In a quiet corner of the Kanzaki district a few miles east of the prefectural capital of Saga City, work began in 1985 to clear an area of land for the construction of a new industrial estate. Plans for the site were soon abandoned when it became clear that the workers had stumbled upon a major archaeological discovery. Before long there were scenes of unprecedented interest as, every Sunday, crowds of visitors from all over Japan flocked here to the village of Yoshinogari. Amid growing speculation on its significance, a series of excavations conducted over the next three years gradually uncovered the single largest Yayoi settlement yet found.

It is easy enough to see why a populous community might have developed in this low-lying area some two thousand years ago. The fertile Saga plain is the granary of Kyushu, with a longstanding tradition of crop cultivation. The largest stretch of open land on the island, it is noted particularly for its rice, and various brands of sake are brewed in the small distilleries scattered across the area. In Saga City itself, banners on the streets provide a reminder of the local farmers’ ongoing campaign to protect their rice from foreign competition.

Overlooked by a wall of mountains rising to Mt Tenzan at 3,431 feet, the plain is intersected by several rivers, which flow south towards the Ariake-Kai, Kyushu’s own inland sea. These are linked by a complex system of irrigation channels to form what is known as a ‘creek network’. The scenic canals in nearby Yanagawa City have even invited comparison with Venice. Almost completely enclosed by the Shimabara peninsula and the Amakusa Islands, the shallow waters of the Ariake Sea teem with crab and mudfish, and the tidal flats provide...
ideal conditions for cultivating seaweed. Recently, the catch has been depleted by the environmental impact of the vast sluice gates closed in 1997 as part of the Isahaya Bay reclamation project along the west coast, which cut off more than eleven square miles of tidal flats from the sea. In response to concerted pressure a government panel has now recommended that they should be reopened in an effort to restore the local ecosystem.

This area’s natural abundance could certainly have supported a sizeable population in ancient times. What the archaeologists uncovered at Yoshinogari in the heart of the Saga plain were the remains of a small fortified city stretching over an area of thirty-six acres. There seems to have been a heavy emphasis on defence, for the site is surrounded by inner and outer moats spaced some distance apart, and clusters of deep holes reveal the foundations of high watchtowers. The burial mounds nearby contained 2,500 pottery jars, as well as bronze swords and the characteristic embryo-shaped glass beads (*magatama*) once worn as necklaces in Yayoi times.

This settlement was a major centre with a developed system of political control. A clearly-defined social hierarchy is reflected in the separate burial site reserved for members of the leader’s family located away from the graves of the general population. It was a society involved in war, for the watchtowers reflect the perceived threat of attack, and mutilated skeletons found here confirm that fighting took place. There is also evidence of an extensive trade network, as the large shells found could only be obtained from the Ryukyu Islands. With their centres hollowed out so that they could be worn as armlets, these decorative items might even have been made in southern Kyushu at workshops such as the example found at Makurazaki in the Satsuma peninsula. From the artefacts discovered it would appear that Yoshinogari reached the height of its prosperity some two thousand years ago. As such, it bears all the hallmarks of a powerful local polity in the Middle Yayoi period.2

Ancient sites such as this offer clues on the formation of early societies in the Japanese islands. Archaeological finds, in fact, provide the only real on-site evidence of what life here was once like. No written records survive, either because the inhabitants had no script of their own or because any records they did keep have perished. To all intents and purposes, therefore, the first written records of Japan’s early