



The Jōmon People of Ancient Japan: A Blueprint for Hope

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When considering an ancient civilization, especially one that has been largely unexplored, it is easy to form ideas based on unexamined assumptions. The phrase ‘Lost Civilization’ probably brings to mind megaliths buried in a desert or hidden beneath ocean waves. This is the vivid image conjured by Percy Bysshe Shelley in his classic poem, *Ozymandias*:

*I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said— “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*

A contrasting idea, however, would be instead of pondering thoughts of wreck and ruin, to think about the possibility of discovering forgotten wisdom. A lost civilization could possibly teach one something totally divorced from technologies couched in the language of architecture and cities, or even the imaginary death rays and mythical magic crystals that are a staple of science fiction. It might contain, within its store of forgotten lore, something modern man desperately needs to understand if he is to avoid becoming a lost civilization of the future.



Jomon Oyu Stone Circles, Akita Prefecture, Japan. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Yonaguni Sunken City

In 1995, off the southern coast of Yonaguni, Japan, a disoriented diver who found himself too far away from the Okinawa coast, discovered a sunken group of megalithic

blocks that appeared to be a human-made, terraced structure. When he reported his finding, he sparked a hotly debated argument that continues to this day. Some believe the structure to be a natural formation, eroded by water but still explained by the usual forces of nature. Others disagree. They claim the discovery is a 10,000-year-old artificial structure built by an ancient lost civilization that has long since been submerged by rising ocean levels. Where some see erosion and water-eroded features, others see arches, straight edges not usually found in nature, staircases, and pylons.

A diver inspecting the underwater site of Yonaguni, a key site in megalithic Japan. (EyeEm / Adobe stock)



After local researchers sent out subsequent diving teams, more sites were reported. Currently five subsurface archaeological sites have so far been explored, in depths ranging from 20 feet to as deep as 100 feet (six – 30 meters).

It is especially interesting that when pictures of round holes and a straight line of smaller depressions were published, people familiar with dry-land quarries immediately recognized the

kinds of drilled holes used to split and quarry rocks before transportation. They also spotted what they called a "plus" sign and a V-shaped emblem of some sort.

Controversies, just like the area's treacherous oceanic currents, swirl around the discovery. Even those who are usually allies when it comes to a liberal view concerning daring interpretations of traditional sites, find their ranks divided. Geologist Robert Schoch, for instance, known for his controversial work concerning the dates of the construction at Giza in Egypt, and John Anthony West, who before his death gathered quite a reputation as a 'rogue' Egyptologist because he championed ancient dates for the construction of the Sphinx, believed the structure to be natural, although possibly modified a bit by human hands at some point in time.

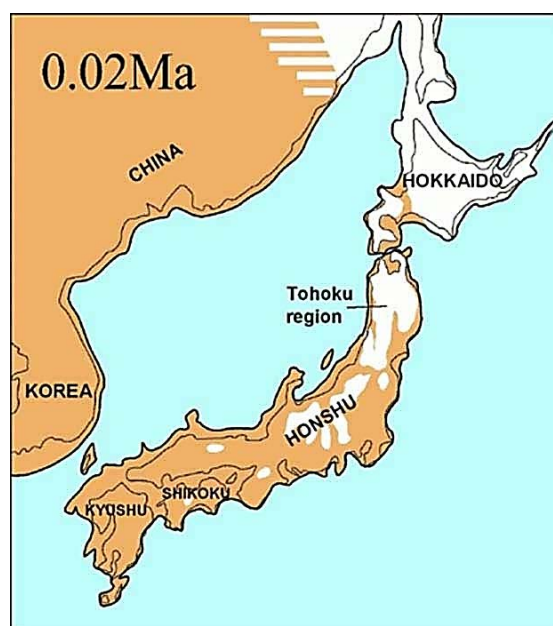


Yonaguni underwater (nudibblue / Adobe Stock)

