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CLAY FIGURINES
OF THE JŌMON
PERIOD: A
CONTRIBUTION TO
THE HISTORY OF
ANCIENT RELIGION
IN JAPAN

For the historian of religions, these small, chiefly anthropomorphic figurines modeled in clay—rarely in stone or other materials—belong among the most impressive relics of prehistoric Japan. As archaeological as well as artistic assertions, they leave little doubt that they are, at their depth, real expressions of an early religious spirituality.

Their average size ranges from ten to twenty-five centimeters. Except for a very few later specimens, they all come from the Jōmon¹ or Neolithic period and date back to the last four millennia B.C.² It is noteworthy that in the whole area of the Japanese islands, there are no other regions or contemporaneous cultures that possess a similar figural art, and that might be considered as a point of origin or center of radiation for these figures. This art must therefore be accepted as an original creation of the Jōmon people; it thus represents a valuable document of Neolithic spirituality emerged from the soil of Japan.

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¹ Jōmon, a Japanese word, means "cord pattern." It denotes the Neolithic period of Japan because of the apparent predominance of pottery decorated with cord patterns.

² A three- to four-millennia higher age is assumed by some Japanese archaeologists on the basis of radiocarbon (C-14) datings. However, before these dates can finally be accepted, more research is needed. See Richard E. Morlan, "Chronometric Dating in Japan," *Arctic Anthropology* 4 (1967): 180–211.

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What was the social and economic background of this astonishing art? The Jōmon people were hunters, fishermen; and, along the protected bays of the east coast and some rivers, they specialized in gathering shellfish.³ Shell mounds or, more precisely for the case of Japan, kitchen middens are scattered all along the coasts of the bays (with the greatest density in the Tokyo Bay region) and extend along the rivers in the Kanto plain. For the most part, these mounds have been flattened out by later and recent agriculture, but still today the dispersed whitish shells distinctly betray the former settlements. In the oldest phase, these comprised only single or grouped pit dwellings, but from the Middle Jōmon on, they were real village communities. According to a recent count, approximately 2,000 middens have been discovered.⁴

As a number of scattered finds⁵ prove, Early Jōmon people already produced clay figurines in rough form and in small numbers. The custom seems to have been discontinued, however, before being revived and developed in the Middle Jōmon with increasing artistic technique and spiritual expression. Often regional specialization and stylization can be noted down to the end of the period (ca. 250 B.C.).

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 vessel. Thus there must have existed, at that time, a distinct belief in animal-like spirits.

The same theriomorphic expression appears on the figurines proper, although only a few of them reach a point of being recog-

³ There are some indications that, from the Middle Jōmon on, in the mountainous inland, some form of agriculture, including the cultivation of the mountain potato and taro, took place. Rice cultivation, however, was introduced only later by a new people who entered from the south during the Yayoi Period (ca. 250 B.C.-A.D. 250); these were the direct ancestors of the historical Japanese.

⁴ See J. E. Kidder, *Japan before Buddhism* (New York, 1959), p. 36.

⁵ A first comprehensive and well-documented study of the clay figurines was published by Teruya Esaka (1960) in Japanese (not accessible to me). A detailed description has been given by J. Edward Kidder, Jr., in his *The Jomon Pottery of Japan* (Ascona, 1957); and there is a splendid presentation with black and white photographs and some color plates by the same author in his book about the prehistoric art of Japan, of which French and German editions have also appeared. The German edition, *Japan. Frühe Kunst* (Munich, 1964), has been used here. Also, according to Jennifer S. Byrd, "Fascinating Figurines of Jomon Period," *Japan Times*, April 4, 1969, more than 400 figurines from over 100 public and private collections have been assembled and put on display at the Suntory Museum in Tokyo.

Figurines of the Jōmon Period

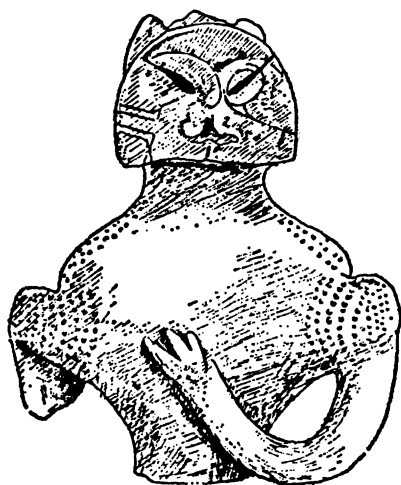


FIG. 1.—Clay figure from Misaka (Kami Kurokama), Yamanashi Prefecture. Middle Jōmon. Height: 25.2 centimeters.

nizably human. They are generally of a small size. An exceptional and impressive specimen is a head and torso, 25.2 centimeters in height, which comes from Kami Kurokama (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 (fig. 1) 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. It has a masklike animally demoniac 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 demoniac 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.

