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A History of Nagoya

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Introduction

Nagoya, situated at the heart of Japan's Chubu region, has long stood as a microcosm of the nation's larger historical, cultural, and economic shifts. As the fourth largest city in Japan and a leading industrial powerhouse, Nagoya's narrative is inextricably linked to themes of resilience, adaptation, and innovation. Over thousands of years, its location, between the ancient capitals and modern metropolises of Kyoto and Tokyo, has shaped its destiny as both a battleground and a bridge, a center for faith and commerce, a cradle of tradition, and a vanguard of progress.

The story of Nagoya begins in the mists of prehistory, with archaeological finds that chronicle millennia of human settlement. Early societies left their mark in the form of shell middens, burial mounds, and sacred sites, examples of which still fascinate historians and archaeologists today. Perhaps most legendary among the city's ancient treasures is the Atsuta Shrine, one of Japan's most revered Shinto sanctuaries and, according to myth, the resting place of the imperial sword Kusanagi no Tsurugi. Its enduring prominence highlights the region's significance as a spiritual epicenter deep into antiquity.

Yet Nagoya is perhaps most renowned for its pivotal role in Japan's unification and the age of the samurai. Three of the nation's great leaders—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—were all connected to this region, shaping the nation's trajectory from the chaos of the Sengoku period to the relative stability of Edo. The construction of Nagoya Castle and the development of its bustling castle town, orchestrated by Ieyasu in the early seventeenth century, would anchor the city's identity for centuries to come. The convergence of castle and shrine towns, economic innovation, and strategic location cemented Nagoya's place in Japan's political and cultural topography.

The emergence of modern Japan brought both upheaval and opportunity. The Meiji Restoration saw old feudal structures swept aside in favor of modernization and industrialization. Nagoya, leveraging its central position and industrious spirit, quickly adapted—textile mills, ceramics, and remarkable inventions like Sakichi Toyoda's automatic loom provided the seeds for future industrial giants. The city's growth as a transport and manufacturing hub, particularly in the automotive and aerospace sectors, echoed throughout the twentieth century, its fortunes rising and falling with the tides of national and global history.

War tested Nagoya's strength and spirit, with devastating bombings in World War II flattening much of the city's historic core. Yet, in the ashes of destruction, the people of Nagoya rebuilt, blending a forward-looking urban vision with careful preservation of

cultural touchstones. Architecture, museums, gardens, and festivals all form part of a living tapestry that binds the past to the present. The story of Nagoya is thus one of continuity and transformation, of tradition reverberating within the machinery of innovation.

This book aims to chart a comprehensive journey through Nagoya's remarkable history, from its earliest inhabitants to its place on the global stage—a city shaped by emperors and artisans, war and industry, faith and enterprise. It is not just the chronicle of a city, but the story of a people whose resilience and creativity have continually propelled Nagoya to the forefront of Japanese life.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Origins: The Jomon and Yayoi Settlements

Long before the stern gaze of samurai lords fell upon the fertile plains bordering Ise Bay, the land that would one day become the bustling metropolis of Nagoya echoed with the rhythms of a much older way of life. Stretching back thousands of years, the history of human habitation in this region unfolds across the vast expanse of Japan's prehistory, primarily through the archaeological remnants of the Jomon and Yayoi periods. These early inhabitants, though nameless to us today, laid the foundational layers upon which all subsequent history of the area would be built.

The Jomon period, a remarkably long era spanning from roughly 14,000 BCE to 300 BCE, is characterized by a semi-sedentary to sedentary hunter-gatherer-fisher culture that flourished across the Japanese archipelago. Unlike many contemporary cultures elsewhere in the world, Jomon people developed pottery very early, some of the oldest in the world, giving the period its name, derived from the "cord-marked" patterns often pressed into the clay before firing. The coastal areas around Ise Bay, with their rich marine resources and access to diverse terrestrial environments, proved to be an attractive locale for these ancient communities.

Life for the Jomon people in this region revolved around the abundant natural resources available to them. The sea provided a bounty of fish and shellfish, while the surrounding forests offered nuts, berries, roots, and game. Archaeological sites reveal the tools of their trade: stone axes, arrowheads, spears for hunting, and bone hooks and harpoons for fishing. Evidence suggests a deep understanding of their environment and the seasonal availability of different food sources, allowing them to maintain settled or semi-settled communities for extended periods.

One of the most compelling types of archaeological evidence left by the Jomon people are shell middens - mounds composed primarily of discarded shells, but also containing animal bones, pottery shards, stone tools, and sometimes even human burials. These middens serve as invaluable windows into the diet, daily life, and environment of these prehistoric communities. The Ōguruwa Shell Midden, located in what is now the Mizuho ward of Nagoya, is a significant example from the early to middle Jomon period in this area.

Excavations at Ōguruwa have unearthed layers of shells, predominantly from oysters and crabs, sometimes exceeding a meter in thickness, alongside artifacts that speak to the activities of the people who lived there. The presence of such substantial shell mounds underscores the importance of shellfish in their diet and their ability to

harvest these resources consistently over long periods. The Ōguruwa site also yielded the foundations of pit dwellings, the typical housing of the Jomon period, which were simple structures dug into the ground with thatched roofs.

