



# Bashō's Journey

The Literary Prose of Matsuo Bashō

Translated and with an Introduction by  
David Landis Barnhill

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for Chuck and Larry Barnhill  
*true brothers along the path*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Although Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) was certainly a great poet, his true genius only unfolds in his literary prose. The great theme in his prose is the journey, a path through nature, time, spiritual reality, and one’s life: “Each day is a journey, the journey itself home.” This translation has certainly been a journey, decades in the making, with numerous people who have impacted it in a variety of ways. Professor Lee Yearley first introduced me to East Asian culture, the study of religion, and the intellectual life. Poets Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder intensified my interest while enriching my perspective. Professors Edwin Good and Susan Matisoff were instrumental to my graduate work on Bashō, as was Makoto Ueda, whose scholarship on Bashō has been extraordinarily important. Friends Scott, Jerry, Phil, Zack, and Bill helped ensure the trip would be a long and strange one. My wife, enduring my solitary character and obsessive work, has been a true companion along the way. Guilford College provided a nourishing environment for someone dedicated to interdisciplinary approaches to learning, and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh now serves as a productive home for such wayfaring. Thanks to Daniel Sattler for assiduous work on the maps. And I am grateful to Nancy Ellegate and the State University of New York Press for their support of this project.

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## SELECTED CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF MATSUO BASHŌ

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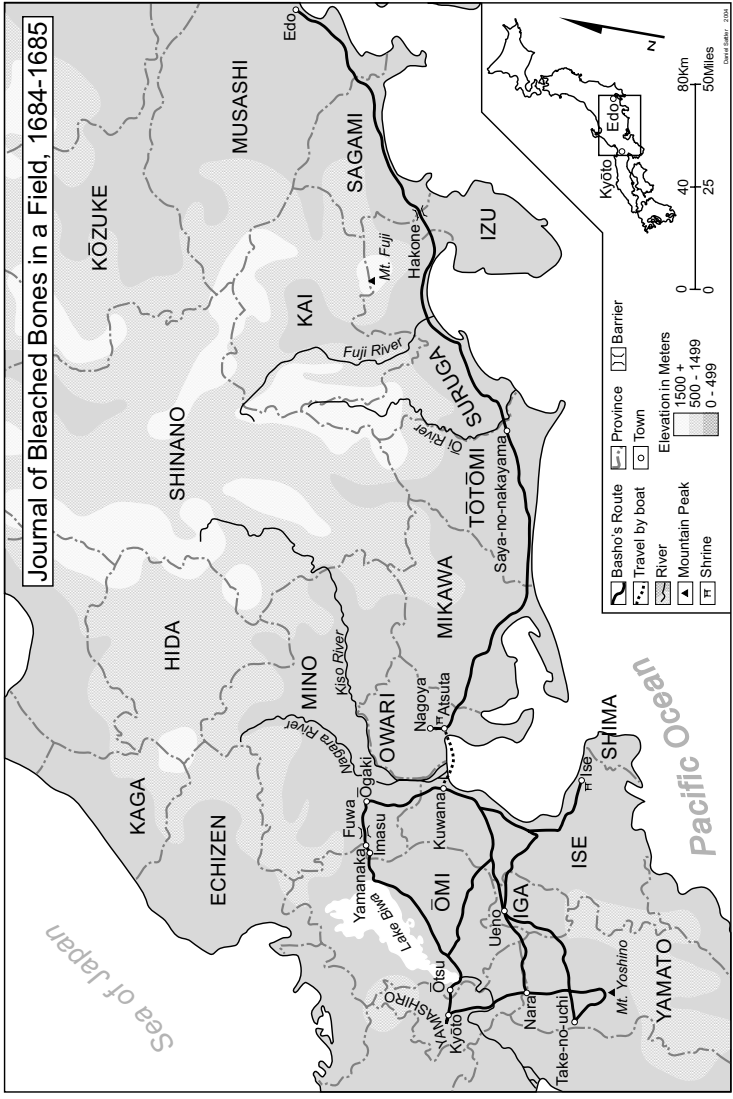
- 1644 Matsuo Kinsaku (Bashō) is born in Ueno, Iga Province.
- 1656 Matsuo Yozaemon, Bashō's father, dies.
- 1662 Earliest extant poem.
- 1666 Death of Tōdō Yoshitada, Bashō's friend and fellow poet, son of his Lord.
- 1672 Dedicates a poetry contest he judged, *The Seashell Game (Kai ōi)*, at a Shinto Shrine. He moves to Edo.
- 1675 Participates in a linked-verse (*haikai no renga*) gathering with Nishiyama Sōin (1605–82), the founder of the Danrin School. By now he has students, including Sugiyama Sanpū (1647–1732) and Takarai Kikaku (1661–1707).
- 1676 Participates in two Danrin-style linked-verse sequences, *Two Poets in Edo (Edo ryōgin shū)*.
- 1677 Begins to work at the waterworks department in Edo as he continues to be a rising star in the Danrin school.
- 1679 Becomes a lay monk.
- 1680 Two major collections by his school are published, *Twenty Solo Sequences by Tōsei's Disciples (Tōsei montei dokugin nijikkasen)* and *Haikai Contests*

(*Haikai awase*). He moves out of central Edo into a hut on the rustic outskirts in the Fukagawa district. His poetry begins to reflect the emotional intensity and spiritual depth of Chinese poetry.

