



*Reconstructed six-pillared structure and a large pit dwelling, Sannai Maruyama site*

©APTINET Aomori Prefecture

## Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

Simon Kaner, Great Britain

# Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River



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*It sometimes seems as if Japan's urban sprawl is endless ©photoAC*

**Motivation** Thanks to two initiatives in particular, one connected with a UNESCO World Heritage nomination for northern Tohoku and southern Hokkaido, the other a Japan Heritage designation in Niigata, increasing numbers of exceptional sites have good English-language explanations, and the sites are complemented by some world-class museums.

**Objective** This essay seeks to offer a brief flavor of the distinctive character of the Jomon archaeology available to experience in northern Tohoku and along the Shinano and Chikuma Rivers, and to show how an encounter with these sites can encourage visitors to think about different ways to inhabit the Japanese archipelago.  
The essay provides a brief background to Jomon archaeology and its relationship with the modern world, and then introduces a few of the highlights of the Jomon landscapes of northern Tohoku and the Chubu/Shinshu regions.

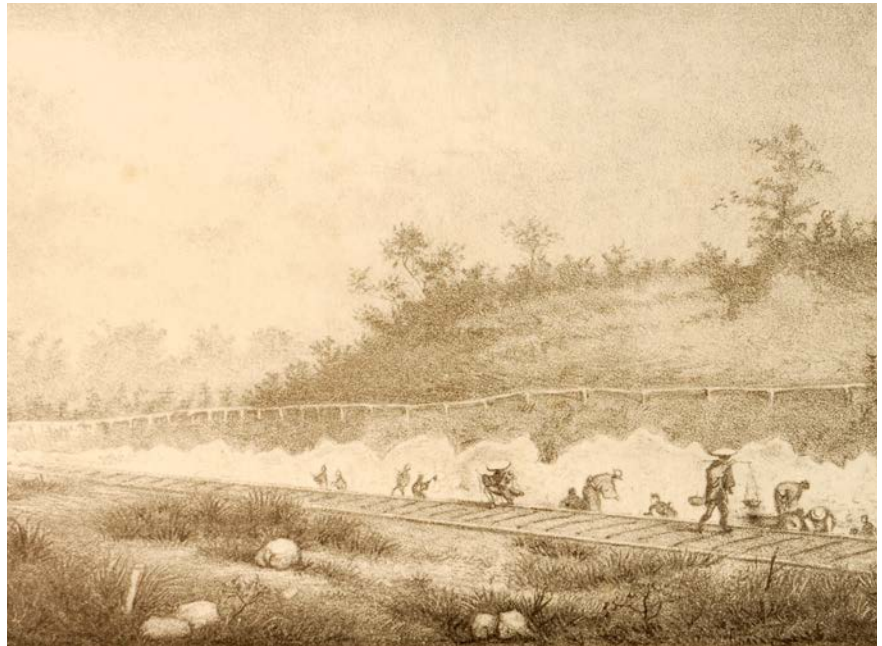
**Context** For many visitors, Japanese landscapes are surprising and on occasion shocking and disappointing. Encouraged by tourist literature to expect pristine paddy fields and unspoilt greenery, the impact of recent development is everywhere: roads, overhead cables, signboards, mountainsides, and coastlines covered in concrete, once picturesque thatched roofs covered in corrugated iron. It can give an impression of interminable urban sprawl. An encounter with archaeology can help visitors understand how these landscapes have come about, and can help focus attention on conservation and preservation, as well as the treasures often hidden underground that are testimony to other, buried, landscapes.

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*A stone monument in the Omori Shell Mounds Park marks the achievement of Dr. Edward S. Morse ©BGC*



*Excavation Scenery of Omori Shell Mounds in 1877, an illustration from the first Japanese archaeological report, The Shell Mounds of Omori, 1879, Edward S. Morse published by the University of Tokyo; Courtesy of Shinagawa Historical Museum*

Visiting the Japanese archipelago today, with its high density urban centres linked by seemingly interminable urban sprawl, with paddies, dry fields, and golf-courses apparently filling all the remaining available space between the steep mountains, it is difficult to imagine other ways of inhabiting these landscapes.

