

④ Soma Nomaoi: Passing Down the Culture of the Samurai

~Catching a glimpse of upper class samurai culture through our cultural heritage~

■ What is Soma Nomaoi

Soma Nomaoi is a festival centered around horses and is a cultural asset representative of the Soma area, with horseback riders dressed samurai garbs participating in each event. It is highly valued as a remnant of upper class culture from the Edo period and as Shinto ritual displaying the deep connection between humanity and horses since long ago. This is particularly evident in the *nomakake*, or wild horse capturing event, when a wild horse is symbolically offered to a shrine in a Shinto ritual. *Nomakake* is actually the source of the *ema* tradition, which are small wooden plaques bearing pictures and written prayers that are offered to shrines.

■ Nomaoi in the Edo Period

A vast field known as Nomaoi Field once covered almost the entirety of the modern-day town area of Haramachi Ward. Wild horses, or *noma*, would graze here. Until the Edo period, the Soma clan's horseback warriors would chase these horses in an event known as *nomaoi* (lit. "wild horse chase"). They drove the wild horses to Odaka Myoken Shrine (now Soma Odaka Shrine) and captured them there (*nomakake*). A sacred horse was then offered to Myoken, in whom the Soma clan based their faith, in a prayer for tranquility within the territory. In this way, Nomaoi held significance as both a military drill and as a samurai event designed by the Soma clan to unify the Nakamura Domain.

■ Nomaoi from the Meiji Period Onwards

The Meiji period saw the demise of the

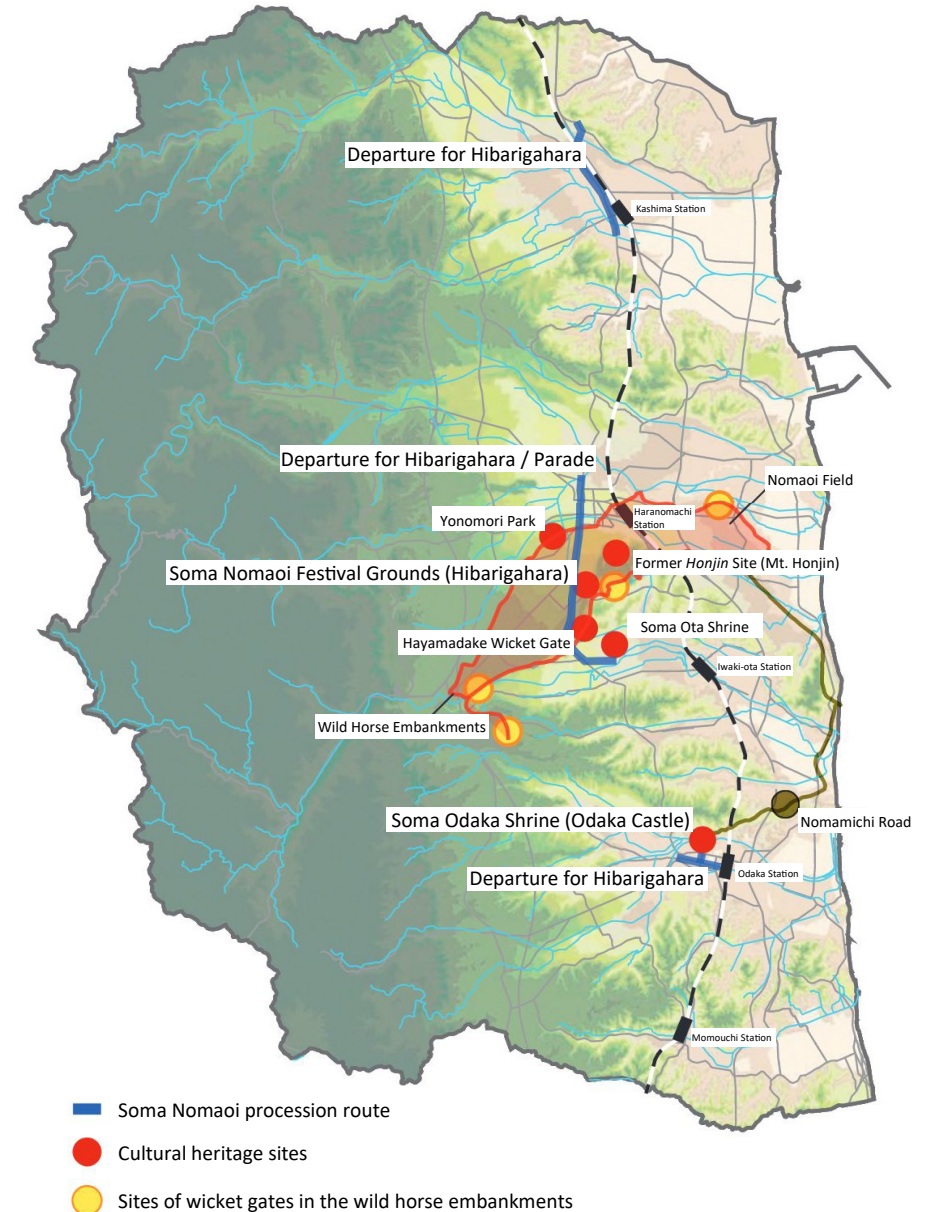
samurai government, as well as the potential termination of Nomaoi. However, the Soma clan avoided Nomaoi's end by converting it to a Shinto ritual at the three Soma shrines (Soma Ota, Soma Odaka, and Soma Nakamura), which were all originally dedicated to Myoken. There were some large changes to the contents of Nomaoi, including the replacement of chasing wild horses with an event called *shinki sodatsusen*, or the sacred flag competition. Riders contend with each other to capture sacred flags, which are fired into the air to imitate fleeing horses. Despite these changes, Nomaoi continues to be held in the territory of the former Nakamura Domain to this day as a rare living connection to the culture of the samurai.

