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Issue

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Jomon Prehistoric Sites in Hokkaido
JET Spotlight: Michael Arthur



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A Journey Across Ten Thousand Years: Uncovering Hokkaido's Jomon Roots

At 6:30pm on July 27th, 2021, seventeen archaeological sites across Northern Japan were officially inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage cultural property, and in an instant over 10,000 years of history came rushing back to the present with renewed relevance. The story of the Jomon people has always been central to the story of Hokkaido, but the recognition of these sites by UNESCO has ensured that this story is broadcast to the modern world, shining a light on how people and place have shaped each other on this island since ancient times. To learn more about this fascinating period of (pre-) history I was invited to visit a number of these archaeological sites, and in this issue of the Red Brick Bulletin I would like to share my experience of a culture many millennia in the making. Get ready to party like it's 9999 BCE.



Firstly, let's clarify what constitutes the Jomon period and what the word actually means. Most definitions place the start of the Jomon period at somewhere around 13,000BCE, lasting until around 300BCE. The people of this period are thought to have practised a largely hunter-gather (though notably non-

nomadic) lifestyle, with many settlements clearly chosen for the rich diversity of food and natural resources in close proximity.



The word 'Jomon' itself derives from the intricately marked pottery – *jōmondoki* (縄文土器) – which has come to define the period. The exact Japanese name for this pottery has seen some variation over the years, with '縄紋土器' (similarly pronounced *jōmondoki*) and '索紋土器' (*sakumondoki*) finding use at various points. The names all ultimately derive from the English description 'cord marked pottery' – first used by American archaeologist Edward S. Morse in 1877. However, as we would discover, there is much more to the Jomon period than just pots. Read on to learn more about some of the locations we visited on our journey!

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Our first stop was the Chitose City Buried Cultural Properties Center, where we admired many artefacts excavated from the nearby Kiusu Earthwork Burial Circles and learnt about how the area had sustained people for centuries.

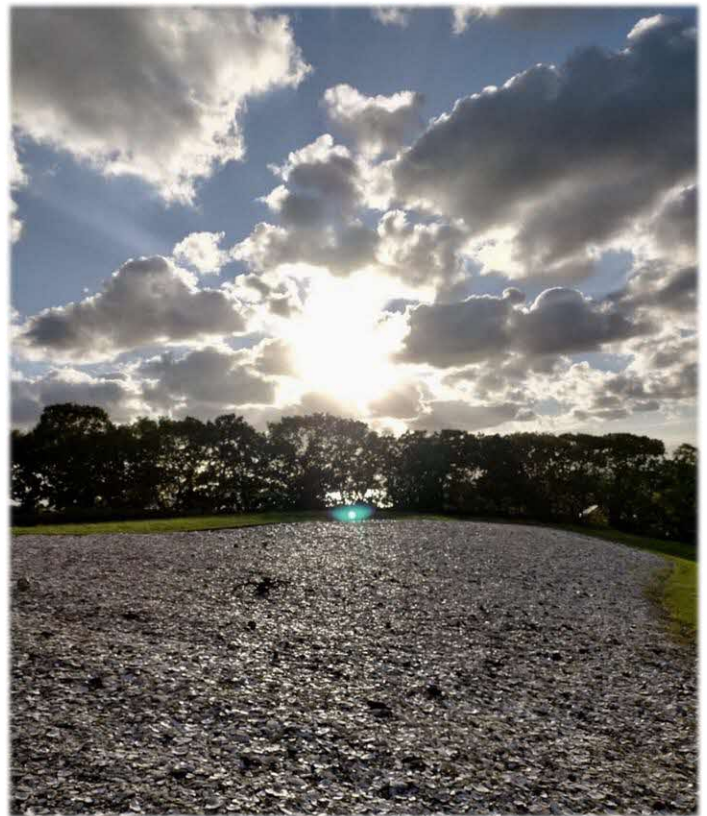
While the area around this site has now been largely repurposed for agricultural use, at the time it bordered lush wetlands to the west, which together with food foraged from the nearby Maoi Hills provided the people of the time with a rich and varied diet.

The main attraction was of course the burial circles themselves, which at their largest measured an enormous 83m in diameter – longer than a Boeing 777! They were also impressively deep, and it is estimated that around 3000m³ of soil would need to have been moved in order to create the largest – enough to fill an Olympic swimming pool with plenty of soil to spare. With the tools of the time, it is thought this would have taken 25 people around 120 days of labour – quite an undertaking!



