

Ofune Site

Evidence of a large-scale settlement (c. 3200 BCE) has been uncovered at the Ofune Site in Hakodate, southern Hokkaido. Archaeological excavations have revealed the foundations of more than 100 pit dwellings, graves, storage pits, and an earthwork mound containing large quantities of pottery, stone tools, and animal bones. Findings indicate the site was settled continuously for almost 1,000 years.

A favorable location

The Ofune Site is located on a plateau that extends along the Ofune River and faces the Pacific Ocean. Carbonized chestnuts and the bones of fur seals, tuna, salmon, whales, and deer have been found at the site. Communities here would have fished the ocean, hunted along the coastline, and foraged in the forests.

Pit dwellings at the Ofune Site

The inhabitants of the site lived in pit dwellings. These were wooden pillar-supported structures that enclosed a single living space dug into the ground. Archaeologists are able to identify the outlines of the pits and the post holes that held the pillars. The foundations of nearly 120 pit dwellings have been discovered at the Ofune Site. Many overlap, indicating that new dwellings were built on the sites of older dwellings.

Some of the pits discovered at the site measure more than 2-meters deep and nearly 10-meters long. Pits at most other sites are typically not as deep nor as long. Some of the largest foundations have been preserved in their excavated state to give visitors a sense of the scale of the dwellings that were constructed here.

An unusual discovery

Beneath the ground of one of the dwellings, archaeologists found a small hole with blackened soil at its base. Analysis of the soil revealed biological material possibly from the placenta. Archaeologists surmise that the act of burying the placenta had some ritual significance. In Japanese culture, it was once customary to bury the placenta within the entranceway to the home, to ensure the healthy growth of a newborn baby.

A treasure trove of artifacts

A large earthwork mound almost 80-meters long and 10-meters wide has been discovered at the site. It has yielded large quantities of pottery, stone tools, animal

bones, and artifacts such as sewing needles made from deer antler. Pit graves have been found within the mound and there is evidence that fires were lit here. The mound seems to have functioned as a ritual space as well as an area to deposit tools.

Pottery: design and characteristics

Pottery artifacts from the Ofune Site indicate that the site was settled continuously for nearly a millennium. The pottery unearthed here is flat-bottomed and cylindrical in shape, with notable variations in patterning and design. The shape and design of pottery artifacts enable archaeologists to date Japan's prehistoric sites and understand how long sites were settled. A clear change can be observed in the design of the artifacts unearthed at the Ofune Site, indicating it was settled for a long time. Earlier vessels have less elaborate decorative features and simple rims, whereas later pieces feature stylized rims and applique decorations.

Hakodate Jomon Culture Center

Artifacts from the Ofune Site are on display at the Hakodate Jomon Culture Center [\[link\]](#) next to the Kakinoshima Site [\[link\]](#). The museum exhibits artifacts from several local archaeological sites, including a hollow clay figurine (*chuku dogu*) that is a National Treasure of Japan. The museum is a five-minute drive from the Ofune Site.

Related archaeological sites

Other large-scale settlements have been discovered at the Sannai Maruyama Site [\[link\]](#) (Aomori), one of the largest Jomon archaeological sites in Japan, and the Goshono Site [\[link\]](#) (Iwate).