

Chronology of the history and archaeology of the Japanese archipelago

33,000 -12,500 BC: Palaeolithic (first occupation of Japan)

12,500 – 500 BC: Jomon period

12,500 – 8000 BC: Incipient Jomon

8000 – 5000 BC: Initial Jomon

[7000 BC - AD 1000: Shellmound period in Ryukyus (Okinawa)]

5000 – 2500 BC: Early Jomon

2500 – 1500 BC: Middle Jomon

1500 – 1000 BC: Late Jomon

1000 – 500 BC: Final Jomon

500 BC – 250 AD: Yayoi period

[300 BC – AD 650 in Hokkaido: Epi-Jomon]

500 – 200 BC: Early Yayoi

200 BC – AD 0: Middle Yayoi

AD 1 – 250 AD: Late Yayoi

AD 250 – 600: Kofun period

AD 250 – 400: Early Kofun

AD 400 – 500: Middle Kofun

AD 500 – 600: Late Kofun

AD 600 – 710: Asuka period

[AD 600 – 1000 in northeastern Hokkaido: Okhotsk culture]

AD 710 – 794: Nara period

[AD 700 – 1200 in southern Hokkaido and northern Honshu: Satsumon culture]

AD 794 – 1185: Heian period

[AD 1050 – 1422: Gusuku period in Ryukyus (Okinawa)]

AD 1185 – 1615: Medieval period

[AD 1429 – 1879: Ryukyu Kingdom period in the Ryukyus (Okinawa)]

[AD 1200 – AD 1868 in Hokkaido: Ainu culture before Japanese colonisation]

AD 1615 – 1868: Edo / Early Modern period

AD 1868 – present: Modern period

AD 1868 – 1912: Meiji era

AD 1912 – 1926: Taisho era

AD 1926 – 1989: Showa era

AD 1989 – present: Heisei period

Notes:

There is much discussion about how to divide up the Japanese past into chronological periods. This debate could form the basis for an interesting classroom discussion, but the sequence presented here reflects conventional thinking. We need to be aware that new discoveries and developments in dating methods may result in changes and discrepancies. The major period divisions are indicated in bold.

The first reliable historical dates are from the 8th century, when the first official histories of Japan were prepared: the *Kojiki* [*Records of Ancient Matters*] (AD 712) and the *Nihon Shoki* [*Chronicles of Japan*] (AD 720). Archaeologists name the earlier periods according to the forms of archaeological materials. There are also debates about the appropriateness of the terms BC [Before Christ] and AD [Anno Domini] as against BCE [Before the Common Era] and CE [Common Era]. Archaeologists sometimes like to use BP [Before Present]. Following consultation with the ORJACH Focus Group we settled on BC / AD. There are regional variations within the Japanese archipelago, most notably in Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa).

The Palaeolithic is named in accordance with the globally accepted terminology for the archaeology of the geologically-defined Pleistocene epoch which ended with the last Ice Age. The word 'Palaeolithic' derives from the Greek for 'Old Stone Age'.

The Jomon period is named after the cord-marked earthenware that is found on most sites of this period. Jomon is the Japanese term for 'cord-marked' or 'cord-patterned'. The start of the Jomon has traditionally been defined as equating with the appearance of pottery, which is usually regarded as being technological development in the Holocene, the current geological epoch, in which modern environmental conditions developed, following the end of the last Ice Age. But recent discoveries have shown that pottery containers were being made in what was to become the Japanese archipelago before the end of the Pleistocene, around 16,500 years ago. So there is a big debate about when the Jomon period began.

The start of the Yayoi period was traditionally defined as being associated with the appearance of paddy rice agriculture in the archipelago. Until a few years ago this date was usually accepted as being around 300 BC. Recent work, however, has demonstrated that rice farming was taking place in northern Kyushu by 900 BC, leading to the definition of a new Initial Yayoi phase, which seems to have been restricted to this region. The Yayoi period takes its name from the location in Tokyo where the distinctive red earthenware of that is often found on sites associated with rice farming was first discovered in Tokyo in the 1880s.

The Kofun period takes its name from the burial mounds in which the elites of this period were interred. The Asuka, Nara and Heian periods are named after the locations which were traditionally regarded as the centres of culture, politics and religion at these times. Asuka is a region in the south of Nara prefecture, the centre of early Buddhist activity in Japan. Nara was the capital from 710 to 794, before the capital was transferred to Heian (modern-day Kyoto).

The Edo period takes its name from the city of Edo, centre of government of the Tokugawa Shoguns during the Early Modern period, renamed Tokyo (Eastern Capital) when the capital and residence of the Emperor were transferred from Kyoto at the beginning of the Meiji era. The Meiji, Taisho, Showa and Heisei eras take their names from the four emperors' reigns of the Modern period.