

1 Early Japan

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Japan is an archipelago that consists of four large islands and over six thousand smaller islands, mostly uninhabited. Together, the islands are roughly the size of California or Italy. The four main islands, from north to south, are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. Among the smaller islands, Okinawa, in the Ryūkyū chain to the south, and Sado, off the coast of northern Honshu, are two of the most populous. For this island nation, proximity to the seas has strongly influenced culture and society, as an important source of food, a factor in influencing climate, and a barrier to easy contact with nearby countries. The distance to China is five hundred miles, while the closest nation, Korea, is 125 miles away. If Japan were located farther from these Asian nations, it might not have absorbed Chinese civilizational influences, such as the writing system, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which were transmitted to Japan through migrants from the Korean Peninsula. If it were closer to the powerful Chinese empire, it might not have developed its own distinctive language and material culture.

Mountains cover about 80 percent of Japan's land surface and are surprisingly heavily forested. These mountains include many volcanoes, both dormant and active, so thermal hot springs are abundant and earthquakes occur frequently, up to one thousand tremors per year. Mount Fuji—Japan's tallest mountain, at 12,388 feet—is a volcano that last erupted in the eighteenth century. It was particularly active from the eighth to twelfth centuries, when it was perceived as an angry deity, but today represents an important and scenic symbol of national identity. Only about one-quarter of Japan's land is considered habitable, and settlement is concentrated densely

Hokkaido

1. Hokkaido

Tohoku

2. Aomori
3. Iwate
4. Miyagi
5. Akita
6. Yamagata
7. Fukushima

Kanto

8. Ibaraki
9. Tochigi
10. Gunma
11. Saitama
12. Chiba
13. Tokyo
14. Kanagawa

Chubu

15. Niigata
16. Toyama
17. Ishikawa
18. Fukui
19. Yamanashi
20. Nagano
21. Gifu
22. Shizuoka
23. Aichi

Kansai

24. Mie
25. Shiga
26. Kyoto
27. Osaka
28. Hyogo
29. Nara
30. Wakayama

Chugoku

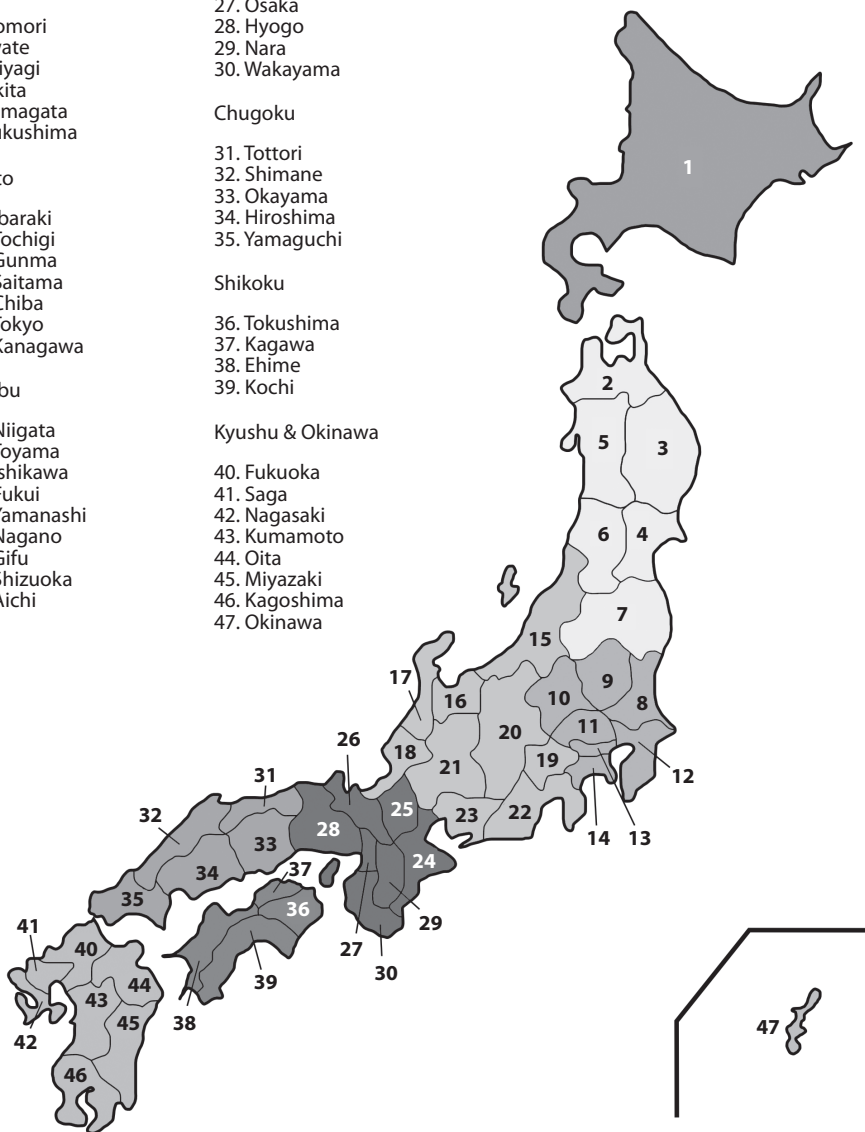
31. Tottori
32. Shimane
33. Okayama
34. Hiroshima
35. Yamaguchi

