

Jōmon Culture

【Flame-Style Pottery】

The Jōmon period (14,000–350 BCE) is characterized by a shift from the nomadic lifestyle of the Neolithic period to fixed settlements of as many as 500 hunter-gatherers. This shift began as the result of a major technological advancement: the invention of pottery. After the Ice Age ended some 11,500 years ago, the climate stabilized and plant life grew widely and in greater concentration. Earthenware pottery allowed the Jōmon people to take advantage of these new food sources and expand their diets to include cooked nuts, roots, meat, and plants. The abundance of food led to a dramatic rise in the population, which increased five and then tenfold over the next 8,500 years. By 3000 BCE, as many as 200,000 individuals inhabited the Japanese archipelago.

It was during the middle period of Jōmon that the “flame-style” vessels (*kaengata doki*) in the museum’s collection are believed to have been developed. The pottery is characterized by flame-like ornamentation sculpted into the rim of each pot. Unlike pottery from the very beginning of the Jōmon period, which was rounded or pointed on the bottom and used primarily outside, the walls of flame-style pottery are thinner, and they have flattened bottoms for use indoors.

The collection of artifacts maintained by the Tōkamachi City Museum contains 928 pieces that have been designated National Treasures. Of those, 57 are deep, flame-style vessels. “Flame-style Vessel Number 1,” which was unearthed at the Sasayama excavation site in Tōkamachi and is exhibited at the museum, was notably found 95 percent intact.

For scientists studying the Jōmon period, flame-style pottery is something of a mystery. The flame-shaped ornamentation does not serve any clear purpose, and not every specimen of pottery contains traces of carbonized food, suggesting that they were not always used for cooking. Pottery with this distinct flame-style shape has been found mainly in the mid-Shinano River Basin. This has led some researchers to speculate that the design and shape are symbolic of local identity and held meaning within the local religion or mythology of the time. Others theorize that the swirls and upper patterns represent water flowing through a river.