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;⁶ the intended animal form

⁶ Seiroku Noma, *Japanese Sculpture: Archaic Period* (Tokyo, n.d.), p. 1. See also the same author's "Masterworks of Japan's Stone Age Art," *UNESCO Courier* (June 1958), p. 14.

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is too evident and is rooted in a certain psychology and ideology. It is significant that these products come from the mountainous regions of central Japan which, during the Middle Jōmon, were culturally a dynamic center. Would not the wild and awful landscape, threatened by earthquakes then as now, have caused in the minds of its 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 the 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.

The small scale of variations in the figurines has led Kidder⁷ 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" (*Seelenschicht*), according to which animals often represented epiphanies of higher beings. Thus in the Obed culture of Mesopotamia (fourth millennium B.C.) there appeared female clay statuettes with theriomorphic—above all, feline-like—heads; these, however, were anteceded in the Halaf culture (fifth millennium B.C.) by clearly anthropomorphic figures.⁸ Likewise, the figurines of the early Vinca culture in Yugoslavia often exhibit theriomorphic features.⁹ If between these two groups there was hardly any direct genetic connection, the possibility of there being one with regard to the Japanese group is absolutely excluded. Not even for the well-known theriomorphic deities of Egypt is the old theory of totemism still accepted.¹⁰ Obviously, behind these prehistoric occurrences, which, moreover, were always episodic, there existed to some extent what can

⁷ See Kidder, *The Jomon Pottery*, p. 30.

⁸ See E. Strommenger and M. Hirmer, *Fünf Jahrtausende Mesopotamien* (Munich, 1962), figs. 10, 11.

⁹ See Zagorka Leticia, "The Neolithic Figurines from Vinca," *Archaeology* 17 (1964): 1, fig. 12.

¹⁰ See Siegfried Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1960), p. 18.

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FIG. 2.—Clay figurine from Ebaradai, Chiba Prefecture. Late Jōmon. Height: 10.15 centimeters.

only be understood as a human psychic structure (*Seelenschicht*) spanning all oceans and continents.¹¹

In the Late Jōmon (about 2,000 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 Jōmon people living there the figures received human—often expressively female—features. However, they were still not altogether free from bizarre and grotesque traits. According to Noma: “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.”¹² 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 adduce a clay figurine (fig. 2), ten to fifteen centimeters high, from Ebaradai, Chiba Peninsula, on Tokyo Bay. Its swollen breasts and belly indicate a pregnant woman. On top of the rather clumsy body is set a somewhat gloomy head, reminiscent in its contours of Egyptian heads, which could well belong to a mountain ghost. It should be noted that the Japanese call this type of figurine

¹¹ Also, the three-fingered hand is a symbol found in other parts of the world. Its meaning may not be everywhere the same, but it always has a symbolic signification.

¹² See Noma, *Japanese Sculpture*, p. 2.



FIG. 3.—Clay figure from Gōhara, Gumma Prefecture. Late Jōmon. Height: 30.2 centimeters.

yamagata, which means “the mountain-like.” Behind this name may be seen a reminiscence of the figurines’ old homestead.

Especially in the mountainous regions and in the neighboring lowland more stylized figurines are found, such as the 30.2-centimeter-high clay figure from Gōhara, Gumma Prefecture (fig. 3). This one 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 sub-human 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 Jōmon art.

Other figurines—with hollow bell-shaped bodies—have a similar ghostly expression. An example is the 20.4-centimeter-high piece (fig. 4) from the Inariyama shell mound to the south of Tokyo in Kanagawa Prefecture. 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 endeavors to speak—resembles a mask. Serpent-like furrows wind up the front and the sides.

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FIG. 4.—Clay figurine from Inariyama, Kanagawa Prefecture. Late Jōmon. Height: 20.4 centimeters.