Their colleague Graham Hancock, after diving on the site himself, believed it to be the work of an ancient culture. In his book, *Underworld*, he credited this site with his interest in underwater historical studies,

which are as yet mostly ignored by land-based archaeologists. It is his contention that one of the reasons traditional archaeologists as a whole do not subscribe to the theory of really ancient civilizations is because they are looking in the wrong places. Sea levels on planet Earth are not static. Places as far removed from one another as Egypt, Lake Titicaca, and Dwarka, harbor underwater ruins. But submerged civilizations are usually incredibly old, so they do not fit the accepted historical story. If that alone were not enough, to study submerged sites demands a set of skills most archaeologists do not have. They are not divers. Besides that, until recently the technology needed for deep sea exploration has been prohibitively expensive for most people, so the sites go unexplored and unexplained.

Japan at the Last Glacial Maximum in the Late Pleistocene about 20,000 years ago. Orange - above sea level. White - unvegetated. Blue - Sea. (CC BY-SA 2.5)



Ancient Jōmon Civilization

If the Yonaguni site is eventually proved to be a megalithic discovery, it has to be more than 10,000 years old, because that is how long it has been submerged. This pushes it back into the time of an ancient Japanese civilization called the Jōmon people, who lived there for a long time, beginning at least 16,500 years ago. They were a complex civilization who were probably the first people on earth to manufacture pottery. During much of their time, the Yonaguni site would have been above water. The Jōmon would undoubtedly have, at the very least, walked over these structures, natural or not, so it is not out of the question that they were either the creators or developers of this site.



A reconstructed model of a Jōmon man. Exhibition in National Museum of Nature and Science (CC BY-SA 3.0)

A study of the little knowledge available about the Jōmon people cannot help but make one wonder if they were unique in more ways than one. First of all, they existed for a very long time without exhibiting much change. That in itself is interesting. It is the nature of civilizations to grow and expand, to spread out and multiply while changes evolve within their culture. The Jōmon do not seem to demonstrate this trait. Unlike modern civilizations that live by the mantra ‘grow or die’, the Jōmon seem perfectly content to have accomplished great things while living within a

simple code that existed at the heart of their civilization. That code seems to have consisted of one word—‘Enough’! Did they learn the importance of a secret that is largely missing from modern hectic life? Did they learn how to be happy and content while scorning the need to ‘grow or die’?

When an economy is growing, when new-construction housing determine whether or not a developed nation is economically healthy, when modern citizens are happy only when wages are up, when politicians are elected at least in part because of their promises to get the economy booming, and when towns adopt the policy that they must grow or die, it is obvious that the motto of ‘enough’ does not even enter the popular mindset when it comes to determining levels of happiness. Will civilizations stagnate when they say enough? That is what many leaders assume.

Inventions Of The Jōmon

The Jōmon did not seem to think in those terms, but they accomplished a lot anyway. Consider the following: They spoke the same language, acted in the same ways, went about their daily life, and suffered very little social turmoil for more than 16 millennia! The archaeological record shows no evidence of warfare or social upheaval until they were conquered and absorbed by the much more aggressive Yayoi people about 2,500 years ago. The Yayoi is the civilization usually thought to have been the antecedent culture for the modern Japanese. It thus appears that the demise of the Jōmon came from without, not within, their culture.



*Incipient Jōmon corded pottery 10,000–8000 BC
(Public Domain)*



Jōmon vessel dated to the Middle Period, (3000–2000 BC). (Saiko/CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Jōmon invented the world's first pottery. Although some archaeologists insist the discovery of pottery must be attributed to the Yayoi, examples of Jōmon corded pottery, named after the distinctive cord marks embedded in their clay pots, have been excavated that date unequivocally back to 16,500 years ago. The same evidence is found continuously throughout the archaeological record for the next 14,000 years and shows up in ancient layers in archaeological digs from Fiji to Valdivia in South America.

