

The formation of a complex society in Japan.

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Introduction

During a period of one thousand years from *c.* 500 BC onwards, complex societies gradually developed on the Japanese islands. Alongside them, traditional cultures of hunter/gatherers survived in the northern region, especially in Hokkaido (Fig. 1). Okinawa and the other southern islands also had characteristic cultures. Although the inhabitants of the Japanese islands have been strongly influenced by China and Korea, developments there were generally indigenous, being separated from the mainland by the Sea of Japan. In China, many dynasties were established and destroyed for more than three hundred years from the third century AD, while the Korean peninsula saw the development of three states, Koguryo, Paekche and Silla, which coexisted with small polities in the Kaya region.

Japan had a long-lived hunter-gatherer tradition. The Jomon period is famous for its pottery which is more than 10,000 years old (Table 1). Japan had no Bronze Age and in the beginning of the Yayoi period in the mid-first millennium BC, knowledge of food production was introduced together with bronze- and iron-working. The shift to food production led to an increase in conflict, social stratification and the development of political organization. In the late third century AD, during the Kofun period, large burial mounds were constructed. The largest of the keyhole-shaped burial mounds, the *Zenpo-koen-funs*, extends for as much as 496 m in length and such enormous mounds were constructed for each chief or king. In all, more than 100,000 burial mounds were constructed during the three hundred years of the Kofun period in Japan.

The development of settlements

In the early stage of the Yayoi period, in the mid-first millennium BC, nuclear settlement sites were built with surrounding ditches. The typical settlement of this period was a communal one with few dominant houses (Fig. 2-1). By the end of the Yayoi period, enclosed settlements had ceased to be constructed, and during the Kofun period, the chiefs' residences were built separately from communal settlement sites (Tsude 1983). A chief's residence was found in 1981 at Mitsudera, Gumma prefecture, with a strongly fortified ditch (Figs 2-3, 2-4). The chief must have been buried beneath a large keyhole-shaped mound. In 1985, an extremely important settlement site was found at Kuroimine, Gumma, under a layer of thick volcanic ash and rocks (Fig. 2-2). This site, buried in the mid-sixth century AD, shows evidence of a precise

layout of houses and farms. Later in the seventh century AD, capital cities developed that were intentionally planned by political authorities, and not the direct outcome of urbanization.

The process of urbanization in Japan has two characteristics: (1) The chiefs, owing to their strong power and independent status from the communities, prevented the free development of urban societies. (2) The resources put into production and reproduction were limited, as a large part of the wealth was consumed in constructing burial mounds. These two characteristics show the weakness in the autonomous development of urban societies in Japan. Capital cities of the next stage therefore indicate their political rather than economic nature.

The hierarchy of power

The word 'Kofun' means old mound. In the three hundred years of the Kofun period, thousands of *Zenpo-koen-funs*, keyhole-shaped burial mounds, from 20 m to 486 m long, were constructed. The total number of Kofuns, including small round barrows constituting cemeteries, is more than 100,000. The volume of the biggest mound is more than 1,000,000 m³. Usually the bodies were buried in stone chambers with many prestige items, e.g. bronze mirrors, weapons and jewellery. The size of each burial mound reflects the volume of human power the dead person could assemble and consequently the dead person's degree of authority. Figure 3 shows the size of the largest *Zenpo-koen-fun* in each old province, and many of them were constructed in the fifth century AD. The map indicates a developed stage of social stratification and the same hierarchy is shown in the smaller area of the Okayama region. However, the evidence from the settlements does not clearly support a hierarchy as indicated by the size of burial mounds.

