

Wakasa and Tsuruga Regions in the Kofun Period

Overview

During the Kofun period (ca. 250–552), the Yamato court rose to power in present-day Nara and Osaka Prefectures, gradually expanding its influence over clans that ruled in more remote regions. The name of the historical period comes from the large burial mounds (*kofun*) that were built for emperors and members of ruling elites, such as clan leaders and other prominent figures. The *kofun* served both as tombs and as displays of power and political status. The body of the deceased was usually placed in a stone burial chamber, and an earth mound was formed over it. The deceased was accompanied by grave goods such as weapons, horse tack, agricultural and other tools, jewelry, and ritual implements. The keyhole-shaped *kofun* built across the Japanese archipelago are considered symbols of Yamato power. A number of *kofun* were also erected in the Wakasa and Tsuruga regions, and the excavation and analysis of burial mounds built between the mid-fifth and mid-sixth century suggest that the area played an important part in relations between the Yamato court and the ancient kingdoms of the Korean Peninsula.

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Kofun Culture and the Connection to the Yamato Court

Most *kofun* were keyhole-shaped, double-rectangle, round, or square. It is believed that the shapes and sizes of the mounds reflected the political and social hierarchy established by the Yamato court. In the Wakasa and Tsuruga regions, the existence of about 20 keyhole-shaped *kofun* and several large round *kofun* has been confirmed. These are considered to have been tombs of powerful clan chiefs who were related or otherwise strongly connected to the Yamato. The burial mounds built in Wakasa between the mid-fifth and the early sixth century show the adoption of horizontal stone chambers that first emerged on the island of Kyushu, as well as the use of grave goods originating from the Korean Peninsula. This is thought to reflect close connections between Wakasa clans and the people of northern Kyushu and the Korean Peninsula and may indicate the clans' involvement in diplomatic relations between the Yamato court and the old kingdoms of Korea.

The Largest Kofun in the Wakasa Area

Many of the particularly large *kofun* in the Wakasa and Tsuruga regions are located in the Kita River basin between the present-day city of Obama and the town of Wakasa.

The seven largest burial mounds erected for Wakasa clan leaders in the area were keyhole-shaped and measured from 63 to 100 meters in length. The biggest of these is Jonozuka Tumulus, which dates to the early fifth century. The last large *kofun* of a powerful clan leader in the area was Maruyamazuka Tumulus, a round mound about 50 meters in diameter that was built in the mid-sixth century (but no longer exists). Most of these *kofun* were two- or three-tiered mounds delineated by clay objects called *haniwa* and surrounded by moats; the slopes of the mounds were covered with stones. These features reflect the adoption of the *kofun* style of Yamato rulers and clan members.

Grave Goods

Similar to other regions, grave goods discovered in the *kofun* in Wakasa include mirrors, bronze decorations, jewelry, swords and other weapons, horse tack, various tools, and pottery. For example, items found in Nishizuka Tumulus, the late fifth-century tomb of a clan chief located in the central part of Wakasa, include gold earrings, bronze mirrors, gilt bronze belt fittings, and silver bells, some of which were made on the Korean Peninsula. These valuable objects (particularly the belt decorations) were symbols of status and power, suggesting that the person buried in Nishizuka Tumulus was a prominent figure who played a role in the relations between the Yamato court and the kingdoms of the Korean Peninsula.

Sue Pottery

Early in the fourth century, a type of unglazed, reddish-brown pottery called Haji ware was developed in Japan. The clay vessels were shaped by hand and fired at 700-800°C, as in the Yayoi period (400 BCE–300 CE). However, in the first half of the fifth century a new pottery-making technology was imported from the Korean Peninsula, in which clay items were shaped on a wheel and fired at 1,000°C in “tunnel” kilns built into a hillside. This produced more durable, less porous, gray-colored pottery called Sue ware. In the mid-fifth century, ritual objects used on the outside of *kofun* mounds began to include Sue pottery, and by the early sixth century, grave goods would contain large amounts of Sue ware together with smaller amounts of Haji ware.

Exhibition Items

The large collection of grave goods on display was discovered at the site of Shishizuka Tumulus, a 34-meter keyhole-shaped burial mound built for a local leader in the early sixth century in the Mihama area of Wakasa. Included are many kinds of Sue pottery, such as pots, tall decorated jars, jar stands, footed trays and tray lids, a drink-serving jar

with a hole for inserting a pipe, and horn-shaped drinking vessels that are particularly rare examples of Sue ware. Remains of a kiln that produced Sue pottery for the Shishizuka Tumulus were discovered on the nearby mountainside. Other grave goods include weapons such as a long sword, a knife with a deer-horn handle, and an iron arrowhead, as well as parts of horse tack and iron tools such as a curved sickle, an axe, and tongs. The ornament on display was assembled from round, tubular, and comma-shaped *magatama* beads that were discovered in the burial chamber; the beads were originally parts of several necklaces. The large cylindrical *haniwa* was restored from fragments found at Shiroyama Tumulus, a tomb of a Wakasa chieftain built in the first half of the fifth century.

The cross-section *kofun* model represents the keyhole-shaped Mukaiyama Tumulus No. 1, built in the mid-fifth century. Its excavation uncovered a horizontal burial chamber corresponding to an older burial style used in northern Kyushu, which led to the conclusion that Wakasa was one of the first regions on the island of Honshu to adopt such chamber construction. The front (square) part of the *kofun* had a rectangular pit that contained weapons, suggesting that the person buried in the stone chamber was a prominent warrior. Among the grave goods was a gold earring from the Korean Peninsula, which indicates that a connection already existed between Wakasa and the old Korean kingdoms.