



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Remains from Mass Grave in Japan Suggest Epidemic in 1800s

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Workers have unearthed the remains of more than 1,500 people in western Japan. Archeologists report finding evidence that many of those individuals died of disease, possibly in an **epidemic**.

The burial ground is thought to date back to the 1850s. It is being dug up for a development project in the city of Osaka.

Officials at Osaka's City Cultural Properties Association have studied the remains. They said many of the individuals were likely in their 30s or small children when they died.

The Umeda Grave is one of seven historical burial grounds in Osaka. It was discovered near a main train station as part of a redevelopment project that began in September 2019.

In an earlier study, workers dug up hundreds of similar remains in surrounding areas, said Yoji Hirata, an official at Osaka's Cultural Properties Association.

"It was our first historical discovery of a burial site in Osaka," Hirata said. "The findings will provide details of burial traditions of **ordinary** people back then."

In the earlier find, many remains showed signs of disease in the hands and feet. The discovery of additional, similar remains suggests the 19th century mass grave was used for victims of an epidemic in the area, Hirata said.

All the remains have been removed from the work area. Experts hope to examine them and other objects to learn more details about the deaths. Some experts have suggested that the epidemic could have involved syphilis, which was widespread during the time in populated areas.

Many of the remains were in small round holes, where bodies appeared to have been buried on top of each other. Researchers found **coffins** containing more than one skeleton, a sign that many epidemic victims were buried together, Hirata said.

Reuters news agency says researchers discovered about 350 small graves. They also found the remains of animals including four piglets, horses and cats, city officials said. Researchers also unearthed money, Buddhist jewelry and **dolls** that were believed to have been buried with the dead.

Hirata said experts plan to prepare a report with their findings by the end of next year. The burial ground sits in what used to be a farming area near the city's famous Osaka Castle. It was one of seven major **cemeteries** in the city.

People used to visit the cemeteries to pray for their ancestors during Japan's mid-summer Bon season under Buddhist tradition.

I'm Bryan Lynn.

The Associated Press and Reuters reported on this story. Bryan Lynn adapted the reports for VOA Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

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Words in This Story

epidemic – *n.* when a large number of people get the same disease over the same period of time

ordinary – *adj.* not special, different, or unusual in any way

coffin – *n.* a box used to bury dead people in

doll – *n.* a child's toy that looks like a small person

cemetery – *n.* a place where dead people are buried
