

Omura Burial Caves

Twenty-six burial chambers are carved into a cliff at the Omura archaeological site behind Hitoyoshi Station. They date from the late sixth century and provide insight into the early history of the Hitoyoshi Kuma region and the reach of the political influence of the Yamato court, which was established in Yamato Province (present-day Nara Prefecture) in the fourth century.

The lateral burial caves have narrow openings that lead to dome-shaped interior chambers which are approximately 2 meters deep. No remains or burial items have been discovered in the caves, but the effort required to carve them into the cliffside suggests they were for influential and well-respected people.

The caves continue horizontally across 800 meters of the cliffside, and several have openings decorated with carvings in relief. The designs include geometric patterns, horses, horse bells, knives, arrows, and arrow quivers. Some of the motifs have weathered almost beyond recognition but are illustrated on signage at the site.

The burial caves and their decorations suggest similarities with the burial methods and iconography of the Kofun tomb mound period (ca. 250–552) and the culture prevalent in regions under Yamato rule. The caves are among the most southerly burial sites discovered to date that have such similarities. The formation of a centralized state in the Japanese archipelago began with the Yamato court, and the Omura Burial Caves suggest Yamato influence extended as far south as Hitoyoshi Kuma by the late sixth century. The entirety of Kyushu did not come under centralized rule until the eighth century.