

TIDAL WAVE

The day Japan shook

Following the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in Spring this year, archaeologist **Simon Kaner** insists there is much to celebrate about the country's heritage – and much to mend.

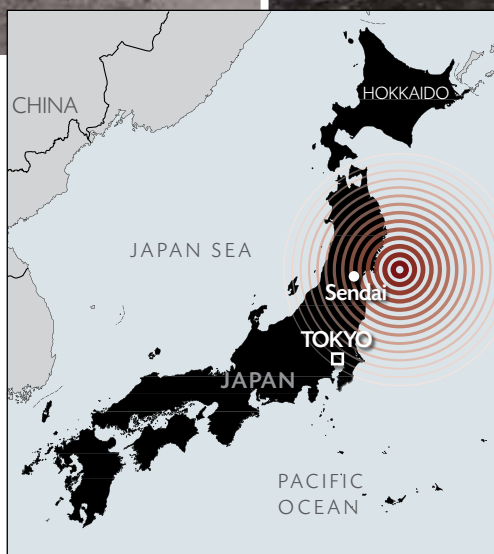
ABOVERIGHT Damage caused by the tsunami at Rikuzentakata Museum's storehouse, in Iwate Prefecture.

ABOVE The main lobby of the Ishinomaki Culture Centre. The walls facing the sea were built with no windows to lessen the tsunami risk. But this time, the waves struck the museum from the other three directions. As it rushed back out to sea, the water flooded the second floor, bursting through the ceiling, cascading onto the first floor, and sweeping away a great number artefacts – together with the lives of all six members of the museum staff.

On 11 March at 2.46pm, I was browsing the archaeology shelves high up in one of Tokyo's premier bookshops in the huge new Oasa Building overlooking the Marunouchi side of Tokyo Station; to the north lies Edo Castle, built by the Tokugawa Shoguns and today home to the Emperor and his family. The largest earthquake to strike Japan for 1,000 years – a country that endures about 2,000 quakes a year – lasted some five minutes. The building swayed, books fell from the shelves, a stand-alone book case collapsed, and fellow shoppers – better trained than me in earthquake etiquette – squatted down on the floor. There was no panic. Finally, as announcements over the tannoy system confirmed this was, indeed, an earthquake, everyone calmly made their way down the stairs and out through the exit.

The epicentre lay off the Pacific shoreline of Sendai, north of Tokyo, and about 45 minutes after the first major shock, the tsunami tore into the coast, sweeping away everything in its path. The huge wave relentlessly engulfed the tidy fields, villages, and towns along the coast. Japan is home to some of the world's most exceptional archaeology, including well-preserved prehistoric settlements, stunning castles, and huge burial monuments. Artefacts include some of the oldest pottery and lacquer yet discovered; prehistoric waterlogged sites have yielded well-preserved organic remains, evidence of a sophisticated early civilisation.

Japan's Neolithic started earlier and ended later than anywhere else; its pottery is the oldest in the world. Yet, surprisingly little is known of this country's archaeology outside its own borders. When the catastrophic earthquake and



subsequent tsunami struck earlier this year, among the appalling casualties were many archaeological sites and museum collections.

I had come to Tokyo to attend a conference, but this was, inevitably, postponed. Rail, road, and air links in the affected areas were out of action, as were mobile phone networks. Unable to travel north, as planned, I headed west. But the impact of the disaster was being felt across Japan. Everywhere we went, impromptu groups set themselves up to raise funds for the *hinansha*, the victims of the earthquake and tsunami: more than 20,000 people lost their lives, or remain missing. A massive rescue and relief operation has swung into effect and, as news and images of the disaster were broadcast around the world, the global community responded with immense generosity.

Happier times

I first visited the north-east of Japan in 1988, gathering data for a PhD on the settlements of the prehistoric inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago. I spent several days in the archaeology laboratory of Tohoku University in the city of Sendai, where I was introduced to the wonders of shell-midden archaeology along the remarkable coastline.

Later I was able to visit one of the spectacular later Palaeolithic sites, including an astonishing preserved forest floor dating to 20,000 years ago, at Tomizawa – while it was being excavated in 1989 in advance of the redevelopment of a local schoolyard. These remains are now the focus of Sendai City Tomizawa Site Museum, a kind of Palaeolithic Flag Fen.

