

Dwellings in Ancient Japan: Shapes and Cultural Context

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Dwelling is the constructed homestead of man, the most important place of family life. Every family foundation started, at least in ancient times, with the construction of a dwelling following the shape or shapes of the proper cultural custom. Thus the study of ancient dwellings, single or clustered into a community, reveals a lot of information about the then culture, social structure, economy, ways of life and, sometimes, about magico-religious beliefs and practices.¹

The ancient past of Japan, with which we are here concerned, comprises the Jōmon-Period, the Yayoi period and the Tumuli-Period.

The word Jōmon means cord pattern, and the period is named after the predominance of pottery decorated with cord patterns. It denotes the Neolithic period of Japan. The major subdivisions of the Jōmon-period have been built up around families of pottery types which have been visualized as forming five stages in their evolution. The equivalents to the Japanese names are: Earliest or Proto-Jōmon, Early-, Middle-, Late- or Later- and Latest- or Final-Jōmon. The Neolithic or Jōmon-period of Japan dates back to the last four millennia B.C. A three- to four millennia higher age is assumed by many Japanese archaeologists on the basis of radiocarbon (C-14) datings. However,

1. The interest in Japanese ancient dwelling awoke in the author during his stay in Japan (1952-59), then acting as director at the Archaeological Institute in Ichikawa at the border of Tokyo and as Professor of Archaeology at the Nanzan University in Nagoya. In collecting the material he was much helped by his Japanese assistant at the Institute, Mr. Y. Sinotō. The then collected material collected at that time is more of a technical character. Newer material had to be added by the author after his return to Europe. But, concerning the cultural context as background, only a selected number of report of excavation could be evaluated. All information about the cultural context had to be taken from more modern literature.

before these dates can finally be accepted, more research is needed.²

The Yayoi period, named after Yayoi-machi, a street in Tokyo, denotes the Bronze-Iron age. It began slowly in the early part of the third century B.C., not sharply separating its origin from the Jōmon background, although its very existence is due to continental stimuli. It ended in the third century A.D.

The Tumuli period is named after the then appearing tombs in the shape of often large tumuli. It is the protohistoric period which ended with the appearance of Buddhism in Japan, about the sixth to the seventh century A.D.⁴

Earliest- or Proto-Jōmon. Of this initial stage only a few dwelling-sites have been discovered and excavated. They were situated in the Kantō Plain around the Tokyo Bay. The scarcity is, according to J. E. Kidder Jr.⁴ not necessarily so much due to a warmer climate, but rather because the remains of the small population are sparse.

The then dwellings existing at that time were pit-dwellings, semi-subterranean, with slanting roofs reaching down to the surface of the ground. As postholes and, in some cases, carbonized beams prove, four or more upright posts were inserted in the ground across which four or more beams were laid, and then poles slanting in from all sides, produced the needed support for a ridge pole placed along the top. These were lashed together and covered with bark or leaves, and in some cases, with earth. A door-hole formed the entrance. Fire places were rarely found. The shape of the pit was often square, seldom rectangular.⁵ Normally they had an east-west orientation.

To judge from the mass of shells the subsistence of the then people was based mainly on collecting shell fish. By throwing away the shells outside the dwelling, real kitchen-middens or shell-mounds were built up in the course of time. For the most part, these mounds have been flattened out by later and recent agricultur, but still today the dis-

2. See Richard E. Morlan, *Cronometric Dating in Japan*. Arctic Anthropology 4 (1967), pp. 180-211.

3. For further information see J. E. Kidder Jr., *Japan before Buddhism* (Ancient Peoples and Places (Ed. Dr. Glyn Daniel), Vol. 10 (London / New York) 1959.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

5. Thus a cluster of five square pit-dwellings, situated on a hill, was found at Hayao, Fumi Village, Ibaraki Prefecture, all without fireplaces. See I. Yoshida, *Report of the shell-mound of Hanawadai* (In Japanese). Nippon Kōkōgaku 1 (1948), No. 1, with figures. A single pit-dwelling of rectangular shape was excavated at Sōzudai, Oita Prefecture. See Kagawa Mitsuo, *On the site of Sōzudai, Oita Prefecture* (In Japanese). Nippon Kōkōgaku 13 (1954), pp. 8-9, with figure of reconstructed roof.

persed whitish shells distinctively betray the former settlements.

