

A Prehistoric Pompeii: Hashimure-Gawa Archaeological Site

At first glance, the Hashimure-gawa Archaeological Site appears to be little more than a public park. The lush green grass and relaxed atmosphere bely a discovery of immense importance to the study of Japan's ancient peoples.

In 1916, a high school boy found some shards of pottery while playing in the park. He brought the pieces to his teacher, who noticed that they seemed to be a mix of styles from the Jōmon and Yayoi, two of Japan's prehistoric peoples. Up to that point, their pottery had rarely been found in the same place, and it was believed that the Jōmon and Yayoi had inhabited different regions. That high schooler's discovery suggested otherwise. The teacher sent the shards to Professor Hamada Kōsaku (1881–1938) of Kyoto Imperial University, who saw an opportunity to clarify the timeline of Japanese prehistory.

Hamada excavated the site, uncovering more pottery, along with evidence

of volcanic eruptions that clearly dated the soil strata. Using the eruptions as reference points, Hamada was able to prove that the Jōmon people existed long before the Yayoi, an important clarification to the history of civilization on the Japanese archipelago. Hashimure-gawa was designated a National Historic Site in 1924, and today, re-creations of ancient pit dwellings are the main feature of the park.

Even today, the archaeological findings continue to provide new information. Similar to Italy's Pompeii, the volcanic ash from past

eruptions entombed entire villages, preserving them as records of ancient people's daily lives. Remnant piles of shell mounds (called middens) and shards of cookware reveal what they ate, and pollen trapped in the ash tells us what plants thrived at different points in history. Artifacts uncovered at the site are displayed at the neighboring Ibusuki Archaeological Museum.