At the beginning of the Late Jomon period, multiple corpses were reburied together in the Kanto district. Such mass secondary burials are found to have some features in common. First of all, they coincided with the appearance of settlements. Secondly, they were situated in special areas in the settlements or cemeteries. Thirdly, they contained many male adult skeletons and no young children skeletons. So far, seven mass secondary burials have been excavated at six sites. This type of burial seems to have served as a monument for ancestor worship rituals. This grave system spread beyond the boundaries of time and space. In fact, burials that are likely to have served as monuments have been found at the Sanganji Shell Mound in Fukushima Prefecture and the Yosekurawakage Site in the Taishaku Valley in Hiroshima Prefecture.

This study re-examines three burials unearthed from the Shimo’ota Shell Mound in Chiba Prefecture. They were previously considered as mass secondary burials built as monuments, but this study finds that they did not fall into that category. Rather, it is concluded that they were constructed not as monuments but as mere burial pits to collectively dispose of corpses.

In the latter half of the Jomon period, tombs and other large-scale stone-covered burials were built as monuments, and many of them served as bases for ancestor worship rituals. Apparently, mass secondary burials were developed in the same context. More specifically, in the latter half of the Jomon period, human skeletons and burials became a means of creating new related groups and strengthening their integrity and unity. This resulted in the use of “memorial graves” as symbolic monuments for the new groups. The mental and technical background of this phenomenon was attributed to the view of life and death based on genealogical relationships that were intentionally strengthened or broken. Symbolic monuments built for ancestor worship, including large-scale stone-covered burials, further created new groups and allowed them to prove and reconfirm their legitimacy, or priority right, to claim their land and exploit resources within the boundaries. This was intended to establish new “tradition,” which reflected the manifestation of ancestor worship and the significance of such rituals.

Key words: Jomon period, mass secondary burial, monument, ancestor worship rituals, Shimo’ota Shell Mound