ABOVE LEFT What remains of the library at Rikuzentakata City Museum and Library, in Iwate Prefecture.

ABOVE RIGHT The wave reached the fourth floor of this building in Rikuzentakata, in Iwate Prefecture (note that only windows on the fifth floor remain intact).

Some of the most significant sites in Japan are the shell middens, where huge mounds of shell were piled up during the Jomon period. I received exceptional hospitality from my hosts in Sendai: they took me to the shell-midden museum at Satohama, and to the Tohoku Historical Museum, with its magnificent reconstructions of the Heian period northern outpost of Yamato civilisation at Fort Tagajo (see p.30).

Recently, I returned to Tohoku to prepare for the first-ever overseas exhibition of the wonderful dogu

(see CWA 37), ceramic figures from the Jomon period, which took place at the British Museum in 2009. One of the lenders was the Goshono Jomon Museum, where a Jomon village has been reconstructed as an historical park, and where the painstakingly excavated remains of burnt pit-dwellings provided good evidence for how these buildings had been constructed.

We were exceedingly fortunate in that we were able to borrow all three of the dogu that have been designated National Treasures by the Japanese Government (see illustration p.24). Two of them are from northeastern Japan – Kazahari in Aomori Prefecture – and one from Chobonaino on the southern tip of the north island of Hokkaido. Local museums, designed and built to house these treasures, open their doors this year, post-disaster, and we introduce them both in special features in this issue.

While still in Japan, I spoke to colleagues about what we could do to help with the rescue and relief efforts. Clearly, the first priority was to secure the future of the survivors and those directly affected. The disaster knocked out communication routes; in many



coastal areas, settlements are located at the end of narrow winding roads that are unsuitable for the heavy vehicles needed to clear the enormous quantities of debris, while the widespread reshaping of the sea bed during the quake and tsunami has made it difficult, where not impossible, to approach stricken areas by sea.


As the focus shifts from emergency relief to reconstruction, we have become aware of a number of initiatives set in train by archaeologists. Archaeologists and museum curators were among those who lost their lives in the disaster, and many museums and sites were directly affected – indeed, some museum stores were completely destroyed. The Agency for Cultural Affairs – the Japanese government agency responsible for archaeology and historical sites – has produced a list of over 700 cultural properties directly affected by the disaster. The full devastation is still unclear, but help from the international archaeological community will certainly help with the recovery process.

At the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures in Norwich, UK, we began a project to address the impact of the disaster on cultural properties, including archaeological sites, museums, and art galleries. This issue of *Current World Archaeology* is part of this project, and over the coming months we will be working with Japanese archaeologists and other interested parties to help with the rescue and reconstruction efforts. On the evening of 26 October, we join

ABOVE LEFT A hollow figure of a dogu, from Chobonaino, Hokkaido. It was probably a funerary object designed to resemble the deceased. Late Jomon period (c.1500-1000 BC).

MIDDLE The dogu with clasped hands is from Kazahari, in Aomori Prefecture, and dates to the Late Jomon period (c.1500-1000 BC). Discovered in pieces on the floor of a pit-dwelling, it probably once sat on top of an internal wall, facing the entrance.

RIGHT Dating from the Middle Jomon period (2500-1500 BC), this figure from Tanabatake, Nagano Prefecture, is believed to represent a pregnant woman and is considered the finest of all the undecorated dogu.

the Japanese Embassy to host a special seminar on the impact of the earthquake and tsunami on cultural heritage in the affected areas. Prior reservation is essential, and anyone interested in applying for a place should email bunkazai@ld.mofa.go.jp with their name and organisational affiliation. 

BELOW Sifting through the remains to salvage archaeological material.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Simon Kaner is Head of the Centre for Archaeology and Heritage at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, and director of the Centre for Japanese Studies at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. In 2012, he will lead a tour of Japanese archaeology with Andante Travels. Further details of the impact of the disaster on Japanese cultural heritage, along with information on the various appeals, can be found at www.sainsbury-institute.org.