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The Role of Dogū as Ritual Objects in Jomon Domestic Spaces: Evidence from Sannai Maruyama

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Abstract:

A major settlement of the Middle Jomon period is the Sannai Maruyama site (3900–2300 BC). Approximately 1,500 dogū figurines have been found at the Sannai Maruyama site. Since most of the dogū fragments found at the Sannai Maruyama site were recovered from middens or garbage heaps, this study argues that middens should not be considered simply as garbage dumps but rather as well-organized extensions of the settlement area, which were essentially an integral part of the daily ritual life of Jomon families. Through a comparative analysis of the contexts of the installation of figurines, this study proposes a "family ritual" model, arguing that 'dogū' figurines served as essential focal points for family-centered rituals within the domestic sphere. By comparing the unique "flat and cross-shaped" 'dōgu' figurines from Sannai Maruyama with those from other Jomon sites, this study shows that the refuse mounds or middens served as sacred extensions of family life, with the figurines being placed as part of a cyclical 'use-and-renew' process.

Keywords: Jomon Period, Sannai Maruyama Site, Dogū Figurines, Domestic Rituals, Midden Deposition.

Introduction:

Why did the Jomon people at the Sannai Maruyama archaeological site 14,000 years ago make thousands of clay figurines and then deliberately break them into mounds?

This question and its answer lie not behind the walls of their houses, but within the settlements' own traditional waste disposal systems.



Dogū refers to a type of clay figurine. Typically, 10 to 30 centimeters in size, the dogū figurines highly artistically crafted human or animal figures. Female figurines seem to have been particularly popular. However, there are exceptions in some cases. Some dogū figurines have been found that could not be identified as either male or female. It is likely that the Jomon people believed that women had life-giving power and used these figurines during prayers. Since nature was severe at that time, people prayed to the gods of nature through special women. This was because people believed that these women had magical powers. It can be said that women played an important role in society during this time. These female clay figurines, known as Dogū, were once considered mere toys or works of art. However, the Aomori and Sannai Maruyama archaeological sites have changed our view through research by researchers. Compared to other Jomon sites in Japan, more than 1,800 Dogū figurines have been found at the Sannai Maruyama site (Steinhaus & Kaner, 2016, p. 45). The majority of dogū at Sannai-Maruyama were recovered from the North and South Mounds and other midden deposits (Aomori Prefectural Board of Education, 2004; Steinhaus & Kaner, 2016, p. 45). These mounds and middens are interpreted as ceremonial grounds where domestic refuse and ritual objects were deposited together. These discoveries suggest that dogū were not simply objects of worship. They were household objects used for various family functions, such as mitigating crises, welcoming new children, or seeking solace. Through research at Sannai Maruyama and an analysis of Dogū artifacts, this study will demonstrate that these figurines served as the focal point of the Jomon people's domestic rituals within their pit-dwellings; they functioned as indispensable instruments for these rituals and held personal significance among Jomon families.

Review of literature:

Previous studies on Jomon Dogū have analyzed these figurines from various archaeological, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. Yamagata Mariko (1992), in the study titled “*The Shakadō Figurines and Middle Jomon Ritual in the Kōfu Basin,*” presents a very important archaeological analysis of the Dogū figurines found in the Kofu Basin, Japan, described in her study. Excavations were carried out at the Shakadō site in the early 1980s. As a result, 1,116 clay figurines were discovered at the site. By analyzing the scale of production and use of such clay figurines, the author takes her research to a whole new level. Analysis of these has shown that they were intentionally made fragile for collective rituals, establishing the Shakado site as a major religious and cultural center of the Middle Jomon period. Tatsuo Kobayashi (2004), in the book titled “*Jomon Reflections: Forager Life and Culture in the Prehistoric Japanese Archipelago,*” presented a new perspective on the Jomon period. Rather than viewing it as a static cultural phase, the book shines a light on the cultural creativity and distinctive traits of that era. Furthermore, the author identifies the dogū and stone bars as ritual/cult objects of the Jomon people. He emphasizes a structural interpretation of the archaeological data to understand the meaning of such dogū and their practical context. Overall, the author sees these artifacts not as mere objects, but as expressions of the Jomon people’s mindscape and their