The system of the *Jie*

At the base of this hierarchical organization lies a Chinese system of domination (Niuro 1989). In ancient China, joints of bamboos (*Jie* in Chinese) were used as tests of reliability (Fig. 4). The minute form of each joint is so complicated that if split into two or more pieces no piece from another joint fits exactly into the broken end. Bamboos were used by the emperors to control the reliability of their delegates. They split a bamboo into two or more pieces and kept one for themselves and let the other pieces to their delegates who could use them to identify each other. If the pieces fit together, they could be sure that the other delegate was the right man. This *Jie* system turned later into a symbol of authority of the emperors. Kings of Japan, Korea and other regions were given the title of 'the *Jie* Holder' from Chinese emperors. The form of the *Jie* was depicted in Chinese documents. It was also painted on the wall of a burial chamber in Korea, and there is an inscription 'the *Jie* holder' on a wall in the same chamber. *Jie* battle-axes in ancient China symbolized the military authority of the emperors. Some time

later, battle-axes gave place to swords and a custom granting swords to subordinate kings and chiefs played an important part in the system of domination.

Triangular rimmed bronze mirrors with *Jie* motifs have been found in burial mounds of the late third century and the early fourth century AD in Japan. Several mirrors were cast from each mould (Kobayashi 1976, pp. 303–77; Fig. 5). The network of chiefs linked together by the system of the *Jie* is the characteristic Eastern way to organize political relations in the course of formation of complex societies.

Agricultural basis

The relatively rapid development of the complex society in Japan was partly due to its high agricultural productivity. Before industrialization, each typical Japanese farmer had very little land, less than one hectare. However, because of its high productivity of wet cultivation, such a small area could support the life of a family and produced surplus to pay heavy taxes. There were no sheep nor much cattle in prehistoric Japan. Rice fields were cultivated with mainly human power and therefore communal cooperation was essential. Communal control of irrigation systems also promoted the clustering of settlements. The smallness of each land helped easy access from the clustered settlements. This intensive farming created a Japanese rural landscape completely different from those in Europe.

The population of the 8th century Japan has been estimated to approximately five million, based on the fragmentary documents of the family registration. This figure is remarkable compared to the population of about one million in eleventh century Britain, based on the census of Domesday Book. There is not such a large difference in size of land between these countries and, furthermore, in Japan, a relatively small part of the land was cultivated.

This intensive agricultural system on the one hand brought the rapid development of ceremonial monuments and political hierarchy. However it also prevented the autonomous development of economic systems. The independence of individual families from the community was prevented and the status of specialists was relatively low. The wealth from the high productivity was mainly used for communal or public purposes such as the construction of huge burial mounds. The development of merchant and commercial economy was therefore very late and the introduction of coinage was as late as the seventh century, although coins as such had been introduced more than half a century earlier from China. The political regime based on this system has been referred to as the 'Asiatic' despotism.

Recent theoretical framework

After the World War II, the most urgent theoretical responsibility for Japanese archaeologists was to criticize and overcome the traditional historical framework based on nationalism and the Emperor centralism. There were two major themes. The first was to criticize the Yamato

or Kinai centralism, Yamato being the region said to be the birthplace of the Emperor's family. The second theme was to reexamine the relationship with Korean cultures. Traditionally, ancient Japan has been thought to have a very simple political hierarchy, with an emperor at the top of the hierarchy and all the regional societies subordinated to the emperor. This regime was believed to have continued without any serious interruption. However, the theoretical and practical re-examination has shown that the central authority was not so simple but rather an alliance of plural powers including some changes of political regimes, or dynasties. The role of the powers of the peripheral regions was also re-examined and the relative independence of the different regional powers has been stressed. These tendencies have encouraged settlement archaeology to identify the differences within the central regions, the characteristics of each region and the complex relationship between the central regions and the peripheral authorities.

During the imperial colonization of Korea by Japan after 1911 historical and archaeological evidence was utilized to authorize the domination. Mimana of the southern part of Korea was claimed to have been the territory of Japan and both people were said to have a common ancestry. This framework was strongly criticized after the independence of Korea and the theory of the domination of Mimana by ancient Japan was thoroughly denied. Some Korean and Japanese archaeologists have also tried to identify Korean factors in archaeological materials in Japan. Although some difference in nuance can still be seen, there are no serious conflicts between the archaeologists of the two countries. Japanese archaeologists have recently tried to find direct ties between Korean and Japanese regional powers which did not involve the interference in society of a central authority.