Shikoku

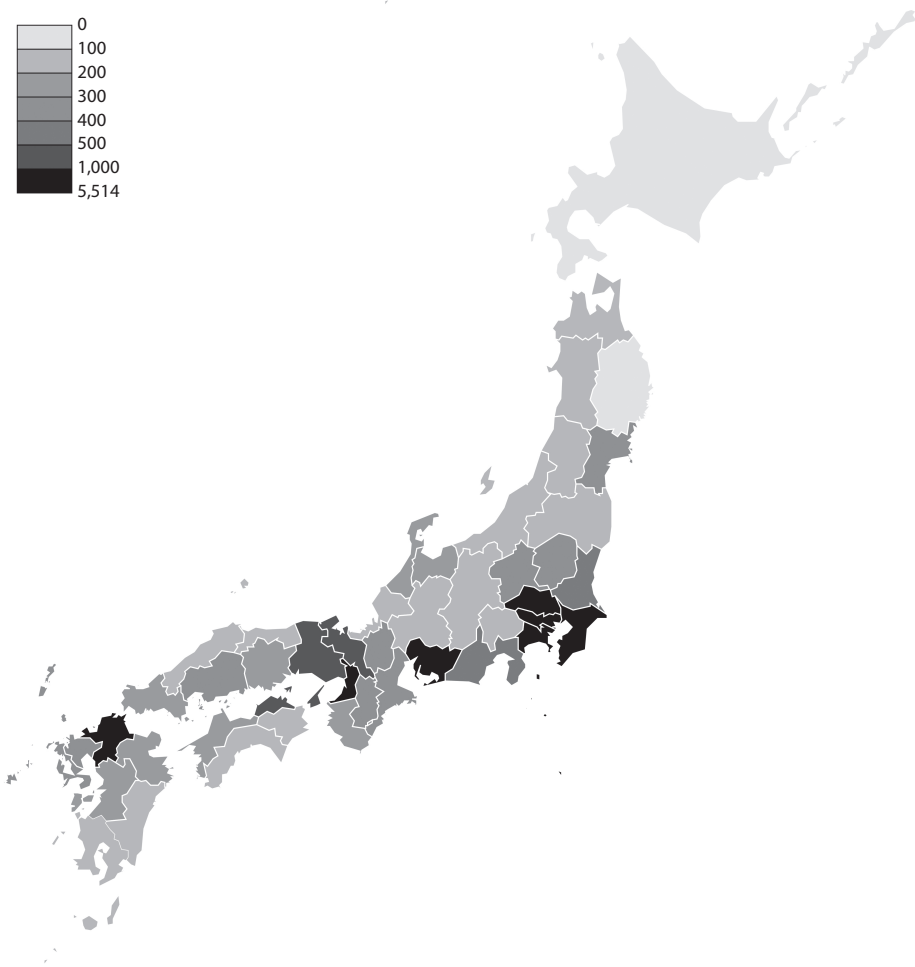
36. Tokushima
37. Kagawa
38. Ehime
39. Kochi

Kyushu & Okinawa

40. Fukuoka
41. Saga
42. Nagasaki
43. Kumamoto
44. Oita
45. Miyazaki
46. Kagoshima
47. Okinawa



MAP 1. Regions and prefectures of Japan.



