance of studying the estate system and thus the history of the silent majority of the population in premodern Japan. This is followed by seven parts that address the estate system in different ways and provide good structure to the volume. The individual chapters in general provide plenty of historical context, and even though this at times leads to some redundancies when read front to back, the chapters can easily stand alone and thus make excellent readings for both students in general and scholars with specific interests.

Part I (“The Big Picture”) outlines the historical and historiographical background for the study of the medieval Japanese estates through two chapters. In the first of these, Joan Piggott introduces the reader to three very influential works in the field of estate history published in 1978, 1989, and 2013. Through these works Piggott skillfully introduces the social, economic, and political functions of the premodern estate, although it takes on a shape more akin to a review article than an introduction to the estate system as such and is, therefore, more of interest to the specialized reader than to a general audience. The second chapter by Sakurai Eiji sets out to link “two topics that are not usually associated with each other: economic history...and the history of medieval estates” (p. 37). While it can be objected that estate history has always primarily been economic history, the chapter does a nice job of describing the circulation of coins and the production of various goods in provincial society and how the latter was tied together with the center through trade routes. It could, however, also be argued that these economic structures were not restricted to, or even primarily about, the estate system, and the chapter seems to be more about the state than the estate system.

Part II (“How do We Know about Estates”) consists of three chapters that all address the methodological issues historians face when researching premodern estates. Chapter Three, by Nishida Takeshi, thus gives a detailed picture of archeological findings in the area covered by the Ōbe estate, but it is curious, and unfortunate I think, that he has focused on findings predating the establishment of the Ōbe estate. The chapter therefore reads more as a local history (with all the merits that this may have) than as a contribution to estate history. Chapter Five, by Hirota Kōji, likewise uses archaeological material, but in contrast to the chapter by Nishida, it uses that material to give the reader a thorough impression of the typology and layout of a medieval estate (the Hine estate). Chapter Four, by Endō Motoo, on the other hand, takes the reader through the documentary archives and introduces the many different kinds of written sources that an estate historian will encounter. The chapter is a great source of information for anyone aspiring to make sense of medieval documentary material as well as the importance of identifying the authorship of documents and how and by whom they were stored and preserved.

Two articles on agricultural practices make up Part III (“Making the Land Productive”), Chapter Five (Kimura Shigemitsu) and Chapter Six (Joan Piggott). Kimura takes on a holistic approach in emphasizing that estate production was not just about rice production or dry fields, but that several other kinds of products and agricultural techniques were employed in the early medieval period. Piggott provides a very nice

introduction to the founding of one of the most well-known and researched estates, the Kuroda estate in Iga province, in which she shows the many challenges, obstacles, and opportunities faced by anyone embarking on opening up new lands for agriculture in the Heian period.

Part IV (“Secular and Sacred”) is the longest section, with four chapters that all shed light on the role of the monk Chōgen (1121-1206) in the development of the Ōbe estate from different perspectives. The four chapters by Nagamura Makoto, Ōyama Kyōhei, Janet Goodwin, and Yoshiko Kainuma together provide a highly interesting picture of the involvement of religious figures and ideologies in the otherwise mundane management of agricultural communities.

Nagamura’s chapter discusses the early career of Chōgen as an itinerant preacher and donation collector for the rebuilding of Tōdaiji, but, more importantly, it gives a careful introduction to the involvement of monks and other temple affiliates in the daily management of provincial estates. The participation of monks in land management is further elaborated upon by Ōyama, who discusses the many activities of Chōgen in estates belonging to Tōdaiji as well as on public infrastructure. Together the two chapters give the reader a good understanding of the relationships between provincial estates, their populations, and the temples and monks holding proprietary rights. They clearly demonstrate that these relationships were more than just an exchange of produce for legal protection and that any differentiation between secular and religious practices was murky or non-existing. Many of these points are reiterated in the chapter by Goodwin, where she demonstrates the close collaboration between Chōgen and local cultivators in the creation of the estate. While parts of her chapter therefore seem a bit redundant if read together with the rest of the volume, the thematic overlaps make the chapter highly informative if read on its own, which I suspect will be the case for many students. The last chapter in Part IV, by Yoshiko, focuses on the role of local temples in the daily lives of estate communities, exemplified by the construction of a Jōdoji temple in the Ōbe estate. The chapter is a wealth of information on architectural techniques as well as on the particular iconography in the temple, but it can be a little difficult at times to see the direct connection to the estate system, and it is a good example of how the volume at times struggles with making Ōbe and Chōgen representatives of an overall proprietary system.