The cultural remains comprise stone artifacts, pot-sherds and sometimes more or less intact vessels. None of the first ones bears any trace of polishing. All the artifacts are roughly chipped. They include handaxes, triangular projectile points, points with a concave base, net-sinkers of flat oval stones, hammerstone and "violin-shaped" stones of doubtful function.⁶

The earliest prehistoric pottery known in Japan was rarely found in shell-mounds. The vessels have a number of characteristics in common. They are generally somewhat funnel-shaped, with pointed or more or less rounded bottoms. The outer surface is covered with fiber-wrapped-stick impressions. Some vessels bear shell impressions and incised parallel lines.⁷

Early-Jōmon. Dwellings of this stage preferably show the rectangular shape with post-holes varying in number from sixteen to forty.⁸ The longer buildings were sometimes enlarged at intervals when emergencies or family increase required it. Thus a pit at Shimaibata, Itabashi ward of Tokyo, was expanded four times, another at Fukuota, Saitama Prefecture, one of the largest dwellings known, must have been lengthened seven times.⁹ In Early-Jōmon the pits had fireplaces, oval in shape, formed of stones, situated often to the west of the centre. The enlargement seems to point to more than one family group living in the house as is also indicated by more than one hearth.¹⁰

The people of Early-Jōmon already knew polished stone axes of round cross-section and double-beveled edge. Furthermore, narrow polished slate chisels, harpoons and fishhooks of deer antler appear. Many more bone and antler artifacts were produced in the Aomori Prefecture of northern Honshu.¹¹

The pottery shows flat bottoms. The outer surfaces of the vessels are covered with complicated cord-impressed designs.

6. See G. J. Groot, *The Prehistory of Japan*, (New York) 1951, Pl. IV.

7. See J. E. Kidder, *The Jōmon Pottery of Japan*, (Ascona) 1957, Fig. 11. Sugae Yamanouchi, *Primitive Art of Japan, I. Jōmon Pottery*, (Tokyo) 1964, Pl. I, Figs. 1-33.

8. E. Oka, *On the research of the shell-mound of Yawatadai, Musashi Province* (In Japanese). *Shinzengaku Zasshi* 6 (1934), pp. 1-20. S. Yajima, *The pit-dwelling in the shell-mound of Kōde, Chiba Prefecture* (In Japanese). *Kodaibunka* XII (1941), pp. 130-48.

9. Kidder (Note 3), p. 44.

10. N. Sakezume and T. Esaka, *The excavation of a stone age pit-dwelling in the shell-mound of Yonmai-hata, Shimura-Azusawa Town, Itabashi District, Tokyo* (In Japanese). *Kōkōgaku Zasshi* 28 (1938), pp. 368-93.

11. See Groot (Note 6), Figs. 5-7.

As a number of scattered finds prove, Early-Jōmon people already produced clay figurines in rough form and in small numbers. The custom seems to have been discontinued, however, being revived and developed in the Middle-Jōmon with increasing artistic technique and spiritual expression. The first products were animal-like heads. These exhibit cat- or rabbit-like features, sometimes dog and serpent-like ones. They appeared in the western part of mountainous central Japan. From a number of intact pieces, which have been found, one can see that the heads were attached to vessels as rim decorations. Apparently they were intended as guardians of the contents of the vessels. Thus there must have existed, at that time, a distinct belief in animal-like spirits.¹²

Middle-Jōmon. During this stage, Jōmon people expanded over larger parts of Japan and the archaeological assemblages are richer in kind and number than those of any of the preceding stages. As to the shape of the dwellings there must have been considerable flexibility. They run from round through square and rectangular, with irregularities and rounded corners. They made up clusters of population and real communities which must have been organized into rather efficient bands for hunting, fishing, collecting, and possibly for defence if the need arose. The majority were located near advantageous water sources on plateaus overlooking rivers. There were sometimes pits near the communities. One thinks of something along the order of a parturition house.¹³ In Yosukeone, Nagano Prefecture, a stone platform, was found in the northwest corner of a hut on which a phallus-like upright stone, stone clubs, and vessels were deposited: "quite obviously the platforms and pillars mark the family altar or shrine which brings together concepts of stone worship and protection for the processes of and the benefits derived from procreation".¹⁴

The stone industry includes the usual projectile points, broad scrapers, round mortars of andesite, a large number of netsinkers and axes of sandstone.

