

# 16

## The commons in prehistory: The case of Japan

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### Abstract

The notion of the commons derives originally from material things, such as grazing land, held and used in common by a group. I have broadened the idea of a commons to include a range of important skills, practices and resources that people share. I would also see commoning as a process that helps maintain access to vital aspects of life, operating best when groups are relatively egalitarian. I have used the case of the Jomon of Japan to explore how such egalitarian groups might work, holding in common knowledge about vital resources, such as plants or fish, but also aesthetic products such as fine pottery or stone circles created through cosmological engagements. Human history has often been written as a story of progress and such progress is often seen as a small group of people gaining power over the majority, eroding the commons in the process. The Jomon show that commoning can exist over many millennia, maintaining the egalitarian ethos of the group and this occurs even when Japanese groups were in close contact with people in mainland East Asia organised in a more hierarchical manner. The Jomon show that many human histories are possible and that we need to broaden the scope of the narratives told about the past.

### Introduction

In this chapter, I want to explore the idea of the commons and its utility in thinking about past cultural forms. My use of the term commons differs somewhat from its most usual usage, so that it is necessary to explore what I mean. In English usage and in law, most often the word 'commons' refers to shared physical resources, such as grazing land, which exist in distinction to privately owned resources. People had rights to use things like shared grazing land and a duty not to overuse them. Over-exploitation results in the so-called 'tragedy of the commons' and can arise from pressure on a common resource through overpopulation, but equally can come about when personal advantage is placed before the general good, as when, for example, someone puts more cows than they are allowed on public grazing land, leading to the decline of the grassland (Hardin 1968). Hardin's famous 'tragedy of the commons' is based on the premise that selfishness and the pursuit of individual advantage are natural human traits, so that compromising the commons is inevitable. Important counterarguments to Hardin's are found in the work of Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990; Ostrom and Chang 2012), who cites numerous examples of the careful joint management of common resources existing over the long term. Others have pointed out that increased use of a commons

can in fact benefit everyone: greater usage of Wikipedia helps enrich its content and scope. In all such usages and debates the commons are open not enclosed, public rather than private, shared not individually owned. Within a Japanese context, it has been pointed out that a number of ecosystems have been created and maintained by long-term and cooperative human management. For instance, the ecotone known as satoyama exists as a mosaic of habitats encompassing paddy fields, grasslands and woodlands. People have worked between these habitats, for instance taking fallen leaves from the forests to act as fertiliser in the paddy fields, over long periods of time. Recently a combination of rural depopulation, the move to chemical fertilisers and loss of skills needed to integrate these habitats has meant that areas designated as satoyama have decreased markedly, a case of a commons declining due to underuse (Miyama and Shimada 2018).

The idea of the commons links physical resources with the politics and constitution of the group. For me, one of the benefits of the idea of the commons is its political dimension, exploring the balance between group provision and responsibility as against private benefit.

I wish to use the idea of the commons more broadly and to include not just physical resources, but also the technologies, techniques, practices and knowledges needed to use them. Indeed, I would make little distinction between a physical resource, such as grazing land, and knowledgeable engagement with it: understanding when to graze animals, the size of the herd and for how long are all things that develop as people husband both the animals and the land that nourishes them. Such knowledge develops over the long term, is distributed across the group, is handed down to be used strategically. A herder today can vary their herd size depending on whether this is a dry, hot year or a cool, wet one, whether an important feast is coming up or if there is a suspicion that the spirits of the land are disturbed in some way. Common knowledge is flexible, strategic and experimental, not a set of techniques to be applied by rote. The land, the animals and knowledgeable human engagement are all part of the commons, all part of developing cultural projects and desires. If the commons is defined by combined material elements, skills and knowledges, it is not to be defined mainly in terms of scarcity, as Hardin attempted when emphasising the tragedy of the commons, nor is it easily quantified.

In such a broad view, the commons becomes a process, not a physical thing, as much a verb as a noun. The commons has spatial extent, as determined by its physical properties, but also temporal shape, as relevant skills, knowledges and their material referents unfold over time.

The commons is an important element of the material engagements of human life, with, for instance, clay, wood, metal, cows, wheat or rice. The commons is not purely shaped by human desires and needs, but rather through all its participants, so that the needs and habits of cows are important, as are the properties of clay or metal when worked and heated. The commons is a complex field with multiple actors and is always unstable, changing and potentially creative. There is a spontaneity about the commons as process, so that novelty is always arising: it is an engine of creativity and alteration, for better or worse from the point of view of humans. People are also altered by the commons—all our senses, skills and desires are educated by the cultural world in which we live. We create the commons and it in turn creates us. Some expansion or sequestering of the commons shifts our powers to think, to feel, to see, to relate to one another, to love. The commons starts and ends with the group: it is always political. The commons is also always a process, a verb not a noun, the means through which life unfolds.

Following this line of thought, the commons is not just about pragmatics, not purely about how many head of cattle we can graze on an area of land; it also concerns models of the universe, of cause and effect, of how people can place themselves within a universe made up of spiritual forces in addition

to what we might see as physical ones. The commons is enacted not just through the *chaîne opératoire* of stone tool making, but through ritual forms and observances. Ritual helps us understand how the world works, and generates understanding, immersion, alienation or transcendence. Making a living is pragmatic, requiring us to think what is possible or necessary, what is the relationship between people and other entities, or the balance between the group and the individual. But for some time there has been a reaction against the standard Childean model of human history being powered by three revolutions (Neolithic, the urban and the industrial), where history is powered by technology and technological change, which in turn shifts society from an early state of equality to rank or class-based societies. But of course ritual forms are central elements of technology, guiding human action in the everyday and at significant moments of the calendar.

In consequence, each commons is based on a model of reality, which specifies in very broad terms whether the world is animistic or mechanistic, how far people are a separate creation from everything else or whether everything can be seen as sentient in some manner. Such models of reality always contains a morality and an ethics: how should we act towards other people, what duty of care or of exploitation do we owe to the world? The answer to these questions will be very different if we think we live in a mechanistic, uncaring universe without gods and spirits or in an animate world where spirits of things and of the human dead are spread throughout the material aspects of the universe. A mechanistic universe is ripe for exploitation, a spirit-infused one requires care and respect.

