



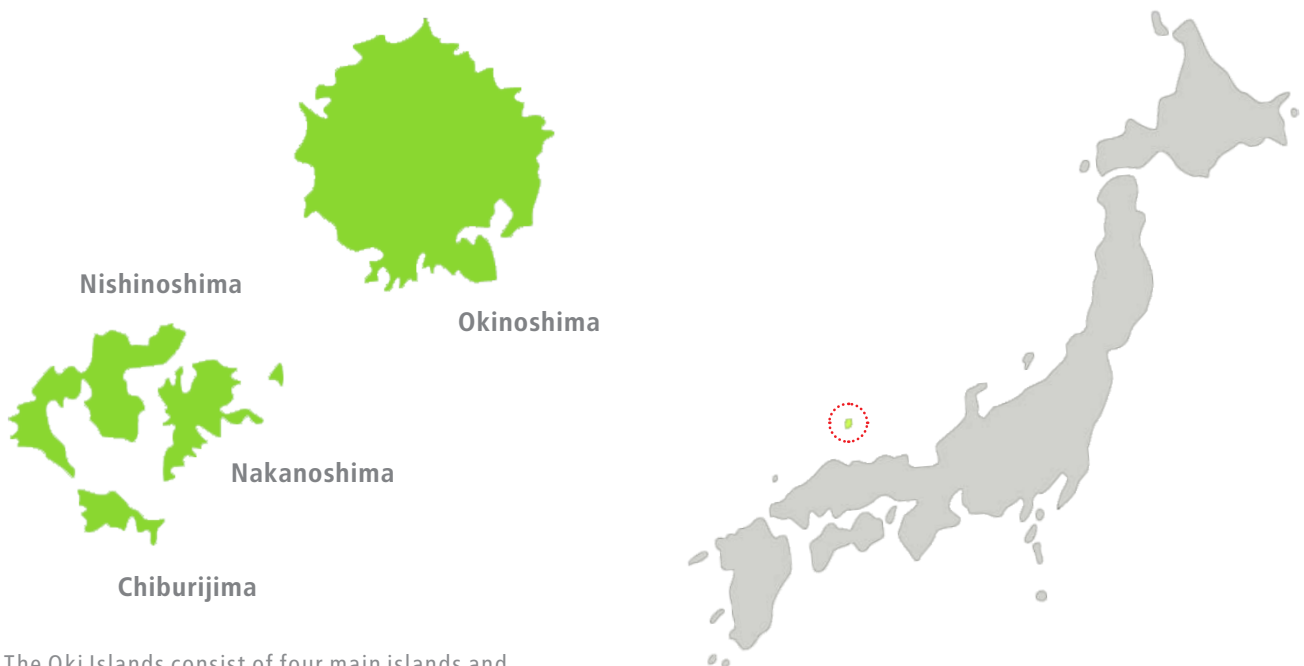
Overlooking Nishinoshima from Hisuka district, Ama cho, ©Ama Town Tourism Association

Exile and Poetry on the Oki Islands An Archipelago of Natural and Cultural Vibrancy

Christina Laffin, Canada

Exile and Poetry on the Oki Islands

An Archipelago of Natural and Cultural Vibrancy



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The Oki Islands consist of four main islands and 180 smaller uninhabited islands

Motivation Nestled in the Sea of Japan, the Oki Islands are known as a place of exile, where everyone from court elites to petty criminals were sent when their transgressions merited the punishment of banishment to the periphery. While the Oki Islands may have seemed foreboding in their distance from the central archipelago of Japan, their intense natural beauty and cultural heritage offer the traveler immense rewards. As someone raised on a remote island in Canada who came to study Japan's poetic history, I have long been intrigued by these islands of exile and their cultural legacy. Having journeyed to the Oki Islands in search of historical sites and the remnants of an illustrious poetic past, I was left in awe of the striking natural scenery and the dedication of residents to preserve ties to the court culture of the past.