- 1681 A disciple transplants a *bashō* (banana) tree at the hut. Before the year is over, the hut and the poet are known by that name. He practices Zen meditation under Butchō (1642–1716), and Zen and Chinese Daoism become influential in his poetry.
- 1683 The Bashō Hut is destroyed by fire in January. The first major anthology of his school, *Shriveled Chestnuts* (*Minashiguri*), is published. In August his mother dies.
- 1684 In September, he begins a long journey to the west that will give rise to his first travel journal, *Journal of Bleached Bones in a Field* (*Nozarashi kikō*). During a visit in Nagoya, he leads five linked-verse sequences (*kasen*) that will be published as *The Winter Sun* (*Fuyu no hi*).
- 1685 Visits his native village of Ueno to celebrate the New Year. After several other stops, he returns to Edo in summer, which concludes the *Bleached Bones* journey.
- 1686 Writes the unfinished *Critical Notes on the New Year Sequence* (*Hatsukaishi hyōchū*).
- 1687 In October, travels to Kashima Shrine to see the harvest moon, which results in *Kashima Journal* (*Kashima kikō*). He publishes *Collected Verses* (*Atsumeku*), a selection of thirty-four of his hokku. In late November, he sets off on a long journey to the west, which results in *Knapsack Notebook* (*Oi no kobumi*).
- 1688 *Knapsack Notebook* journey ends at Suma in May. He spends the summer in Kyotō and Nagoya areas with friends and disciples. In September, he travels to Sarashina village to see the harvest moon, which results in *Sarashina Journal* (*Sarashina kikō*), and then returns to Edo.

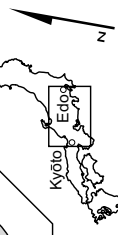
- 1689 Leaves Edo in May for a very long journey to the north country and the west coast of Japan, which becomes the basis for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*Oku no hosomichi*). The journal ends with Bashō heading to Ise in October.
- 1690 Spends much of the winter in his native village of Ueno. He lives from May to August in the “Unreal Hut” by Lake Biwa, and then moves to his native village of Ueno. He begins to speak of his new poetic ideal of lightness (*karumi*).
- 1691 Spends late May at the “Villa of Fallen Persimmons” in the hills west of Kyōto, where he writes *Saga Diary* (*Saga nikki*). The linked-verse anthology *Monkey’s Straw Raincoat* (*Sarumino*) is published. He returns to Edo in December.
- 1692 After many relatively quiet months, a new *bashō* hut is built for him in Edo and he becomes busy again as a haikai master.
- 1693 Tōin, a nephew he had looked after for many years, becomes ill, moves in with Bashō, and dies in April. Bashō begins to take care of Jutei, a woman with three children. In August he closes his gate to visitors.
- 1694 Begins a journey to the southwest in June in poor health. Two anthologies of his school are published, *The Detached Room* (*Betsuzashiki*) and *A Sack of Charcoal* (*Sumidawara*). On November 28, while in Osaka, he dies.

