



Doigahama beach (Shimonoseki city, Yamaguchi).

Culture, Tradition and Innovation along the Rice-Road: the Yayoi Period Doigahama Site in Yamaguchi Prefecture

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Prologue

The Yayoi period (300 BC - 300 AD) immediately followed the Jomon Period (14,000 BC - 300 BC), vividly illustrated in another essay (*1), and was a time when significant influences from the continent changed Japan's material culture and, in turn, its social structures. Such influences were first felt in Kyusyu, western parts of Japan, from where they spread east. Yamaguchi prefecture, the westernmost prefecture on Honshu, Japan's main island, has archaeological sites that witness changes from the very beginning of Yayoi.

In October 2019, I visited Yamaguchi prefecture for the first time, and had an opportunity to visit the Doigahama site in Shimonoseki, in the west of the prefecture. This is a very well-known archaeological site from the early-middle Yayoi Period. When I was a graduate student of archaeology in Japan, I studied the general context of Doigahama, but after that I focused mainly on archaeology outside Japan, so the site's name faded from my memory, until I heard it again in Yamaguchi.

When we talk about diet in eastern Asia, including Japan, rice and rice-products occupy a central place. This subsistence crop reached Japan from the continent at the end of Jomon, and the particular characteristics of the Yayoi period include intensive wet-rice cultivation that originated on the continent, Yayoi type pottery, and the appearance of bronze and iron work.



Doigahama site Anthropological Museum (Shimonoseki city, Yamaguchi).

Doigahama site

Due to its geographical location, particularly the areas lying on the Japan Sea coast, Yamaguchi has had a very close relationship with the continent since ancient times.

Some archaeological sites from the Yayoi Period (*2) are known in Yamaguchi.



This period saw large physical and cultural impacts. The most prominent changes were intensive wet-rice cultivation from the continent, the appearance of new pottery types, and of metal objects, particularly in bronze and iron. This in turn led to changes in Japan's social structures and settlement patterns.

Doigahama is a burial site, where more than 300 people were buried in early-middle Yayoi. This makes the site very special (*3).

Generally speaking, it is known that organic substances and bone remains, which contain both organic and inorganic substances, do not survive for long periods. In Japan, due to acidic soil conditions, preservation of bone is usually very poor.

The Doigahama site is a valuable exception, as the bones were buried in sandy soil, a dune very close to a sandy beach, and they are well preserved. It reveals not only rare examples of human remains, but also the unique characteristics of the burial customs of the Doigahama people, including a so-called “warrior’s tomb” and a woman buried with a bird on her chest.



Doigahama site Anthropological Museum
(Shimonoseki city, Yamaguchi).

Although the site has been excavated several times since the 1950s, there are still questions to be answered. One concerns the origins of the Doigahama people. Their observed physical characteristics are different from those of the Jomon population (*4). The people buried at Doigahama face west—toward the sea, and therefore to the continent, with their heads tilted slightly forward. It was stimulating to imagine comings-and-goings of the people across the sea in the past, and to think of my own voyages across the sea in the present day.

Epilogue

The earliest evidence of rice cultivation in Japan is found in northern Kyusyu and Yamaguchi prefecture is an early stage of the road along which rice cultivation spread eastward. At present, rice is still actively cultivated in Yamaguchi, and sake (Japanese rice wine) breweries operate in many parts of the prefecture. Grains of rice that the ancient people to Japan brought long ago, an innovation of the Yayoi period, have now evidently become tradition.



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Kitagawa, C. (co-authors: Kahl, J. and Vittmann, G.) 2016, The Tomb of the Dogs at Asyut: Faunal Remains and Other Selected Objects, The Asyut Project 9, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

The Asyut Project website (English, German and Japanese):
<https://www.aegyptologie.uni-mainz.de/das-projekt-lage-der-stadt-und-ausgangspunktthe-project-location-of-the-city-and-the-starting-point/>

Information

- *1 Enhanced Landscapes of Japanese Prehistory
<https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#prehistorylandscapes>
- *2 The absolute date of the onset of the Yayoi Period is still a matter of ('controversy'). There has been a view that it started around 300 BC, whereas a study based on carbon 14 analyses pointed to a much earlier date, 10th century BC (a study by the researchers of Graduate University for advanced Studies, National Museum of Japanese History [Fujio/Imamura / Nishimoto 2005: 藤尾/今村/西本 2005年「弥生時代の開始年代 -AMS-炭素14年代測定による高精度年代体系の構築-」『総研大文化科学研究』創刊号 73-96頁]).
- *3 Doigahama site Anthropological Museum
<http://www.doigahama.jp/English/index2.html>
- *4 See also a genetic study to compare the Doigahama Yayoi population to the modern Japanese (Igawa et al. 2009, Mitochondrial DNA analysis of Yayoi period human skeletal remains from the Doigahama site. in Journal of Human Genetics 54: 581 - 588).



Web-Site
japan-insights
<https://www.japan-insights.jp>