Objective Imagine being at the apex of aristocratic society and then suddenly being thrust to the outer edges of Japan, relegated to the social and geographical peripheries. This was the experience of emperors and eminent courtiers who found themselves banished following political discord. Those who experienced exile included emperors and aristocrats; their desire to maintain ties to the capital and preserve the aesthetics of courtly life meant that pastimes such as poetry composition continued to flourish through long-distance exchanges with esteemed writers.

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Shara-bune Spirit Boats, used to bid farewell to ancestral spirits in August, Nishinoshima

©Shimane Prefecture Tourism Federation



Aka Kabe, literally Red Wall, earth containing iron-oxide which has eroded to reveal beautiful patterns on Chiburijima

©Shimane Prefecture Tourism Federation



Cherry blossoms at Oki Shrine on Nakanoshima

©Shimane Prefecture Tourism Federation

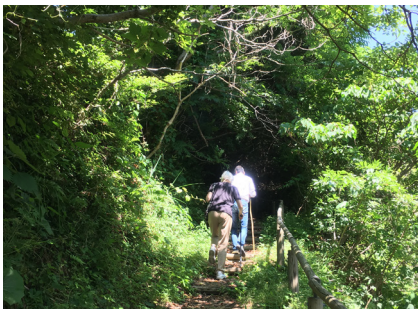
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For the court elites sent from the capital to the windswept shores of Oki, the rustic environment brought poetic inspiration along with lamentation for their past lives and loved ones. Oki was one of many remote areas where exiles were sent, yet the ties that were forged between local residents and banished courtiers can still be seen in the cultural practices and historical remnants that remain. How did the arrival of thirteenth and fourteenth-century royal exiles foster cultural exchange and leave traces of literary heritage on these remote islands? How have residents continued to preserve and celebrate these traditions? This essay will consider these questions.

Context The Oki Islands are tied to the originary tales of Japan, the story of poetry in the medieval world, and a history of exile and cultural crossings within the Japanese archipelago. In terms of cultural history and natural beauty, these islands represent some of the most vibrant and exciting places to visit in Japan.

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Mountain path to Takuhi Shrine
©Laurel Rasplica Rodd



Takuhi Shrine, with its main hall partially built into the rock cave behind it
©Nishinoshima Tourism Association



Portrait of GoToba-in, 13th century,
Fujiwara Nobuzane, Courtesy of Minase Shrine

In the thirteenth century, Japan's government was a duopoly: the warrior leadership in Kamakura, the shogunate, held de facto power, while the old capital, the present Kyoto, continued to serve as the center of aristocratic life. This equilibrium was frequently contested, and in 1221 the Retired Emperor GoToba (GoToba-in, 1180-1239), who had taken the throne at the age of three and retired by the age of eighteen, had amassed enough power among warrior rivals of the shogunate that he attempted to overthrow the Kamakura military government to reassert rule by the emperor. Shogunal forces put down the rebellion and GoToba was exiled along with his followers. The Oki Islands were the destination chosen for GoToba and his entourage.

As he approached the Oki Islands, GoToba may have been guided by the tallest mountain on Nishinoshima, Mt Takuhi, a religious site associated with fishing and navigation. Although the current building dates to 1732, Takuhi Shrine has a long and illustrious history and is associated with various myths, having been founded in the late ninth or early tenth century after three flames witnessed at sea rose up and lodged itself in the mountain. Today you can still climb the mountain and see the shrine, the main hall of which seems to meld with the mountain behind it.

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The seat stone where GoToba-in stopped to rest after he arrived at Saki, ©BGC



The picturesque village of Saki ©Ama Town Tourism Association



Katsuta Pond where GoToba-in read a verse on the sound of frogs and pine trees, ©BGC

When GoToba-in arrived at Nakanoshima, his boat docked at the village of Saki, from where he made his way up the hillside to the first rest stop – a *koshikake ishi*, or seat stone, records the site. Saki remains a picturesque village encircling the bay where the royal entourage would have landed. The village is referenced in the *Izumo Province Gazetteer* (Izumo no kuni fudoki, 733) as one of the places pulled together to form the archipelago of Japan.

