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Panel: Starting Over Again: the Early Palaeolithic Research in Japan Today (Fumiko IKAWA-SMITH and SATŌ Hiroyuki)

INTRODUCTION TO “STARTING OVER”

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PALAEOLITHIC RESEARCH IN JAPAN: IN THE BEGINNING

During the Pleistocene, when the sea level was lowered due to glaciation, the Japanese archipelago was often connected with the Asian continent, and presence of fossil animals suggests that hominins, who were present at least by one million years ago in northeast Asia, could very well have reached the archipelago as well. There always have been enthusiasts searching for indications of such presence, as I noted before (IKAWA-SMITH 1978), but it was not until 1949 when the solid evidence turned up, and the pursuit of Palaeolithic remains became the subject of serious academic inquiry. It began with the recovery of stone artefacts from road-side exposure of Pleistocene formations at Iwajuku 岩宿, about 90 km north of Tōkyō (Fig. 1), in 1946 by AIZAWA Tadahiro 相沢忠洋, a young amateur, who was making a living by peddling foodstuff from door to door. After failing to convince a series of professional archaeologists of the authenticity of his finds, he finally found receptive ears with a team of archaeologists of Meiji University, who undertook to investigate. The 1949 excavation of the Iwajuku site by the Meiji University team recovered lithic assemblages from two levels (SUGIHARA 1956). Once it was established that Pleistocene formations do contain artefacts, Palaeolithic sites were discovered and investigated in a rapid succession. Nearly 100 sites were identified within 10 years since the Iwajuku excavation, and now over 65 years later, there are more than 14,500 Palaeolithic sites in the archipelago.

SEARCH FOR EARLIER PALAEOLITHIC REMAINS

Two of the stone tools recovered from the lower layer of the Iwajuku site were bifacially flaked oval axes. These were first described as “hand-axes”, with the implication that they may be comparable to Lower Palaeolithic specimens elsewhere. With the progress of the Palaeolithic research, Quaternary geology of the

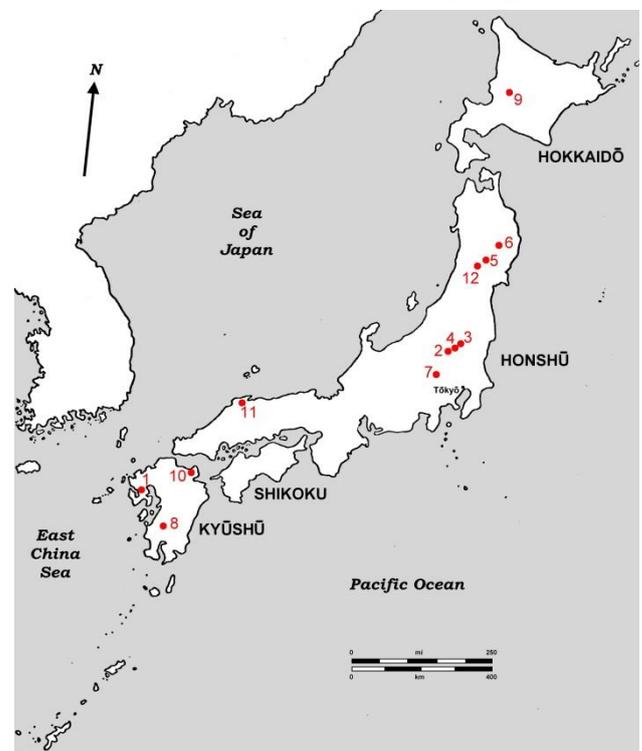


Fig. 1: Palaeolithic sites mentioned in the text (in alphabetical order),
 1: Fukui, 2: Gongenyama, 3: Hoshino, 4: Iwajuku, 5: Kamitakamori,
 6: Kanedori, 7: Nagaone, 8: Ono, 9: Sōshin-Fudosaka, 10: Sōzudai,
 11: Sunabara, 12: Zazaragi.

archipelago became better understood, and it became quite clear that the Iwajuku "hand-axes" came from a stratum which could not be older than 30,000 BP. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Palaeolithic assemblages recovered so far were contained in Late Pleistocene formations, dating to what is now known as Oxygen Isotope Stage 2 (OIS2).

