

Jomon

By Takashima Hatsuhisa

On November 5, 2000, the *Mainichi Shimbun*, one of Japan's major newspapers, published a feature article at the top of its front page that will go down in history. This article reported that Fujimura Shin'ichi, vice chairman of the Tohoku Paleolithic Institute and a person considered to be the top figure in excavations of Old Stone Age sites in Japan, had actually buried stone implements at excavation sites, then "excavated" them in the presence of reporters and photographers as if they were newly discovered. Seven years earlier at the same site, Fujimura had announced that he had determined that primitive people had existed in Japan more than 500,000 years ago. This created such a stir that high school history textbooks had to be revised and the common consensus of Japanese archeology was completely reconfigured. The *Mainichi Shimbun* made a video recording of Fujimura by himself at the site early in the morning digging a hole, removing stone implements from a bag that he had brought with him and burying them in the hole. It was reported that when Fujimura was shown the video, he admitted that he had repeated such fabrications at other sites as well. This scoop showing that this well-known excavation expert – referred to as "a genius with the touch of a god" – was actually a great impostor appeared in front-page headlines in all the major dailies the following day, a major event in the history of the mass media. As a result of this news, doubts surfaced as to whether the articles found at the majority of the 33 sites where Fujimura had been involved were actually real. This was followed by a tumult caused by the inevitable calls for amendments of and even suspension of publication

of textbooks which said, on the basis of Fujimura's "discoveries," that there were primitive peoples inhabiting Japan in the Old Stone Age, between 500,000 and 700,000 years ago.

How could such an inconceivable event come about? In interviews and question-and-answer sessions with reporters after the discovery of his fabrications, Fujimura said, "I was possessed by an evil spirit. I was obsessed with the feeling that I had to continue

Photo: Aomori Prefecture Tourism & Product Yaesu Service Center



A huge wooden structure made of chestnut trees and dwellings of Jomon people at the Sannai-Maruyama Historical Site

to make new discoveries." The actual facts, however, have yet to be made clear. On the other hand, Japan's archeologists and the journalists who were in charge of reporting on excavations simply swallowed Fujimura's announcements of new discoveries without chewing. Movements to consider their own responsibility are spreading among both journalists and the academic associations which allowed such a situation to develop as a result of their not making efforts to confirm these reports with further research and not making sufficient efforts to compare evidence.

Japan's archeology circles find themselves enveloped by dark clouds, yet

there has been some bright news. One encouraging piece of news is that *Jomon* period sites have been excavated in various regions around Japan, and in rapid succession these excavations have shown the richness of Jomon culture, through such discoveries as exquisite lacquer ornaments and graves with floor panels. The Jomon period, dating from approximately 13,000 years ago, is held to be the starting point of Japan, and the period is named

for the designs of rope pressed into the surface of contemporary clay vessels. Of even greater interest is the fact that designs on Jomon vessels differ with the region where they are found. Pieces discovered in Niigata Prefecture have no rope design, but are instead enveloped entirely by a dynamic flame-like design. Referred to as "*Kaendoki* (flame vessels)," they are works of considerable artistic value, and in addition to strongly influencing painters and sculptors, they have attracted considerable attention at Jomon exhibitions in France and the United States. Until quite recently, our

image of the Jomon period was entirely one of people clothed in animal skin, wandering the plains and mountains gathering nuts and berries and hunting, possessing little that resembled culture. I remember that 45 years ago in my junior high school textbook the illustration of what Jomon people were imagined to have looked like showed a monkey-like figure with unkempt hair, wearing animal fur and carrying a club. Today, however, our image of the Jomon people is changing rapidly. It has become the dominant view that the people of the Jomon era lived an abundant, orderly lifestyle and possessed a high level of technology and culture.

