

Miyagahama: Origins of Modern Ibusuki

Humans have lived in the area around Ibusuki since at least the Jōmon period (10,000–300 BCE). Early inhabitants established both roaming hunter-gatherer societies and small villages. The modern city of Ibusuki itself, however, was the product of a natural catastrophe that occurred in 874.

That year, Mt. Kaimondake erupted calamitously, burying villages across the southern peninsula in ash and debris. Survivors gathered in the area around Miyagahama Beach, in northern Ibusuki, which remained relatively unscathed. Many of the refugees settled there, and a community developed.

From the 1100s to the late 1400s, the area was governed by the Ibusuki family, a branch of the powerful Satsuma family, which ruled much of Kyushu. The Ibusuki built their castle and seat of power near Miyagahama,

turning it into a bustling port town.

The waters at Miyagahama are shallow, however, with no safe way to anchor close to shore. Larger ships were forced to anchor offshore and ferry goods to land in smaller boats. Without proper infrastructure, it was difficult to prevent smuggling. In 1833, the lord of Satsuma ordered the construction of a 230-meter-long, 5-meter-high breakwater, which was built of volcanic rock in a single year. The breakwater, called Gangishi, helped calm the waters of the bay and provided offshore mooring for larger boats. The structure has since been designated a Tangible Cultural Property of Japan.

With this infrastructure, the area remained a key trading port through the end of the Edo period (1603–1867). As Japan modernized, the evolving machinery of politics, education, and commerce was concentrated in the

former castle town, and it remains a central part of modern-day Ibusuki.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures still stand in the area,

including several Tangible Cultural Properties of Japan.