MAP 2. Population density by prefecture, Japan (number per square kilometer).

along the coastlines of the Pacific Ocean, Japan Sea, and Inland Sea, in river valleys, and on the occasional plains, most notably the Kanto plain in north-eastern Honshu, where Tokyo is located, and the Kinai plain in central Japan, where the cities of Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka are located. Today, over three-quarters of the population live in crowded urban areas in these places, while rural regions are much less densely populated. Before modern transportation, travel was difficult in the mountainous land, giving rise to distinctive regional differences in dialects, lifestyles, produce, and animal life.

Climate varies along the extensive archipelago, ranging from the harsh, snowy winters in the north and along the northwest coast of Honshu to the mild winters and subtropical summers of Okinawa. The capital city, Tokyo, is at roughly the same latitude as Los Angeles. Summers there are hot and humid, with a rainy season in June and July. Typhoons bring violent, destructive rainstorms to the islands beginning in September. The most pleasant seasons are the spring and fall, when many venture out to view blossoming cherry trees or colorful maple foliage. Such distinctive seasonal changes have been celebrated in Japanese arts and poetry for centuries.

PREHISTORIC JAPAN

Who were the ancestors of the Japanese? What were their origins, and when did they begin to inhabit the islands that we call Japan? The earliest inhabitants were likely from the Pacific islands or Southeast Asia, but there are no written records of these distant ancestors. The earliest Japanese chronicles, the *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters) and *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, also known as *Nihongi*), tell of the mythological origins of the islands but were written much later, in the early eighth century, and are unreliable sources for much early history. In order to investigate the sources of prehistoric Japanese culture, we must therefore rely on the findings of archaeologists. Archaeology is an extremely popular field of study in Japan, because of the thousands of readily accessible archaeological sites throughout the nation. Excavations indicate that the archipelago has been inhabited for about fifty thousand years and that a rich Paleolithic culture existed in the islands.

Japan's prehistoric era, before the existence of local written records, is generally divided into four phases: Paleolithic, from approximately 35,000 to 15,000 B.P.; Jōmon, from approximately 15,000 B.P. to 900 B.C.E.; Yayoi, from 900 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.; and Kofun, from 250 C.E. to 600 C.E. Each phase has distinguishing characteristics, yet there are also strong continuities running through these eras. Over many thousands of years, there were gradual transitions from Paleolithic (or "Old Stone Age") culture to the pottery-making, hunting, and gathering culture of the Jōmon era; to the metal use and agriculture of the Yayoi; and finally to an era characterized by enormous burial mounds, called *kofun*, which indicate that local rulers possessed the power to draft tens of thousands of laborers to build such monuments. It is important to remember that these eras are not clearly distinct. There was significant overlap between the periods—techniques for making ceramics and salt and for building structures, initiated in the Jōmon

period, persisted long after the introduction of metal and advanced agricultural technologies in the Yayoi period.

Until the 1990s, archaeologists generally believed that Japan's modern inhabitants were largely descended from Jōmon stock. Now, however, DNA evidence from skulls and teeth has convinced most that the Japanese population has a dual structure, including both the ancestors of the Jōmon, who came from the south, and a later wave of immigrants with different characteristics who intermingled with the Jōmon during the Yayoi era. Most modern Japanese are genetically closer to the later immigrants, but characteristics of Jōmon people can still be seen among Okinawans and Ainu, the indigenous residents of Hokkaido.