With the arrival of the ex-emperor and various courtiers, local leaders were recruited to liaise and provide services. Today you can visit the Murakami-ke Museum to see how the Murakami family lived and their relationship to the newly exiled aristocrats. Included among items held in the museum is a kemari ball, a leather ball used for the court pastime of kick-ball.

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The Murakami-ke Museum introduces the history of the Murakami and their ties to GoToba-in

©Murakami-ke Museum



The Murakamis are an influential local family who served the visiting court elites

©Murakami-ke Museum

The exiled courtiers maintained communication with those in the capital via messengers. GoToba-in dedicated much of his time to literary activities, including the composition of waka poetry. In addition to composing many poems of his own and editing them into collections, he also carried out revisions to the royal anthology he had commissioned, called *The New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (ShinKokinshu, 1205). While on Nakanoshima, GoToba exchanged poems and anthology revisions with associates in the capital, including his loyal supporter Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237), and a poet with whom he frequently sparred yet admired, Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241). Teika's descendants continue to visit the islands today to pay homage to their ancestor and his work with the retired emperor.

Today, 700 of GoToba's poems remain from the 19 years he spent in Oki. A selection of these which seem to speak to his experience on Oki are included below, translated by the scholar Laurel Rasplica Rodd during her visit to the islands in 2016.

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mi no uki ha
tofu beki hito mo
tohanu yo ni
ahare ni kinaku
hototogisu kana

such misery in
a world where those who ought to
ask after me do
not how touching that the sweet
hototogisu comes to call

GoToba-in onhyakushu

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<i>tsuyu shigeki</i>	in the loneliness
<i>mugura no yado no</i>	of my garden overgrown
<i>sabishiki ni</i>	with mugwort heavy
<i>mukashi ni nitaru</i>	with dew the voices of bell
<i>suzumushi no kowe</i>	crickets are those of long ago

GoToba-in onshu

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<i>watatsumi no</i>	unable to dye
<i>nami no hana woba</i>	these blossoms of waves that float
<i>somekanete</i>	on the broad seas cold
<i>yasoshima tohoku</i>	rains from the clouds blanketing
<i>kumo zo shigururu</i>	myriad distant islands

GoToba-in onshu

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<i>omohe tada</i>	think of this	beneath
<i>koke no koromo ni</i>	this robe of moss	thick with dew
<i>tsuyu okite</i>	I lie in	lonely
<i>nezame sabishiki</i>	wakefulness	enduring night
<i>fuyu no yona yona</i>	after frigid	winter night

GoToba-in onshu

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<i>kasumiyuku</i>	rays of morning sun
<i>takane wo idzuru</i>	filtering from the drifting
<i>asahi kage</i>	mists that veil the high
<i>sasuga ni haru no</i>	peaks ah truly now I see
<i>iro wo miru kana</i>	the colors the signs of spring

GoToba-in ento hyakushu

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yufusuzumi
ashi no ha midare
yoru nami ni
hotaru kazu sofu
ama no isaribi

taking the evening
cool the blades of reeds are tossed
in the approaching
waves the fireflies' number grows
fishing flares of the seafolk

GoToba-in ento hyakushu

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*ima ha tote
somukihatenu
yo no naka ni
nani to katarafu
yama hototogisu*

I know my time has
come with those still in this world
on which I have turned
my back of what would you now
converse mountain nightingale

GoToba-in ento hyakushu

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<i>kefu mo kure</i>	as I keep hoping
<i>asu mo suginaba to</i>	for this day to reach its end
<i>omofu ma ni</i>	for tomorrow too
<i>munashiki toshi no</i>	to pass away empty years
<i>mi ni tsumoritsutsu</i>	pile up one upon the next

GoToba-in ento hyakushu

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<i>momochidori</i>	the myriad birds
<i>sahedzuru sora ha</i>	chirp in the skies unchanged from
<i>kawaranedo</i>	what they always were
<i>waga mi no haru zo</i>	yet this spring of my own life
<i>aratamarinuru</i>	is something completely new

GoToba-in ento hyakushu

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A Hundred Verses from a Distant Island, matching poem cards displayed at the Emperor Gotoba Museum
©Emperor Gotoba Museum