spiritual relationship with nature, which is an integral part of the social and ritual complexity of Jomon society. Junko Habu (2004), in the study titled "*Ancient Jomon of Japan*," aims to introduce the rich and complex Jomon culture of prehistoric Japan to English-speaking readers. The study delves into the lifestyle of the Jomon people, highlighting their sophisticated pottery, large settlements, extensive trade networks, and diverse cultural aspects such as food, housing, burials, and art. It also sheds light on ritual artifacts, notably Dogū (clay figurines), discovered at various Jomon sites.

Further research conducted on specific sites helps to provide a clearer understanding of their functions. Douglass W. Bailey (2009), in the study titled "*The Chobonaino Dogu: understanding a Late Jomon figure from Hakodate*," sheds light on the Chobonaino Dogū, a prehistoric artifact dating back approximately 3,500 years. In this study, CAT scans reveal that the dogū has a hollow body, likely used as a vessel for pouring liquids during funerary rites, which suggests it symbolized a high-status spiritual entity. Methodological critiques followed: Miyoko Ono (2011) in the study titled "*Dogū kenkyū to jendā kōkogaku (II)*" [Dogū research and gender archaeology (II)], challenges existing gender biases. The author argues that treating the female-shaped 'dogū' as a mere 'reproductive symbol' ignores their social complexity; and that it is essential to consider their context, usage, and geographical distribution to understand gender concepts. Yoshinobu Mori (2014), in the study titled "*Rekishiteki shiryō to shite no Jomon dogū: Dogū no yōto o meguru gakusetsu no gaikan*" [Jomon Dogu as historical material: A survey of various theories about the usage of Dogu], surveyed various theories of dogū use. The author acknowledges the consensus regarding intentional ritual breakage, yet highlights the diverse interpretations such as fertility and disease deflection. The author also emphasizes the importance of conducting scientific analyses on the structure and symbolism of individual dogū, rather than relying on broad speculation.

Recent studies expand the scope of interpretation. Clifford C. Richey (2020), in the study titled "*The Dogu: An Ancient Earthen Figure*," offers a different viewpoint on Dogū figurines. He interprets dogū as more than just sculptures, viewing them as 'linguistic entities' adorned with pictographs. The motifs of birds, frogs, and owls are seen to symbolize concepts like flight, transformation, and afterlife journeys, drawing intriguing parallels to Aztec cosmology. Sylvie Esheborg Hack (2024), in the study titled "*Body Optics, the Theory of seeing the self: Dogu, bodies, and the art history canon in prehistoric Japan*," introduces the concept of "body optics." She interprets dogū as "self-portraits" of the Jomon period and establishes a connection between masked dogū and female shamans; furthermore, to advance the concept of an inclusive art history, she compares the "Jomon Venus" with the "Woman of Willendorf." Emma Yasui (2024), in the study titled "*Of robots and ancient mysteries: Representations of Jomon figurines as cultural heritage and popular culture*," investigates the representation of final Jomon clay figurines (shakōki dogū) in Japanese popular media, including games, manga, and anime. She investigates the influence of these contemporary interpretations on the perception of female ritual figures within traditional folklore and academic circles.

Although extensive research has been conducted on Dogū or clay figurines in recent decades, there is a lack of investigation focusing on the role of Dogū in domestic practices at the Sannai



Maruyama site and its associated middens or garbage mounds. While Shakadō and Chobonaino sites have provided detailed descriptions of the practical use of Dogū based on the works of Yamagata (1992) and Bailey (2009), descriptions of the unique ‘flat’ and ‘cross-shaped’ Dogūs at Sannai Maruyama are lacking. While Kobayashi (2004) and Habu (2004) have provided broad frameworks for Jomon society, and researchers such as Ono (2011) and Mori (2014) have called for contextual and methodological rigor, there is a lack of research that specifically sheds light on the role of dogū in the daily domestic practices of Sannai Maruyama Site.