The process of the commons creates social value: things that are necessary to live, in a physical and emotional sense. It is only relatively recently that value has come to be viewed in transactional terms, as money or some form of currency that exists as an objective and agreed-upon measure of value. Most forms of social value are best thought about in terms of quality, primarily the quality of life as understood by people and all their significant others. A healthy commons will maximise value for the greatest number.

No commons is ever totally held in common; there are always distinctions made in who has access to what sorts of knowledge, skills and resources, whether these distinctions are made through gender, class or ethnicity. Or, to put the same point another way, no one in society holds all the skills and capabilities that exist within that society: there is women's knowledge and work, as there are tasks and skills restricted to men. On the other hand, the commons is impossible to extinguish, so that even in societies in which private rights are strong, such as our own, there is the spontaneous generation of activities and effects, beyond the power of any elite to control. No commons are entirely positive or negative, they can lead to exploitation or to care.

The advantage of the commons for archaeologists is that ideas of control, desire and power can be given material form, through looking at landscapes, material culture and the remains of people, plants and animals, and thinking about the sets of skills and processes which shaped all of them and the politics surrounding such processes.

Let us now think about the case of the commons through a particular example, one of the most intriguing in global prehistory: that of Jomon Japan. In the brief account that follows, I am aware of the dangers of essentialising and simplifying the Jomon, making it appear a single entity or approach to the world. Much recent Japanese work has shown how much variability there is over both time and space. It is very hard to give a true sense of this in the account that follows.

## The Jomon as commons

The most conventional view of prehistory, one which many are now reacting against (e.g. Graeber and Wengrow 2021), is that derived from Gordon Childe and others, as mentioned above. For Childe, human history was revolutionary, with three revolutions powering progress: the Neolithic, the urban and the industrial. Of these three, the farming revolution was primary and fundamental, leading to sedentism, surplus, superior craft production and ultimately private property and the state. In the terms I am developing, Childe's view of the Neolithic was that it brought about the severe compromise of the commons (not that he uses the term), as, over time, people started to own land, develop a stress on surplus and means of exchange that came to emphasise wealth. Of recent years, the Neolithic revolution has been much critiqued, often making the point that few places see a sudden change to farming, that the process of domestication was frequently long and drawn out, or that changes previously associated with farming, such as sedentism and pottery, developed either before or long after farming did (e.g. Denham et al. 2007). The so-called origins of agriculture have been freighted with enormous historical significance, moving humans away from an original state of equality and eventually giving us all the aspects of modern life (Mizoguchi 2019).

We can question what farming was—the classic definition centred on the controlled husbandry of domesticated species—partly because many early modes of food-getting combined wild and domesticated forms, or cultivated wild forms of grasses especially, which only later became domesticated. Nowhere we know of does farming develop rapidly or with immediate consequences, so that it is very rarely revolutionary. China is a classic case of a slow move towards rice cultivation in the south and millet in the north, both happening so slowly that the point at which a group became agricultural is impossible to pinpoint. Systems of getting food are unfolding processes, only rarely subject to revolutionary change, often occasioned by a new crop or, more often, outsiders coming into an area. Nor can we say that the advantages of farming were so self-evident that whenever people knew of agriculture they would adopt it: here Japan is the classic case.

The Japanese islands were never isolated from the mainland to the west and north, so that Kyushu had regular contact with the Korean Peninsula and Hokkaido enjoyed links with Sakhalin in the north (Figure 16.1). From the Palaeolithic onwards, common tool types are found in the Japanese archipelago and the mainland, with obsidian from Hokkaido found in Sakhalin and that from southern sources occurring in the Tongsamdong shell midden in south-eastern Korea (Imamura 1996:213). Shell middens are found along the coast of China and up to Japan and north into Sakhalin and east Russia. The most discussed ancient artefacts linking what are now China, Russia and Japan are the world's oldest pots, being some 20,000 years old in China and currently some 4000 years younger in Japan—although a single find can change this chronology, being found also in eastern Russia. Such sharing indicates regular early seafaring connecting a huge area at an early date (Gaffney 2021:290–293). Shared pottery technology does not exist in cultural isolation, but indicates similarities in boiling and steaming technologies in both places, as well as what is now eastern Russia. It is likely that vessels of fired clay diffused through a network of relationships throughout the region, by people able to travel by sea even at the height of the last glaciation. Connections across the Japan Sea are ancient and longstanding, with no reason to believe these ended in the Holocene. When agriculture gradually crystallised out of earlier broad-spectrum practices in China some 6000 BC, a fact most likely known to contemporary inhabitants of Japan given the long contacts across the Sea of Japan, the Jomon groups chose to go their own way, refusing agriculture for many thousands of years while receiving a range of material culture from Korea and China (Hudson et al. 2021). There was eventually something of a farming revolution in Japan, but this did not occur until around 800 BC (the Yayoi period), many millennia after paddy field rice occurred in China and Korea.



**Figure 16.1: The major regions of Japan.**

Source: Author supplied.

For much of the Holocene, Japanese groups lived on wild plants, animals, fish and shellfish, resisting cultivation practices, as a result of a set of deliberate choices. From the point of view I am developing here, they were preserving the commons.

Let us look in a little more detail at Jomon culture. First of all, the Jomon period lasted for an immensely long time, some 13,000 years in all, so it is obvious much changed over those millennia; it also had considerable geographical variation from Kyushu in the south to Hokkaido in the north. For long periods in the final glacial and early Holocene, settlements were ephemeral and stone tool types suited for hunting indicate small populations that were very mobile (Imamura 1996:56–57, 88–91; Mizoguchi 2020:8) (Table 16.1).