Emperor Gotoba Museum, adjacent to the Oki Shrine, Ama cho, ©BGC



Cremation Mound of GoToba-in ©BGC

Fifteen years after arriving on Nakanoshima, GoToba conducted a poetry contest by compiling sets of ten poems sent to him by courtiers from the capital. He added ten of his own poems and created eighty rounds of the contest, judging the poems himself and naming it *The Poetry Contest from a Distant Isle* (Ento uta-awase, 1236). A few years later he collected a series of one hundred of his own verses as *A Hundred Verses from a Distant Island* (Ento onhyakushu, after 1239). For a complete translation of these 100 poems, see Thomas McAuley's www.wakapoetry.net

GoToba died on Nakanoshima in 1239. His legacy lives on at Oki Shrine, the shrine dedicated to his memory, where his grave site is sanctioned by the Imperial Household Agency and maintained by members of the Murakami family. Close by is the Emperor Gotoba Museum, which houses objects related to his exile on Nakanoshima.

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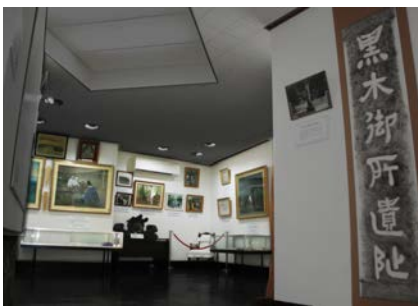


Looking toward Matengai Cliff, a distinctive landscape 257 meters above sea level created by numerous eruptions and years of erosion

©Laurel Rasplica Rodd



Portrait of Emperor GoDaigo, 20th century
Hirose Kanssen, Courtesy of Hekifu-kan Museum



Records and artifacts related to Emperor GoDaigo's journeys and escape displayed at the Hekifu-kan Museum

©Hekifu-kan Museum

GoToba was not the only emperor to have been exiled on the Oki Islands. A century later Emperor GoDaigo (1288-1339) spent less than a year on the islands before escaping with local help. Visitors may learn of his journey and his escape at the Hekifu-kan Museum, and walk from there to the site of his residence overlooking the sea. The nearby Nishinoshima Folklore & History Museum offers insights into the traditions of Nishinoshima that GoDaigo would have encountered and which continue to be practiced in local communities today.

GoToba and GoDaigo were but two of the many exiles who were sent to the Oki Islands. Their stories of poetry produced in a new and unfamiliar environment, or a daring escape undertaken with the help of islanders' knowledge, shed light on the interactions of newcomers with local elites on this archipelago. Nakanoshima, Nishinoshima, and the surrounding islands offer a cultural history and scenic beauty deeply tied to the mythic origins and poetic history of Japan. Following the footsteps of those in the past, we can retrace the journeys of emperors and exiles through scenic fishing villages, along mountain paths to shrines, and across sweeping vistas of the Sea of Japan.

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Stone monument engraved with a poem by GoToba-in, Oki Shrine, ©Oki Shrine

Today, visitors to the Oki Islands are struck by its phenomenal natural beauty. If we scratch below the surface of its towering cliffs, intricate rock formations, and native flora, we see a history of interaction with central Japan and a long tradition of erudite exiles who inscribed their poetic practices into literary history, sometimes inspired by the rugged scenery around them.

Oki communities are currently undergoing revitalization by tapping into their vibrant natural and human resources, offering an invaluable opportunity to learn more about these islands and their connections to an illustrious poetic past.

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Places **Cremation Mound of GoToba-in**

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After spending 19 years exiled to the islands, GoToba-in died and was cremated on Nakanoshima in 1239. The cremation mound, sanctioned by the Imperial Household Agency, marks the site of his funeral. For generations, the mound has been maintained by the Murakami family, who are said to have supported the ex-emperor during his exile.

684-0403 Shimanen ken, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama

Emperor Gotoba Museum

Located near Oki Shrine, this museum houses approximately 300 objects related to GoToba-in's exile on Nakanoshima.

Closed during winter (November 21 to March 19), except with prior reservation.