Despite Richey (2020) and Hack (2024) offering symbolic and spiritual interpretations of Dogū, and Yasui (2024) analyzing their presentation in local culture, these studies are primarily limited to the formal structure and external forms of the figurines.

In this study, a new concept called the ‘Domestic Ritual’ model has been introduced. This perspective considers dogū not only as physical objects or symbols of general worship, but emphasizes their role as a vital component of the family’s daily routine. By examining the precious decorations and necessary tools recovered from Sannai Maruyama’s midden, in addition to the dogū figures, this research challenges the traditional waste disposal idea and offers a fresh social interpretation of the life cycle of dogū and their spiritual significance within the Jomon family.

Dogū Depositional Context:

Habu (2004) identifies the six large chestnut posts at Sannai Maruyama as evidence of ‘corporate work’ and notes interpretations of these features as ‘ceremonial wooden poles’ [p.195]. However, according to the official site materials, there is documentation of chestnut posts but not dogū among the artifacts linked to this structure (Aomori Prefectural Board of Education, n.d.). This is notable because dogū are primarily recovered from domestic contexts such as mounds (Aomori Prefectural Board of Education, n.d.). At Sannai Maruyama itself, the South and North Mounds are interpreted as middens based on the recovery of numerous potsherds [Habu, 2004, p.112-113]. The spatial separation — dogū in middens versus their absence in the large pillar-supported building — suggests that dogū-centered rituals occurred within private or familial spheres rather than in major communal structures.

Dogū often show up mixed in with all sorts of other trash. It is found alongside bits of broken pottery, stone tools, and leftover food. It is pretty different from actual religious offerings, which were usually kept separate from all that daily junk. The absence of dogū inside the large, six-pillared structure suggests that the rituals associated with the dogū were strictly familial rather than communal in nature.

		
<p>Figure 1: Flat dogū figurines at Sannai Maruyama Site (Source: Sannai-Maruyama Site Preservation Office. (n.d.). Sannai-Maruyama Site. [Sannai-Maruyama Special Historic Site]. Retrieved from https://share.google/6NK2wxio2c1bNU4lc</p>	<p>Figure 2: Flat and cross-shaped clay figurines at the Sannai Maruyama Site (Source: Jomon Japan. (n.d.). Sannai Maruyama Site. Retrieved from https://jomon-japan.jp/en/jomon-sites/sannai-maruyama</p>	<p>Figure 3: Pictures of the North Mound (time of excavation and current view) and pictures of excavated objects and Pictures of the South Mound (time of excavation and current view) and pictures of excavated objects such as jade at the Sannai Maruyama Site (Source:Sannai-Maruyama Special Site. (n.d.). Mounds. Retrieved from https://sannaimaruyama.pref.aomori.jp/english/about/mounds/</p>

Iconography:

More than 1,500 dogū have been found at the Sannai Maruyama site in Aomori. The style of dogū found at this archaeological site is a unique document of the beliefs and practices of Jomon society. The Dogū figurines from Sannai Maruyama differ somewhat in style from the traditional 'three-dimensional' or 'rounded' Dogū found at other Jomon sites. The dogū found at Sannai-Maruyama are mostly flat and cross-shaped. Although the face, chest, and navel are clearly depicted on these dogū figurines, the physical features are often considered indistinct or mysterious. Like the Sannai Maruyama site, the Shakadō site is another Jomon site where a large number of dogū figurines have been found. However, the Shakadō site mainly contains "standing female dogū". Their chest, abdomen, and hips are exaggerated. This means that the dogū figurines found at the Shakadō site mostly look like pregnant women. There are also cruciform dogū - with their arms spread out to the sides, as if they are praying while giving birth. Compared to figurines with such characteristics as those at the Shakadō site, the dogū at Sannai Maruyama are considered different. These dogū seem to represent a spiritual entity. According to archaeologists, these figurines served as symbols of a mystical or spiritual entity, transcending the limitations of a specific gender or body structure.

