CHAPTER 7

DIVIDED LOYALTIES: PIRATES AND RIVAL COURTS

When the Mongol ships went down off Takashima Island in Imari Bay in August 1281, the first survivors to clamber ashore were promptly despatched or rounded up by local fishermen. These were men who spent much of their working lives spreading their nets at sea, but who clearly knew how to fight as well. In the defence of their communities they were often drawn into the long civil wars that dominated politics in medieval Kyushu. Some also used their boats to look for booty as well as fish, for here in this mountainous terrain, the forested slopes made the land ill-suited to agriculture and the inhabitants were forced to seek their livelihood at sea. Many of these fishing villages were so isolated that they were largely cut off from any central or even regional authorities’ spheres of influence. With their independent spirit and durable local organization, however, they could certainly make an impact on the overall balance of power both in Japan and overseas.

These were the Matsura-tō, a loose confederation of coastal communities who united to protect their interests in times of need. In Korea and China these and other bands of men from across the water had long been recognized as wakō, the notorious ‘Japanese pirates’ who spread fear whenever they appeared offshore. This is the Japanese pronunciation of a term in Chinese letters that first appears as early as 414 CE, inscribed on the Kwanggaet’o monument on the banks of the Yalu River in northern Korea. It is formed from two characters; wa- meaning ‘dwarf’, the pejorative name traditionally used for the people and islands of ‘Wa’, together with -kō, meaning ‘brigand’. In medieval times,
from the thirteenth century onwards, such bands – known as *waegu* in Korean, or *wōkòu* in Chinese – began to feature prominently around the coasts of the East China Sea.¹

Fear of the *wakō*, real or imagined, created a powerful discourse of victimhood among coastal communities in Korea and China, just as people in northern Kyushu for a long time had lived in fear of ‘Silla pirates’.² At least some of these seafarers set out with trade foremost in mind, only to arouse the suspicion of local populations. In Murai Shōsuke’s analysis, the inhabitants of remote areas on the northern coasts of Kyushu or Iki and Tsushima islands can be thought of as ‘people of the margins’, as they developed a culturally distinct maritime livelihood of their own. In many cases those who ventured overseas could also be described as what Philip Curtin calls ‘cross-cultural brokers’, playing intermediary roles in negotiations across these borderlands.³

There was always scope for conflict when trade was involved, and any visiting seafarers disappointed with their haul could soon turn violent. It would be misleading, however, to characterize the *wakō* only as disgruntled merchants. The Chinese described them as ‘shrewd by nature’, noting how ‘they carried merchandise and weapons together and appeared here and there along the sea-coast’.⁴ Clearly, there was a thriving culture of piracy, and from their bases in Japan, they were able to launch raids far and wide on the coasts of the Tsushima Straits and East China Sea.

Together with fleets operated by adventurers in the Inland Sea, the Matsura-tō in particular built a reputation for their naval power. Their activities escalated in times of weak political control, notably in the fourteenth century when Japan was gripped by civil war during the ‘age of rival courts’ (*nanboku jidai*). Such raids were less conspicuous in the peaceful interlude that followed as order was restored and new dynasties, Ming and Chosŏn, took charge in China and Korea, but they returned with a vengeance in the sixteenth century, in the chaotic political climate that prevailed during the ‘age of warring states’ (*sengoku jidai*).

At their height *wakō* raids could be full-scale military operations, involving fleets carrying small armies on board that sometimes numbered in their thousands. On arrival these bands would terrorize the coastline, burning everything in sight, stealing all they could lay their hands on from rice to gold, and enslaving local villagers. Their ships