684-0403 Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama 1521-1

[web-site](#)

Hekifu-kan Museum

Opened in 1989 within the Kurogi Imperial Residence Site to record Emperor GoDaigo's exile in Nakanoshima. The museum features a series of paintings depicting the exile and escape of Emperor GoDaigo. A walk up the hillside near the site of GoDaigo's residence offers a panoramic view of the surrounding area.

684-0302 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Beppu 275

[web-site](#)

Kurogi Imperial Residence Site

In Japanese *Kurogi gosho*. A stone memorial near Beppu Port marks Emperor GoDaigo's residence during his exile until his escape in 1333. The Hekifu-kan Museum and Kurogi Shrine are nearby.

684-0302 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Beppu 275

[web-site](#)

Mt. Takuhi

Nishinoshima's highest mountain and a religious site long associated with fishing and navigation. Local legend tells that three flames seen at sea rose up and lodged themselves in the mountain, guiding GoToba-in who became lost as he approached the Oki Islands.

684-0303 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Mita

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Places **Murakami-ke Museum**

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Museum devoted to the Murakami family, one of the local leaders at the time of GoToba-in's arrival. Exhibits cover the history of the family and its relationship to the exiled sovereign and his entourage. The museum building is the family's former homestead.

684-0403 Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama 1700-2

[web-site](#)

Nishinoshima Folklore and History Museum

The museum introduces the history of Nishinoshima and local traditions, customs, and practices. Exhibits include a replica of one of the spirit boats launched during Obon, the festival to commemorate ancestors.

684-0302 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Beppu 56-10

[web-site](#)

Oki Shrine

Built to commemorate the 700th anniversary of GoToba-in's death, the shrine precincts include the grave site of GoToba

684-0403 Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Ama 1784

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Saki

A village in southern Nakanoshima, and the place where GoToba-in and his entourage landed

684-0413 Shimane, Oki gun, Ama cho, Saki

Takuhi Shrine

Located on Mt. Takuhi, Takuhi Shrine was founded in the late 9th or early 10th century and is one of the oldest shrines on the Oki Islands. The current building dates to 1732 and is designated an Important Cultural Property. Dedicated to the protection of seafarers, the shrine is associated with a legend of three flames which guided GoToba-in to safety.

684-0303 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Mita

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

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Yurahime Shrine

References to this shrine's deity, Princess Yura, date to the mid 9th century. The wooden torii, the gate at the entrance to the shrine, is located at Squid Bay, where squid occasionally gather in great numbers to atone for one having bit Princess Yura's finger in the mythic past.

684-0211 Shimane, Oki gun, Nishinoshima cho, Urago 922

Publications

Shinkokinshu: New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern

2 volumes

Rasplica Rodd, Laurel (Trans.), 2015, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers

An introduction and annotated translation of the 1978 poems that make up the 20 books of *The New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (ShinKokinshu), commissioned by GoToba-in in 1201

The Making of Shinkokinshu

Huey, Robert N., 2002, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press

An investigation into the process behind the production of the 8th imperial poetry anthology, the ShinKokinshu, and the central role of GoToba-in

Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology

Carter, Steven D., 1991, Stanford: Stanford University Press

A collection of over 1,100 classical poems from the earliest times to the 20th century

Waka Poetry

Web-Sites

The website offers commentary, explanation, and over 5,000 waka translations

[web-site](#)

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Glossary **Emperor GoDaigo (1288-1339)**

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Ninety-sixth emperor of Japan. Unlike most emperors of his era, GoDaigo took the throne at the late age of 30 in 1318, and maintained power through the remainder of his life, at a time when the imperial family was split into two rival lines. After his attempted overthrow of the bakufu in 1331, he was exiled to the Oki Islands, but successfully escaped within a year and returned to the throne, eventually retreating with his court to the mountains of Yoshino in present Nara Prefecture.

- ▶Nishinoshima
- ▶Oki Islands

Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)

Eighty-second emperor of Japan. Enthroned at the age of three, he abdicated fifteen years later and was thereafter known as *GoToba-in* – Retired Emperor GoToba. GoToba was a major patron of the arts, undertaking the commissioning and compilation of Japan's most ambitious imperial poetry anthology, *The New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (ShinKokinshu). In 1221 GoToba attempted to overthrow the ruling Hojo clan and was banished to the Oki Islands where he spent the rest of his life, while continuing to produce poetry and revising the ShinKokinshu.