According to Kobayashi (2004), such features were not present in some of the figurines. For this reason, it is considered that these clay figurines could not be identified as either male or

female, or that they did not simply look like Jomon people, but rather were images that transcended the boundaries of gender and shape and were designed to embody spiritual beings.

On the other hand, male dogū figures were almost rare from Jomon society. From this, we can presume something about the social structure of the Jomon people and their way of life, a deeper insight into their thought processes. In such a society, men seemed to have more importance than war or heroism. It can be considered that their ceremonial life was not centered on hunting or war, but rather on the cycle of life and connecting with spiritual beings. Although the true identity of the dogū figurines found at the Sannai Maruyama site remains a mystery to this day, their 'mysterious nature and significance' embody the spiritual needs of the Jomon family's daily life. It is believed that these dogū figurines served as essential tools within the domestic sphere, providing solace, spiritual connection, and protection for the family. This significance was viewed with great sacredness and deep reverence by the Jomon people, which was clearly reflected in their artwork and the style of sculpture.



A comparative analysis of the archaeological context and ritual functions of Dogū from Sannai Maruyama and other Jomon sites:

Site Name	Prefecture	Figurine type	Context of discovery	Ritual pattern	Symbolic Interpretation
Sannai Maruyama Site	Aomori Prefecture	Flat and cross-shaped	Mounds/Middens	Intentional fragmentation and ceremonial disposal	Mystery, spiritual entities, domestic protection
Shakadō Site	Yamanashi Prefecture	Human, female shaped (There are five types of Katusaka sub-phases: Sakai, Kamiyahara, Hirohata, Togariishi, Narahara)	1. Pit dwellings 2. Pits 3. Pottery disposal areas around 三 口神平 (Sankojindaira)	Sacrificial fragmentation and dispersion	Fertility, pregnancy, safe childbirth, cyclical rebirth

Tanabatake Site	Nagano Prefecture	Jomon Venus (We can clearly recognize pregnancy by seeing a large belly and its overall round shape also help us understand the characteristics of women.)	Pit	It is believed that, unlike other excavated Dogū figures, these were not intentionally broken but were instead cared for with special attention.	Fertility and maternal power
Kazahari Site	Kazahari Prefecture	合掌土偶 (Dogū with palms pressed together)	Floor of Pit dwelling	Veneration as focal objects	Refers to items used in spiritual rituals, or to a state of prayer or meditation

[Table:1]

Note: Data compiled from multiple sources. Sannai Maruyama site data from Aomori Prefectural Board of Education (2004) and Steinhaus and Kaner (2016). Shakadō site details from Yamagata (1992). Tanabatake site information from Chino City (n.d.). Kazahari site details from Korekawa Jomon Museum (n.d.). General ritual interpretations based on Habu (2004) and Kobayashi (2004). Additional context from The Telegraph (2009).

			
Figure 1: Flat clay figurine at Sannai Maruyama Site (Source: Adapted from The Power of Dogū, by The Telegraph, 2009(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/6133175/The-Power-of-Dogu.html)).	Figure 2: Various types of Dogū figurines at the Shakado site (Source: Shakado Museum of Jomon Pottery. (n.d.). Artifacts of	Figure 3: Jomon Venus at the Tanabatake site (Source: Adapted from "The Power of Dogu Clay	Figure 4: 合掌土偶 at the Kazahari site (Source: Adapted from "The Power of Dogu Clay



