

The Birth of Mino Ware (8th–12th Centuries)

The story of Mino ware begins in the fifth century CE, when *anagama* (tunnel) kilns were introduced to Japan from China via the Korean peninsula. *Anagama* kilns were first used in the Mino region in the seventh century. Simple pit kilns had been used in Japan as far back as 13,000 BCE, but the larger, more advanced *anagama* kilns could fire bigger batches at higher temperatures, producing ceramics that were more durable and less absorbent.

The ceramics fired in these early *anagama* kilns were called Sue ware. Potters had not yet started using glazes, and early pieces had a simple matte-grey finish, as seen on the container and lid below. However, in the ninth century, potters in neighboring Sanage noticed that firing the pieces for longer created patches of natural ash glazing. This glazing occurs when inorganic elements in the ash, such as silica and calcium, melt and fuse with the clay. The potters began applying a rudimentary glaze made of wood ash before firing. In addition to strengthening and waterproofing the ceramics, this glazing process produced unexpected patterns and textures, making each piece unique. The “Jar with Long Neck” below is an excellent example of ash glazing.

Sanage’s ash-glazed ceramics were a luxury item, and they were in high demand. Potters in Mino recognized the opportunity presented by this demand, and they began producing their own ash-glazed wares for sale. By the early tenth century, Mino had overtaken Sanage as the country’s largest producer of Sue ware.