The pottery of Middle-Jōmon is distinguished by its many large vessels with massive raised or applied clay ornamentation in compli-

12. J. Maringer, *Clay Figurines of the Jōmon Period: A contribution to the History of Ancient Religion in Japan*. *History of Religion* 14 (1974), pp. 129. See also Kidder (Note 7), Fig. 40, 1-15.

13. Kidder (Note 3), p. 45.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86, Fig. 16.

cated patterns and with large handles attached to the rims.¹⁵

In some instances heads of animals are absorbed into these massive projections. Most are now disassociated from their vessels, but in rare cases an intact one illustrates the possibilities of their position. Their expression is again theriomorphic, although a few of them reach a point of being recognizably human. They are generally of small size. An exceptional and impressive specimen is a head and torso, 25.2 centimeters in height, which comes from Kami Kurohama (now called Misaka), Yamanashi Prefecture. It lacks a right arm and the lower part of the body. The complete work was larger than the average Jōmon figurine. This piece exhibits a mixture of therio-anthropomorphic features: a nearly disk-shaped face with large oblique slit eyes, eyebrows converging over a blunt nose, and a cleft upper lip, combined with a thoroughly human body.¹⁶ It has a masklike animally-demonic expression. The incisions on the cheeks and the punctures on the shoulders and upper arms apparently indicate adorning tattoos. Except for the narrow, rather female waist and headdress, the figure looks sexless. A striking detail is the hand with only three fingers. On the whole, this bizarre, subhuman and demonic figure seems to represent a spirit, a supernatural being, which is beyond the horizon of human experience; it is for this reason that the effect is so grotesque.¹⁷

It is clear that these terra-cotta figures belonged to the sphere of cult. Their masklike, theriomorphic forms can hardly be explained by the assumption that they, as embryos of Japanese sculpture, exhibit embryo-like features; the intended animal form is too evident and is rooted in a certain psychology and ideology. It is significant that these products come from the mountainous region of central Japan, which, during the Middle Jōmon, was culturally a dynamic center. Would not the wild and awful landscape, threatened by earthquakes now and then, have caused in the minds of the inhabitants a strong inner tension and prompted some permanent arrangement with the invisible powers? Apparently they did not imagine these powers or spirits to be exactly like human beings. Even if a few figurines did reach a certain human standard, animal-like ones predominated. Strangely enough, it is not the big game of these Jōmon people—the bear, cerf, and wild boar—that form the prototypes for their figurines, but

15. Kidder (Note 7), Figs. 15-18; (Note 3), Pl. 7. See also Yamanouchi (Note 7), Pl. VI.

16. S. Noma, *Masterworks of Japan's Stone Age Art*. UNESCO Courier (1958).

17. Maringer (Note 12), p. 130, Fig. 1.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-31.

small felines, rodents, and serpents. In what way were these more appropriate? Perhaps the shy, fugitive, mysterious character of just these animals excited the people's fantasy and religious imagination.¹⁸

The small scale of variations in the figurines has led Kidder¹⁹ to see here an initial form of totemism, a belief which, before reaching its maturity, was superseded by a more powerful cult which extinguished it and which was inclined more to anthropomorphism than to theriomorphism. However, analogies from the prehistoric Near East and southeastern Europe seem to point less to a totemistic belief in man's animal ancestry than to a "generally human mind", according to which animals often represented epiphanies of higher beings.²⁰