Original work from London’s British Museum.)	Shakado site: Dig deeper to discover another Japan! Retrieved from https://share.google/ej3C9ezl55tN1YBtN	Figures," by Asian Art Newspaper, 2024, Retrieved from https://asianartnewspaper.com/the-power-of-dogu-clay-figures/	Figures," by Asian Art Newspaper, 2024, Retrieved from https://asianartnewspaper.com/the-power-of-dogu-clay-figures/
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Analysis and discussion: The domestic life cycle of dogū at Sannai Maruyama Site: At Sannai-Maruyama, the vast majority of Dogū figurines were recovered from middens (refuse heaps). Given this context, the distribution of Dogū and middens at the site cannot be fully explained by the conventional ‘ritual deactivation’ model. Instead, the arrangement of archaeological finds points toward a new ‘domestic ritual’ model. Three key observations are discussed below to further substantiate this theory:

First, rather than viewing the midden merely as a ‘garbage dump,’ it is logical to consider it a well-organized extension of the domestic sphere (Okada, 2004; Habu, 2004). Large quantities of ivory beads and jade stones have been recovered from middens at the Sannai Maruyama site. It is indicating the immense significance of the middens. Its function extended beyond mere routine waste management; the presence of these valuable and symbolic items across various layers of the midden suggests that the area served as a repository for both household refuse and sacred objects. Such an arrangement represents an expression of an organized domestic structure rather than a simple waste disposal system.

Second, the abundance of Dogū and the associated valuable ornaments support the ‘seasonal renewal kit’ model. Rather than serving as objects of long-term veneration, the Dogū and materials like jade or ivory found in the Sannai Maruyama middens likely formed an integral part of specific cyclical rituals—such as those related to household protection. Moreover, the co-occurrence of cross-shaped dogū and valuable ornaments at this site suggests that personal or social symbolic objects associated with the dogū—used during the conclusion of specific rituals—were ‘respectfully’ deposited in the midden.

Thirdly, a comparison with the Shakadō archaeological site reveals that the domestic use of dogū and valuable items was predominant at Sannai-Maruyama. While dogū were typically kept on house floors at Shakadō (Yamagata 1992), the presence of over 1,500 fragmented dogū alongside ivory and jade in the Sannai Maruyama midden indicates that this location served as a ‘sacred site of farewell’ for these ornate and significant objects. Thus, the life cycle of the dogū and the disposal of these valuable items do not represent a mere act of discarding; rather,



they are part of a 'Use-and-Renew' process, wherein the midden is defined as a place of sanctity and a dignified site marking the end of rituals.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the dogū figurines from the Sannai Maruyama archaeological site were far more than mere artistic expressions or objects of simple worship; they were integral components of the Jomon people's domestic lives. By analyzing the contexts of their deposition and comparing the unique characteristics of these figurines with those from other Jomon sites, this study proposes a "domestic ritual" model. This model suggests that dogū served as essential focal points for family-centered rituals, offering solace, protection, and spiritual connection within the private spheres of pit-dwelling inhabitants. Table 1's comparative analysis reveals a distinct contrast in ceremonial practices between Sannai Maruyama and other Jomon sites. While sites like Shakadō focus on symbols of fertility and pregnancy with individual female figures standing, the 'dōgu' at Sannai Maruyama are often flat, cruciform, and some are not clearly identifiable as male or female. These dōgu do not resemble typical Jomon people but instead depict transcendent images beyond gender and form, hinting at a more mystical spiritual presence. Moreover, the discovery of these dōgu figures in a refuse pile alongside precious items like jade and ivory challenges the traditional view of garbage dumps. Let's not forget that these middens were more than just garbage - they contained valuable items such as ivory beads and jades. It is fascinating to consider that they might have represented a unique "sacred starting point," signifying the end of a cycle of consumption and regeneration. The dogū figures at Sannai Maruyama display a significant fusion of spiritual beliefs and everyday domestic practices, illustrating how the Jomon people greatly respected the cycle of life.



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