

Prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands (2)

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The environment of an island is very delicate. The environment of an island before people colonized it, had its own long history: several hundreds of thousands to millions of years ago, or perhaps even longer; plants and animals arrived on the islands, where they adapted and evolved. As a result, a balanced and extremely delicate environment was created. One can easily imagine that the ecosystem, evolved over millennia, would be influenced by the arrival of an external species. It is said that humans are the most troublesome among these external species.

For example, humans need forest resources for homes, boats, fuel, and so on. Even the arrival of the single species, the human, into an island environment would affect that ecosystem, but humans intentionally bring with them livestock, animals such as dogs, and cultivated plants, and may unintentionally bring in animals and plants such as rats and weeds. As a result, human colonization in many islands worldwide has been reported to cause environmental degradation or destruction, such as the extinction of species (it is said that approximately 2,000 species in the islands of Oceania have become either extinct or disappeared from the islands), deforestation, landslides, and resource depletion. Researchers have hypothesized that: human colonization of an island environment = environmental destruction / degradation.

Thinking that “there must have been a similar trend during the prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands,” researchers have investigated this hypothesis for about 30 years. This research focused mainly on the Shellmidden period, where data were accumulated. First, no extinct animals were found according to TOIZUMI Takeji of Waseda University, who conducted analyses of vertebrates, unlike other islands worldwide. What was learned recently was that people had eaten *Amami no Kuro Usagi* (the Amami rabbit hereafter in this book, scientific name, *Pentalagus furnessi*) since the early part of the Shellmidden period.

It would be very likely that the Amami rabbits, consumed from a very early period, would have been extinct long ago if this were another island. However, they continued to survive, and it is now a symbol of the World Natural Heritage. According to TOIZUMI, it was believed that the utilization of vertebrates was stable throughout the Shellmidden period. Furthermore, research on the global utilization of shellfish on islands has indicated that the types of shellfish gathered changed from those that were easy to collect to those more difficult or dangerous to gather. Moreover, since the objective was to gather shellfish meat, the size of shells gathered were large at first, but excessive gathering resulted in a gradual decrease in the size of the shellfish.

These trends, however, were not recognized in the Amami and Okinawa Islands. KUROZUMI Taiji of the Chiba Prefectural Central Museum, who has been studying shellfish

excavated from sites dating to the Shellmidden period for many years, stated that “there was no human-based influence on shellfish.” Though not surviving as well as the animals, the plants of the Shellmidden period, understood from plant species and pollen, exhibited no major human-based influence on the environment. The analysis methods of the archaeological and related disciplines available today suggest, for now, that the impact of humans on the natural environment was not significant on the Amami and Okinawa Islands, during the Shellmidden period, unlike many islands worldwide. This was perhaps the case during the preceding Paleolithic period as well. Recent studies have shown that human populations began to affect the islands’ environment around the 11th century when farming began.

Comparing and verifying the prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands with islands globally have made it clear from the results of research over the last 30 years that the Amami and Okinawa Islands had an extremely rare cultural phenomenon regarding the above-mentioned four aspects (the islands where *Homo sapiens* were settled in the Paleolithic period, the islands where hunter-gatherers-fishers lived, the islands that transitioned from hunting, gathering, and fishing to farming, and the islands in “harmony” with nature (?)). Globally, if even one of the four aspects is recognized in the “island” environment, then it seems to have been an anthropologically “rare” island. Not only one but four of these aspects may have existed in the Amami and Okinawa Islands.

There are six ancient civilizations in the world, but there may only be one island in the world with a prehistoric history like that of the Amami and Okinawa Islands. The ultimate human culture, so to speak, may have developed in the prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands. There was no “urbanization” or “writing system,” the elements of civilization, in the prehistoric period of the Amami and Okinawa Islands, but if the facts introduced here are not rejected in the future, can they perhaps be added as one of the triumphant cultures of humans as well?



Oldest grain in the Amami Islands (rice excavated from the Gusuku site group, Kikai town). Cereal farming was first introduced in the area approximately a thousand years ago.