

History of Akiota

Archaeologists have found earthenware dating to the Jomon period (10,000–300 BCE) here, meaning that people have lived in the Akiota area possibly for thousands of years. In the Edo period (1603–1868), the area was one of the centers of the Chugoku region's traditional *tatara* iron smelting, in which foot-pressed bellows are used to force air into a clay furnace. Ironmaking began here in the early Edo period, when the Sumiya group, run by the Sasaki family (later known as the Kake family), initiated *tatara* smelting in the Kake area. The Sumiya made use of natural resources from both the local region and beyond, such as wood from the forests (for fuel) and iron sand from the Chugoku Mountains. The area eventually became known throughout Japan for its iron production.

The Ota River, which runs through Akiota, played an important role in the transportation of iron. *Tatara* furnaces, in which iron sand from the surrounding mountains was smelted, were located in upstream areas such as Kake and Togouchi. From there, riverboats transported wrought iron (raw iron smelted from iron sand) downstream to blacksmiths in what is now the city of Hiroshima, where it was forged into products such as needles, files, and saws. These products were shipped along the Seto Inland Sea to the mercantile center of Osaka and from there dispersed throughout the country.

By the end of the Edo period, the Sumiya group was one of the largest iron merchants in western Japan. In the late Meiji era (1868–1912), however, *tatara* ironmaking declined rapidly because of the influx of cheap, imported steel and the introduction of Western-style ironmaking to Japan. The legacy of *tatara* ironmaking is nevertheless still visible in Hiroshima Prefecture—the region's needle manufacturers and thriving automobile and shipbuilding industries owe at least part of their success to the industrial history of *tatara*.