



The distinctive character and value of Jomon culture seen from world prehistory

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The archaeology of the Jomon period in the Japanese archipelago is of tremendous significance for world prehistory. And yet, largely due to the language barrier, Jomon archaeology does not yet have the global impact it deserves. The bid to have a series of the most impressive Jomon sites in northern Tohoku and southern Hokkaido inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage will help rectify this situation.

Since the earliest reports of Jomon sites, dating back to the 19th century, the archaeology of the Jomon period has generated great international interest. In addition to giving rise to the first proper archaeological report of a Japanese site (both interdisciplinary and bilingual), Edward Sylvester Morse's investigations at the Omori shell middens in 1877 were widely reported, including in the *Illustrated London News* – the 19th century equivalent of CNN. Neil Gordon Munro paid great attention to Jomon sites in the first synthesis of Japanese archaeology, his monumental 'Prehistoric Japan', first published in 1908.

The archaeology boom of the later 20th century resulted in the production of what is undoubtedly the richest archaeological record for temperate fisher-hunter-gatherers anywhere in the world. And it is an extraordinarily diverse record, including completely excavated settlements, ceremonial sites, cemeteries, extraction sites, wetland sites with astonishing preservation of organic materials, caves and rock shelters – in addition to thousands of shell middens of the kind first reported by Morse.

The achievements of the Jomon peoples of the Japanese archipelago are unquestionably of immense significance. They created what are among the oldest known ceramic containers in the world, for example at Odai Yamamoto over 16,000 years ago, thousands of years before pottery was being used in the Near East or Europe, and long before they took up farming. Their early use of lacquer (for example from Kakinoshima B some 9000 years ago) demonstrates what a detailed understanding they had of the materials available to them – what archaeologists in the west sometimes call 'affordances'. They lived in some exceptionally long-term settlements, including Sannai Maruyama in Aomori, the largest Jomon site yet discovered, occupied for over 1500 years, longer than most cities in the contemporary world.

Jomon potters exhibited a remarkable sense of design. Even many of the earliest ceramic vessels are decorated with distinctive designs, including delicate linear relief patterns. At a recent exhibition of Jomon dogu at the British Museum in London, many visitors commented on how modern many of the dogu appeared, finding it hard to believe that they were really made thousands of years ago. This highly developed design sense was complemented by

technological mastery of ceramic techniques, so clearly exhibited in 'chuku chan', the hollow dogu found by a lady digging in her vegetable garden at Chobonaino in Hakodate.

Jomon people clearly had a very well developed sense of their place in the world, and their relationship with the other world. These relationships are in part expressed through their stone monuments, which include stone circles, standing stones and other stone arrangements. Neil Gordon Munro was intrigued by the stone circles of Oshoro, just outside the port town of Otaru in Hokkaido. Since then Japanese archaeologists have investigated many hundreds of Jomon stone monuments, including the wonderful stone circles of Oyu and Isedotai in Akita, and Komakino in Aomori. Just as at the archetypal stone circle at Stonehenge in England, there are still many unanswered questions: What was their connection to the movement of the heavenly bodies? Were they related to death and burial, or to seasonal ceremonies, or both? These enigmatic sites are some of the most immediately accessible to modern visitors – as they remain as visible monuments in the landscape, carefully revealed through archaeological investigation. Archaeologists have gone to great lengths to ensure their survival in the face of development pressures – as shown at the stone circles of Washinoki in Mori-machi in Hokkaido, where the site has been preserved over a major road tunnel.

These sites and monuments are the enduring traces of Jomon populations who were fully modern human beings, with exactly the same intellectual, emotional and physical capacities as people today – just shaped in unfamiliar ways through their own cultural experiences. Although we cannot reconstruct how they spoke, they must have had a rich language, with which they doubtless created many concepts for describing how they saw the world around them. The study of Jomon archaeology offers a glimpse of other, different ways of inhabiting the landscapes of the Japanese archipelago – and perhaps this in part explains the fascination which still enwraps the Jomon.

The bid to have a series of Jomon sites in northern Tohoku and southern Hokkaido inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage offers the opportunity to re-examine the significance of the Jomon for world prehistory, and indeed for the modern world. Many new interpretation facilities have been built and with their outstanding displays and explanations, usually in English as well as Japanese, they provide the top guidance for the modern visitor. With the approach of the Tokyo

Olympics and Paralympics in 2020, the eyes of the world will be on Japan as never before. This offers opportunities to present the wonders of the Jomon cultures (and their plurality needs to be emphasized to avoid any misunderstandings about the diversity represented by Jomon archaeology) in new ways, so that everyone can appreciate the outstanding universal value of the archaeological remains of the Jomon period, and their significance for human history. They are a match for any European cathedral, and are of comparable importance to the cave paintings of the Upper Palaeolithic in France.

