

JAPANESE CULTURAL HISTORY - Ancient Period

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PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Early Religion. Organized religion had not yet emerged in neolithic period Japan, but early people were nonetheless very spiritual and sought out answers to some of life's persistent questions. Given that each clan or group existed as a fairly independent unit, customs and rituals varied from place to place and throughout time. They left evidence of many and varied symbols representing spirits associated with hunting, fertility, agriculture, stars and the moon. In particular, bear skulls are known to have been carefully placed in inland pits in areas of spiritual significance. According to Nelly Naumann, one of the foremost scholars in the discipline, large-animal hunting, represented by the most fearsome predator then known in Japan, the bear, is thought to represent this important food source. In coastal areas where fishing provided much of the protein needed for subsistence, dolphin skulls have been found buried in sacred spaces. Other objects such as clay masks have also been found. Finally, among the most pervasive found in sacred pits are objects representing the female form. These objects are associated with fertility deities, the renewal of life and the safe birth of the next generation. Often accompanying the female form are representations of phalluses. For Naumann, the moon was thought to be among the most important deities because of its association with death and rebirth in Japan.

The Arts. There is scant evidence of many of the art forms as we know them today. Music, story-telling, painting, drama and the like almost surely existed but have disappeared from the human record. However, one that remains is sculpture in the form of ceramics, pottery and religious artifacts. Indeed, the very long and diverse era known as the neolithic period is understood to be the same epoch because from beginning to end, cord markings appear as decoration on ceramics. Sculptors shaped objects by hand without the use of wheels. They used clay with small amounts of connective fiber to fashion representations of the female form, of masks representing the sun or stars, animals—some with human faces, and phalluses. Early attempts were rather crude and were clearly created by people with little extra time or talent. These early objects were fired in open pits at relatively low temperatures. During periods of warming, for example, approximately 2500 BCE-1500 BCE, early Japanese populations lived in larger groups which allowed for some specialization. During this period, figurines and other ceramics were carefully sculpted with great attention to detail and were lavishly decorated with pigment and inlaid with exquisite decoration. A small number of artists used the medium of stone or bone to carve figures and inlay images and some woodworking rose to the level of art, but most artists used fired clay. Motifs, though more detailed and more carefully executed later in the period, remained much the same as in past millennia.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Religion. Organized religion in Japan during the iron age was still in the formative stage. It is known from the Chinese sources, in particular, the *Wei Zhi* (The History of the Wei Kingdom), that the Japanese were spiritual and sought out wisdom through divination. Iron age Japanese burned bones and then attempted to interpret them as a way of discerning spiritual direction. This assumes the presence of an interpreter, most likely a shaman or other holy man or woman. Evidence exists in the form of fired clay images of animals, frogs, the moon and the like that iron age Japanese likely followed animistic practices and were also generally superstitious. The Chinese sources indicate that when going on a long voyage, they appointed a fortune keeper, someone whose job it was to act as the spiritual presence on the trip. He was required to abstain from sexual relations, not eat meat and not even to wash for the duration of the trip. If successful, he was showered with gifts upon his return. If ill fortune befell the trip and the holy man was deemed to have not kept his vows, he could be killed. It is very likely that many Japanese, based on the connection to the Han and Wei, were aware of Confucianism and Buddhism, both of which were well-established on the mainland. However, conclusive proof that organized religion had taken hold in Japan has not yet been discovered.

Sculpture. Iron age Japanese produced a full range of ceramics—everything from very utilitarian clay pots to highly decorative religious artifacts to a whistle. In part, the Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 CE) is demarcated from the Jōmon period (8000-300 BCE) which preceded it, and Kofun period (250-538 CE) which followed it, by the particular style of pottery produced. Jōmon period pottery was generally very rough and crudely produced.

However, Yayoi period pottery is more refined and used processes that are also found in Korea. It is likely that migrants brought this technology with them from Korea and, finding it useful, was adopted by Japanese potters. In particular, Yayoi period potters burnished porous surfaces with slip, which had the effect of smoothing the surface and making it more waterproof. Slip is a form of liquefied clay that has a slightly different composition than what is found in the body of an object and is added before firing. In addition, slip allowed for different forms of decoration and Yayoi pottery is distinguished by red and occasionally black pigment being used in decoration. There is no evidence of Yayoi potters using a wheel or other mechanical aids during production. Therefore, it is likely that potters used the cord stacking method to mold objects, indicating some continuity between Jōmon pottery and Yayoi pottery.

Bronze and Iron. Iron age artisans had also become adept at casting bronze and iron. This technology, which came to Japan very late in human history, was quickly adopted by early Japanese. In particular, artisans crafted iron weapons—swords, tools, armor, rudimentary jewelry and cast bells and mirrors—for use in religious ceremonies. Motifs in sculpture and decoration on pottery included female figures, celestial objects, birds, wild and domesticated animals and structures.