In this context of archaeological research, there has been a tendency to see the Kofun period as occurring prior to the state formation. This was in a sense a reaction to the traditional image of the emperor-dominated state. However, recently some archaeologists such as Hiroshi Tsude have pointed out that the Kofun period society was more complex and more developed, and should be considered as an early state. Some historians have criticized this opinion and controversies continue.

Conclusion

In the process of urbanization in Japan, the political factor played a more important role than the economic one, which may also be the case in other regions in eastern Asia. The strong authority of the chiefs and kings weakened the autonomous development of urban societies. This led to poverty in the settlements, but to richness of the burial mounds during the Kofun period in Japan. Two factors should however be taken into account: 1) It might not have been necessary to live close together in this area, due to fewer social conflicts and ample space to build houses; 2) The building material of the houses seems to bias our impression. A settlement composed of wooden houses without distinct fortifications tends to leave fewer archaeological traces than one of stone houses.

References

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Illustrations

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- Figure 2. Three typical examples of settlement in the Yayoi and Kofun periods.
- Figure 3. Hierarchy of power shown by the size of burial mounds, mainly fifth century AD. (The largest mounds of each province is shown).
- Figure 4. The development of the *Jie*. A Chinese system of displaying credibility.
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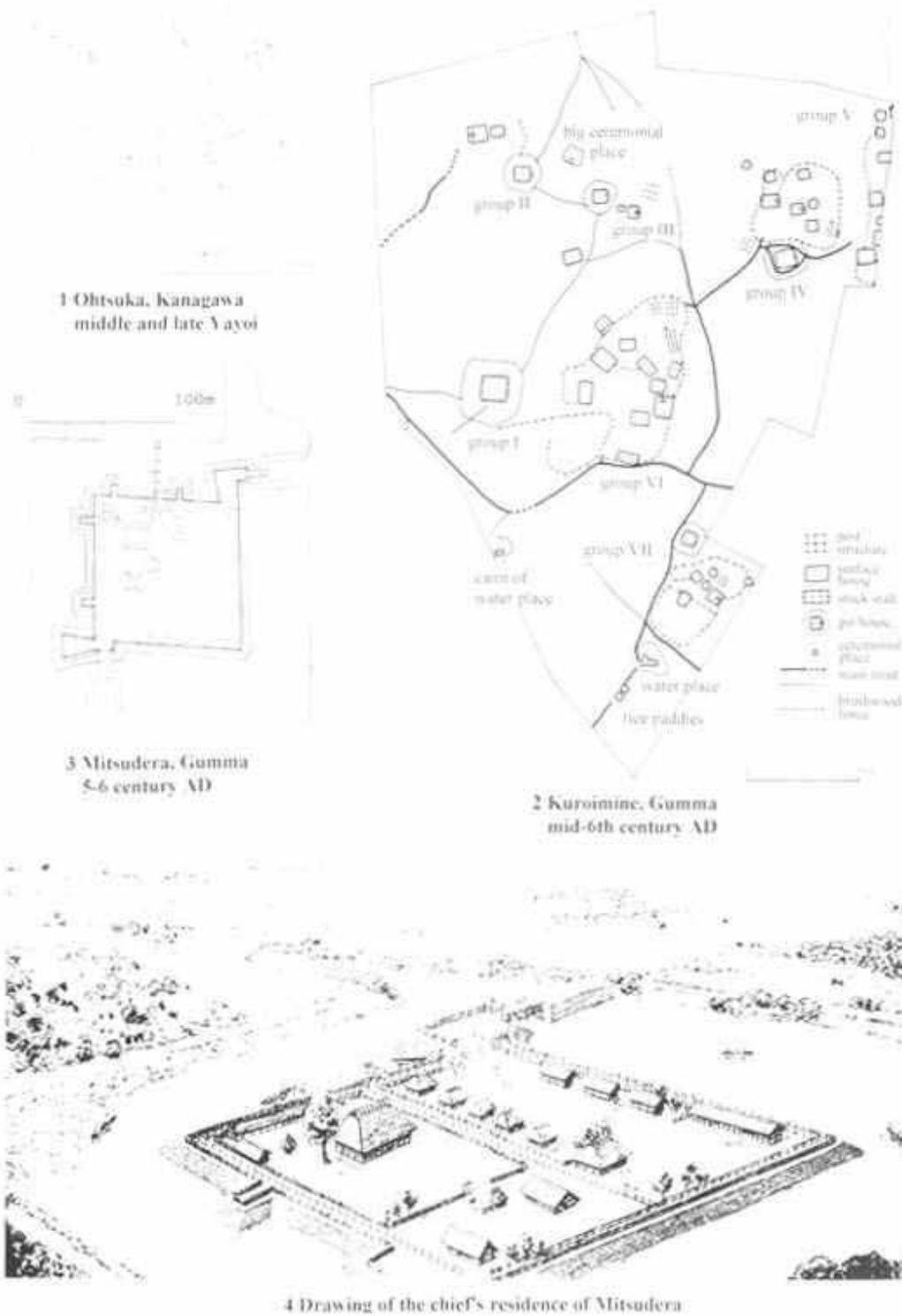


