

# Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan

## Japan's latest UNESCO World Heritage Site

**The Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan** is Japan's latest inscription on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List. The name of the site does not roll off the tongue or stick in the memory very easily, but one look at an image of the impressive Nintoku Mausoleum (below) and you can see that there is something special going on. Just as its shape suggests, the site is a key to understanding the past—a past considered to be of universal significance and part of not just Japan's but the world's heritage.

Japan is fortunate to be the custodian of 19 cultural world heritage sites and four natural sites. These sites are a precious source of knowledge for all people.



**The largest kofun in Japan is the Nintoku Mausoleum in Sakai City and is 486 metres long. It is thought to be the tomb of Emperor Nintoku (5th century). If you were unaware of its existence, at ground level it would be easy enough to walk past it and perhaps think how nice it is to have green space in the urban environment.**

The newly listed site comprises two major clusters of mounded tombs in the south of Osaka Prefecture. Kofun (古墳) means 'old burial mound' and are large and distinctive shapes. There are 160,000 burial mounds throughout Japan, so what makes the Mozu-Furuichi clusters of kofun special?

The Kofun period in Japan is considered to include the 3rd to 6th centuries. The country did not yet have a centralised state (which it would in time develop under the influence of the Chinese system of law after the Taika Reforms of 646). With the introduction of Buddhism from the mid-6th century, members of the elite increasingly chose to build temples for posterity rather than tombs and the building of kofun mound tombs gradually ceased during the 7th century.

The Mozu-Furuichi kofun groups represent the middle kofun period, the late 4th to 5th centuries, considered to be the peak of the Kofun period, and the Mozu-Furuichi kofun groups—the structures and grave goods—are an expression of kingly power. They *demonstrate the period's socio-political structures, social class differences and sophisticated funerary system* as the UNESCO inscription reads.

The sites have remained largely intact despite being in a highly urbanised environment; Osaka is after all a major population centre in Japan. This continuous preservation suggests how important the sites are culturally. When it comes to the preservation of the tombs, the fact that some such as the Nintoku Mausoleum (part of the Mozu cluster) are the burial sites of former emperors means that the sites are managed by several different groups: the Imperial Household Agency as well as Prefectural and City Governments.

While aerial photos can provide a tantalising hint of past times, new technology is also being employed to give visitors a better appreciation of the tombs. At the Sakai City Museum, it is possible to have a virtual reality (VR) tour of the Mozu tomb cluster from above, see a recreation of a tomb as it was when first built and then 'step inside' the stone chamber that lies within the burial mound—all created some 1,600 years ago!

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

**UNESCO description of the The Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan**

[whc.unesco.org/en/list/1593/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1593/)

**Sakai City Museum VR tour**

<https://www.sakai-tcb.or.jp/en/spot/detail/447>