**Table 16.1: Chronology Jomon to Kofun.**

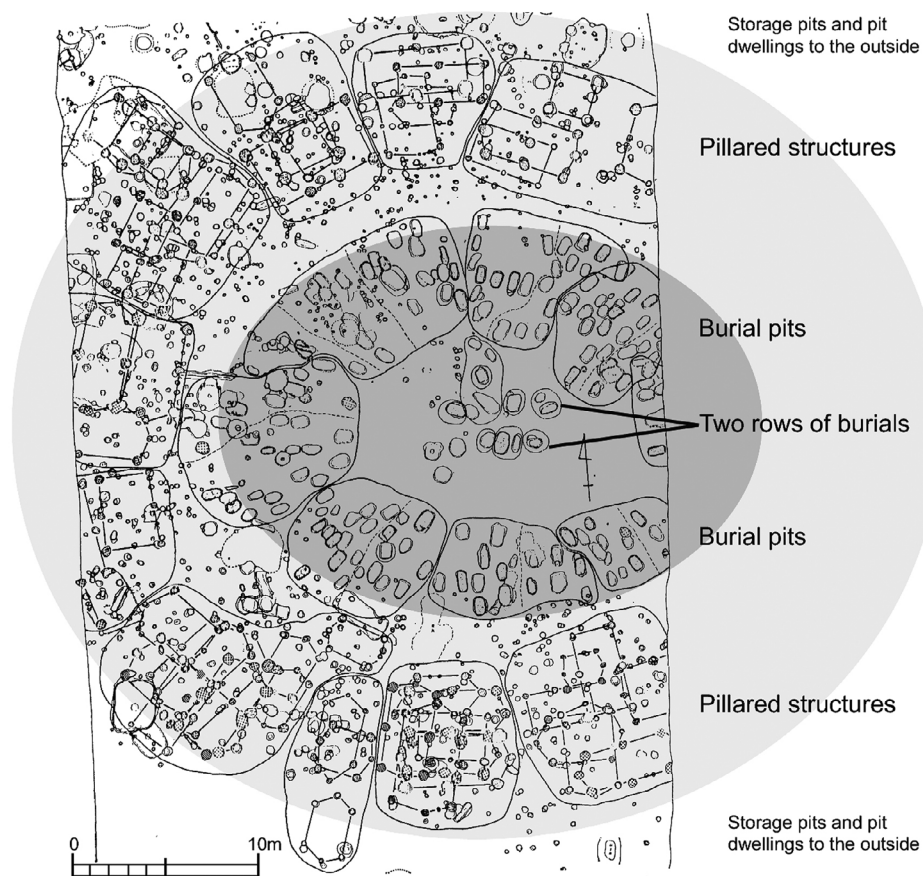
Initial and Incipient Jomon	13500–5000 BC
Early Jomon	5000–3500 BC
Middle Jomon	3500–2470 BC
Late and Final Jomon	2470–800 BC
Yayoi	800 BC–250 AD
Kofun	250–538 AD

Source: Author's summary.

By the end of the Initial phase and into the Middle Jomon people settled, with some larger settlements, probably lived in all year round, with a series of smaller, special-purpose sites, these differentiated from one another by specialist tool kits. It is possible to recognise a repeated pattern of a central large settlement, surrounded by smaller ones, with each of these combinations forming a territorial and social unit (Mizoguchi 2020:8). There is evidence of burning the landscape in a controlled manner. Jomon landscapes were ones without domesticated plants and animals, or indeed agriculture, but they were highly managed and regulated by people with very deep pools of knowledge.

The larger permanently occupied settlements often have a circular structure. The Nishida site (Figure 16.2) in its Middle Jomon phase is typical: at the centre of the circle are burials around which are pillared structures which might either be for the exposure of the dead or food storage. In a last outer ring are storage facilities and pit dwellings. Many settlements seem to have their circular structures divided into radial segments, indicating perhaps that a lineage of the living and the dead occupied each segment (Mizoguchi 2020:9). On occasions, radial segments are marked by stones and these can be aligned with significant points on the horizon, such as the setting sun at a solstice or a prominent local mountain. A settlement combines several lineages with no indication of differences in status between them within a strong cosmological orientation.





**Figure 16.2: The Nishida site, Middle Jomon phase (Iwate prefecture).**

Source: After Mizoguchi (2020:Fig. 2).



**Figure 16.3: Jomon pots excavated at the Komakino site.**

Source: Author supplied.

