

Jōmon Culture

【History of Echigo *Chijimi*】

Tōkamachi has long been a production and distribution center for Echigo *chijimi* crêpe. This traditional fabric is woven from thread made of ramie, a bast fiber extracted from the bark of the ramie plant, which grows in abundance in the nearby Shinano River marshlands. The earliest evidence of fabrics woven from plant material in the area dates back to the Jōmon period (14,000-350 BCE).

The earliest known use of the *chijimi* weaving method occurred between the Kofun (250-552 CE) and Heian periods (794-1185) in a large settlement in the area of what is now the Tōkamachi City Museum. During the Edo period (1603-1867 CE), Echigo *chijimi* was known across the country as a high-quality fabric. Tōkamachi was particularly famous for *omeshi*, a version of the textile woven from tightly spun thread that was made into summer clothes for members of the shogunal government.

Plant fiber threads were used until the end of Edo period, by which time the demand for *chijimi* had declined. Tōkamachi's weavers embraced the use of silk, and the wave of modernization that accompanied the Meiji era (1868-1912 CE) brought the introduction of new fabric-making technologies from the West, such as the Jacquard loom. In the 1950s, the technique of painting dyes directly onto the surface of the fabric (*yūzen*) was incorporated into the production of textiles, an industry that still thrives today.