CHAPTER 3

The Phallus in the ‘Age of the Gods’

In the year 1623 a diarist noted the finding in northern Japan of an ancient clay figurine. To him and to his contemporaries who discovered similar examples the object was a relic from the ‘Age of the Gods’, the mysterious time that the accepted mythology placed between the creation of the Japanese islands and the founding of the imperial system. As to the identity of those who created the figure, its location at the northern extremity of Honshū would probably have suggested to him that it was made by the Emishi, the legendary aboriginal occupants of Japan who were regarded as the ancestors of the Ainu.¹ Many thousands of these dogū (ceramic figurines) have now been found. In terms of dating the seventeenth-century scholars were broadly correct in concluding that they were made long before the creation of the written records that provided the yardstick of official mythology around which they had based their idea of an age of the gods. The dogū are now known to date from the Neolithic Jōmon Period (c. 14,500–300 BC). Some depict female figures with breasts, genitalia and swollen abdomens that probably indicate pregnancy, while a few are simple phallic or ktenic symbols.

Pottery appeared in Japan a little over 12,000 years ago and marks the transition from the Palaeolithic Period to the Neolithic, so that Japan’s ‘Old Stone Age’ has sometimes been referred to as the Pre-Ceramic Period.² The ensuing ceramic-making Jōmon Period takes its name from the jōmon or markings made with cords on the surfaces of the fine quality pottery with which the Jōmon people engaged extensively in trade. As the Jōmon pottery tradition is the oldest in world history, to have chosen that feature as the name for the era was very appropriate.³

In contrast to the farmers of the subsequent Yayoi Period (c. 300 BC–AD 300), who came to Japan from the East Asian continent with skills of rice cultivation and metal working, the Jōmon people are regarded as forming a simpler hunter-gatherer culture, although there is some evidence for plant and tree cultivation.⁴ The absence of farming therefore means that the Jōmon Period

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A ‘goggle-eyed’ dogū dating from the Final Jōmon Period (1000–300 BC). Although its body is somewhat out of proportion it seems to possess female sexual characteristics with modest breasts and external genitalia. The large eyes may represent Siberian snow-goggles designed to protect the wearer from snow-blindness. This figure was excavated from the Teshiromori site in Morioka City and was exhibited at Akita Prefectural Museum during 2012.