The next two parts both deal with different aspects of power and they both consist of three chapters each. Part V (“Power, Space, and Trade”) begins at the highest levels of the proprietary system with a chapter by Sachiko Kawai, in which she demonstrates the capacity of women in the imperial family to hold and manage vast portfolios of estates. Through several case studies she not only shows the role of top female proprietors in the estate system but also the larger trade networks that these estates would be part of through the office of the proprietors, thus adding considerably to our understanding of the archipelago-wide trading systems and overseas connections of the estates as well as to our appreciation of female agency in a system primarily featuring males. The next chapter, by Rieko Kamei-Dyche, further develops the idea that estates were integrated parts of larger operative systems as seen also in Kawai’s chapter. She argues very

convincingly that singular estates cannot be isolated from the larger clusters of estates that constituted the portfolios of central proprietors and that the spatial distribution and eventual dismantling of such clusters were results of conscious strategic considerations—an extremely important point that has often been ignored in estate research. The last chapter in Part V, by Michelle Damian, takes the discussion of estate trade networks to a more local scale and provides an interesting approach to teasing out information from material that is otherwise often silent on local trade practices. The chapter is thus a very valuable source on methodologies for the study of the “other 99%” of the medieval population to whom the volume editors wish to give voice. That being said, Part V is quite focused on more elite networks and proprietorships, and we only get very few glimpses of the people who actually produced and moved the goods around.

In recent years, more emphasis has been put on conflict processes as an integral element of the estate system, and Part VI (“Power: Challenges and Conflicts”) is a welcome representative of this development. Philip Garrett, in his chapter on a border conflict between the Nate estate and Niunoya village in the 1240s, and Dan Sheerer, in his chapter on a dispute in the Ōbe estate, shed light on estate conflicts and the relations between local actors, estate proprietors, and central legal institutions of conflict resolution and law enforcement. This section thus moves away from a traditional treatment of estate conflict as something happening between proprietors and land-hungry and aggressive warriors, and instead sees estate conflicts as involving many other actors both locally and externally. The final chapter in this part turns to the somewhat more familiar story of how estate residents, and in particular estate managers, interacted with provincial warrior powers during the later years of the estate system in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The chapter is rather short (only half the length of the other chapters in the volume) and serves almost like an epilogue over the decline of the estate system and the gradual transfer of land and power into the hands of provincial warrior families.

The last chapter in the anthology stands out from the rest and has also been given its very own Part VII (“Getting the Word Out”). Ethan Segal deals with the difficult but pertinent question of how we can teach about Japanese estates. He accurately discusses some of the many problems in studying the estate system, incorporating a historiographical discussion and an extremely useful overview of available material in English.

Land, Power, and the Sacred thus presents a fascinating and multi-faceted look into the complexities of the premodern Japanese estate system, and the book will be an incredible source for most, if not all, students of premodern Japan. The editors and authors in different ways manage to demonstrate the importance of estates, not only as sources of wealth for the rich but as spaces of contention, collaboration, piety, and exchange, and they do so in a lively and engaging way. As Goodwin states in the Introduction, estate studies furthermore provide a window into the lives of the other 99 percent in medieval Japan that we otherwise never hear about. Unfortunately, and perhaps inevitably, *Land, Power, and the Sacred* only provides a very small window into the elusive lives of cultivators, fishermen, loggers, outcasts, artisans, and others, but I applaud the

collaborators of this volume for inspiring students and scholars to see the benefits of digging further into the estate archives and archeological sites to integrate the silent majority of the medieval population more fully into the grander narratives on premodern Japan.

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