In 1965, when the discovery of thousands of Jōmon pottery shards in Valdivia was reported in *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology*, it set off an argument in the field of anthropology that is ongoing to this day. How could ancient Ice Age Japanese pottery show up in South America? Because it did not *seem* possible, it was declared to not *be* possible. But then even more problems arose. Kernels of rice were discovered baked into really old Jōmon pots. Rice is a cultivated crop, so now it appears that the Jōmon people even invented agriculture thousands of years before anyone else.

DNA research in the American west indicates that the ancestors of many American Indian tribes originally came from Asia. That is to be expected because people who crossed the Siberian Land Bridge, after spending countless generations around the shores of Lake Baikal in Siberia, were of Asian descent. But skeletons found in the region of Lake Baikal share similar DNA with the ancient Jōmon people. That means that the antecedents of the Jōmon set out on foot to migrate both east to America, eventually becoming the ancestors of the American Indian peoples, and south to Japan, where they would become the ancestors of the Japanese. In other words, ancestral Japanese might have a legitimate claim to be among the first Americans.



Jomon clay statue, Kazahari I, Aomori Prefecture. Late Period (1500 – 1000 BC). (PHGCOM/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

Evidence seems to indicate that the Jōmon were also a seafaring people who followed the so-called Black Current that sweeps north up the Pacific, swings east below the Aleutians, and then south down the American west coast all the way to South America. They might have left a record of their passage behind in the form of stone anchors found off the coast of California, along with pottery discovered in South America.

Finally, at the close of the 20th century, came the discovery of an enigmatic, megalithic, submerged structure off the coast of Okinawa which, if it turns out to be a human-built complex, was undoubtedly constructed during the Jōmon people's time on earth. This was obviously not a static civilization. The culture lasted 16,500 years, accomplished all this, and never seems to have gone to war, polluted their land, over-exploited their natural resources, or populated themselves out of existence. How did they do it without either stagnating or breaking apart?

In the book *Ancient Gods*, the current author sums up their civilization in this way: *“We might even say that they changed the course of the entire human species on the planet. If pottery was made 16,000 years ago, they invented the process. If plants could be tamed and made to grow for the benefit of humankind, they discovered the techniques. If there was a collision with a comet 12,800 years ago, they saw it. If there was a sudden melt-down following the Younger Dryas 11,600 years ago, they experienced it. If there was a Siberian land bridge, they walked it. If boats sailed down the coast of California to South America, they navigated them. They were a prolific people with an impressive resume. Yet they didn't change all that much. That's the one thing anthropologists agree on.”*

More elaborate rim typical of the Middle/ Late Jōmon period (c. 4000 BC- c. 200 BC) (CCO)

Enough Versus Growth

Is it possible that the Jōmon people of Japan can teach modern civilization a hidden truth about the wisdom of 'enough'? It is a truth forgotten in much of today's consumer-based society that describes economic security and comfort only by employing the word 'growth'. Might it be possible, without one shred of evidence except common sense to make such a claim, that they did not change very much because they did not see the need to do so? The science of archaeology reveals 'how' and 'when'. It rarely can deduce 'why'. So, it may be a bit of a stretch to speculate that they discovered, probably by accident rather than philosophical pursuit, that life could be enjoyed and bring accomplishment without increasing its speed. But such speculation is certainly within the realms of possibility.



Dogū (clay figure), Jomon period, 7000-400 BC, Tokyo National Museum. (CCO)

Did they survive for so long because they never felt the need to over-exploit their environment? Did they discover the wisdom of 'enough?' When they were finally absorbed by a much more aggressive people, the Yayoi, they began their quick descent into modernism. The doors swung open on aspects of civilization more familiar to contemporary life - war, consumerism, over-exploitation, abundance, and all the rest. But for a long time, before the antecedents of modernism discovered and eventually overwhelmed them, they must have had a pretty good life. Is this assessment correct? There are well-respected archaeologists who will certainly disagree and say there is not yet enough evidence to support such a claim. But until they unequivocally prove it otherwise, one can at least consider it, as it provides a semblance of hope.

Top Image: Divers inspecting the underwater site of Yonaguni in Japan. (nudiblue / Adobe stock)

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