Figure 2. Three typical examples of settlement in the Yayoi and Kofun periods.

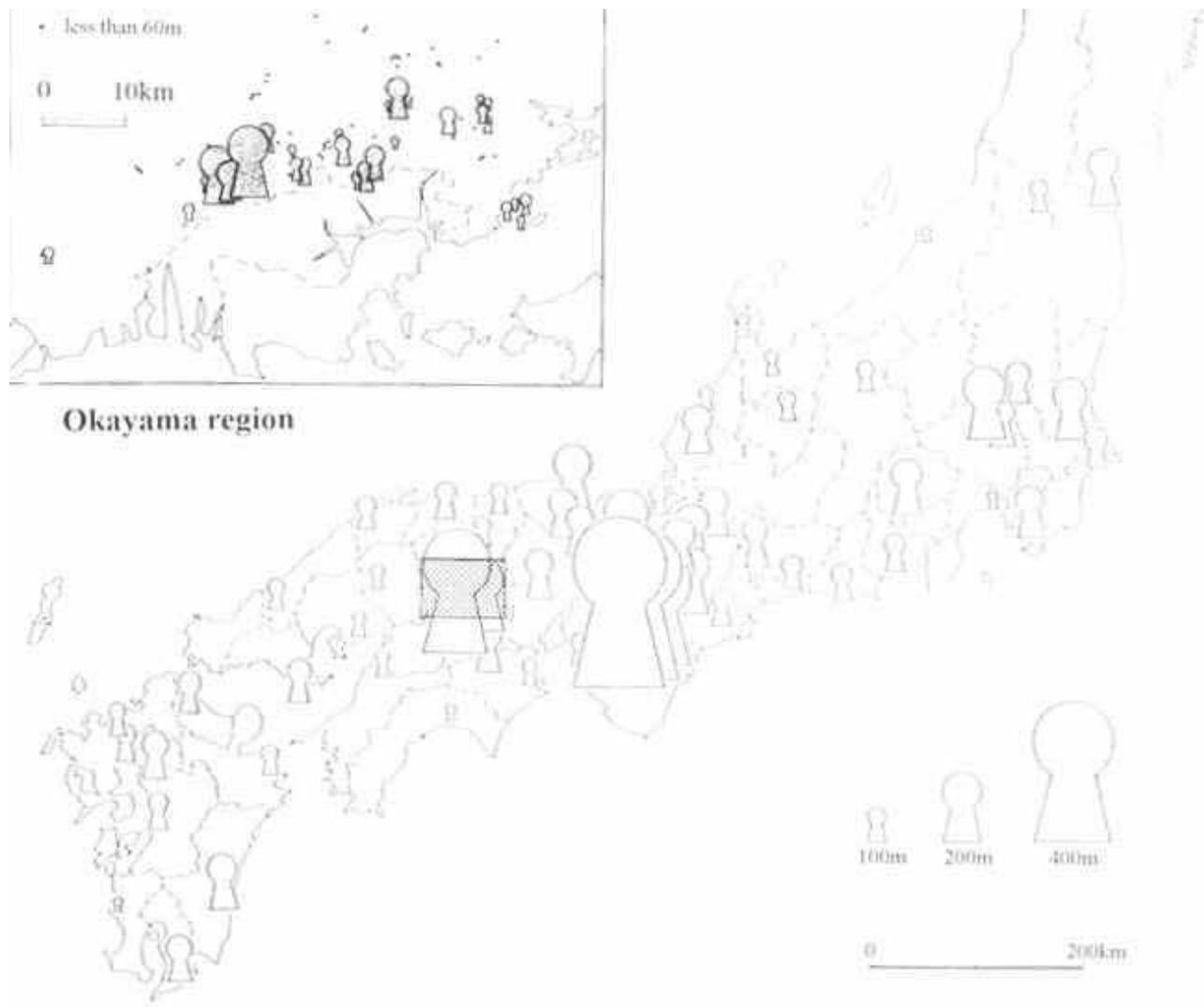


Figure 3. Hierarchy of power shown by the size of burial mounds, mainly fifth century AD. (The largest mounds of each province is shown).

