

Oki Islands: Earliest Inhabitants

Origins

Archaeological research suggests that the earliest modern humans to reach Japan arrived here sometime between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago. The Oki Islands are generally believed to have been settled during the same period.

A key factor in tracing the settlement of the islands is the dissemination of local obsidian. Unlike organic remains, this volcanic glass does not decompose over time, and it serves as an excellent archaeological indicator. Obsidian that can be traced to the Oki Islands has been found in 30,000-year-old sites as far away as Hyōgo Prefecture, indicating that not only were the islands settled by this time, but their inhabitants were engaging in trading and possibly mining.

The “Leaf People” Legend

The precise relationship between the islands’ early obsidian traders and modern-day Oki residents is unclear. As in other regions, the earliest histories are preserved only in the oral transmission of myths and legends. According to local legend, the first inhabitants to settle the islands were the “Leaf People” (Konohabito)—individuals who are thought to have worn hide garments covered with dried leaves and tied with kudzu vines or strips of willow bark. The leaves repelled rain and seawater, keeping the wearers dry. The Leaf People also wore their hair long and beards uncut, giving them a fearsome appearance.

The legends tell us the first Leaf People arrived in small numbers—perhaps only a pair of them—at a bay on the northern side of Dōgo. They brought fire-making implements and rudimentary fishing gear. Over time, they migrated farther west, to what is now Nishinoshima. One day, deciding to cross to the southern end of the islands, they climbed to the highest point on Dōzen to survey the land. Meanwhile, a second group of Leaf People had landed far to the south. They had no means of making fire and were struggling to survive. When they saw the light from a fire on the highest peak to the north, they ventured toward it. There on the mountaintop, the two groups joined. According to legend, this is how Mt. Takuhi (literally, “Burning Fire Mountain”) got its name.

In time, other groups arrived on the island, including the tattooed “Sea People” (Umibito) from the Izumo region of the Japanese mainland (now part of Shimane Prefecture). Eventually, the language and culture of the Leaf People were absorbed into that of the Sea People.

Archaeological Evidence

In 1998, a preliminary archaeological survey was conducted prior to the construction of Dōgo's Rainbow Arena. The survey revealed an important discovery: a tomb mound (*funkyūbo*) from the end of the Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE). Measuring roughly 18 meters by 11 meters, the mound was rectangular with projections at the corners, a shape distinctive to the culture of the ancient Izumo kingdom. The powerful rulers of that time controlled what is now mainland Shimane and western Tottori prefectures, and the presence of Izumo-style burial mounds on Dōgo indicates that their influence extended to the Oki Islands as well. Furthermore, because the distribution of Oki obsidian largely overlaps the Izumo cultural sphere, it is possible that Izumo culture spread along the established lines of the prehistoric obsidian trade.