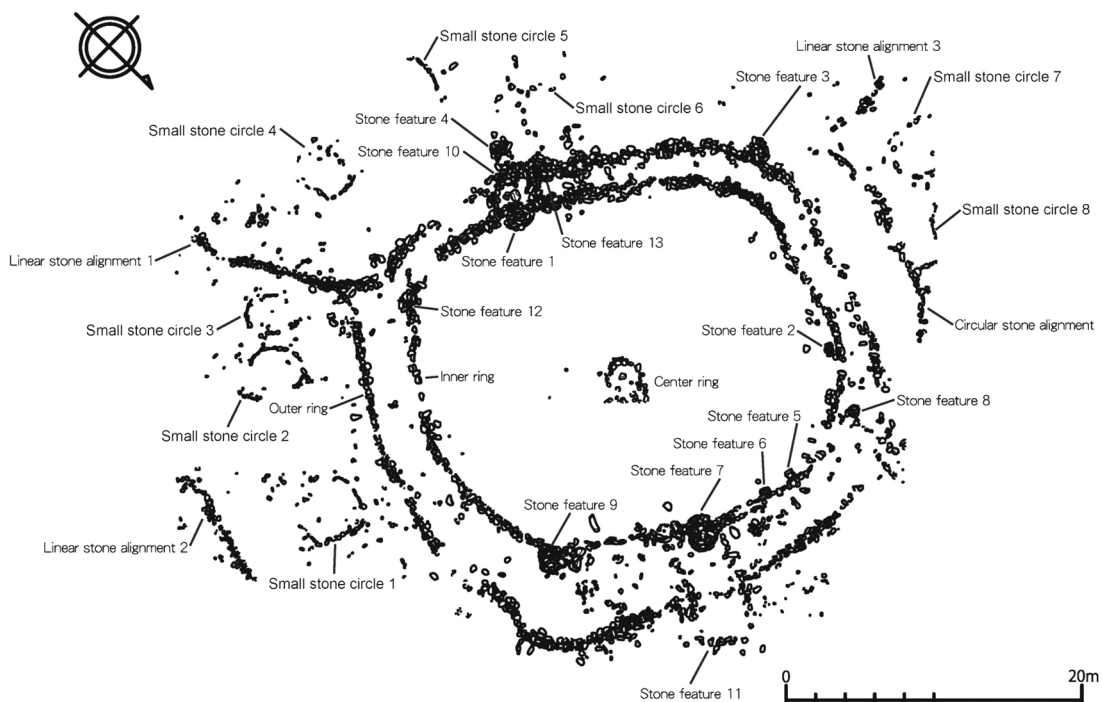
The strong spatial structure of the settlement gave structure and pattern to the activities of the living whose repeated actions would have helped shape the group in which they lived, with mundane daily activities of food processing, eating, sleeping or raising children on the outside and recognition of the ancestors towards the middle, perhaps with the exposed bodies of the recently dead in between. Children brought up in a circular settlement internalised a series of rules of correct action—perhaps including how to move through the parts of the site belonging to their lineage, what you were allowed to do in each circle and the manner in which the settlement as a whole was oriented on features of the landscape or the sky. A series of both pragmatic and more cosmological strictures were written into arms, legs and bodies as children moved and acted, becoming not something people knew, but something they were. And, of course, there would also have been movement across the landscape and between the large sites and smaller ones. It might have been that the big and small settlements had different social compositions, with a good proportion of a lineage living together in a radial segment of a larger site, with their different mixtures of age, gender and kinship affiliation in the smaller ones. Some sites might have been camps for hunting, especially those at the base of wooded mountains home to deer and other animals, and others for plant gathering. Without slipping into clichéd notions that men hunted and women gathered, there might have been differences in gender and age groups coming together for the various activities. Such regular shuffling of people would have led to a range of affiliations and affective networks.

If the activities necessary for making a living created forms of mobility which mixed and complicated groups, then the vibrant ritual lives of middle and later Jomon communities held them together. The extraordinary pots of the Middle Jomon had applied clay motifs added to their surfaces which combined the abstract with human and animal figures, as well as occasional phallic designs (Figure 16.3). A great variety of pottery style zones have been seen across Japan, distinguished by stylistic variations in pots. The heads and bodies of quasi-human creatures on pots may have been seen as emerging out of another dimension beyond the wall of the pot. Some figures are probably engaged in ritual activities such as dancing. Further links with lifeworlds may have been embodied in the undulating rims of the pots that some have compared with salmon tails—the salmon being a crucial food on the west of the islands especially (Steinhaus et al. 2020). Pots were used for storage and cooking, transforming raw into cooked states in containers constructed from important figures of this world or some other. Not only was food transformed, but also the figures on the pots do not fit into simple categories of species, so that transformation occurred in human and animal bodies, or it might be better to say that the strict division we tend to make between human bodies and those of other species did not exist for Jomon people, perhaps indicating a rather more animistic world, a point I will come back to.

A further feature of note in our whistle-stop tour of the Jomon, and again focusing on the Middle Jomon after 3500 BC, are the so-called *dogū* figures. Fired clay figures have been made, used, broken and deposited since the start of the Jomon period, but their numbers gradually increase so that many of the roughly 18,000 figures known date from the Middle and Late Jomon periods (Kaner 2009:16). The greatest concentrations are found in central and northern Honshu, with a number also from southern Hokkaido. A good percentage of the figures appear human, many with female attributes, commonly with ornate designs such as coiled snakes. A lot of attention was paid to the face with prominent eyes, sometimes round mouths and occasionally well-modelled noses. Many figures wear clothing and some have lines which might indicate tattoos. In the Late Jomon, clay masks were made and indeed some of the figurines of all periods may have been wearing masks. There is greater abstraction through time and in the Late Jomon some very large figures were made. Numbers wax and wane: the end of the Middle Jomon sees a decline, but from the middle of the Late Jomon large numbers were made and deposited. *Dogū* overlap in date with the advent of rice

agriculture and their large numbers in some areas have been seen as a form of resistance to the new ways (Kaner 2009:18, 24–39). Not only were *dogū* made in recognisable forms, but they were broken in standard ways, with some having head and arms removed and others various parts of the torso and legs (Harada 2009:Fig. 43).

Quite what the role or meaning of *dogū* for various Jomon people might have been has been much discussed, with common interpretations circling around the idea of an Earth Mother or Mother Goddess, due in part to the prevalence of the female form. It is worth noting that the two Chinese characters for *dogū* represent earth and spirit. The fact that these figurines, like Jomon pots, were made from the earth and potentially embodied with spirit again hints at an animistic world, wherein aspects of the landscape we might take to be inanimate, such as clay, were seen by Jomon groups as living in some way, to be given extra energies through forming into the human body or a pot, hardened by fire and then sometimes broken with the pieces distributed across Jomon sites. The lively world of the Jomon did not respect boundaries between people and other aspects of that world, so that people put a lot of effort into recreating parts of the world to use, break and distribute in graves, pits and other contexts. It has been argued that *dogū* emphasised the female form and may have been involved in rites emphasising reproduction, an emphasis reinforced by stone rods which may have been phalluses, as well as stone tools shaped as genitalia (Mizoguchi 2013:Chapter 5). Reproduction encourages a cyclical view of reality, an emphasis on replacement and generation, contained perhaps also within an ethics of care, points we will return to below. The seasonal nature of site use in the Jomon, with gatherings at large permanent sites at some times, alternating with movement to smaller, special purpose camps at others, might have encouraged notions of repetition and cycles.



**Figure 16.4: The Komakino stone circles with a small central ring, two larger concentric circles with hints of a fourth ring outside of those and a series of stone alignments oriented on the movement of the sun or prominent features of the landscape.**

Source: After Kodama (2003:Fig. 13.7).