Over the past 140 years, however, since the first excavations at the Omori Shell Mounds between Tokyo and Yokohama, archaeology has revealed the remains of very different ways of living in the Japanese islands. Archaeological excavation has provided views of layers of earlier occupations, each covered over and hidden by later activity.

Since 1945 the rate of economic and associated land development in Japan has given rise to the creation of an archaeological record of unsurpassed scale and complexity, produced by tens of thousands of professional archaeologists supported by untold numbers of local labourers. Their endeavours have uncovered and meticulously recorded the material traces of earlier inhabitants. We now know that human beings were in what is now the Japanese archipelago at least 40,000 years ago.



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*Large numbers of people lived at Sannai Maruyama during the Early and Middle Jomon periods (~5500-4000BCE) ©Aomori Prefecture*



*Reconstructed Jomon dwellings at the Sasayama site ©Tokamachi City*



*Flame-style Pottery vessels are renowned for its elaborate, modern-looking appearance; Courtesy of Tokamachi City Museum*

With the end of the last Ice Age, sea levels rose, the Japanese archipelago as we know of today took its current form, and people developed lifestyles well adapted to the new environmental conditions of the Holocene. Of particular importance for the history of humankind on a global scale, was the very early development of sedentary lifestyles in settled, village-like communities with a number of houses and household along with other shared facilities, such as rubbish dump areas, cemeteries, and clusters of storage pits which appear to have been used over quite long periods of time – thousand of years in some instances, and the technological innovation of pottery. Both of these took place over 12,000 years ago in the Japanese archipelago, long before most other parts of the world. This heralded the advent of what is known as the Jomon period, named after the eponymous cord-marked pottery that is becoming increasingly well-known around the world for its strikingly mysterious and modern-seeming designs.

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*Yatsugatake, Nagano ©Hokuto Tourism Association*

There are many places in Japan where you can now visit museums and historical parks featuring Jomon remains and reconstructions. Two regions really stand out for me in this regard. In Nagano and Niigata prefectures, along the longest river drainage system of the Japanese archipelago, the Chikuma-Shinano River, some of the most spectacular Jomon pots were produced in the Middle Jomon period. These include the distinctive Flame pots of Niigata Prefecture, exemplified by the National Treasures from the Sasayama site in Tokamachi city, dated to some 5,000 years ago. In northern Tohoku and southern Hokkaido, around the Tsugaru Straits, one of the longest-lived Jomon settlements known was discovered at Sannai Maruyama. This is now on Japan's Tentative List for World Heritage Status, along with another 17 or so important locations, including stone circles, shell middens, and settlements.



## Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River



*The Bense Wetlands, Aomori ©APTINET Aomori Prefecture*

These landscapes have a very particular feel for me as an archaeologist. The Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane has spoken of the enchanted landscapes of Japan. For me, some of this enchantment lies in the knowledge of the remarkable Jomon sites that lie beneath the surface of the banks and terraces of the Shinano River, the southwestern slopes of the volcanic massif of Yatsugatake, the low-lying wetlands of the Tsugaru Peninsula, and so many more places which were once home to Jomon people. Thanks to the networks of preserved sites, monuments, and museums it is possible for everyone to visit these locations. Entering these landscapes and knowing their Jomon past, I experience a similar frisson to encountering the Vézère Valley in the Dordogne in southwestern France, home to so much Upper Palaeolithic Cave art, or Salisbury Plain in southern England with its vistas across to Stonehenge. Despite modern appearances these are all very ancient landscapes, understanding the development of which has occupied generations of archaeologists.

## Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

### Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River



*Flame pots discovered along the Shinano River ©Niigata Prefectural Museum of History*



*Excavated Flame pot in 2003, Umataka Sanjuinaba Jomon site ©Nagaoka Municipal Science Museum*



*Realistic figures tell of the harsh winters people endured in snow country ©Niigata Prefectural Museum of History*

In Niigata, a half-day in the city of Nagaoka, where valley of the Shinano River begins to widen out as it flows into Japan's largest coastal plain, is sufficient to visit the Niigata Prefectural Museum of History, with its excellent dioramas and displays focusing on the Jomon and Flame pots. We are at the heart of Japan's Snow Country, immortalised in the novel of that name by Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari, and after wondering at the achievements of prehistoric Jomon inhabitants, you can enjoy a taste of traditional life in the extreme winter conditions in this area. There are also fine displays about rice farming, now a billion-dollar industry in this region, famed for some of the finest sake in Japan. Just down the road, the Umataka Jomon Museum, built close to the location where the Flame pots were first discovered in 1936, is full of exquisite examples of pots with their magnificent sculptured rims: hard to believe they were mainly used for cooking.



## Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

### Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River



*One of the large buildings at Sannai Maruyama has a floor area of 252.4sqm and walls 7.5m high, supported by 19 thick pillars*  
©Aomori Prefecture



*Reconstructed large dwelling from approximately 4,300 years ago* ©Aomori Prefecture

A day in Aomori will allow you to explore the Sannai Maruyama site, where Jomon people lived for some 2,000 years, building large houses that maybe sheltered several family groups during the long winter, burying their dead in carefully planned linear cemeteries, and leaving behind middens bursting with treasures for the archaeologist – including five metre deep deposits of ceramic sherds, testimony to the astonishing productivity of Jomon potters. Jomon lifestyles are brought back to life through an engaging museum, reconstructed buildings across the site, multimedia presentations, and increasingly through the use of Virtual Reality. Sannai Maruyama is just part of an extensive network of Jomon sites throughout this region, each of them distinctive and well-worth spending the extra time to search out and enjoy.



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*The Resort Shirakami, a sightseeing train that runs on the coastal Gono Line between Akita and Aomori, rewards the traveller with magnificent views*

You can get to either Nagaoka or Aomori from Tokyo in just a couple of hours by bullet train today. My favourite way to get from one to the other is by the slower trains, along the Japan Sea coast. Travelling at a more human pace through the mountains and plains, past Mount Iwaki, skirting Hakkoda and the Shirakami Sanchi World Heritage mountain range with its stands of beech trees, and other significant points in the landscape, allows time for more considered reflection on the achievements of modern Japan's prehistoric Jomon forebears. Instead of bullet trains they had to rely on dugout canoes and their own feet to traverse these lands, but as attested to by the greenstones from the Itoi River region found in Sannai Maruyama, and as the sherds of Kamegaoka style pottery from Tsugaru unearthed recently in Okinawa far to the south testify, this did not constrain them in journeying and creating networks across vast areas. I would encourage anyone to follow in the footsteps of these ancient pioneers, and explore the richness of Japan's Jomon heritage.

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*Siebold's beech forests at Shirakami Sanchi. The offerings of nature supported the lives of the Jomon people ©Shirakami Sanchi Visitor Center*

**Closing** An encounter with Jomon archaeology can reveal many other aspects about the broader history of occupation of the Japanese archipelago. In particular it challenges the notion that the Japanese landscape as experienced today is unchanging. Humans have impacted on the Japanese archipelago for many thousands of years and the landscapes we see today are the result of the interactions between humans and the natural environment. Jomon offers a very different view of how to inhabit Japan – but one which has resonances with many aspects of contemporary Japanese life, including attitudes to nature, and enchantment. This essay touches on just a few of the wonderful Jomon sites available to visit. The theme could be continued to different periods in the Japanese past.



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[www.uea.ac.uk](http://www.uea.ac.uk)  
[global-britisharchaeology.org](http://global-britisharchaeology.org)

# Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Places **Niigata Prefectural Museum of History**

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The museum presents the achievements of Jomon inhabitants with excellent life-size dioramas and a wide range of artefacts. A compelling feature of the museum is the presentation of life under extreme winter conditions. 940-2035, Niigata, Nagaoka shi, Sekihara machi 1-2247-2

[web-site](#)

### **Sannai Maruyama Site**

This very large Early to Middle Jomon period site is recognized as one of Japan's most important prehistoric site, known for many important finds that have fascinated archaeologists and visitors alike. The *Jomon Jiyukan* facility near the entrance displays discoveries and provides comprehensive explanation of the period. Guided tours in English are available. 038-0031, Aomori, Aomori shi, Oaza Sannai Aza Maruyama 305

[web-site](#)

### **Sasayama Archaeological Site**

A Middle Jomon period site on the Shinano River. 15,460sqm were excavated from 1980 to 1985, prior to the construction of a municipal baseball and athletic ground. Findings included 112 fireplaces and 36 jars, some of which are distinctive Flame-style Pottery vessels designated as National Treasures.