The occasion for this shift was the

Photo : Nagaoka Chamber of Commerce & Industry



Kaen-doki (flame vessels) of the Jomon period have considerable artistic value

excavation of the Sannai Maruyama site in the outskirts of Aomori City. It had been known among local amateur archeology enthusiasts as a place where one could find fragments of old clay vessels, but in 1992 a plan was made to build a baseball diamond on the site. A survey by the Aomori Prefectural Archeological Center was hurriedly carried out. The surface was stripped, and as the digging progressed, surveyors discovered enormous one-meter-diameter chestnut pillars, remains of innumerable dwellings, countless tombs and large numbers of clay vessels and clay figurines. They had found a large Jomon-period village whose scale exceeded anything ever seen before. Two years later Aomori Prefecture decided to cancel the construction of the baseball field and preserve the remains. Sannai Maruyama as Japan's largest Jomon remains became a mecca for academic researchers and at the same time became a well-known site that attracted large numbers of tourists to Aomori.

Last summer I was designated to preside over a televised symposium on the world's four great civilizations, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus and China. Leaving the ruins and remains in these foreign countries aside for the moment, I paid a visit to the Jomon site at Sannai Maruyama as part of my preparation for the symposium. I was most fortunate to be accompanied by Okada Yasuhiro, chief of the Sannai-Maruyama Site Preservation Office, a virtual walking dictionary who has followed the progress of the site since the first hastily implemented survey of 1992. With an expression like that of a father delighted over the growth of a child, he explained to me the wonders of Sannai Maruyama.

According to what he said, it is now known that the village at Sannai Maruyama was inhabited without interruption for 1,500 years (from 5,500 years ago through 4,000 years ago) and that about 500 people lived communally in large and small pit dwellings. This was concurrent with the building of the pyramids in Egypt and the flowering of the civilizations of

Mesopotamia and ancient China. From these dwellings and tombs many human bones have been recovered together with large numbers of clay vessels, stone implements and clay figurines, large jewels made from green jadeite brought a long distance (more than 500km from Sannai Maruyama) from the Itoi River in present Niigata Prefecture, lacquer vessels, cords braided from thin vines, and a pouchette-like bag plaited from rush, with walnuts inside, giving evidence that the Jomon people managed a stylish existence. The highlight is the wooden structure made of huge chestnut trees in the center of the village. Towering 17 meters, these six one-meter-diameter pillars stand at intervals of 4.2 meters, and those who see the structure are astounded at how the Jomon people could have constructed such a work. Needless to say, the current pillars are replicas, but they are based on the portion of a pillar from the period 4,000 to 5,000 years ago that was unearthed at the time of the excavation. Furthermore, evidence was found that suggests the people of that period cultivated chestnuts, and from the seeds of soy beans, barley, bottle gourd and millet that were found, it has become ever more likely that there was agriculture in the Jomon period. According to science and technology specialists, there is even evidence from the items excavated at Sannai Maruyama that contemporary inhabitants used natural asphalt as a binding material and possessed the technology to drill small, exact holes in hard jade. From these surprising discoveries, it is anticipated that as excavations continue further new facts will be revealed.

It seems that in that period, with the warming of the climate of what is now

Aomori, the region surrounding Sannai Maruyama had large forests of broad-leaf trees such as Japanese beech and oak, and because the sea was nearby, food was abundant. Hence the inhabitants were able to live an abundant, stable, rich and cultured lifestyle.

In the world of archeology, civilization has generally been considered as centering on enormous remains like the Pyramids or stonewalled fortresses and on writing, and because Jomon does not have such elements, the general response to it has been that it was not as advanced as the four great civilizations. However, as the life of the people at Sannai Maruyama has gradually become more clear – which in turn has stimulated excavation and research at new Jomon sites around Japan – it no longer seems strange to hold that Jomon formed a single civilization.

In China, Sima Qian (about 145-86 B.C.), the sage of the Han Dynasty, once wrote that the South, that is, the region of the Yangtze River, had no civilization, and until quite recently, people have continued to believe this. But now new ruins and wonderful artifacts are being unearthed one after another in different areas of the Yangtze basin, and there is now excitement about the possible appearance of a fifth great civilization, other than the civilization of the Yellow River in the North. With this new development in mind, one is once again impressed with how deep the field of archeology is. The exhilaration of writing a new chapter in history as a result of these new discoveries has led to the booms in archeology and excavation in Japan today. In fact, many amateur archeologists now spare no pains to excavate ruins and remains throughout Japan. Despite this, how could one be so overwhelmed by this captivating power that one would go so far as to dig a hole in the ground, bury a stone implement and pass it off as a new discovery? **NTI**

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