Clay was obviously crucial to the Jomon world, with changing uses over time, and so too was stone. Many circles and some rectangles of stone are found across the Jomon area. There are so-called 'sundial' circles with a vertical stone in the centre and stones laid flat radiating out from it.

Much more complicated stone circles are also known, such as those from the broader site complex at Komakino within Aomori city (Figure 16.4). On a slope overlooking the sea an artificial terrace was cut into the hillside some 1500 BC. On this terrace were constructed a series of stone circles and other stone features, indicating a series of activities perhaps stretching over hundreds of years. The stone circles were constructed from around 2,400 boulders from the Arakawa riverbed which was some 70 m below the artificial terrace. The cutting of the terrace and the movement of the stones would have necessitated a considerable amount of labour. The site was much more complicated than that, made up of more than 100 burials (both barrows and graves) containing pottery coffins and miniature pottery vessels. In addition, animal and human figures in clay have been found on the gentle slope to the east of the circles. These include more than 400 triangular-shaped stones, also found at other neighbouring sites. There is also a rich midden area and a nearby spring (Kodama 2003).

In the worsening climate of the Late Jomon after around 1500 BC large permanent settlements disappear and it is assumed that people became more mobile, distributing their lives and activities across a range of camps. The coming into being of small mobile groups would have had implications for broader group cohesion, so that large ritual sites such as Komakino were created as crucial gathering points where the ancestral dead were buried and then honoured and observances carried out at important times of the solar or lunar calendar. Labour needed to construct the stone circles would also have helped construct the group, as would smaller-scale activities, such as burials, the deposition of triangular stones or clay figurines. The group worked with a variety of substances, minimally clay and stones, but more likely also a range of organics now hard to detect.

If we compare the Nishida and Komakino sites we can see that in both the Middle and Late Jomon the spatial arrangement of sites was complex and meant that human activities were structured, as bodies were educated to move and act in appropriate ways on each of the sites. Such sites derive from, and help strengthen, a commons: a mode of distributed intelligence that guided group action across the landscape. But we can also see that forms of group intelligence were never static and always changing, with the reorientation of the landscape in the Late Jomon there was a major set of changes, which took place not just at one site, but across the landscape as a whole. The Middle to Late Jomon saw the shift from one commons to another, with no evidence of hierarchy in houses or burials, indicating that everyone had general access to the physical and psychological skills and resources they needed for life.

## **The Yayoi, agriculture and the compromise of the commons**

Agriculture appeared relatively suddenly in Japan perhaps around 800 BC (although rice and millet had been known for some time). The question to be posed here is: did agriculture destroy the commons and, if so, how? In historic periods, Japan is well known for growing rice in paddy fields and still today Japan grows enough rice to feed its own population of 126 million people, a remarkable feat given the relatively paucity of lowland areas suitable for intensive agriculture. Paddy field cultivation starts in the Yayoi period, some 800 BC.

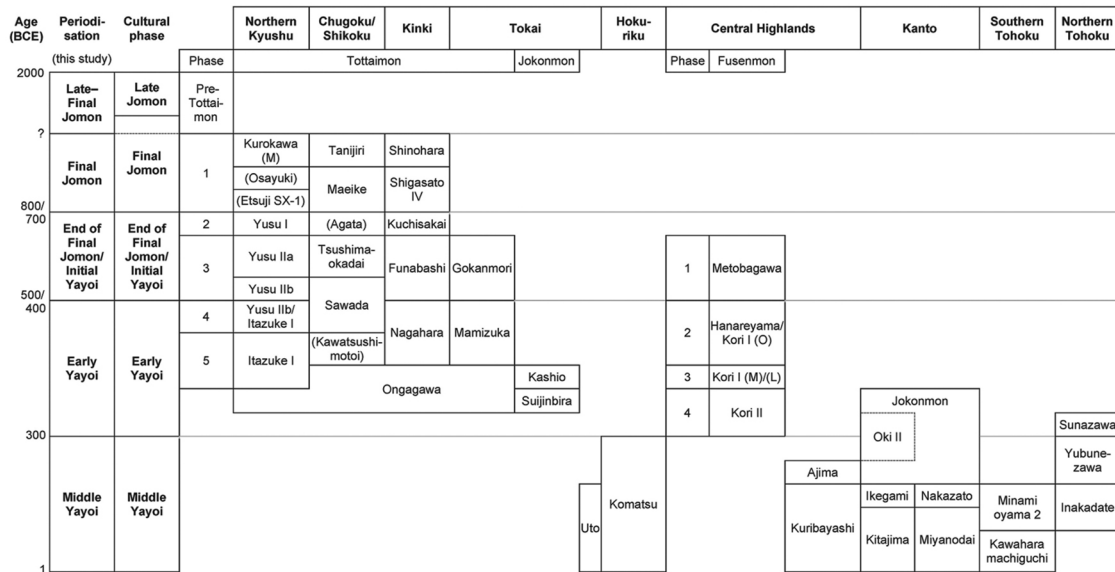
Farming of rice and millet without irrigation started in Korea around 3000 BC, broadly contemporary with the Middle Jomon. There is no evidence of such a phase of dry-field farming in Japan as yet, although claims have been made on the basis of possible cereal inclusions in pottery back into the Middle Jomon; these are undermined by the lack of evidence for widespread occurrence of domesticated grains on archaeological sites (Endo and Leipe 2022; Mizoguchi 2013:54). If farming on the Korean Peninsula was known, but not adopted, this indicates that it held no attraction for Jomon people for perhaps two millennia, probably because it did not fit in with people's deeply held values concerning the nature of social relations and the place of humans within an active cosmos. As the final Jomon unfolded, however, from around 1000 to 500 BC, the cultivation of rice began, so that by the later date it is likely that rice was grown in paddy fields, which required considerable labour and also brought high returns.