JŌMON-ERA DEVELOPMENTS

Some time around 15,000 B.C.E., the inhabitants of the northern and eastern sections of the archipelago mastered the techniques of coiling clay to form vessels and figurines, then baking their work in open fires in order to harden it. The resulting pottery allowed the people of the Jōmon era to cook food more easily, to store food they had gathered, and to live farther from immediate sources of water. They could make salt by boiling seawater in the pots, allowing preservation of foods. The Jōmon period is very long—over ten thousand years—so there is a great deal of variety in the shapes and decorative markings among the pots; they differed over time and by region. From the prehistoric era to contemporary society, ceramics have remained an important aspect of Japanese art and culture.

The period takes its name from the distinctive earthenware pottery produced throughout the period. The word *jōmon* means “cord-mark”; many pieces of pottery were decorated with patterns made by pressing cords or branches into the soft clay before firing. Jōmon pottery is generally classified by age: Incipient, Early, Middle, and Late. Incipient pots are the earliest clearly dated pottery found so far in the world, dating from around 11,000 to 5000 B.C.E. They typically have rounded or pointy bottoms, and archaeologists believe they were mainly used for cooking outdoors, with stones or sand to keep the vessel upright. By the Early Jōmon period (5500–3500 B.C.E.), flat-bottomed pots had become customary, which suggests that they were now being used more indoors, set on floors. Different styles of ornamentation are found in different regions. In northeast Honshu and Hokkaido, cord markings are common, whereas



FIGURE 1. Middle Jōmon pot, British Museum. Photo by Morio, via Wikimedia Commons.

in Kyushu a herringbone style of decoration was dominant. Middle Jōmon pottery is especially striking. Many vessels have wild, abstract, decorative shapes, suggesting things like leaping flames or snakes heads. These pots were not standardized—each was a unique work of creative art. Archaeologists believe that the imaginative design of the pots indicates they were used for ritual as well as functional purposes. In the Late Jōmon period (2500–1500 B.C.E.), pots with thinner walls were made in a greater variety of shapes and sizes.

Much of what we know about Jōmon society, including the pottery, comes from the excavation of garbage mounds, or middens. Huge mounds of shells near settlement areas preserved remains of the diet, daily life, and

burial practices. The high calcium and alkaline content of shell middens slowed decay, allowing archaeologists to examine food remnants, tools, and other evidence of Jōmon society. The mounds indicate that the people survived through a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle—living on nuts, fruit, roots, fish, shellfish, and animal flesh. Shell mounds contain deer, boar, and bear bones; the bones and shells of dozens of different kinds of fish and shellfish; stone and wooden tools; bows and arrowheads; fishhooks and harpoon heads; oars and net fragments; and personal ornaments like lacquered hair combs and shell earrings. American zoologist Edward Sylvester Morse first discovered the shell mounds in 1877. Morse had been hired by the new Meiji government to help modernize the education system and spied a large mound while looking out a window on a train between Yokohama and Tokyo. In September 2016 the world's oldest fishhooks, around twenty-three thousand years old and made from the shells of sea snails, were found in a cave in the Okinawan islands.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered semipermanent settlements, consisting of a small cluster of pit dwellings, with floors dug well below ground level and hearths in the center, each housing five or six people. Sometimes these clusters also contained a large ring of tall stones, which may have been used for village rituals related to hunting or fishing. Jōmon communities probably tried to be self-sufficient, but there is evidence of trade: salt from coastal regions has been found in mountain settlements, and obsidian and stone from the mountains, used for tools, have been found at coastal locations. They also engaged in simple, small-scale farming, probably using slash-and-burn techniques to raise beans, melons, and grains like barley and millet.

Graves were small and simple holes into which bodies were inserted. Dwellings and gravesites in the settlements appear to be undifferentiated, leading scholars to suggest that Jōmon society did not make social distinctions according to class or wealth. They theorize that there was simply not enough surplus food to support elites who did not perform labor.

Among the most striking artifacts from the Jōmon period are stone and clay figurines, known as *dogū*. These become increasingly elaborate in the northeastern part of the country during Middle and Late Jōmon. The clearly anthropomorphic *dogū* are characterized by bulging eyes, sometimes called “coffee-bean eyes” or “goggle eyes” because they resemble the snow goggles used by northern peoples. Some appear to be pregnant females with prominent breasts, and others seem to be intentionally broken.