

Isedotai Stone Circles

More than 4,000 stones are arranged in four circles (c. 2000 BCE) at the Isedotai archaeological site in northern Akita. Evidence suggests the circles were constructed over 200 years and served as ritual spaces. Large quantities of pottery have been found buried around the circles, including clay figurines (*dogu*) in a broad range of styles and designs.

Sourcing the stones

The circles are located on a plateau with views of the Shirakami Sanchi mountain range. They are made up of many types of stones, sourced from local rivers such as the Yoneshiro and Osarube. Archaeologists believe the stones may have been transported over distances of up to 5 kilometers.

Preparing the site

Surveys of the circles indicate that the ground was worked before the stones were set in position. Leveling and digging work would have been carried out with simple tools made only of stone or wood.

Buildings around the stone circles

Around the outer edges of the circles, the remains of pillar-supported structures have been found. It is unclear what the structures were used for, but they are not believed to be dwellings. Findings indicate it was a ritual site, likely shared by communities in the surrounding area.

Some theories suggest the structures may have been used for laying out and preparing the deceased for burial. Consistent with this theory, burial pits have been found around the circles. The graves have not yielded any human remains because of the acidity of the soil, but many have contained clay figurines and burial items. Post holes have been left uncovered around some of the circles and pillars have been erected to give visitors a sense of the scale of the structures.

Clay figurines

More than 200 clay figurines (*dogu*) in human form and with distinct and expressive facial expressions, have been found at the Isedotai site. They range in style and design from flat, tablet-like figurines (*banjo dogu*) to hollow figures (*chuku dogu*). More

simplistic designs have an abstract shape without clearly defined limbs, whereas more elaborate figurines feature detailed patterning, accentuated curves, and identifiable body parts. Many have been intentionally broken, in an act of ritual expression, possibly prayer.

Isedotai Jomon Museum

The Isedotai Jomon Museum [\[link\]](#) at the entrance to the site displays unearthed artifacts in brightly lit showcases. The lighting highlights the facial expressions and intricacies of the clay figurines and other pottery works. Exhibits at the museum give an overview of the site and the stone circles. Large displays with photos of the excavation work, present the findings of archaeological investigations in English and Japanese.

The museum holds craft workshops, where visitors can make accessories and clay vessels. Reservations are required. There is a gift shop selling a range of t-shirts and clay-figurine-themed souvenirs. A small admission fee is required to enter the exhibition space, but the gift shop and museum foyer are free of charge. In the foyer, a short video about the stone circles is screened. The video is available in several different languages including English.

Related archaeological sites

Other large prehistoric monuments in northern Japan include the Kiusu Earthwork Burial Circles [\[link\]](#) (Hokkaido) and the stone circles of Oyu [\[link\]](#) (Akita), Washinoki [\[link\]](#) (Hokkaido), Komakino [\[link\]](#) (Aomori), and Omori Katsuyama [\[link\]](#) (Aomori).