- ▶Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237)
- ▶Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241)
- ▶Kamakura
- ▶Murakami Family
- ▶Nakanoshima
- ▶Oki Islands
- ▶Rest Stop of GoToba-in

Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237)

An eminent medieval court poet who was one of the editors of the eighth imperial poetry anthology ShinKokinshu. Like his cousin Teika, he studied under the poet Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114-1204) and was a member of GoToba-in's court salon.

web-site

- ▶Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)
- ▶Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241), Uta-awase

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Glossary **Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241)**

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A medieval poet, scholar, and courtier famed for his allusive compositions and his activities as an anthologizer, editor, poetry judge, and journal recorder. Today he is considered one of the greatest producers of waka poetry, a legacy passed down from his father Shunzei to Teika and his descendants, who still produce poetry today.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237)
- ▶ Uta-awase

Izumo Province Gazetteer

Fudoki, or provincial gazetteers, were imperially requested reports of the provinces produced by local governors. They include narratives of the myths and stories of the province. The Izumo Province Gazetteer (Izumo no kuni fudoki) is one of the most complete of the extant gazetteers.

Kamakura

A coastal city in eastern Japan, located approximately 60 kilometers south of Tokyo. From 1185, when Kamakura became the bakufu headquarters, it functioned as the political and administrative center of the shogunate. Although the seat of bakufu power shifted to Kyoto in the 1330s, Kamakura continued to serve as a major religious and political center through the 16th century.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)

Kemari

Literally, *kickball*, a game resembling the more courtly form of footbag or hackey-sack, introduced from China to Japan at the beginning of the 7th century. In this popular pastime among male courtiers of the Heian period (794-1185) six players formed a circle and kept a deer-leather ball, similar in size to a volley ball, in the air by kicking it. Certain players and families were renowned for their prowess, and spectators would watch the skillful maneuvers as the competition took place.

[web-site](#)

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Glossary

Koshikake Ishi

Literally, *seat stone*, a hallowed marker indicating the site where a deity, fantastic being, or a famous historical figure sat as a rest stop on a journey

► Rest Stop of GoToba-in

Murakami Family

One of the influential families on the Oki Islands that supported GoToba-in during his exile. The family has been appointed by the Imperial Household Agency to maintain the Emperor's graveyard.

► Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)

Nakanoshima

Third largest island of the Oki Islands, where GoToba-in was exiled in 1221. He died and was buried on the island in 1239.

[web-site](#)

► Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)

► Oki Islands

Nishinoshima

Second largest island of the Oki Islands, where Emperor GoDaigo was exiled in 1332. The island is home to Mt. Takuhi and the Takuhi Shrine.

[web-site](#)

► Emperor GoDaigo (1288-1339)

► Oki Islands

Oki Islands

An archipelago in the Sea of Japan consisting of four inhabited and 180 uninhabited islands. The Oki Islands are known as a place of exile, where everyone from court elites to petty criminals were sent when their transgressions merited the punishment of banishment to the periphery. Their geological heritage has earned them recognition as a UNESCO Global Geopark.

[web-site](#)

► Nakanoshima, Nishinoshima

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Glossary **Rest Stop of GoToba-in**

Site located by the port of Saki where GoToba-in made his first rest stop following his arrival at Nakanoshima. A *koshikake ishi* or seat stone commemorates the site.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

- ▶ Emperor GoToba (1180-1239)
- ▶ Koshikake Ishi

Uta-awase

Poetry contests practiced at court and in private settings in premodern Japan. Poets were divided into two teams – Left and Right – and competed in matches by composing poems based on set topics. Poetry contests were one of many forms of matches (*awase*) carried out as pastimes and displays of talent, including painting contests (*e-awase*) and shell-matching (*kai-awase*).

- ▶ Fujiwara no Ietaka (1158-1237)
- ▶ Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241)

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