949-8616, Niigata, Tokamachi shi, Nakajootsu 3081

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

### **Shinagawa Historical Museum**

Only a five minute walk from the Omori Shell Mound site in Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward, this museum offers a good introduction to local archaeological discoveries.

140-0014, Tokyo, Shinagawa ku, Oi 6-11-1

[web-site](#)

### **Omori Shell Mounds Park**

Set up around a midden that has been accidentally discovered by American zoologist Dr. Edward S. Morse (1838-1925) during a train journey from Yokohama to Tokyo. Dr. Morse's investigation of this ancient site in 1877 is presumably Japan's first archaeological dig. The site is now open to the public.

140-0014, Tokyo, Shinagawa ku, Oi 6-21-6

[web-site](#)



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## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Places **Tokamachi City Museum**

A regional museum themed on snow, textiles, and the Shinano River. Its extensive collection includes a series of Flame-style Pottery vessels designated as National Treasures.

948-0072, Niigata, Tokamachi shi, Nishihon cho 1-382-1

[web-site](#)

### **Umataka Jomon Museum**

Close to the Umataka Sanjuinaba site, where distinctive Flame-style Pottery vessels were first discovered in 1936, this museum has three sections: the flame pot zone, the archaeological site zone, and the experience room. Visitors can hold replicas of flame pots and study the details of their extraordinary artwork.

940-2035, Niigata, Nagaoka shi, Sekihara machi 1-3060-1

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

### Publications **An Illustrated Companion to Japanese Archaeology**

Werner Steinhaus, Simon Kaner, 2016, Oxford: Archaeopress

A comprehensive visual introduction to a wide range of sites and finds from the earliest occupation of the Japanese archipelago 35,000 years ago to the establishment of Nara in the 8th century.

### **Jomon Reflections: Forager Life and Culture in the Prehistoric Japanese Archipelago**

Kobayashi Tatsuo, Simon Kaner, 2005, Oxford: Oxbow Books Ltd.

An introduction to Japan's Jomon period, exploring how people's relationship with an abundant natural environment affected their lifestyles and social structures

### Web-Sites **Jomon Japan: Jomon Archaeological Sites in Hokkaido and Northern Tohoku**

A comprehensive, easy to navigate introduction to Jomon period archaeological sites in Hokkaido and northern Tohoku

[web-site](#)

### **Online Resource for Japanese Archaeology and Cultural Heritage**

Excellent educational references for teachers and students alike

[web-site](#)

# Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Glossary

#### Aomori Prefecture

The northernmost prefecture of Honshu, Japan's main island. Settled by humans since prehistoric times. Home to numerous Jomon sites, including the largest and one of the best preserved Jomon period villages at Sannai Maruyama.

##### [web-site](#)

- ▶ Hakkoda Mountain Range
- ▶ Jomon period (~14000-300BCE)
- ▶ Jomon Sites of Northern Tohoku
- ▶ Mount Iwaki
- ▶ Shirakami Mountain Range
- ▶ Tohoku
- ▶ Tsugaru Peninsula
- ▶ Tsugaru Straits

#### Chikuma River

Name of the Shinano River in its upper reaches in Nagano Prefecture

- ▶ Nagano Prefecture
- ▶ Shinano River
- ▶ Shinshu

#### Chubu

Collective name for the nine prefectures in central Honshu, Japan's main island: Aichi, Fukui, Gifu, Ishikawa, Nagano, Niigata, Shizuoka, Toyama, and Yamanashi. Since ancient times, home to a wide range of industries, including textiles, ceramics, and paper.