The process by which paddy field agriculture enters Japan is complicated and debated. There was undoubtedly some movement of people from southern Korea into northern Kyushu, the point of the Japanese archipelago closest to Korea. Conversely there are Japanese assemblages of the Yayoi period found in Korea, so that movement was two-way at least since the Early Jomon period, when pottery changes in similar ways in Korea and Kyushu, with Japanese obsidian also being found in the Tongsamdong shell midden in south-eastern Korea (Imamura 1996:213). In many ways the modern nation-state distinction between Korea and Japan may be historically unhelpful here with the sea being a bridge as much as a barrier to competent seafarers, with shared elements but considerable distinctions on both sides of the strait.

A recent wide-ranging study of impressions of grains in pottery shows some of the complexity of the introduction of both rice and millet, together with their subsequent spread from Kyushu into Honshu (Endo and Leipe 2022). During the five phases of use of Tottaimon pottery assemblages, spanning the final Jomon through to Early Yayoi, rice and two sorts of millet are found in small amounts, quickly increasing to a dominant crop in the case of rice.

The grain impression study (Endo and Leipe 2022) provides evidence to argue that the three newcomer crops (rice, foxtail millet and broomcorn millet) arrived together most probably from the Korean Peninsula. Choices of crops were selective however, as barley and wheat were part of the crop repertoire of Mumun period farmers on the Korean Peninsula by the time arable agriculture spread to Japan, but no evidence of them exists either from impressions or charred remains in Kyushu or Honshu until the end of the Kofun period.

Once established in northern Kyushu, the rice and millets spread eastwards with Tottaimon pottery as far as the central Tokai region by the end of the Initial Yayoi period, around 500 BC (Figure 16.5). The Initial Yayoi period in the Central Highlands shows complications and only millet was grown here, partly because creating paddy fields was more difficult in the Highlands and maybe also because these were indigenous Jomon populations rather than incomers. Rice-based farming then spread across the western part of the archipelago as far as central Tokai, accompanied by Ongagawa-type pottery during the Early Yayoi period, arriving in southern Kanto by the Middle Yayoi period after 300 BC. The rice-centred agriculture in Hokuriku is also suggested to have appeared during the Middle Yayoi period. Influenced by the millet-centred agriculture in the Central Highlands, a mixed rice–millet cultivation system spread to northern Kanto during the Middle Yayoi period. There are clear indications that agricultural practices focused on rice appeared in northern Tohoku during the Early Yayoi period. People who made pottery similar to Ongagawa pottery might have helped establish rice cultivation (Endo and Leipe 2022).

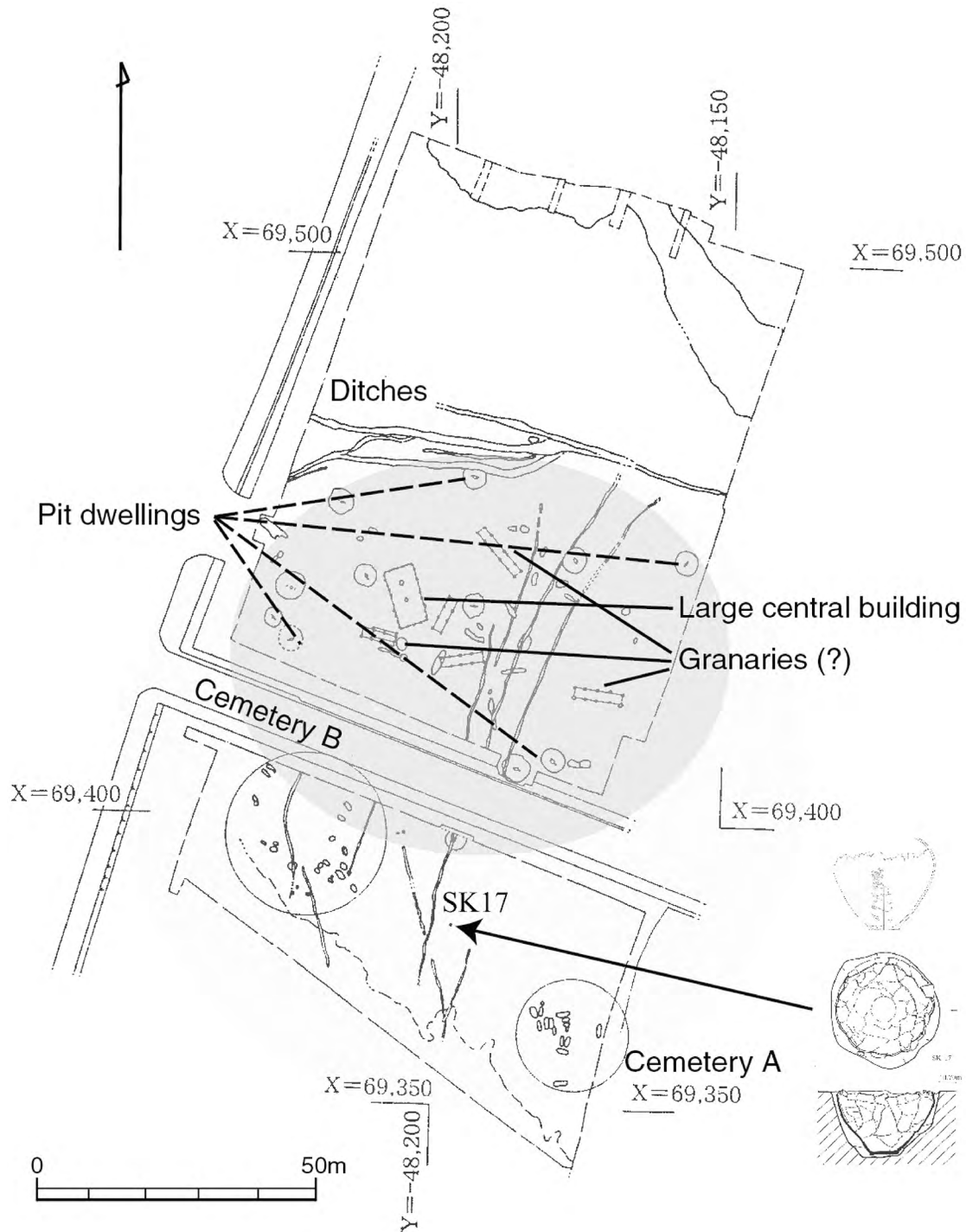


**Figure 16.5: The detailed chronology from the Late Jomon to Middle Yayoi showing the main pottery types and some important sites across Japan.**

Source: From Endo and Leipe (2022:Fig. 3).