Late or Later-Jōmon. The sites of the Jōmon-Period become, as we have seen, larger and larger with each succeeding phase. In the Later-Jōmon the sites attain a great size, which is exceeded only by the sites of the Final-Jōmon. The population now lived in large communities. Most of the dwellings were circular in shape, had four or more supporting pillars for the slanting roofs, and a jar or stone arrangement for a fireplace slightly off-centre to the north or west. Surface-dwellings became increasingly popular, not due to a more tolerable climate, but to improved building methods that stimulated the changing style. The semi-subterranean type was less needed now as houses were more secure, better insulated with ditches and ventilated.²¹

In the Late-Jōmon (about 2000 B.C.) the production of clay figurines spread from the mountainous inland down to the coastal plains and over the whole main island of Honshu. In the hands of the people living there the figures received human—often expressively female—features. However, they still were not altogether free from bizarre and grotesque traits. According to S. Noma²² they were fantastic because man's joy of creation, having learned the art of making human figures, burst out into fanciful shapes which were more than faithful reproductions of human shape. But must we not doubt that nothing more than "man's joy of creation" was behind it? This impulse of creation surely had deeper roots.

As typical of the group of recognizably female figurines we may

19. Kidder (Note 7), p. 30.

20. Maringer (Note 12), p. 131.

21. N. Sakazume and C. Serizawa, *The excavation of the dwelling-site in the shell-mound of Aradachi daijō, Tsurumi District, Yokohama City*. *Kōkogaku Zasshi* 28 (1938), pp. 18-41 with reconstruction plan. See also Kidder (Note 3), Fig. 3.

22. Noma (Note 16), p. 3.

adduce a clay figurine from Ebaradi, Chiba Peninsula, on Tokyo bay ten to fifteen centimeters high²³. Its swollen breasts and belly indicate a pregnant woman. On top of the rather clumsy body is set a somewhat gloomy head, which could well belong to a mountain ghost. It should be noted that the Japanese call this type of figurine *yamagata*, which means "mountain-like". Behind this name may be seen a reminiscence of the figurine's old homestead.

Especially in the mountainous regions and in the neighboring lowland more stylized figurines were found, such as the 30.2-centimeters-high clay figurine from Gôhara, Gumma Prefecture.²⁴ This figurine with its pointed breasts and narrow waistline looks almost youthfully female. Over the richly decorated upper part of the body with its broad shoulders and stump arms, there is set a very bizarre head with a large heart-shaped face which is almost completely occupied by an awful nose between two staring eyeholes. The mouth and also the ears are missing. The whole figure conveys thereby a ghostly, demoniac, indeed subhuman impression. Its mighty arched legs apparently have the sole function of providing the unusually high figure with the needed support. One cannot overlook the vigorous and elegant form, a real masterpiece of Jômon art.

Other figurines—with hollow bell-shaped bodies—have a similar ghostly expression. An example is the 20.4-centimeter-high piece of the Inaariyama shell mound to the south of Tokyo.²⁵ The small breasts testify to this mysterious figurine's female character. The head is put on a thick neck and exhibits a more human face with punctured eyes and mouth. The impressive physiognomy—as if the mouth endeavours to speak—resembles a mask. Serpent-like furrows wind up the front and the sides of the body.

The figurines, which were found mostly in domestic sites and not in burial grounds, occupied a cultic position in domestic life and often enjoyed an intense reverence; this is clear from a number of observations made on the occasions of in-situ finds. Thus, in some of the figurines, a significant smoothness may be detected. This is concentrated here and there on the swelling belly. Evidently the statuettes were often taken in hand by their worshippers and rubbed—in some cases probably only on the pregnant womb. The request is evident: the desire for children, or the hope of already pregnant women for good childbearing or easy childbirth. Evidently, a deep concern for life

23. Maringer (Note 12), Fig. 2.

24. Kidder (Note 3), Pl. 22. Maringer (Note 12), Fig. 3.

25. Maringer (Note 12), Fig. 4.

and procreation was one—perhaps the principal—motive for making the figurines.