Interestingly, burials have also been discovered at the Ōguruwa Shell Midden, providing rare glimpses into the funerary practices of the late Jomon inhabitants. These remains were often found interred in a flexed or fetal position, a common burial style in the Jomon period. A unique discovery at Ōguruwa was the finding of dog bones placed on the chest of some buried individuals, suggesting a special relationship between humans and dogs, perhaps extending to the afterlife. Grave goods, such as stone axes, Jomon pottery, and jewelry, were sometimes included, hinting at early forms of social differentiation or beliefs about the needs of the deceased in the spiritual realm.

Beyond Ōguruwa, other Jomon sites dot the landscape of Aichi Prefecture, contributing to the broader picture of Jomon life in the Tōkai region. Sites like Tenjinyama in Minamichita town have yielded pottery typical of the later phase of the Initial Jomon period, helping archaeologists piece together the timeline and spread of different pottery styles across the archipelago. These scattered sites, often located near coasts, rivers, or fertile uplands, paint a picture of a population well-adapted to its varied environment.

The Jomon people's technological achievements included not just pottery, but also sophisticated stone tool production. They utilized various types of stone, including obsidian from distant sources, to craft sharp and effective tools for cutting, scraping, and hunting. The intricate cord-marked decoration on their pottery, while aesthetically pleasing, may have also served a functional purpose, perhaps aiding in heat distribution during cooking or providing a better grip.

As the Jomon period drew to a close, subtle changes began to appear in the archaeological record, hinting at the dawn of a new era. Around 300 BCE, a transformative shift occurred with the introduction of rice cultivation techniques, metalworking in bronze and iron, and new pottery styles, ushering in the Yayoi period (roughly 300 BCE to 250 CE). This transition, which began in Kyushu and spread eastward, brought fundamental changes to the lifestyle, social structure, and technology of the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago.

The area around present-day Nagoya, strategically located on the fertile Nōbi Plain and along important routes, became a significant center during the Yayoi period. The introduction of wet-rice cultivation allowed for a more stable and abundant food supply compared to the hunter-gatherer economy of the Jomon period, leading to population growth and the development of larger, more permanent settlements. While rice farming became central to their subsistence, the Yayoi people in this region did not abandon the old ways entirely; hunting, gathering, and especially fishing

continued to supplement their diet.

The Asahi site, located in what is now Kiyosu City, adjacent to Nagoya, stands as a testament to the scale and complexity of Yayoi settlements in the region. It is recognized as one of the largest Yayoi period settlements discovered in Japan, covering an extensive area and believed to have housed a significant population, potentially over a thousand people. The sheer size of the Asahi site suggests it functioned as a regional center, likely playing a crucial role in the economic and social life of the surrounding area.

Excavations at the Asahi site have revealed evidence of sophisticated planning and defensive structures, including a large moats surrounding the settlement, along with palisades and possibly watchtowers. These fortifications indicate a potential for conflict between communities during the Yayoi period, perhaps arising from competition over land, resources, or trade routes. The presence of dedicated burial areas outside the residential zone, some marked by square moated mounds, reflects a growing social stratification and differentiated funerary practices compared to the Jomon period.

Yayoi pottery, while often less ornate than its Jomon predecessor, was more functional and produced in greater quantities, reflecting the needs of an agrarian society. Large storage jars for rice and other crops, cooking vessels, and serving bowls became common finds at Yayoi sites. Alongside pottery, the Yayoi period saw the introduction and increasing use of metal tools and weapons, initially bronze and later iron. While raw metal ore was limited in Japan, artifacts such as bronze bells (dotaku), mirrors, and iron tools circulated through trade networks, sometimes originating from the continent. The discovery of artifacts like bronze bells and bead-making workshops at the Asahi site points to its importance as a center of production and exchange.

The transition from Jomon to Yayoi in the Nagoya area wasn't necessarily a sudden replacement of one culture by another, but rather a process of interaction and assimilation. Archaeological evidence from sites like the Kaigarayama Shell Midden, associated with the Asahi site, shows layers containing both late Jomon and early Yayoi pottery, suggesting a period of coexistence or gradual cultural shift. The indigenous Jomon people likely interacted with migrants bringing the new technologies and agricultural practices, leading to a blending of traditions and lifestyles.

The Yayoi period also saw the development of specialized skills and industries. Evidence at the Asahi site, for example, suggests early forms of aquaculture, with archaeological finds pointing to the possible cultivation of fish in controlled environments. The strategic location of the area, with access to both coastal and inland resources, facilitated the growth of diverse economic activities.

The settlements of the Yayoi period, particularly large ones like Asahi, represent a

significant step towards the development of more complex societies and regional polities. The increased food production supported larger populations, leading to the formation of settled agricultural villages. The need for organized labor for rice cultivation and the defense of settlements likely contributed to the emergence of leadership roles and social hierarchies.

As the Yayoi period progressed, these regional communities and confederations of clans grew in size and influence, setting the stage for the emergence of more centralized power structures in the subsequent Kofun period. The prehistoric inhabitants of the land that would become Nagoya, through their ingenuity, adaptability, and labor across the Jomon and Yayoi eras, laid the essential groundwork – literally and figuratively – for the city's long and layered history. Their legacy is etched into the soil, waiting to be uncovered by the archaeologist's trowel, offering silent testimony to the deep roots of human presence in this dynamic region.

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