

Fujioka Historical Museum

Kofun

Kofun are burial mounds that were commonly built for the deceased of the ruling and other upper classes of Japanese society from the third century to the seventh century. There are approximately 30,000 *kofun* extant across Japan, including 13,000 in Gunma Prefecture. *Kofun* burial so defines this period of Japan's history that it is commonly known as the Kofun period (ca. 250–552). A *kofun* chamber is constructed to inter the remains and a mound of earth is raised over the chamber.

There are various styles of *kofun* mounds: keyhole, circular, square, and rectangular. The earthen exterior may be terraced or smooth. Many *kofun* were covered with rounded stones and decorated with earthenware funerary figures and objects known as *haniwa*, but in most cases those have disappeared with time, leaving only the earthen exterior on which grass and even trees have grown. Today, smaller *kofun* may be hard to discern; they often resemble nothing more than overgrown hillocks or have eroded away completely.

Weapons, mirrors, metalware (such as for harnesses), jewelry, pottery and bisque figurines, and ceremonial objects are among the items that have been found in *kofun*.

The parkland around the museum contains several *kofun* dating from the fifth and sixth centuries. These *kofun* are collectively known as the Shiroishi Cluster, although they are spread out to such a degree that they are usually referred to as four separate groups: Inariyama, Nanakoshiyama, Saruta, and Shimogo. The individual *kofun* also have separate names.

The Shiroishi-Inariyama *kofun*, from the fifth century, is the oldest. It includes a 155-meter long, 13.5-meter high keyhole-shaped mound. Within the Nanakoshiyama group, the Nanakoshiyama *kofun* is 150 meters long and 16 meters high, making it one of the largest keyhole-shaped burial mounds in eastern Japan. It was built in the sixth century and is now covered with trees.

Haniwa

Many of the relics on display in this museum were excavated from the *kofun* of the Shiroishi Cluster. They include the *haniwa* earthenware figurines usually placed in the periphery of the *kofun* that have been pieced together by archaeologists and researchers based on excavated sherds.

The word *haniwa* literally means “circle of clay.” They have been broadly classified into two types: cylindrical *haniwa*, which were placed around the *kofun* to signify a boundary, and *keisho* (honor-related) *haniwa* to symbolize the life, authority, and rituals of the dead. Young women, men in formal dress, warriors, and sumo wrestlers are among the figures represented in *keisho haniwa*. In addition, some bear a shield, which is believed to ward off demons.

Human *haniwa* figures often have distinctive facial expressions. One of the museum's most prized examples is the *Laughing Haniwa*, a whimsical figure from the sixth century excavated from the Shimoda site. In 2018, it won an award for being one of the most popular *haniwa* unearthed in Gunma Prefecture.

Haniwa made in the latter part of the Kofun period are often depicted in armor or other costumes, and the horses in livery, providing archaeologists with information about clothing, harnesses, and other items that have not survived to the present.

A *haniwa* kiln dating from the fifth and sixth centuries, the heyday of *kofun* construction in Gunma, was found at Saruta in 2018–2019. The excavations revealed several *haniwa* and a 10-meter-long climbing kiln—a long, relatively narrow structure built on a natural slope to achieve higher firing temperatures.

Other Kofun Artifacts

Other pottery remains have also been found on top of and inside *kofun*. Vessels were used in rituals. The act of offering, breaking, or piercing a vessel is believed to have been a way to say farewell to the dead.

Jewelry items found inside *kofun* include loop earrings carved from gilt bronze and necklaces made of stone. Archaeologists have established that the gilt bronze used for one pair of loop earrings cannot be found in Japan, suggesting the earrings may have come to Japan through trade with the Korean Peninsula or China.

Other evidence of Japan's international trade during the Kofun period is a sword recovered from the Hirai Number One *kofun* of the Nanakoshiyama group, which is visible from the museum entrance. This sword is believed to have come from the Korean Peninsula. Another artifact recovered from the same group, in the nearby Ojizuka *kofun*, is a sword hilt in the shape of a phoenix head surrounded by a ring.

Mirrors made of polished bronze were introduced to Japan from China even before the start of the Kofun period and became significant funerary objects. It is believed they were regarded as symbols of power, possibly because they reflected light. The mirrors were cast in molds. The non-reflective side of the mirror was usually decorated with concentric rings and images of animals thought to have talismanic power.

The practice of *kofun* burial fell out of favor as Buddhism spread through Japan in the seventh century.