Final-Jōmon. Whereas in central Japan the figurines remained more attached to subhuman spheres, in northern Japan, now the center of figural art, the figurines appear to have been adapted to a colder climate. Certain decorations are believed to be heavy garments. Hairdos appear to be in vogue, sometimes looking like turbans, sometimes like crowns—perhaps an attribute of a goddess? Strikingly large goggle-like eyes occupy the face. “These eyes must have grown out of the concept that the eye is the direct line of communication with the soul”.²⁶ The body is covered with a short coat reaching down to the knees, thickly rolled up at the bottom and somewhat puffed up at the shoulders. Minimized breasts pierce through it. Around the neck cordlike laces and a V-shaped necklace with a dangling jewel form the usual ornaments. The figures have stump arms and bloated legs.²⁷ According to Kidder,²⁸ these figurines should be seen in a particular historical context, and as typically an Ainu product. The Ainu, “the most aggressive and adamant tribal people of all the aboriginals of Japan, had been the only significant group to integrate, resist the (Yayoi) immigrants, and withstand in northern Honshu and finally Hokkaido . . . As these northerners consolidated for resistance, so one seems to see evidence of synthesis in religious beliefs—or at least a religious ideal of a supreme maternal deity represented in clay idol form”. Though opinions about the role of the Ainu in Japan’s prehistory differ considerably among archaeologists, in their statuesque and solemn stature these figurines may well represent a symbol of political union.²⁹

Yayoi-Period. The dwellings of the continental immigrants, the proper Japanese, were customarily round or oblong, frequently provided with two free-standing posts at either end as supports for the ridge-pole.³⁰

The ubiquitous woman’s stone knife provides evidence of an agrarian society. These stone rice reapers were made in a number of sizes, some even as large as one foot. Other remains comprise stone axes, chisels, knives, awls, arrowheads, wooden containers and farming

26. Kidder (Note 3), pp. 73–74.

27. Kidder (Note 3), p. 132, Pl. 19–20. Maringer (Note 12), Fig. 5.

28. Kidder (Note 7), pp. 132–133.

29. Maringer (Note 12), p. 137.

30. R. Kuwayama, *The general report on the research of the site of Edoyama in Kami-sueyoshi, Kanagawa Prefecture* (In Japanese). *Jinruigaku Zasshi* 57 (1942), pp. 444–57. Kidder (note 3), pp. 95–130, Fig. 30.

tools: spades, rakes, hoes, and huge paddle-like clogs for crossing the marshy fields, further stone and bone fishing equipment, and finally bronze weapons, imported from the continent, like double-edged swords, daggers, spearheads, and halberd-blades.³¹

The pottery of the Yayoi-Period is for the most part wheel-made and thus limited to far fewer shapes than Jōmon pottery.³²

Tumuli-Period. In this protohistoric period pit-, surface and raised dwellings were all in vogue. The pit-houses were almost all square in plan with four post-holes and the cooking stoves were stone or clay formations along one wall. The surface-dwellings of the wealthy were normally single-storeyed, often with a hipped-gable roof, or perhaps as frequently gabled with overhanging barge-boards through which the ridge-pole was inserted, and two purlins provided extra support.³³

The most detailed source for the way farms, town dwellings, nobility residences and religious structures looked is offered by the clay house models (*haniwa*) from the mounds of large tombs; other sources are bronze mirrors, in some cases, illustrating houses. The house models exhibit rural buildings, house or barn, built with posts and poles, mud-plastered, thatch-roofed, as well as upper-class town buildings.³⁴

The style of ancient dwellings is still today preserved in many farmhouses and Shintō shrines. Tradition presides in Japan along with modern architecture.

31. Kidder (Note 3), Fig. 29.

32. Ibid., Fig. 30.

33. J. Gotō, *The sites in Sapporo City and its neighbouring* (In Japanese). *Kōkōgaku Zasshi* 27 (1937), pp. 585-619; J. Gotō, *On the pitdwelling in Ebetsu Town, Ishikari Province*. *Kōkōgaku Zasshi* 25 (1935), 87-107.

34. National Museum in Tokyo, *Atlas of the Japanese Archaeology*. Pl. 94-95. Kidder (Note 3), Fig. 33.