In sum, we can see cereal cultivation spread across Kyushu, Shikoku and Honshu islands during the Yayoi period and continuing subsequently, with the spread possibly faster in western Japan than eastern regions, where the Jomon relationship with the landscape resisted change. Much later, in the period of state formation from the seventh century AD rice had become the food of the elite, extracted from commoners through taxes, so that those who farmed themselves eating mainly millets, wheat and barley, supplemented by wild foods. We will look briefly at these later periods below.

Returning to the Yayoi period, we can see that there was a complicated story concerning the spread of rice and millet, with the former becoming the dominant crop in many areas by the Middle Yayoi, but millet also important at higher altitudes. The adoption of these new crops was only possible through wholesale changes to people's lives, with the dispersed Jomon pattern of a large permanent site and smaller camps for specific functions collapsing down into permanent settlements near paddy fields, some of which were not far from earlier Jomon sites (Mizoguchi 2019). Movements across the landscape changed, but so too did the seasonal round, with much of life now focused on rice production between spring and autumn. Paddy field rice is famously labour intensive, but is equally known to be productive. The basic sequence of a rice cultivator's year can be summarised as follows. In the spring, seedlings are planted in nurseries, while the main paddy fields are ploughed and weeded. Transplanting then occurs from the nurseries to the paddy field in late spring, followed by regular weeding and tending. Harvest occurs in the autumn, with large-scale drying, processing and storage of rice either in pits or granaries raised from the ground. The rice can be eaten from harvest onwards and through the winter. It is possible that wild foods were added to the diet from at least spring onwards. Mizoguchi (2019) has argued that rice was initially readily adopted because the main work on this crop fell into periods of the year where the workload was somewhat lighter for Jomon people. However, the needs of rice soon came to predominate, pushing out other activities, changing relations between men and women, allowing for a steep rise in population, perhaps because a larger labour force was needed in the paddy fields, and fairly soon the breakdown of the long period of equality and commitment to the commons found over the millennia of the Jomon period.



**Figure 16.6: The Yayoi settlement at Etsuji village, Fukuoka prefecture, with a large rectangular building and granaries surrounded by a circle of round pit houses and two cemeteries to the south.**

Source: After Mizoguchi (2013:Fig. 5.1).

The balance between change and continuity is made more interesting by the fact that some of the earliest Yayoi settlements were laid out on a circular plan in the same way that preceding Jomon ones had been, showing some initial attempt to preserve known ways in the face of novelty. A prime example is the site of Etsuji near present-day Kasuya township, in the Fukuoka prefecture in northern Kyushu, established in the Initial Yayoi period. Etsuji is a hamlet on slightly raised ground within a floodplain where several rivers met, creating a naturally swampy landscape which was an ideal habitat for early rice cultivation. Reaping knives have been found, indicating rice harvesting took place, but no paddy fields contemporary with the settlement are known. Obsidian arrowheads indicate hunting took place, quite possibly in the nearby hills. This had been an area of dense Jomon inhabitation, with a Late Jomon pit dwelling only 300 m to the north of the Yayoi site and a scattering of Jomon artefacts 500 m east and a series of pit dwellings occupied between the Late and Final Jomon phases some 600 m south-east. Such habitations had probably been sustained by combinations of hunting and the cultivation or gathering of wild plants in the wetter lowlands (Mizoguchi 2013:56).

Initial Yayoi Etsuji had a circular plan defined by round pit dwellings arranged in a circle with a large central rectangular building and a number of granaries in the middle (Figure 16.6)—although its full plan has not definitely been revealed by the excavation. The settlement was occupied for some length of time as there is evidence of rebuilding of new structures adjacent to older ones. While the smaller rectangular buildings probably had floors raised off the ground and were granaries, the largest building (5.5 m wide and 10.3 m long) may have been communally used. From the Middle Yayoi onwards, such buildings have been connected to elite burial grounds, being perhaps used for activities honouring the ancestors (Mizoguchi 2013:57–58). Mizoguchi (2013:58) wonders whether the activities honouring the ancestors were restricted to only part of the group, perhaps indicating that some lineages or moieties within the community were now able to control the ritual life of the group to some extent. The fact that the largest building was surrounded by granaries storing rice might have helped associate the dead ancestors with the new basis of life, which was rice. Furthermore, the structure of the various buildings at Etsuji—the circular pit dwellings, the rectangular granaries and the large rectangular buildings—directly recalled types of construction for these buildings known from the Middle Mumun period on the Korean Peninsula.

A further feature is intriguing. Jomon settlements, especially in eastern Japan, seem to have had a segmentary structure, with indications that the community who lived in them was divided into two parts. The division of burials at Etsuji into two groups (Cemetery A and B in Figure 16.6) further echo such a social distinction. Mizoguchi describes the two sets of burials as follows:

Cluster A, the eastern cluster, consisted of thirteen composite wooden coffin burials, one pit burial (also possibly a wooden coffin burial) and two jar burials (in one, a large globular jar was used as a coffin, while the other's shape-type could not be determined). The graves were generally laid out to form several linear alignments. Burial cluster B, the western cluster, consisted of nine composite wooden coffin burials and fifteen pit burials. The latter might have included some composite wooden coffin burials, but it is impossible to identify them exactly due to the severe disturbance of the upper layers. The graves appear to have been situated in a circular layout. (Mizoguchi 2013:62).