Nevertheless, the search for the oldest evidence of human occupation of the archipelago continued through the 1950's and 60's. The small number of assemblages that were thought to represent such evidence could be divided into three groups, and each met with scepticism. One of the groups, such as Gongenyama 権現山 I assemblage, also recovered by AIZAWA in a locality not far from Iwajuku, consisted of hand-axes and flakes detached from prepared cores (MARINGER 1956). There was no question about their artefactual status, but one could not be certain of its "Early Palaeolithic" age, as the specimens were collected while the site was being prepared for housing construction. An age in excess of 40,000 years was based on AIZAWA's testimony several years later that he remembered that the artefacts lay below a layer of white pumice, which was subsequently radiocarbon dated to 40,500±3,500 BP (ARAI 1971). Another group of assemblages were the results of meticulous excavations, such as at the Sōzudai 早水台 site in Kyūshū 九州 (SERIZAWA 1965, SERIZAWA and NAKAGAWA 1965) and at the Hoshino 星野 site in northern Kantō 関東 (SERIZAWA 1966, 1978), which recovered numerous lithic specimens in situ. In these cases, there was no question that the specimens came from formations dating to 40,000 to 130,000 years ago, but the specimens themselves failed to meet general acceptance as artefacts. To the third and final group belong a very small number of assemblages, such as the three bifacial pieces and flakes recovered the lowest layer of Fukui Cave 福井[洞窟] in Kyūshū, famous for the very early occurrence of ceramic shards (KAMAKI and SERIZAWA 1967). A sample from the layer yielded a non-finite radiocarbon date of >31,900 (GaK-952), but the assemblage consists of only 16 pieces of artefacts plus debitage, and it has not been replicated elsewhere.

"FUJIMURA SCANDAL" OF 2000, AND ITS AFTERMATH

The situation began to change in the 1970's with the activities of the members of the Stone Age Study Group (Jap. Sekki bunka danwakai 石器文化談話会) situated in Sendai City 仙台[市], northern Honshū 本州. A decisive moment came in April, 1980, when FUJIMURA Shin'ichi 藤村新一, one of its members and a local amateur archaeologist, recovered ten arte-

facts, including hand-axes and picks, from a formation, clearly older than 30,000 BP, at Zazaragi 座散乱木 in front of professional archaeologists and geoscientists (OKAMURA 2010:70-74). This sensational discovery was followed by a series of equally remarkable finds at nearby sites. Unlike the assemblages recovered by SERIZAWA and others in the 1960s, artefactual nature of these lithic specimens were unquestionable, and they were sometimes unearthed in front of witnesses by FUJIMURA himself, from layers whose ages can be unambiguously determined in relation to well-dated horizon-marker pumice deposits. As FUJIMURA's reputation as "God's hand" to spot the location within a site where Early and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts were likely to be buried increased, he was often invited to come and give advice to investigators working at the sites further away from the Sendai area, such as the Sōshin-Fudosaka 総進不動坂 site in Hokkaidō 北海道 and the Nagaone 長尾根 site in Saitama prefecture 埼玉[県], north of Tōkyō. As the number of Early and Middle Palaeolithic sites increased, so did the antiquity of human occupation of the archipelago, the oldest being the bifacial tools recovered from the lowest layer at the Kamitakamori 上高森 site, dated to be between 0.58 and 0.60 million years old. As some archaeologists began talking about the need for a paradigm shift in Japanese Palaeolithic studies, uneasiness about his uncanny ability was felt by others, and the Mainichi Newspapers organized a special team to follow FUJIMURA as he visited archaeological sites. He was caught on video in the early morning of November 5, 2000 as he was burying artefacts at Kamitakamori. He has since confessed to having manufactured the evidence by placing genuine, but later, stone tools from his collection in much older geological layers at 42 sites.

Immediately afterwards, in November 2000, the Japanese Archaeological Association established an ad hoc Committee for Investigation into the Early and Middle Palaeolithic Issues (Jap. Zen-chūsekki mondai chōsa iinkai 前・中期旧石器問題調査研究委員会), and set out to examine some 3000 artefacts from about 200 sites where FUJIMURA was, or may have been, involved in excavation. The investigation resulted in the nullification of over 100 assemblages, with profound negative impact on Palaeolithic research in particular, and archaeological studies in general. Nevertheless, there are over 14,500 "untainted" archaeological sites in the archipelago, including about 100 that are thought to predate 40,000 BP (Japanese Archaeological Association 2004; Zen-chūsekki mondai chōsa iinkai 2003).

Currently, the archaeological community in Japan is divided into two camps: these who are unwilling to accept any claim older than 40,000 years, and those

who are undertaking renewed research for such early assemblages. This session presented some of the findings that had been brought out in recent decades in the words of the primary investigators themselves to the international gathering of scholars for their own appraisal. We are pleased to include three of the presentations in this collection: the reports on the Kanedori 金取 site in northern Honshū, on the Sunabara 砂原 site in western Honshū, and on the Ōno 大野 site in southern Kyūshū.

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