

Jōmon Culture

【What Happened in the Jōmon Period?】

Life in the first millennium of Japan's Jōmon period (14,000–350 BCE) was characterized by a nomadic lifestyle. Pre-Jōmon people lived in communities of greatly variable size that relocated with the changing seasons. It was during this time that two critical technological advancements were made: the development of pottery and the invention of the bow and arrow. The use of clay vessels allowed pre-Jōmon people to cook a wider variety of foods, and the bow allowed them to hunt game like rabbits with greater efficiency. The discovery of these new technologies marks the beginning of the Jōmon period.

When the Ice Age ended approximately 11,500 years ago, the climate stabilized and the global temperature began to rise. The seasons became less erratic, and it became possible to inhabit a single area throughout the year. Without the need to constantly relocate, individuals were able to remain with their families as they aged, and several generations came to live together in single households. The shift from an itinerant lifestyle to pit-dwelling settlements of hunter-gatherers created a shared communal culture that gradually developed into societies. Numerous artifacts from the Jōmon period suggest a rich culture of trade, ritual, and even art. The name *jōmon*, meaning “rope pattern,” is derived from the pressed cord markings found on pots discovered from this period.

Through the use of pottery, the Jōmon people were able to greatly expand their diets, which led to an increase in the population. Spurred by the changing climate, acorn, chestnut, and walnut trees grew broadly, and their nuts were likely ground and cooked by the people of that time. Evidence of this can be seen in the stone mortars unearthed at Jōmon sites and the traces of carbides found on the inside of pottery specimens from the time. This diet was likely supplemented with a wide variety of other meats, fish, nuts, berries, plants, and root vegetables. Particularly during the middle period of Jōmon, some 5,500 to 4,500 years ago, the population in the area around the Shinano River Basin, including Tōkamachi and Tsunan, reached as many as 200,000 individuals. It was also during this time that the “flame-style” vessels (*kaengata doki*) are believed to have been developed.

The Jōmon period ended with the advent of rice cultivation and the widespread development of an agrarian lifestyle, which was introduced from the Asian continent.