

Umataka Jomon Museum Captions

The Umataka Jomon Museum

This museum stands on the sites of the Umataka-Sanjuinaba excavation, where pieces of Nagaoka's famous "flame pottery" were discovered. Nicknamed the "Flame Pot Museum," it serves as a place to display, store, and study the earthenware recovered from the sites.

Our main building serves three purposes:

- 1) To exhibit artifacts from the site and tell the public about them.
- 2) To house and preserve these Important Cultural Properties of Japan.
- 3) To educate schoolchildren and others about the history of this site and the items recovered from it.

The Umataka-Sanjuinaba Sites

The remains of a large-scale settlement, located on the left bank of the Shinano River during the Jomon period (15,000–900 BCE), were unearthed at Umataka-Sanjuinaba.

The Umataka remains lie in the eastern part of the site. These date from the mid-Jomon period, between 5,500 and 4,500 years ago. The Sanjuinaba remains occupy the western part of the site and date from a later period, around 4,500 to 3,200 years ago.

The Umataka remains are of a northern village and a southern village, the latter of which was established later. Flame pottery was first discovered at the northern village. At the Sanjuinaba remains, we can see how the population gradually grew into a large-scale settlement while shifting southward.

The Umataka-Sanjuinaba sites were collectively designated a National Historic Site in 1979.

Flame Pottery: An Important Cultural Property

This first example of regional flame pottery was discovered in Sekihara in 1936. The name comes from the decorations at the top of the pots, which resemble burning flames.

Later, archaeologist Nakamura Kozaburo classified this pot as "Flame, A-type, no. 1." It thereafter became a point of reference for other "flame pots," not only in Niigata but also at Jomon-period sites in other parts of Japan.

The Flame Pottery of Umataka

Here, you can see examples of two types of Umataka flame pottery: the flame type and the crown type.

The more common flame type is notable for its four large protrusions with serrated edges. This differs from the crown type, which has protrusions resembling mountain peaks. The pots are generally deep, but the Umataka site also yielded a rare example of a shallow flame-type bowl. Both examples here come from the mid-Jomon period, around 5,000 years ago.

Nagaoka Flame Pottery

Archaeologists discovered these flame-type and crown-type pots in Nagaoka. There are

more than 30 Jomon-period (15,000–900 BCE) excavation sites around the city, in areas such as Yoita, Mishima, and Tochio.

Groups of Flame Pottery

Flame pottery is divided into four groups based on its decorative elements.

Group A are pots with the common flame and crown decorations.

Group B are pots characterized by arrow-shaped indentations.

Group C are pots that have been influenced by the “Daigi” earthenware style, which is common across the southern Tohoku region.

Group D are pots that are simple in form, with only cord markings (*jomon*) on the surface. These are by the far the most common type excavated.

Changes in Flame Pottery

There appear to be three, or possibly four, stages of change in flame pottery that can be observed in the Nagaoka sites. The inhabitants of the Sanka site in the Higashiyama hills were the first in the area to make flame pottery.

The early pots are stubby, with no clearly defined waist, and lack any major detail around the rim. In later examples, taken from the Umataka and Iwanohara sites, we can see the development of a constriction of the body, with the decorative rim flaring broadly outward.

Flame pottery flourished for a short time after it first appeared in the middle of the Jomon period, around 5,000 years ago.

Distribution of Flame Pottery

A total of 150 different sites in Niigata Prefecture have yielded flame pottery discoveries thus far. Most of these are concentrated around the middle and upper reaches of the Shinano River: namely, the city of Nagaoka, city of Tokamachi, and town of Tsunan. Other sites, however, have been uncovered along other riverbanks, stretching as far out as the Sea of Japan and the Sado Island area.

Excavations in the western part of the prefecture have turned up relatively few examples of flame pottery.

Use of Flame Pottery

Examination of flame-type and crown-type pots show traces of blackening by fire. This confirms the theory that people used these pots to cook food. It seems different pots were used for different types of cooking. Some pots may also have been used for festivals or ceremonies. It should be noted that flame-type pottery is found in the same conditions as non-decorative pottery. There are very few instances of these pots being placed or buried in a specific location.

Northern Village from the First Half of the Mid-Jomon Period

Most of the dwellings in the northern village were subterranean. There is also evidence of storage holes, graves, and even a communal waste disposal area.

The pit dwellings were mostly rectangular, about 8 meters long and 4 meters wide. However, there were also some of an oval or circular shape.

Rectangular dwellings were generally arranged in a radial pattern, facing lengthways toward the center of the village at a diameter of up to 100 meters.

Storage Holes and Graves

Within each group of residential units, there was a storage hole, typically about 1 meter across and 1.5 meters deep. The bottom was wide to allow maximum storage capacity.

A burial area was located off to the side of the central open area. Villagers buried their dead in oval holes about 1 to 1.5 meters deep. Research suggests that large standing stones served as markers.

Waste Disposal and Pitfall Traps

On the outer edge of the village, remains of a hole containing large amounts of pottery were discovered. Further study led to the conclusion that the hole was used for waste disposal, where discarded tools and broken items were collected.

Elsewhere, a pit about 1.5 meters long and around 1 meter deep was found. It is believed to have been a trap for wild animals such as deer, or possibly for larger mammals such as bears.

To the west of the settlement was a stream, a vital water source.

Clay Figurines

These female figurines (*dogu*) were fashioned from clay and are noteworthy for their dish-shaped heads and prominent breasts and navels. Most surviving samples have only the torso intact, with the arms and legs having become separated from the body. It is rare to find a figurine that is complete.

The Umataka Jomon people are thought to have used these figurines in rituals. Among other things, they may have prayed for a rich harvest and the safe birth and good health of their future descendants.

Beads and Earrings

Decorative beads and earrings were popular during the Jomon period (15,000–900 BCE). Jadeite was especially favored for pendants. Only a few of these have emerged in excavations so far, so they are extremely valuable.

Clay earrings, inserted directly into holes in the earlobes, were also widespread. Experts believe these items were not only decorative but also played a role in spiritual or religious activities.

Sanjuinaba Site: Clay Mining and Dwellings

Most of the Sanjuinaba dwellings are circular in design. Inside lies a stone-framed fire pit, with a pot in the center.

In the southern part of the settlement, there is a large pit measuring 6 meters long, 4 meters wide, and 3 meters deep. It appears the villagers were digging beneath the

topsoil here in search of good-quality clay. This is believed to be a source of the clay to make pottery. Such clay pits are rare for this time period in the area that is now Niigata Prefecture.

Establishment and Spread of Sanjuinaba Pottery

Sanjuinaba pottery derives its name from materials excavated on the Sanjuinaba Site. A hallmark of this kind of pottery is the use of a tool, such as a spatula, to create patterns or pierce holes in the clay. Unlike many other pots of the Jomon period, these often had accompanying lids.

The Sanjuinaba style was particularly popular in the area around the Shinano River and Agano River basins. Together with flame pottery, it reflects the unique prehistoric culture of this part of Niigata Prefecture.