

Fujioka Historical Museum

Yayoi Period (300 BCE–300 CE)

The Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE) is marked by the shift from a hunter/gatherer society to a settled agricultural society. Though Late Jomon people are thought to have had some agricultural practices, rice cultivation appears to have been the domain of the Yayoi people. Yayoi period archaeological sites often include remnants of ancient rice paddies. Early Yayoi people used the same type of stone tools as the Jomon people, as well as more elaborate tools, including metal ones; the advent of metalworking is another characteristic of the Yayoi period.

Continental Connections

Early theories maintained that the Yayoi people arrived from overseas and supplanted the Jomon people. Current thinking, based on limited DNA evidence, is that the Yayoi people are a mix of Jomon people and migrants from other parts of Asia, perhaps even as far away as the modern-day Chinese province of Yunnan. It is believed the new migrants brought rice cultivation and metal-working know-how to the archipelago. The Yayoi are generally accepted as the ancestors of modern Japanese.

Iron and bronze working in Japan began with the Yayoi people, who produced iron and bronze weapons; bronze bells, mirrors, and coins; and farm tools tipped with iron or other metals.

The Yayoi people continued and refined many Jomon pottery traditions, although they did not decorate pots as elaborately. The pot shapes also evolved over time to meet their changing needs. The evolution of pottery over the two periods is shown in one display case, where Jomon and Yayoi artifacts are arranged chronologically.

Many of the Yayoi artifacts displayed were excavated from a site called Oki II, which was discovered in the early 1980s during the construction of Ono Junior High School in Fujioka. The excavation proved to be one of the largest sites dating from the Early to Middle Yayoi period in eastern Japan, with 27 burial sites uncovered, allowing archaeologists to learn more about funerary practices of this period when bodies were buried and later disinterred, processed, and reburied.

Yayoi dwellings were advanced versions of Jomon precedents. During both periods—and even into the Kofun period (ca. 250–552)—single-family pit houses were common. The houses had a central fireplace and four evenly spaced pillars embedded in the floor against which a frame and thatching were laid. The cut-away scale model inside the museum provides a view of what a dwelling would have been like.

Other structures from the period include communal granaries built on stilts (presumably to keep out vermin) and tall watchtowers.

A chart in the museum shows the evolution of pottery, pit house layout, and burial style across the Early, Middle, and Late phases of the Yayoi period. The artifacts are arranged in chronological order.

Judging from their agricultural practices, the Yayoi people appear to have been more settled than were earlier people. This led to social developments such as ruling institutions and collective defense.