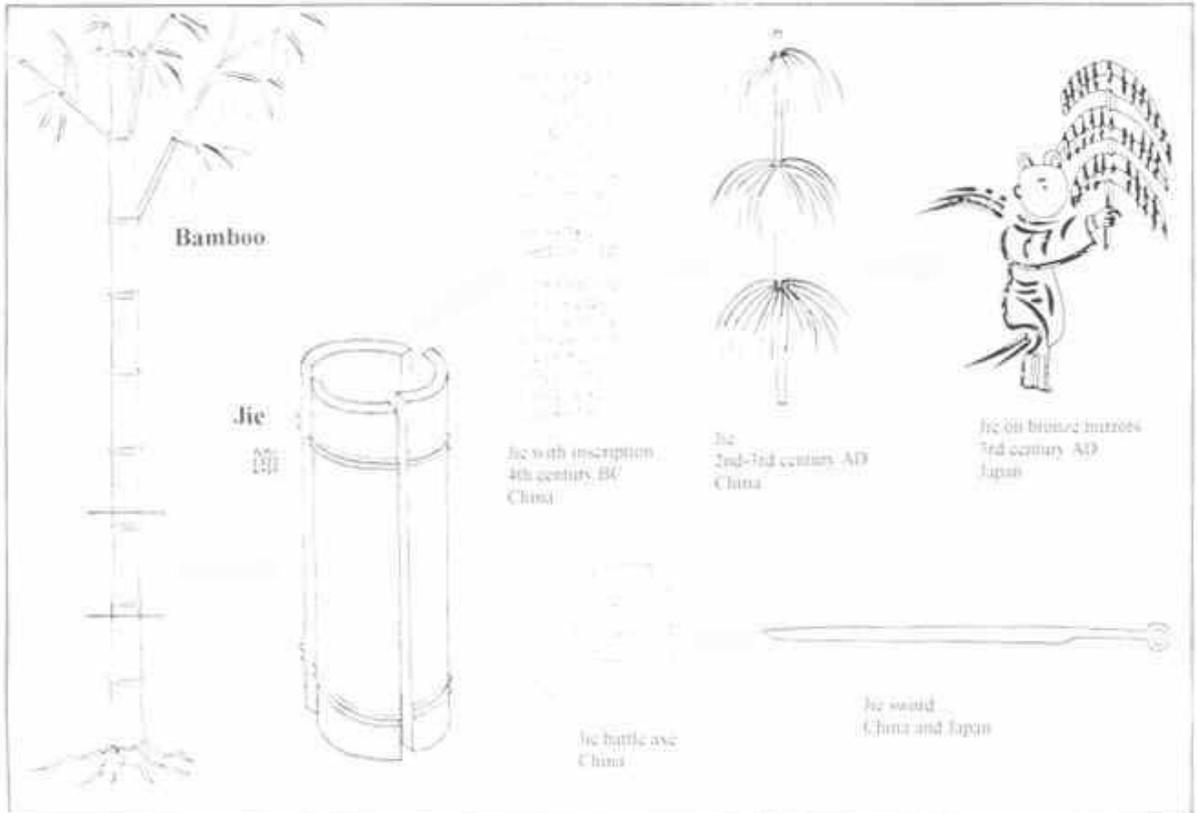


Figure 4. The development of the *Jie*. A Chinese system of displaying credibility.

