CHAPTER 2

Encountering the Sexual in Japanese Culture

The present-day beliefs and behaviours associated with Japan’s sexual gods do not exist in isolation. They are expressed in a number of different contexts, and the first that will be explored is the popular impression that in spite of periodic repression there has long been a ready acceptance of sexual display within Japanese society. A consideration of this topic sheds important light on the sexual gods and their related beliefs as they stand today, but it also gives important pointers towards how they may have been expressed in the past.

The acceptance of frank sexual display within the modern Japanese religious environment contrasts so markedly with conventional Western attitudes that when a foreign tourist catches sight of a phallus in a Japanese shrine the experience may well provoke feelings of surprise and even shock. This was indeed my own reaction during my first visit to Japan in 1970 when I purchased a 1965 edition of the popular history journal Rekishi Dokuhon in a second-hand bookshop. The magazine included an article with photographs published at the time of that year’s annual festivals at the Tagata and Ōagata Shrines in Aichi Prefecture. The prominent portable wooden phallus at the Tagata Shrine was startling enough, but even more remarkable to an outsider was the banner carried during the Ōagata Festival (and now omitted from the event) that depicted starkly drawn female genitalia.

My reaction was probably not an untypical one forty-five years ago, although the gap between Japanese and Western attitudes has since narrowed considerably, as was indicated by the public reaction to two recent ground-breaking exhibitions in the United Kingdom. The first revealed the extent of sexual imagery that had existed in the Western world in antiquity. Entitled Roman Sexuality: Images, Myths and Meanings, it was mounted at Brading Roman Villa on the Isle of Wight in 2014 and consisted of over fifty items from the British Museum that had once been firmly locked away from public gaze. Its display of erotic lamps, drinking cups and figurines proved so popular that its stay at


A banner once carried during the Ōagata Festival including a depiction of female genitalia. Here it is illustrated in an edition of Rekishi Dokuhon from 1965. (Photograph by courtesy of Rekishi Dokuhon).