

The History of Disasters along the Saru River Basin

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Related Sheet: 5

On Natural Disasters in Records and Legends of Hokkaido

According to historical records and oral histories of the Saru River region, the main natural disasters that stand out are tsunami and volcanic eruptions. These records have been verified by archaeological investigations, which revealed layers of volcanic ash from Mount Usu and Mount Tarumae (table 1).

Earthquakes are related to both of these kinds of natural disasters, and events such as these causes a drop in salmon spawning, destruction of rivers and fields, and leads to the devastation of nearby forests and other environments.

Most volcanic ash in Japan is blown eastward by the west wind, but of course this would depend on the direction of the wind at the time of eruption. However, we do know that the volcanic ash from the eruptions of Mount Usu in 1663 and Mount Tarumae in 1667 descended in the Biratori region.

Some scholars have proposed theories, which state that the frequent volcanic eruptions that occurred in the late 17th century had a significant impact on human activity in the area, and may have been one of the remote causes of the Shakushain Revolt in 1669. (Tokui, 1989)

Various Types of Tsunami in Traditional Tales

Looking at table 2, one will notice that people categorized tsunami in two ways. *Orepunpe* (the rear, out at sea, there, thing; the thing that comes from the sea) is a wave that comes after the sea “overflows.” *Koypuruke* (wave, boil over) describes a phenomenon in which the sea level



Photo 1 The geological cross-section of the Kankan 2 ruins in Nibutani (Shot from the southwest side). Several dozen centimeters of volcanic ash depositions can be found over the entire region of Biratori-cho.

Table 1 Major Layers of Volcanic Ash in the Early Modern Period of Southwestern Hokkaido

Volcano Name	Eruption Year	Volcanic Ash Name
Komagatake	1640	Komagatake volcanic ash d layer (Ko-d)
Mount Usu	1663	Mount Usu b pumice (Us-b) *
Mount Tarumae	1667	Tarumae volcanic ash b layer (Ta-b) *
Komagatake	1694	Komagatake volcanic ash c2-layer (Ko-c2)
Mount Tarumae	1739	Tarumae volcanic ash a layer (Ta-a)

* Descended in the Saru Region

Table 2 Oral History of Tsunami in the Saru River 1

O-repun-pe means tsunami. *Koy-puruke* are similar to tsunami, but refers to the phenomena by which the wave slowly and gently presses in. Apparently, tsunami in the noontime are white, but looks red at night.

Once upon a time, a messenger sent by the Lord Matsumae came to Saru. All of the adults from around Biratori assembled and told the messenger about a tsunami. They called it *tono-erenka* when messengers like this came to preach to the adults.

During a tsunami a long time ago, seawater forced its way up Sisirimuka and many Ainu on the coast died. Below the modern-day Penacori, an old man at a *chashi* at Ninatsumi drowned with his *chitarabe*. The scene of furniture floating to the sea with the shellfish is well known. The water dried up and left a large flounder. That place is now called Nina, which means flounder. The land is still called Nina today. Because of this tsunami, you can find fossils of *porsei* (clams) and *mokoreri* (conchs) around the water source. (1911, June 24th, Piratori, Ikoriachi Hiramura)

(Yoshida, 1957)



Photo 2 This is the Rokuntew etu (benzaisen, ship-bow) of the Osachinai Region mentioned in the oral history of earthquakes in the region. Depending on the angle of view, one can see three bows of the ship (shot from the westside). This site is registered as a hill type *chashi*.  567 164 055 (viewpoint)

Table 3 Oral History of Tsunami in the Saru River 2

Once upon a time, when there was an *O-repunpe*, near the *Ohokot-nay-kotan*, a Benzaisen (A large, Benzai-sen, or *Por Rokunte*, shows up time and time again in *yukar*) washed up ashore and came to rest at a mountain called *Rokunte-uetoku*. From the see you can see three capes from the mountain: the stem, stern and hull of a ship. On top of that, near *Museu* (About 20km north from the Nioi Aboriginal School), there are three swamps with the names, *por moutap* (low), *pon moutap* (middle), *shi moutap* (high). These swamps are said to be named after the flow of Kasube. *Moutap* means Kasube (8/23/1911, Penakori, Tomochikauku Kawakami) (Yoshida, 1957)



Photo 3 *Hunpe setur* (whale, back) is a place mentioned in the oral history of tsunami in the Iwachishi region. The mountain located on the left bank of the Saru River is in the figure of a whale (shot from the northwest).  811 707 124 (viewpoint)

Table 4 Oral History of Tsunami in the Saru River 3

The Legends of Flooding of the Saru River

Around midstream Saru, in the land across the river between Okotsunai and Horokeshi, there is a rock called *Rokundet*, which sticks out into the river. It is said to be a Benzaisen, which got stuck there and turned into a rock after an old flood. There is also a place called *Funbeseturu* (back of the whale) in a basin called *Moseu*. A whale had washed up all the way there during the flood. (Biratori-cho, Osachinai, From an Old Tale of Toshikichi Kayano)

(Sarashina, 1971)

increases the flow of the rivers.

Additionally, various expressions related to the concept of “swelling” in relation to tsunami can be seen in *upaskuma* (folklores). For example, the third example in this sheet describes a whale, which turned into a mountain 30km inland from the Saru River estuary. Other examples describe a *kitamaebune*, a type of Japanese ship, turning into stone (tables 3 and 4).

These various expressions of tsunami functioned to educate people in the village about the dangers and evacuation strategies of post-earthquake tsunamis.

How the Region Learns from History in Preparation for Disasters

Biratori-cho is located along Saru River, the longest river in the Hidaka region, which is nearby Mount Usu and Mount Tarumae, both of which are active volcanoes famous in Southwest Hokkaido.

By digging through various historical records, we can understand the history of repeated disasters in the area.

The memories of volcanic disasters have embedded itself in the layers of volcanic ash, whereas the memories of tsunami are left in the names of streams, mountains, and rocks.

Passing down this kind of information was necessary for the people in the region to prepare for future disasters. Therefore, these names, which originate from seemingly unrelated things such as boats and whales, are important in understanding the history of disasters still today.

“Cultural landscapes of the Saru Valley formed by Ainu tradition and modern development”
Designated as Important Cultural Landscape as of July 26th, 2007

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