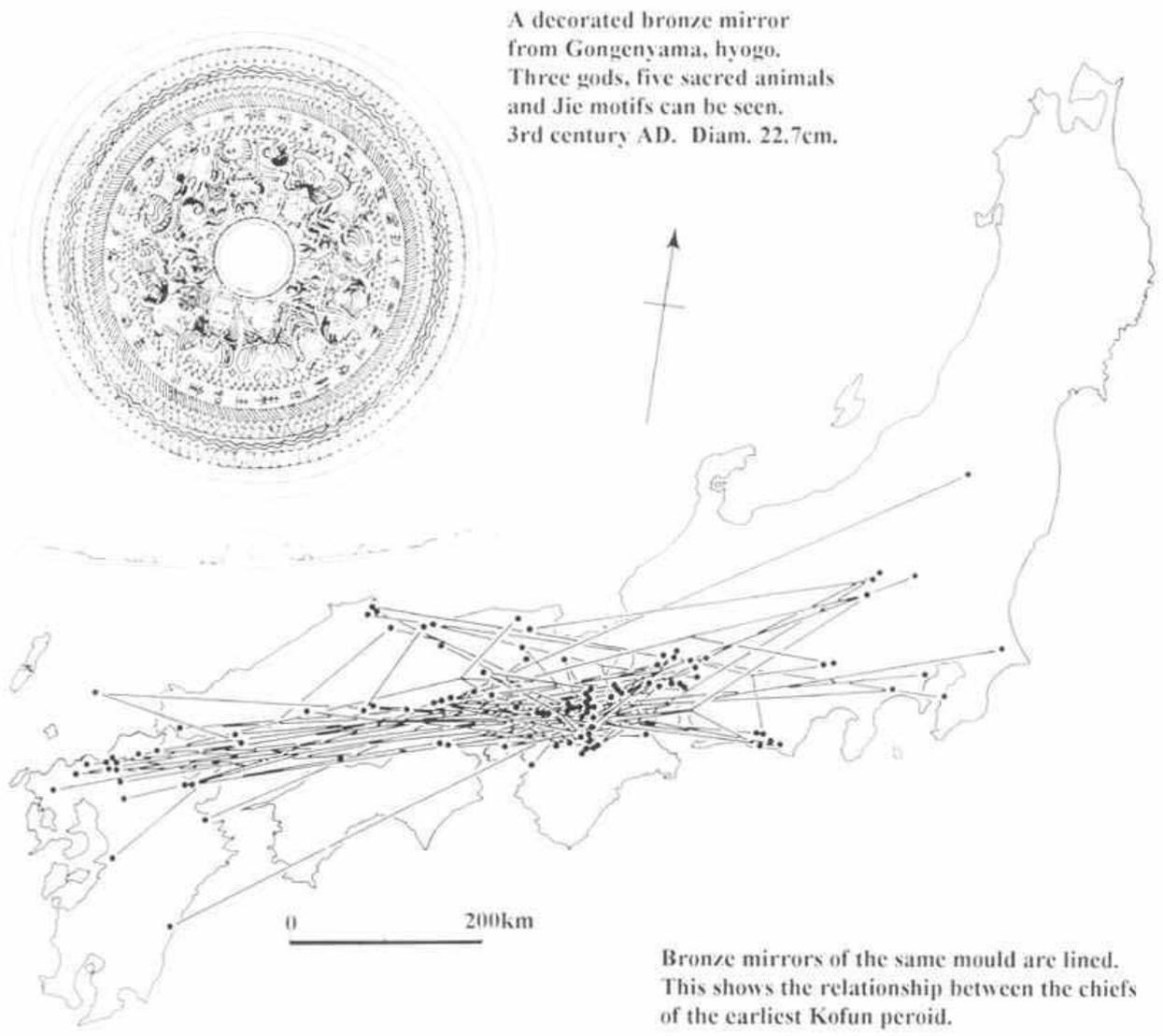


Figure 5. Relations of triangular rimmed