The conspicuous feature of all these figurines is without a doubt their grotesqueness. Grotesqueness, as an expression of the *numino-fascinosum* in the primitive mind, has been sufficiently explicated by Rudolf Otto in his well-known researches.¹³ Also, the Jōmon figures represent beings which are beyond the horizon of human experience and are not immediately—that is, without media—perceptible. In representing these beings in painting, drawing, or sculpture, one spontaneously resorts to a combination of elements taken partly from the human figure, partly from the animal kingdom, and partly from vegetable life. Even today when drawing the supposed inhabitants of the planet Mars, one borrows details from the field of electronics. In this way, one wishes to emphasize the difference between them and known earthly beings. The effect of such a combination is inevitably grotesque without being directly intended. Thus one should suppose the *numino-fascinosum* behind the grotesque, paradoxical, and often demoniac figurines of the Jōmon artists and worshippers. In any event, paradox is a real aspect of primitive religion.

The figurines, which are found mostly in domestic sites and not in burial grounds, occupied a cultic position and often enjoyed an intense reverence; this is clear from a number of observations made on the occasion of in situ finds. Thus, in some of the figurines,

¹³ See Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, 35th ed. (Munich, 1963); and *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen*, 6th ed. (Munich, 1931).

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

More striking is a specimen, discovered in situ, of a bell-shaped hollow figurine from Nakagashiki, Kanagawa Prefecture. It was found at a depth of about one meter in the earth, face downward, over a small heap of human bones. Within the figure, the surprising discovery was made of bone particles and teeth belonging to a small child.¹⁴ One is inclined to think of a disconsolate mother, who in this way strove to effect a compensation for the lost baby or to substantiate her prayers to a mother-spirit. The figure from Gōhara (described above) was unearthed lying on the ground and surrounded by nine big stones forming a rectangle of nearly 1.50 meters in length. About a dozen such finds have been recorded, at different depths in the earth. Kidder interprets them as ritual burials of a spirit aimed at appeasing the powers of nature, as ceremonies of restitution and attempts to ensure greater prosperity.¹⁵

However, other in situ finds suggest small religious places. In Hiromi, Nagano Prefecture, a clay figurine was found standing within a circle 37 centimeters in diameter, constructed with small pebbles. Near it, another stone circle enclosed a clay incense burner. In Ohase, Fukushima Prefecture, a figurine and a vessel were found surrounded by stones piled one upon another.¹⁶ In Chōjagahara, Niigata Prefecture, a figure was found on a stone slab.¹⁷ There is hardly any doubt that these circumstances had some connection with religious ceremonies and a definite cult.

Often, clay figurines have been discovered in pit dwellings where they apparently had their place in a domestic cult. In Yosukeone, Nagano Prefecture, they were found in the northwest corner of a hut on a stone platform, on which a phallus-like upright stone,

¹⁴ Isamu Kono, "Notes on the Urn of Human Figure in Prehistoric Japan," *Jinrui-Gaku-Zasshi* [Journal of the Anthropological Society of Tokyo] 54 (1939): 545–51 (in Japanese with English title).

¹⁵ See Kidder, *Japan. Frühe Kunst*, pp. 25, 90.

¹⁶ See Gerhard J. Groot, *The Prehistory of Japan* (New York, 1951), pp. 50–51.

¹⁷ See Mitsuhashi Teramura, "To the Oval Pit-Dwellings at Tochikura, Niigata Prefecture," *Iyōdai Bunka* 27 (Niigata, 1957): 40 (in Japanese).

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stone clubs, and vessels were also deposited. “Quite obviously the platforms and the 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.”¹⁸ A remarkable find from Hiraide in the same mountainous region should also be mentioned. Of the huts excavated there, only one contained figurines—fragments of five specimens altogether. The building was destroyed by fire. Since the figurines are rather different in style, the likelihood that the place was a workshop for making figurines must be excluded; “rather, it must have been a building set apart in this community for a specific purpose, probably something on the order of a parturition house, and its destruction by fire may have been intentional for the requirements of purification.”¹⁹

Some figurines have been found in the dumping ground where refuse of consumed vegetables and animals was deposited, and it is believed by some scholars that the Jōmon people may have used female idols to pray not only for human fertility but for a rebirth of all food already consumed. There was even, until very recently, evidence of such practices among certain Ainu tribes.²⁰

The question arises of whether the production of the figurines could possibly have been in the hands of women²¹ and, in that case, to what extent female individuality, psychology, and imagination would have played a role in the shaping of the figures and in their expression. But this question can scarcely be answered here.