- ▶ Nagano Prefecture
- ▶ Niigata Prefecture
- ▶ Shinshu
- ▶ Yatsugatake

#### Cord-Marked Pottery

With its patterns of twisted plant fibres pressed into wet clay before firing, this pottery is characteristic of the prehistoric Jomon (Japanese for *cord-pattern*) period

##### [web-site](#)

- ▶ Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)



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### Glossary

#### **Flame-Style Pottery Vessels**

Ornately decorated pottery from the Middle Jomon period (2500-1500BCE), characterized by elaborate flame- or wave-like crenellations along the rim, often between four elaborate projections. Traces of preserved food indicate that these pots were used for cooking.

- ▶ Chubu
- ▶ Flame Pots and Snow Country
- ▶ Nagaoka
- ▶ Niigata Prefecture

#### **Flame Pots and Snow Country**

A group of Jomon sites along the Shinano River in Niigata that received Japan Heritage designation in 2016

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Chubu
- ▶ Flame Pots
- ▶ Japan Heritage Designation
- ▶ Niigata Prefecture
- ▶ Tokamachi

#### **Hakkoda Mountains**

A range of 16 volcanic mountains to the south of Aomori City, including 1,585m high Mount Odake

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Aomori Prefecture
- ▶ Tohoku

#### **Holocene**

The current geological epoch, beginning around 11,700 years ago after the last glacial period, when a milder climate made sedentary lifestyles in settled, village-like communities possible, and encouraged technological innovations such as pottery

#### **Itoigawa**

This coastal city in the southwestern part of Niigata Prefecture is famous as Japan's only known source of jadeite: small pebbles can be found along the shoreline

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

- ▶ Niigata Prefecture

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### Glossary

#### Japan Heritage Designation

Recognition of stories about Japanese culture and traditions by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, aiming to revitalize local communities through comprehensive maintenance and utilization of these attractive tangible and intangible cultural properties and their strategic promotion in Japan and overseas. *Kaengata Doki Jomon Pottery and the Snow Country Culture of the Shinano River Basin* were included to the listing in 2016.

##### web-site

- ▶ Flame Pots and Snow Country
- ▶ Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)
- ▶ Nagaoka
- ▶ Niigata Prefecture
- ▶ Shinano River
- ▶ Tokamachi

#### Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)

Japan's prehistoric period when milder climate at the end of the last ice age fostered the development of sophisticated sedentary fisher-hunter-gatherer lifestyles. *Jomon* is the Japanese translation of *cord-pattern*, a distinctive feature of the period's emblematic cord-marked pottery.

- ▶ Cord-Marked Pottery
- ▶ Flame Pots

#### Jomon Sites of Northern Tohoku

A group of eleven prehistoric sites in northeastern Japan. Currently on Japan's list for nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage site for its representation of life during the Jomon period.

##### web-site

- ▶ Aomori Prefecture
- ▶ Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)
- ▶ Tohoku

#### Kamegaoka Style Pottery

A pottery style common in northeastern Japan during the final stages of the Jomon period (~1000-300BCE), characterised by both elaborated carved designs and cord patterns. Examples are found from Hokkaido to Okinawa, evidence of this style's widespread influence.

- ▶ Aomori Prefecture
- ▶ Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)

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## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Glossary

#### **Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972)**

Japanese writer awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. Notable works include *The Old Capital*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *Snow Country*, in which he immortalised the areas of Japan characterised by heavy, long-lasting snowfalls.

►Niigata Prefecture

#### **Macfarlane, Alan (1941-)**

British anthropologist and historian. Professor at the University of Cambridge. Author of several works on the anthropology and history of England, Nepal, Japan, and China. His best known work on Japan is *Japan Through the Looking Glass*, published in 2007.

[web-site](#)

#### **Mount Iwaki**

The highest mountain in Aomori prefecture (1,625m). Also referred to as *Tsugaru Fuji*, the Mount Fuji of Tsugaru, for its identical shape. Worshiped by locals since ancient times.

►Aomori Prefecture

#### **Nagano Prefecture**

Prefecture in the Chubu region characterised by mountainous terrain. Rich in archaeological sites, including the Tategahana Paleolithic site and the Togariishi Jomon site. Host to the 1998 Winter Olympics.