The circular arrangement in Cluster B appears to be following a Jomon tradition, whereas the linear arrangement in A links to Korean traditions. Are we dealing here with an immigrant and local group, within a community that as a whole is embracing novelty, living in a settlement in which the structures echoed Korean architecture, while the circular structure of the site continued Jomon ways of doing things? People were both breaking with the Jomon past and also sticking with it. Overall, novelty is considerable, containing within it the germ of a new society in which the old



ethics of equality broke down, leading to more hierarchical modes of action by the later Yayoi and certainly into the Kofun period. Mizoguchi (2013:Chapter 12) has argued that the flexibility of Jomon relations, where groups moved to various sites in parts of the landscape with particular plants, animals and fish, which they exploited before returning to the major settlement with food they had procured, made hierarchy an undesirable option. Jomon landscapes were not just or mainly pragmatic ones, but were endowed with spirits of the land, living things and humans, or, most likely a combination of all three of these. Jomon landscapes were ritualised, with a series of shrines and features, large and small, constructed across it, as we have seen briefly. This very spatially varied landscape would have been used following a complicated calendar, with observances happening in the high hills, on the plains and by the coast at times of the year significant to each locale. These complications over time and space would have been hard to control by any one part of the group, even if they had conceived a desire to do.

With the concentration of group activities into the rice paddy field (and indeed through the cultivation of millet), following the spring to autumn calendar of planting to harvesting, the time and space of Yayoi communities was simplified and regularised, giving all aspects of the group an interest in a good rice harvest. Spatial and temporal concentration of pragmatic activity and, perhaps especially ritual actions, was either easier to control by one clan or lineage, or at least allowed the group to think that such a ritual specialisation would have been desirable. By the late Yayoi and into the Kofun periods, a bit before 250 CE, particular lineages may have been deemed efficacious, so that at least some ritual activity focused on the burial mounds of such a lineage. This focus resulted in the construction of ever larger and more formalised burial mounds, best known through the famous keyhole shape of the *kofun*, but also developed into continued activity indicated by deposited stones, shells or the clay *haniwa* figures in a variety of human forms. The power of some ancestors were needed to guarantee and maintain the fertility of the world, both for humans and for rice, whose life cycles seem to have become entangled in the Yayoi period, so that jars for storing rice were also used to bury the human dead (Mizoguchi 2013).

The long equality of the Jomon came to an end, seeing the decline of a commons that persisted for more than 10 millennia. The death of the commons and the redistribution of power and resources into fewer hands (it might have only been the Kofun period elite that ate rice) might not have resulted from the fact that agriculture could generate storable surpluses to be controlled and used by a section of the community, but rather because the responsibility for maintaining the order and fertility of the world was taken into a few hands. Internal differentiation within a group was mirrored by a fragmented social landscape in which clan fought clan, with one group occasionally and rather temporarily aspiring to imperial status, where the overall ruler had the status of a god, in the ultimate indication of the death of the commons. Those who were guarantors of fertility also regulated the flows of the increasing numbers and ranges of prestigious items both produced in Japan and overseas, especially China. The world of the commons derived from the quality of relations between people and also between people and transcendent forces. Quality existed through the respect and honour shown in relations with all significant others, a state of extended reciprocity. As the first millennium CE unfolded, relations of quality gave way to those of quantity, where exchanges were designed to be unequal, to extract for the few the labour of the many. Without reciprocity the commons cannot exist, so that profit is the negation of the commons.

## Final thoughts

We should not romanticise the commons and no perfect state of equality, deriving from shared skills and resources, has ever existed. The Jomon were violent on occasion, although less so than many groups, and where violence did occur it was probably due to fighting between groups: power relations always existed, often between women and men, or the old who use access to systems of esoteric knowledge to control the young. Furthermore, the commons is not one thing but many, existing in countless forms. Each commons is based upon a model of reality, notions of how various biological kinds are interrelated or divided, or the manner in which transcendental, spiritual powers are manifest across the world. It might be that the rims of Jomon pots evoked the tails of salmon (Steinhaus et al. 2020), perhaps hinting in turn that these fish might not have been separate from humans, deriving from an entangled worldview contrasting with a Linnean view of the separate nature of species. Each model of the world contains within it an ethics, specifying not just how the world works but also the correct sorts of action within that world, not just between human and human, but among and between all the things that are distinguished in that world. An equality of action and outcome is only possible if people believe that that is how the world is constituted, as flat and open fields of cultural interaction, in which power of one thing over another is a temporary state, calmed by respect, reciprocity and care. The commons is not a thing but a style of action, an active and ongoing process not a singular outcome. We are better thinking of commoning than of a commons. A stress on commoning is in many ways the negation of a more Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest, where nature is always red in tooth and claw and the strong not only do triumph, but should, because this is the way nature works. Acting against the inherent striving and competitive nature of the world is quite literally unnatural. Not only can Darwinian theory be seen as an encoding of the spirit of capitalism, but it also provided a naturalisation of the desire to thrive at the expense of others. The Jomon established a commons and maintained it in changing forms over 13 millennia, indicating that it is not human nature to subvert the commons for individual gain, as people like Hardin argued. The Jomon encoded an immensely long ethic of care and reciprocity, carefully maintained and curated.

But also, in these days when the deleterious consequences of competitive capitalism are obvious so that many doubt that the spirit of capitalism is natural and certainly worry about the results of all our striving for material advantage, it is not surprising that many are turning to the idea of the commons as the basis for a more sustainable and equitable life (e.g. Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Hyde 2010; Ostrom 1990). The standard model of Childe and others assumed that equality was an original state of society and that the surplus-generating capacity of farming supported the specialist production of prestige items then used to control spheres of exchange. The Jomon shows that this is not necessarily so. People can know about, ignore and resist farming, preferring more equal states of society. Jomon is just one of the more striking counter cases that are accumulating against the standard model, indicating that a considerable range of historical trajectories were possible.

I am very happy to write this piece for Glenn who has always been a political and egalitarian person, who I feel will be in sympathy with the idea of the commons, although we have never had a chance to discuss it. I hope that the Japanese case study will chime with the Japanese dimension of his life. For my part, it has been a great privilege and pleasure to know Glenn these almost 40 years and rather too occasionally working with him. We have a lot in common.

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