**Journal of Bleached Bones in a Field, 1684-1685**



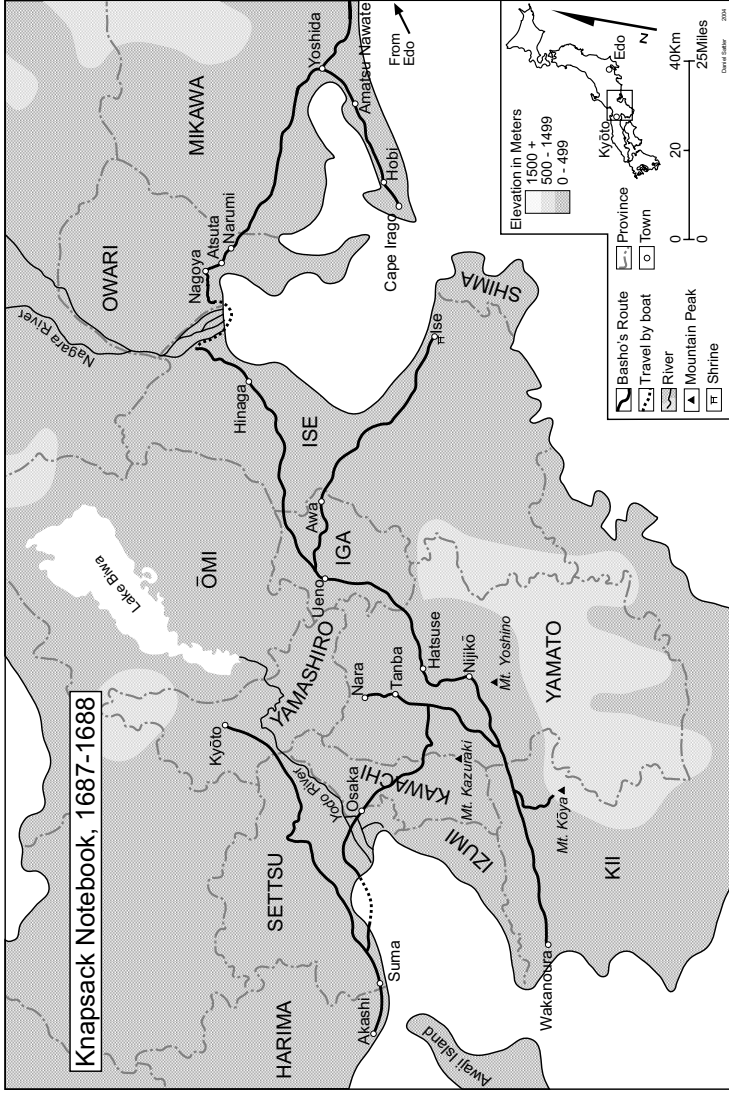
- Bashi's Route
  - Travel by boat
  - River
  - Mountain Peak
  - Shrine
  - Province
  - Town
  - Barrier
- Elevation in Meters
- 1500 +
  - 500 - 1499
  - 0 - 499

80Km  
50Miles



DATE: 2001







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## INTRODUCTION

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*I set out on a journey of a thousand leagues, packing no provisions. I leaned on the staff of an ancient who, it is said, entered into nothingness under the midnight moon. It was the first year of Jōkyō, autumn, the eighth moon. As I left my ramshackle hut by the river, the sound of the wind was strangely cold.*

*bleached bones*

*on my mind, the wind pierces*

*my body to the heart*

nozarashi o / kokoro ni kaze no / shimu mi kana

—*Journal of Bleached Bones in a Field*

In mid-autumn of 1684, the Japanese *haikai*<sup>1</sup> poet Matsuo Bashō set off from Edo (now Tokyo) on a journey. Accompanied by his friend and disciple Chiri, he stopped at his native village of Ueno in Iga Province, where his mother had died the previous year. He also traveled to the Grand Shrine at Ise, the holiest site in Shinto, to Mount Yoshino famous for its natural beauty, and to the ancient cities of Nara and Kyōto.

But his journey was not merely a visit to his old home or to famous scenic spots, it was the beginning of a wayfaring life. He would represent this ideal in five travel journals, the last one, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*Oku no hosomichi*) being one of the great prose works of Japanese literature. His travels also were an occasion for writing the prose poems known as *haibun*, “haikai prose.” In the West, we have become

accustomed to thinking of Bashō as a “nature poet,” but he was also a great prose stylist, and much of his literary prose is inextricably related to his itinerant life.

This trip lasted until early summer of 1685. One result was *Journal of Bleached Bones in a Field* (*Nozarashi kikō*), his first travel journal. Marked throughout by a deep sensitivity to the impermanence of all things (*mujō-kan*), the journal begins with the passage quoted above in which Bashō imagines himself dead by the roadside. In the first significant episode of the journal, he comes across a baby abandoned by the roadside. He expresses great pity for the child and asks how it could have come to such a fate, then decides “this is simply from heaven” and, after tossing the child some food, leaves it behind as he continues on his journey.<sup>2</sup> Soon afterwards we read a famous poem about his horse suddenly devouring a rose of Sharon blossom, unable to live out even its brief life of one day. Back in his home village, he is presented with strands of his late mother’s white hair. Despite all these images of impermanence, there is continuity through time, however, as in the beautiful passage in which he enters Yoshino and communes with poets of old. The journal, which had balanced prose and poetry for much of the text, ends with a series of hokku with only brief headnotes. The journal concludes on a humorous note, with the journey ended but Bashō still trying to remove from his clothes lice he had picked up on his travels.

It is not known when Bashō completed the manuscript of this first journal, but it was published in 1687, the same year as his second, short trip, this time to see the autumn moon at Kashima Shrine. *Kashima Journal* is most significant for the amusing but complex self-image near the beginning. Bashō is accompanied by a rather pretentious monk and a simple lay person who are presented as a bird and a mouse. He then characterizes himself as a bat, someone neither priestly nor worldly but with qualities of both.<sup>3</sup> In this journal there has no integration of poetry and prose throughout the text. It consists rather of an extended prose passage followed by a series of hokku.

Bashō’s third journal is *Knapsack Notebook* (*Oi no kobumi*), the title of which refers to a wooden, lacquered backpack (*oi*) worn by priests while traveling. The journal concerns a lengthy trip west from Edo from November 1687 to May