During the final phase of the Jōmon period (last millennium B.C.), the center of figural art shifted more to the northern part of Japan, and the figurines appear to have been adapted to a colder climate. Certain decorations are believed to be heavy garments (fig. 5). Hairdos appear to be in vogue, sometimes looking like turbans, sometimes like crowns—“perhaps an attribute of a goddess.”²² Strikingly large goggle-like eyes occupy the face. These have been interpreted as snow goggles made of stretched

¹⁸ See Kidder, *Japan before Buddhism*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁰ According to Byrd (n. 4 above).

²¹ Ryuzo Torii, in 1920, ascribed their manufacture to women, into whose hands the cult service was also entrusted. See Ichiro Yawata's article in *Jinrui-Gaku-Zasshi* [Journal of the Anthropological Society of Tokyo] 13 (1939): 6. In any case, for the hollow figurine with the child's bones in it from Nakagashiki, it is assumed by Tadashi Saitō (in *Nippon Kōkōgaku Zukan* [1954], p. 27) that this figurine was made by the mother.

²² Kidder, *The Jomon Pottery*, p. 132.

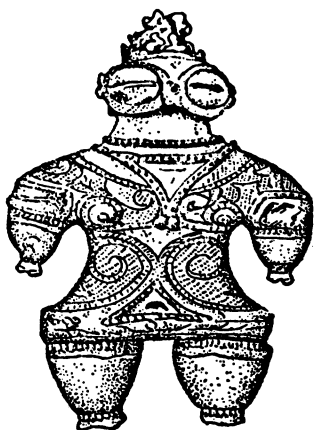


FIG. 5.—Clay figurine from Tokomai, Aomori Prefecture. Final Jōmon.

skin on a frame. But, as Kidder points out, “in North Honshu there is little need for such glasses . . . rather these eyes must have grown out of the concept that the eye is the direct line of communication with the soul.”²³ 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.

According to Kidder 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 immigrants, and withstand the Japanese 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.”²⁴

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.

It is significant that in central Japan the figurines of the Final Jōmon remained more attached to subhuman spheres. This is

²³ Kidder, *Japan before Buddhism*, pp. 73–74.

²⁴ Kidder, *The Jomon Pottery*, pp. 132–33.

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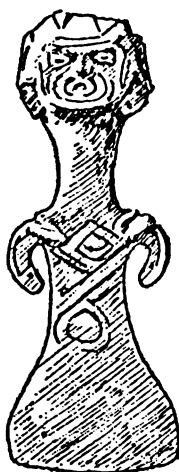


FIG. 6.—Clay figure from Maruko, Nagano Prefecture. Final Jōmon. Height: 36.6 centimeters.

impressively shown, for example, in a hollow demoniac figure (fig. 6) from Maruko, Nagano Prefecture. With a height of 36.6 centimeters, it belongs, moreover, among the unusually large pieces.

Relatively few clay figurines of animals have been found in eastern, central, and northern Japan. (These are small reproductions of bears, boars, monkeys, dogs, and tortoises.) It does not appear, therefore, that hunting magic played any important role among Jōmon people. Rather, it is generally agreed by archaeologists that these figures were made and used with religious intent as symbols of the spirits of these creatures.²⁵

Interestingly enough, the rodent and feline character of the Middle Jōmon figurines disappeared completely in the following phases; all therio-anthropomorphic traits and mysteries surrounding them vanish. Demand came to be only for the more human-like figurines. These were representations of spirits, mostly female ones. Evidently, they were objects of the prayers arising out of man's sincere life desires for procreation and easy childbirth. It is very probable that, at the end of the Jōmon period, they had developed into representations of a goddess, a supreme maternal deity, and finally into a symbol of national union and resistance against the Yayoi invaders from the south.

²⁵ See Kidder, *Japan before Buddhism*, p. 75.

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Many of these prehistoric clay figurines found in Japan strangely resemble the creations of high cultures in South America, and even a good number of products of modern figural ceramic art look like replicas of them. Do not such analogies point to an all-human imagination and deeply rooted psychic forces, and does this not authorize us to see in these products the creations of an “understreaming picture world” of the human soul?

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