

## **Kumamoto Prefectural Decorated Tumulus Museum**

Countless ancient burial mounds known as *kofun* remain extant across Japan. There are only around 700 decorated tumuli (*soshoku kofun*), however, 200 of which are located in Kumamoto Prefecture. Yamaga has a comprehensive museum dedicated to this unique cultural heritage of the Kofun period (300–538), named for the burial mounds constructed for members of the ruling class during this time.

### *Layout and structure of the museum*

The Kumamoto Prefectural Decorated Tumulus Museum is a spacious two-floor museum designed by internationally renowned architect Tadao Ando. The permanent exhibition room on the museum's first floor introduces Kumamoto's archaeological sites and the artifacts found inside these decorated tombs. There is also an exhibition space with rotating thematic displays. The museum's reconstructions of the decorated tombs, its main attraction, are located on the basement floor.

### *A closer look at history*

Some of the tomb chambers, like that of the Chibusan Burial Mound, are open to visitors, but others are closed to the public. The museum has painstakingly detailed reconstructions of the stone chambers found within 12 of the burial mounds located in Kumamoto Prefecture. These replicas can be viewed up close, with the aid of a remote-controlled camera for some of the inner chambers.

Explanatory texts in English and Japanese offer background information on the painted or carved patterns found within the tomb chambers. Many tombs, for example, feature circular or mirror-like designs that may have served ritualistic purposes. Some have fragmented patterns of straight and curved lines similar to those found on shields and swords from the Kofun period. It is believed such patterns were meant to ward off evil spirits. There is also a screening room called the Imagination Hall, which shows educational films about the Kofun period and other eras in Japanese history.

### *An ancient landscape to explore*

The museum is located approximately 10 minutes southwest of downtown Yamaga

by car. A number of related attractions are within walking distance, such as the Iwabarū Tumuli, a group of 13 burial mounds, and the Yokoyama Tumulus. Tours of the Yokoyama site can be requested at the museum during operating hours.

Another nearby attraction is the Higo Ancient Forest. This picturesque park has a walkway lined with clusters of hydrangeas and a lotus pond with lotuses propagated from seeds that are over 2,000 years old. Visitors can enjoy a relaxing stroll here after steeping themselves in the ancient mysteries of Kumamoto's decorated tumuli.