

Chapter 3-6

The History of Transport of the Lake

Abstract

From ancient times, lakes have been one of principal means of transportation in Japan, and for people living around Lake Biwa in the 1960s, the lake served as a means of transportation and supported their lives and livelihoods. As well being an integral part of the lives and livelihoods of people in those days, boats also contributed not only to agriculture, but also to mining and industry.

Keywords: “Maruko-bune” (Wooden transport ship), “Maruki-bune” (Dugout canoe), Routes for transportation

1. Changes in Transportation on the Lake

The dugout canoes of roughly 6,000 years ago are the oldest forms of boat used in the Lake Biwa area, since when more than 30 wooden transport ships have been found, providing evidence that the lake was commonly used for transportation since ancient times. Subsequently, transportation capabilities were enhanced by the appearance and spread of dugout canoes with components such as bow chocks and side planking called “semi-composite boats” roughly 2,000 years ago. In the 8th century, improvements were made by the state to the ports and sailing routes that connected cities such as Kyoto and Nara to areas on the Sea of Japan in the north. The water system of Lake Biwa was used for the transportation of materials used for construction in the capital and the building of temples.

The Middle Ages (12th – 16th centuries) heralded the management of ports by lords of manors, marking the beginning of their use for economic and military purposes. Check points were set up on the lake and it was the regimes of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the second half of the 16th century that attempted to exercise total control of make economic and social use of the lake with Azuchi Castle as the base of their activities. Thus, transportation on Lake Biwa made the lake a major artery in Japan, and authority over the lake subsequently passed on to entities such as the Edo Sho-

gunate of the 17th century and the Meiji government of the second half of the 19th century.

2. The Decline of Transportation on the Lake

In 1869, the steamship “Ichiban Maru” was put into service on Lake Biwa and steamships such as this took over the task of large-scale transportation on the lake that had grown into a bustling center of passenger and freight transport, and the volume of freight transported on the lake reached its peak in 1926. However, the subsequent development of railways and roads resulted in a major decline in the role of ships for transportation.

On the other hand, short-distance transportation around Lake Biwa continued, finally coming to an end in the 1960s. Nowadays, the only vessels that can be seen on the lake are fishing and sightseeing boats.

3. Features of Transportation of the Lake

Up to around the middle of the 1960s, Lake Biwa was considered to be part of the community by the local populace and, more than simply a reservoir or fishing spot, it was regarded as a route and place for people to conduct their livelihoods. Boats were closely tied to both lives and livelihoods with vessels ranging from “Maruko-bune” of roughly 15 tons unique to Lake Biwa to small paddy-field wooden boats. These vessels not only served as

means of transport in the course of daily life and supported agriculture, but they also contributed to the transportation of large, heavy freight in fields such as mining and industry.

Up to the beginning of the Second World War, transport vessels such as wooden transport ships that had played such an active role on the lake offered

both stability and the ability to carry large volumes of freight thanks to the use of sails. Ships such as these capable of performing their functions without engines were in great demand as a form of transportation on the Lake Biwa of modern times.

Masaharu Yoda (Lake Biwa Museum)



Fig. 3-6-1 Typical wooden transport boats in use on Lake Biwa from the 17th century to the first half of the 20th century: "Maruko-bune" (Lake Biwa Museum)

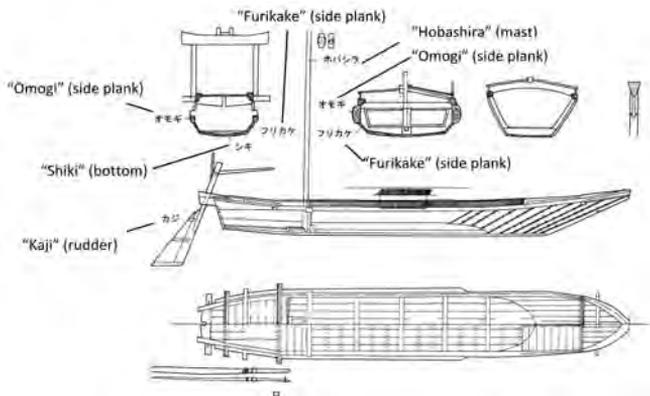


Fig. 3-6-2 General structure of a wooden transport ship