[web-site](#)

►Chikuma River

►Shinshu

►Yatsugatake

#### **Nagaoka**

Former capital of the old Echigo province, today's Niigata Prefecture, on the Japan Sea coast. Flame-style Pottery vessels were discovered along the Shinano River, running north to south through the city.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

►Chubu

►Niigata Prefecture

►Shinano River

►Tokamachi



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## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Glossary

#### Niigata Prefecture

Prefecture located along the Sea of Japan in the Chubu region. The main industry is agriculture, particularly rice. A popular tourist destination for skiing. Niigata has a high density of Jomon villages and is considered the birthplace of Flame-style Pottery vessels.

##### [web-site](#)

- ▶Chikuma River
- ▶Chubu
- ▶Flame Pots
- ▶Flame Pots and Snow Country
- ▶Japan Heritage Designation
- ▶Shinano River
- ▶Tokamachi

#### Omori Shell Mounds

An archaeological site near Yokohama, accidentally discovered by the American zoologist Dr. Edward S. Morse (1838-1925) riding a train to Tokyo. Dr. Morse's investigation of this ancient site in 1877 is presumably Japan's first archaeological dig.

##### [web-site](#)

#### Shinano River

Japan's longest river, running 367km from its origin in the Japanese Alps in Nagano Prefecture to the Sea of Japan in Niigata Prefecture. Of great interest to archaeologists due to the numerous Jomon sites along its banks and terraces.

- ▶Chikuma River
- ▶Jomon Period (~14000-300BCE)
- ▶Nagano Prefecture
- ▶Niigata Prefecture

#### Shinshu

This old province of Japan, also referred to as Shinano, is today's Nagano Prefecture

- ▶Nagano Prefecture
- ▶Yatsugatake

# Enchanted Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory

## Jomon Sites in Northern Tohoku and Along the Shinano River

### Glossary

#### **Shirakami Sanchi**

Large mountainous region along the Sea of Japan, extending across Aomori and Akita prefectures. Its 130,000 hectares include the last virgin forest of Japanese beech trees which once covered the hills and mountain slopes of northern Japan. A UNESCO World Heritage site.

##### [web-site](#)

- ▶Aomori Prefecture
- ▶Tohoku

#### **Tohoku**

Collective name for the six prefectures in northeast Honshu: Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi, and Yamagata. The Tohoku region is important to the Japanese economy for its many resources, including fisheries and agriculture. Its many famous tourist attractions include the Buddhist temples of the UNESCO World Heritage site Hiraizumi, one of Japan's three most venerable vistas, Matsushima Bay, and the beautiful beech forests of Shirakami Sanchi.

##### [web-site](#)

- ▶Aomori Prefecture
- ▶Hakkoda Mountain Range
- ▶Mount Iwaki
- ▶Shirakami Mountain Range
- ▶Tsugaru Peninsula
- ▶Tsugaru Straits

#### **Tokamachi**

City in Niigata Prefecture, famous for its large Jomon period settlement. Over 900 pottery vessels, including flame and crown-type pots, have been excavated from the city's Sasayama Archaeological Site, a designated National Treasure.

##### [web-site](#) (Japanese)

- ▶Chikuma River
- ▶Chubu
- ▶Flame Pots
- ▶Flame Pots and Snow Country
- ▶Japan Heritage Designation
- ▶Niigata Prefecture
- ▶Shinano River

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### Glossary

#### **Tsugaru Peninsula**

Most northern tip of Aomori Prefecture projecting into the Tsugaru Strait towards Hokkaido. The western coast faces the Sea of Japan, while its eastern coast opens to Aomori Bay and Mutsu Bay.

- ▶Aomori Prefecture
- ▶Tohoku
- ▶Tsugaru Straits

#### **Tsugaru Strait**

Separating Honshu and Hokkaido and connecting the Sea of Japan with the Pacific Ocean

- ▶Aomori Prefecture

#### **Yatsugatake**

Volcanic massif on the borders of Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures in Chubu. Jomon artefacts have been excavated on the south-western slopes of the massif at several hundred locations, including Tochibara-Iwakage, Kinsei, Idojiri, Akyu, and Omiyama.

- ▶Chubu
- ▶Nagano Prefecture
- ▶Shinshu

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## Imprint

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