



Constructing kofun and manufacturing haniwa  
(Presumed image of Nakatsuhime-no-mikoto-ryo Kofun and Haniwa Site)

# What is kofun?

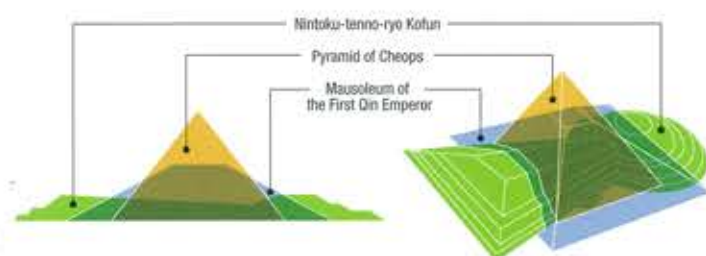
Kofun is a collective term for ancient tombs with earthen mounds that were actively built in the Japanese archipelago for 350 years from the middle of the 3rd century.

People of high rank, that is the elite, in those days were buried in kofun tombs.

A burial mound was constructed by heaping up the soil that was dug from the ground around the mound. The inclined surfaces of the mound were generally covered with stones. The dug-up ground later became a moat, at some kofun, it is filled with water even today.

Kofun show a variety of shapes: round domed mounds (*empun*), square mounds (*hofun*), and notably unique keyhole-shaped mounds (*zempo-koen-fun*), which look like keyholes from the air. The size of kofun also varies, ranging from small ones in 10-odd m to huge ones more than 400 m in length.

The period when kofun were excessively constructed is called the Kofun Period, and the ancient Japanese state was just beginning to form at this time.



	Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun	Pyramid of Cheops	Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor
Length	486 m	230 m	350 m
Height	35.8 m	146 m	76 m
Volume	1.4 million m <sup>3</sup>	2.6 million m <sup>3</sup>	3 million m <sup>3</sup>

\*All figures are in approximation.

## Q1 What is keyhole-shaped kofun?

**A1** It is a kind of ancient Japanese tomb with a unique shaped mound, round at the rear and a square mound at the front, looking like a keyhole from the air. Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun, Japan's largest kofun in terms of area, and Ojin-tenno-ryo Kofun, the largest in terms of volume, are the representative *zempo-koen-fun*, or keyhole-shaped kofun.

Most of the remaining giant tombs are keyhole-shaped kofun, the construction of which continued throughout the Kofun Period (mid-3rd to late 6th century AD).

Many powerful rulers, such as great kings of the Yamato Government, had this type of mounds constructed. Keyhole-shaped kofun are unique to Japan and why this shape was adopted remains unexplained.

## Q2 What are inside kofun?

**A2** A body is placed inside a coffin along with some personal articles of the deceased. Such burial goods including pottery, accessories, mirrors and weapons, all used in burial rituals, vary according to the status, and job of the deceased and to the era to which they belonged. Valuable goods and artifacts from overseas were sometimes buried.



Gilt bronze saddle  
excavated from Kanda-misayama Kofun  
(National Treasure, possessed by  
Kanda-hechimangu Shrine)



Bronze mirror  
excavated from Otsukayama Kofun  
(Possessed by Kansai University  
Archaeological Research Institute)

## Q3 How much labor was required to construct a kofun?

**A3** According to an estimate in the case of Nintoku-tenno-ryo Kofun, it would require about 2 1/2 years by 60 people per day, if modern construction methods and various machines were used. With ancient construction methods and no machines, it would have required 15 years and 8 months, i.e. 6.8 million man-days in total (maximum 2,000 people a day). In addition to this, further time to make *haniwa* or earthenware funerary sculptures, would have been required.

(Source: "Obayashi Quarterly" No.20 in 1985, estimated by Obayashi Corporation Project Team)

## Q4 How did kofun originally look like?

**A4** Although kofun look like forested areas now, there were no trees when they were constructed. The inclined surfaces of mounds were covered with stones called *fukishi* (cladding stones). *Haniwa* made of baked clay to decorate mounds were evenly lined up on the flat surfaces of their terraces.



Cylindrical haniwa  
excavated from Chayama Site



House-shaped haniwa  
excavated from Kurizuka Kofun

## Q5 Where are kofun, and how many?

**A5** In the Kofun Period, there used to be approximately 200,000 kofun tombs throughout the Japanese archipelago between the north of the main Honshu island and the southwestern island of Kyushu. Of these, about 4,700 are keyhole-shaped kofun, and they can be found widely from Iwate Prefecture in the north to Kagoshima Prefecture in the south. Particularly large keyhole-shaped kofun are concentrated in the Mozu and Furuichi Kofungun located in present-day Osaka Prefecture. Nearly 90 kofun of various sizes survive today in these two areas.

## Q6 Are there any kofun already inscribed on the World Heritage List?

**A6** No, there aren't! Various types of burial mounds are on the World Heritage List; the particularly notable are the Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt and the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor in China. However, no Japanese kofun have yet been inscribed. Mozu-Furuichi Kofungun, the representative mounded tomb group of Japan, was listed on Japan's Tentative List of UNESCO World Heritage (list of World Heritage candidates) in November 2010. "Kofun" will hopefully be a World Heritage site for the first time in the near future.

# What is World Heritage?

World Heritage sites are common heritage of all mankind, which should be preserved and transmitted to future generations together. "The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention)" was adopted by the General Assembly of UNESCO in 1972. The objective of the Convention is to encourage international cooperation and assistance to protect valuable properties on the earth from threats of damage and destruction for the purpose of conserving and bequeathing them to future generations. World Heritage sites are categorized into three types: cultural heritage, including monuments, buildings and archaeological sites; natural heritage, including habitats of animals and plants and natural landscapes; and mixed heritage having both features.

Only sites recognized as having "Outstanding Universal Value" shall be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. As of July 2015, 1031 sites are on the list.

## World Heritage sites in Japan

15 Cultural [C] and 4 Natural [N] Heritage sites



1. Shiretoko [N]
2. Shirakami-Sanchi [N]
3. Hiraizumi – Temples, Gardens and Archaeological Sites Representing the Buddhist Pure Land [C]
4. Shrines and Temples of Nikko [C]
5. Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites [C]
6. Ogasawara Islands [N]
7. Fushimi, sacred place and source of artistic inspiration
8. Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama [C]
9. Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto [C]
10. Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara [C]
11. Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area [C]
12. Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range [C]
13. Himeji-jo [C]
14. Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome) [C]
15. Ise Grand Shrine [C]
16. Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape [C]
17. Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining [C]
18. Yakushima [N]
19. Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu [C]