

Echoes of the Past: Archaeology in Tokamachi

The Shinano River Basin, an area that includes modern-day Tokamachi, was settled around 10,000 years ago. Archaeological digs have uncovered earthenware and stoneware pottery from Japan's Jomon period (14,000–400 BCE), attesting to the presence of settlements and providing clues to the life and culture of snow country's earliest inhabitants.

The Jomon period is defined by the invention of pottery, often simple clay forms shaped by hand and fired over an open flame. The name *jomon* (“rope pattern”) refers to the designs made by pressing twine into the sides of these early vessels. Along with the bow and arrow, the invention of pottery drastically changed the human diet, allowing the Jomon people to prepare a wider variety of foods. Fire-safe bowls, for example, enabled them to boil wild plants that were poisonous or unpleasant when eaten raw.

What is known about the Jomon peoples' diet is largely based on the pottery they left behind. In Japan's acidic soil, biological remains such as bone have long since dissolved. However, the carbonized remnants of long-ago meals still cling to cooking vessels, providing concrete evidence of what was once prepared in them.

As their diet improved, the Jomon population grew. During the middle period, some 5,500 to 4,500 years ago, the population of the Shinano River Basin area reached as many as 200,000. This was also the time when “flame-style” pottery (*kaengata doki*) is believed to have appeared.

Flame-style pottery is unique to Niigata Prefecture, and the vessels are thought to have had a religious or ceremonial use. Although some flame-style pieces exhibit burnt food residue like simple, everyday cooking vessels, the flame-style design would have made them fragile and unwieldy for regular meal preparation. Many have impractically high sides and widely flared mouths with projecting ornamentations. Their designs vary widely, but several motifs (such as swirling vortexes or S-shaped patterns) appear frequently. One image even resembles a chicken, though the birds had not yet arrived in Japan. While the vessels' use and the meaning of their designs remain a mystery, the wealth of items pulled from Tokamachi's soil are evidence of a flourishing and complex ancient culture.

Nearly a thousand artifacts excavated from the area are in the Tokamachi City Museum's collection, including clay figurines, stone tools, jewelry, and the earliest examples of flame-style pottery discovered to date. Fifty-seven of these striking pieces have been collectively declared a National Treasure.