

Prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands (1)

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You might first imagine the pyramids of the ancient Egyptians and Mayans when you hear the words “ancient civilization.” There were no pyramids in the prehistoric period (the era without writing system, from approximately 30,000 years to several hundred years ago) of the Amami and Okinawa Islands. Then why do we describe the prehistoric Amami and Okinawa Islands as an “island civilization”? Here, if we assume that civilization is an “ultimate culture established by humankind,” then it is clear that there was an ultimate culture unparalleled in the world in the prehistoric Amami and Okinawa Islands. We would like to introduce those points below.

Our direct ancestors (*Homo sapiens*) were born in Africa about 200,000 years ago. By about 10,000 years ago, they had spread throughout the continents of Eurasia, Australia, North America, and South America, except for Antarctica. The most astonishing part of this spread was that it spanned from Alaska at its northernmost point to Chile at its southernmost point in several thousand years. This aspect clearly shows the high adaptability of human beings to various environments.

It should also be emphasized that they were hunter-gatherers. Thus, hunter-gatherers demonstrate their high adaptability to many different kinds of environments. While highly able to adapt to various environments, even hunter-gatherers had difficulty crossing the islands 10,000 years ago. In reality, there have only been 10–15 islands inhabited by humans 10,000 years ago or earlier worldwide (Paleolithic period). However, archaeological sites dated in the Paleolithic have been found on Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima, Okinawajima, Iejima, and Kumejima. Moreover, Paleolithic sites have been known to be in Tanegashima, Miyakojima, and Ishigakijima. Thus, Paleolithic sites (approximately 35,000 to 10,000 years ago) are known to be in a total of eight islands from the Ryukyu Islands—the Ryukyu Islands rival those worldwide.

One of the explanations for why there were only a handful of islands with human populations during the Paleolithic period was that island environments lacked sufficient natural resources including animal and plant foods, making the hunter-gatherer lifestyle difficult; human populations needed farming to survive on the islands. Farming began in the Neolithic period (from 10,000 years ago onwards), after which people inhabited most islands worldwide. However, the world is still a large place.

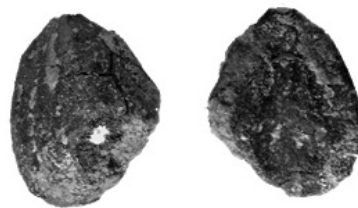
There have been some exceptional examples of islands where hunter-gatherers lived. Characteristics of these islands include (1) a large surface area, (2) proximity to continents and larger islands, (3) the ability to utilize marine animals such as seals, (4) edible animals and plants brought in from their motherland, and (5) combinations of some to all of these possible.

None of these characteristics apply to the islands of Amami and Okinawa. However, recent studies continue to indicate that hunter-gatherers-fishers were present in the Shellmidden period (approximately 7,000 to 1,000 years ago) of the Amami and Okinawa Islands for several thousand years (several tens of thousands of years when including the Paleolithic period). There are few other islands where this was the case. To use a slightly exaggerated expression, the information being obtained from the Amami and Okinawa Islands is thought to add a new page to human history as well as to world history.

As mentioned above, it seems that people on the Amami and Okinawa Islands made a living by using animals and plants obtained from the natural world for thousands of years (tens of thousands when including the Paleolithic period). The people of the Shellmidden period knew about the existence of rice cultivation through interactions with the Yayoi people and the culture of the mainland; however, they did not leap into rice farming. According to some researchers, they stubbornly refused to farm. This was not because the hunter-gatherers-fishers of the Shellmidden period were “backwards” or “barbaric” people, but rather because the nature of the Amami and Okinawa Islands was abundant. Therefore, there was no need to incorporate labor-intensive farming.

However, this period also ended approximately 1,000 years ago. It was clear that the Amami and Okinawa Islands introduced farming focusing on rice and wheat during this time. This farming began between the 8th and 12th centuries in the Amami Islands and the 10th and 12th centuries in the Okinawa Islands. In other words, farming was introduced first in the Amami Islands and then the Okinawa Islands. Therefore, during this time, the Amami and Okinawa Islands oversaw a transition from hunting, gathering, and fishing to farming. Still there are almost no other islands worldwide where there was a transition from hunting and gathering to farming.

As previously mentioned, most islands worldwide were colonized by farmers—there was no hunter-gatherer period on these islands. Meanwhile, exceptional examples of islands inhabited by a hunter-gatherer society continued to do so until “discovered” by Europeans and others. In other words, there was a rare cultural phenomenon in the prehistoric periods of the Amami and Okinawa Islands in this respect as well. The transition from hunting and gathering to farming is one of the most important, yet mysterious, research themes in archaeology and anthropology while the fact that the transition occurred on islands provides extremely important evidence of this theme to these fields.



Oldest edible acorns in the Amami Islands (from approximately 11,000 years ago, excavated from the Hango site, Tatsugo town). Hunter-gatherers-fishers of the Amami and Okinawa Islands ate nuts such as acorns for long periods of time.