With our appetites whet from the thought of all that heavy lifting, we set off for lunch at *Michi-no-Eki: Salmon Park Chitose*, where we witnessed wave after wave of salmon being hauled up from the nearby river, seemingly without end. While the methods may have changed, it struck me that the same rivers that had sustained the Jomon people thousands of years earlier were still feeding us to this day. Once inside, I naturally ordered smoked salmon pizza, and after wolfing it down we departed for our next Jomon site with salmon in our stomachs and salmon on our minds.

The marine theme would continue after we arrived at the Kitakogane site near Date City, where the remnants of thousands of seafood suppers awaited us in the form of giant shell mounds. Along with the shells of clams, scallops, and oysters lay bones from larger marine mammals such as whales and fur seals, as well as from a variety of fish. I would later learn that similar mounds were the site of human burials, which challenged my assumption that they functioned as little more than 'giant trash heaps'. Evidence of rituals performed at the sites suggests they were not so much where unwanted things were 'discarded', but instead 'returned' to the land. We also saw evidence of various tools that had fulfilled their useful purpose being ritualistically broken before burial. While much is still unknown about Jomon spirituality, it is thought that the cycles of nature by which they lived fostered a strong belief that death and rebirth were inseparable forces, and that what is taken must eventually be restored to the earth.



Living in tune with the seasons was clearly at the core of the Jomon way of life, and in our own small way we would continue this tradition with a visit to the nearby *Michi no Eki, Date Rekishi no Mori* to load up on fresh, locally grown produce. Admittedly, placing fruits and vegetables in a basket and carrying them over to a cash register isn't the most hunter-gatherer way of getting one's supper, but what we lost in authenticity we gained in convenience, and who could blame us when the pickings were so good? I was thrilled to find bright pink sticks of rhubarb (a rather elusive vegetable in Japan) lined up alongside more pedestrian produce, and celebrated upon arriving at the hotel with a one-man rhubarb party. If you can't tell, I really like rhubarb: it's my jam.

The hotel itself was positioned on the bank of Lake Toya, and in the evening we were treated to a fireworks display which played out above the lake. Watching the explosion of colours mirrored in the water's surface, we too reflected on the vibrancy of the ancient culture we had experienced over the course of the day, and went to bed tired but content.

Day 2 began with a trip to another *Michi no Eki*, called 'Sobetsu Information Center i'. The town of Sobetsu is known for its bountiful fruit harvest, and I bought a litre of fresh apple juice which I happily slurped as we whizzed past the orchards on our way to the Irie and Takasago sites in Toyako Town.



At these sites, we learnt more about the culinary and hunting practices of the period, and admired various hunting tools such as harpoons and knives fashioned from deer horns and obsidian. We also saw evidence of the change in climate over the period that people had inhabited the site, which is reflected in their change of diet. At the bottom of the enormous midden lay the shells of Japanese oysters and sea urchins, while in the upper layers, the most common shells

were those of orient clams, indicating a general cooling of the climate over this period.

We also saw evidence of regional movement in the tooth cavities of a female thought to have come from Honshu to marry into the community. Cavities were rare among the Jomon people of Hokkaido, who lived on a diet centred around meat and seafood – both of which are low in sugars. In contrast, the Jomon people of Honshu subsisted on a diet rich in fruits and starchy nuts, and cavities are relatively common in their dental remains. Further evidence of regional exchange was found in unearthed ornaments carved from the bones of wild boar – an animal native to Honshu but not Hokkaido.

Perhaps most fascinatingly, among the bones of various animals found in the Irie-Takasago shell mounds (including tuna, sharks, fur seals, dolphins, and deer) 44 sets of human skeletal remains have also been discovered, re-enforcing their role as sacred sites rather than colossal garbage dumps. The bones of a person suffering from polio were also uncovered here, and it is thought they would not have been able to survive as long as they did were it not for a culture of caregiving among the people of the time.



The final Jomon sites of our trip were around 150km away from Irie, resulting in a very long drive. However, at the end of this, we were greeted with possibly the most impressive facility of the trip: the Hokodate City Jomon Culture Center. This state-of-the-art museum was built in 2011 to display artefacts from nearby archaeological sites such as Ofune and Kakinoshima, and houses Hokkaido's first national treasure, the hollow clay figure known as 'Kakku' (pictured on the first page).