bronze mirrors.

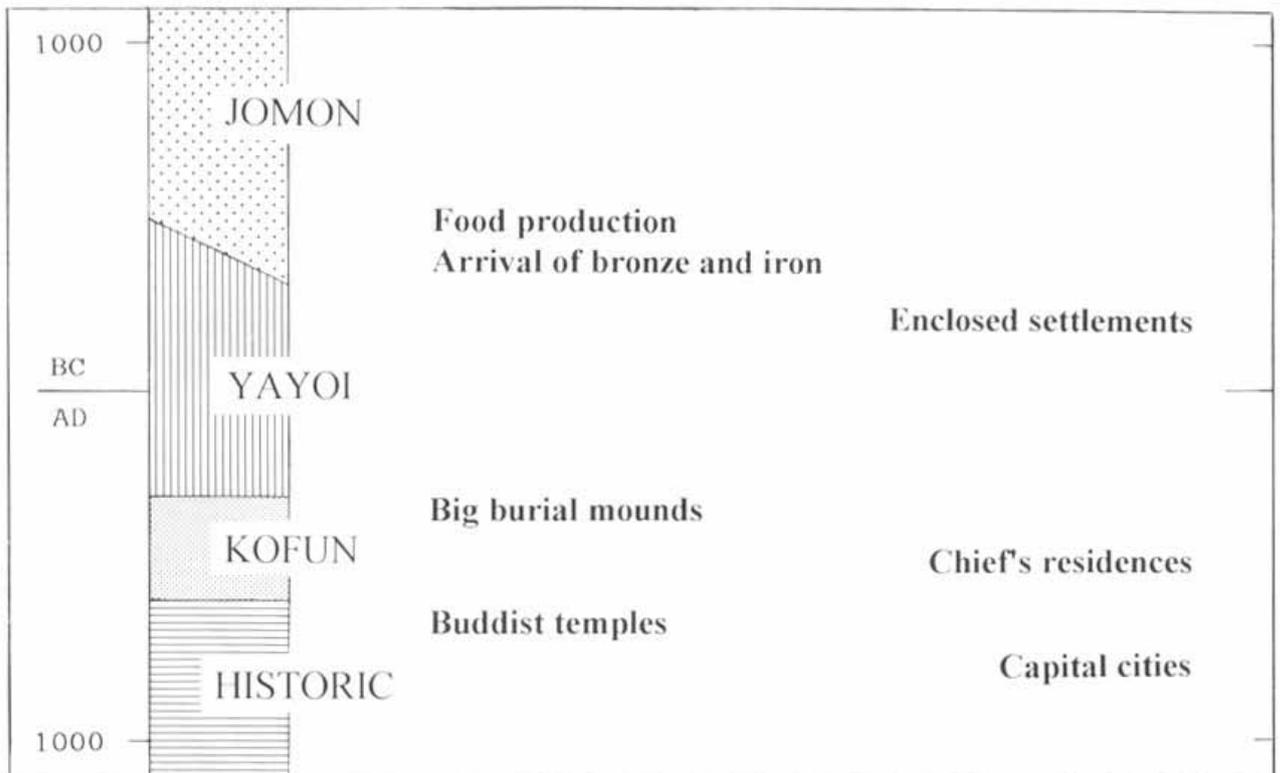


Table 1. Chronology in Japan.