

## **Mt. Sanbe in Human History**

### **Overview**

As Mt. Sanbe's volcanic activity declined, vegetation flourished, and the mountain took on its present-day appearance. Human settlements arose, and Sanbe featured prominently in the myths of the area's early inhabitants. Throughout the centuries, local residents have maintained deep economic and spiritual ties to the mountain.

### **Life in the Jōmon Period**

Humans were undoubtedly present near Mt. Sanbe during the Jōmon period (14,000 BCE–350 CE), when Mt. Sanbe erupted several times. In particular, it seems likely that humans were here 4,000 years ago, on the day of the catastrophic eruption that created the Azukihara Buried Forest. No signs of human settlement were found in the forest itself, but many Jōmon-period artifacts dating to before the eruption have been discovered in the surrounding areas. Broken pottery, weights for fishing nets, and grinding stones likely used for millet or other grains have been found beneath the eruption's deposition layer to the east of Sanbe.

The species and size of trees in the Buried Forest, as well as the insects that were preserved along with them, give hints about the ecosystem of the time. The presence of dung beetles, which feed on the feces of large animals, indicates that the forest probably contained mammals such as deer and boar. These animals may have supplemented the diets of early inhabitants.

### **Mythology and Landscape**

The landscape of Shimane Prefecture is the subject of one of Japan's earliest legends: the "land-pulling" (*kunibiki*) myth. According to the *Izumo fudoki*, an eighth-century record of lore from the province of Izumo (now Shimane Prefecture), the god Yatsukamizu Omitsuno stood on the Shimane coast and decided that the land was too small for his liking. Looking across the Sea of Japan, he spied a piece of "excess" land, which he cut from the continent and pulled to Japan. He repeated this process three times, anchoring the pieces with ropes attached to two great stakes—the mountains of Daisen and Sanbe. This land forms the Shimane Peninsula, and the two thin spurs of land on each end (Sono no Nagahama beach in the west and the Yumigahama Peninsula in the east) are the "ropes" that anchor the peninsula to the mainland.

**[photo caption] A view of Mt. Sanbe from Taisha**

When seen from the town of Taisha, features of the landscape take on the legendary shapes portrayed in the land-pulling myth: the Sono no Nagahama shoreline stretches out like a great rope running toward the distant anchor of Mt. Sanbe.

### **Mt. Sanbe in Historical Times**

The wide grasslands on the northern, eastern, and western slopes of Mt. Sanbe have always appealed to settlers in search of grazing land. At the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912), roughly 3,000 head of cattle were pastured on Sanbe. Once mechanical tillers arrived, far fewer cattle were needed to cultivate the fields, and by the 1950s, the number of cattle on the mountain's slopes had dropped to around 1,200. Even then, the number of grazing livestock was enough to suppress natural reforestation and maintain grassland over most of the mountain, but by the 1970s, trees had reclaimed the summit and parts of the slopes.

Today, about 100 head of beef cattle are pastured in the western and eastern grasslands. Every year at the end of March, the western grassland undergoes a controlled burn to help prevent wildfires and maintain the grassland ecosystem.