The sites of Ofune and Kakinoshima also provided a fascinating glimpse into the living arrangements of the Jomon people, with numerous pit dwellings reconstructed to form a small settlement. The most striking aspect of these dwellings was their depth, with the living area positioned well below ground-level and surrounded by steep walls of earth. The deepest of these was 2.4m, and it is thought that their depth and general construction varied with the climate – which changed considerably between 3500 BCE and 2000 BCE when the site was inhabited.



The Jomon Culture Center proved to be a treasure trove of artefacts and information, reinforcing much of what we had learnt over the trip as well as providing plenty of new information on the spirituality of the Jomon people. Here, we saw how the deceased were adorned with ornaments made from string stained with scarlet lacquer, how clay tablets were imprinted with the hand and foot-prints of infants who had passed away, and how clay figures such as the famous 'Kakku'

were deliberately and ceremonially broken and buried – a slightly strange thought given the level of protection that this national treasure is now under. The Center was the largest and most comprehensive of all the facilities we had visited, and provided a broad perspective on not just the neighbouring sites, but also the entire Jomon period.



Over the course of our trip, I gained a deep appreciation of the Jomon people and their way of life. The period has come to be defined by the cord-marked pottery from which it takes its name, but these intricately imprinted pots offer only a glimpse into the rich and deeply spiritual culture that spans such a long and influential period of Hokkaido, Japanese, and human history. Through visiting the sites in person, I came away with a renewed understanding of the interconnected stories that have played out in Hokkaido for millennia, and for the island itself, which continues to sustain us to this day. On reflection, it seems fitting that a culture defined by impressing patterns into earthenware should leave such a deep impression on me, and if the experience has taught me one thing, it is this: Jomon culture is much more than the sum of its pots.



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are about 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



MEET MICHAEL ARTHUR

This issue we introduce Michael Arthur, a nature-loving wordsmith with a fondness for cute beanies. He is a fourth year ALT in the eastern Hokkaido town of Teshikaga.

Tell us a bit about yourself!

Hello, my name is Michael Arthur. My students (in spite of my objections) call me Michael Jackson, but most people call me plain old Michael. I was raised in Sacramento, which is the capital city of California. I came to Hokkaido back in 2018.

What brought you to Hokkaido (or Japan)?

I've answered this question so many times, and yet I always get the sense that my responses never truly hit the mark. What did bring me here? Some of my most vivid childhood memories are of watching classic Japanese movies with my father, namely those of Akira Kurosawa, and much later in my college years I became utterly entranced by the works of Yasujiro Ozu. So perhaps it was that deep fascination with Japanese cinema which, fostered over years and years, finally found vent in a single spontaneous decision. Oh, and I also really like Dragon Quest.



How has your experience been so far?

Incredible. I was blessed to have been placed in Teshikaga, a town which is home to some of the most extraordinary natural landscapes in all of Japan. Lake Mashu is a mere fifteen-minute drive from my house. I can ride my bicycle alongside the shores of Lake Kussharo any time I please. And there are so many lovely mountains and tranquil forests just waiting to be explored — oh! I daresay it's a wonderful place.

What has been your most memorable moment?

There certainly have been plenty, but the most astounding was undoubtedly my chance encounter with a bear. I was mountain biking with a group of friends in the stately forests of Biruwa, a small farming community in Teshikaga. We had been very cautious of bears for the entire ride, blaring our sirens and shouting out warnings almost every other thirty seconds. But a whim of an incredibly idiotic variety took hold of me during the last slope of the route, and I raced on ahead of everyone else at a very high speed, not caring to sound my siren. There was only a short way to the goal, after all! Indeed, just as the gate separating the forest from

the open fields had broken into view, and I had convinced myself that I was safe from any undesirable ursine encounter, what do you think I saw in the corner of my eye? An astonished mother bear standing on her hind legs, her two cubs tumbling about playfully behind her, and, shortly thereafter, my baffled soul sailing out from my mouth and up to heaven.

What lesson can be learned from this? That no matter how awesome it feels racing through a beautiful forest (like a magical wolf from an old fairy tale!), those very forces of nature that you're so gleefully enjoying are more than ready to snatch that joy away from you!



What is your favourite thing about your region?

The color green. No, I'm serious. From June to early September this place is so astoundingly green. Imagine yourself on the bank of the Kushiro River, with verdant birch all around you. Ferns carpet the forest floor. Just a little way off, tall yellow flowers, taller than yourself even, are swaying softly in the sunlight. And as you stroll down the river, moving through that medium of cicada song and river noise, you begin to feel as though the greenery itself is singing to you. We are all one!