This festival has also become the main event of the year for the area, with Nomaoi culture taking deep root in the hearts of all the people who live here. Flags used in Nomaoi can be seen hanging in the downtown area every year once July rolls around, giving a feeling of anticipation for the coming festival.

■ The Cultural Heritage of Soma Nomaoi

Traces of Nomaoi's origins remain around the city, from the Soma Odaka Shrine where the *nomakake* continues to take place in its original form, to the sites of embankments and wicket gates which give a glimpse to the vast scale of Nomaoi Field during its use in the Edo period. Through these, we can track the changes the festival underwent over the years gain a better understanding of the substantial significance of Nomaoi.

Soma Nomaoi as Told Through Our Cultural Heritage



O,K,H Soma Nomaoi



Kashima Ward Procession



Haramachi Ward Procession



Sacred Flag Competition



Nomakake (Wild Horse Capture)

Day 1

The first day of Nomaoi begins with horseback warriors gathering at the three Soma shrines, each connected to a particular township from the Edo period. The warriors then travel together from their respective shrine toward the Hibarigahara Festival Grounds, taking their *mikoshi* (portable shrine) with them.

Day 2

On the second day a parade proceeds through roughly 3 kilometers of the town area of Haramachi Ward. Seeing the long lines of mounted warriors riding around 400 horses, each carrying the flag of their family passed down since the Edo period, one can feel the culture of the samurai of Nakamura Domain.

The *shinki sodatsusen*, or sacred flag competition, takes place at the Hibarigahara Festival Grounds, with riders vying with one another to catch sacred flags that have been fired into the air. Although this event only began in the Meiji period, it has taken on the significance of Nomaoi by substituting the wild horse chase with flags.

Day 3

Nomakake takes place on the third day, with horseback warriors driving wild horses to Soma Odaka Shrine for youths to capture and offer up before the shrine. This is the most important Shinto ritual of Nomaoi, in which prayers are offered up for the peace and prosperity of the territory in the former Nakamura Domain. It remains as the origin for offering *ema* to shrines, and is recognized for signifying Japan's faith in horses.

O Soma Odaka Shrine

One of the three Soma shrines, located at the site of the Odaka Castle, and the festival grounds for nomakake on the third day of Nomaoi. Besides from the Odaka township, mounted warriors gather here from the Shineha township (Namie Town, etc.) in the south and ride together for Nomaoi. The shrine was destroyed in a giant fire in Odaka during the Meiji period, but the grand main shrine was reconstructed.



H Soma Ota Shrine

One of the three Soma shrines related to Soma Nomaoi. Nomaoi served as an event of the ruling Soma clan during the Edo period, and this shrine took the lead role in reviving Nomaoi as a Shinto ritual in the Meiji period. During the Meiji period, wild horses were chased by warriors all the way from the Hibarigahara Festival Grounds in the Nakano township (now Haramachi Ward) to Soma Ota Shrine.



K Former Honjin Site

A mountain on which was prepared a *honjin*, or military headquarters, for Nomaoi during the Edo period. This *honjin* was depicted in various illustrations from the Edo period. It is currently maintained as an outlook spot from which you can see the vast area of what was once Nomaoi Field. The field once stretched 9 kilometers from east to west and 3 kilometers north to south.



O,K,H Nomaoi in the Edo Period

During the Edo period, horseback warriors would chase wild horses grazing in Nomaoi Field, an immense field that once covered almost the entirety of the town area of modern-day Haramachi Ward, in an event known as *nomaoi* (lit. “wild horse chase”). Nomaoi Field was a pasture that once spanned across an area 100 times larger than the current Hibarigahara Festival Grounds, enclosed by embankments known as *nomadote* to keep wild horses inside.

The horses were chased out through the Sukakeba wicket gate (Haramachi Ward) and down Nomamichi Road toward Odaka Myoken Shrine (now Soma Odaka Shrine). Along the way, the horses would run along the Nomasawa coast, where they would be soaked and purified in the seawater. Then the horses were corralled at Myoken Shrine and, just as in modern times, captured by youths and dedicated to the shrine. This image of Nomaoi in the Edo period is depicted on folding screens and *ema* (wooden plaques).



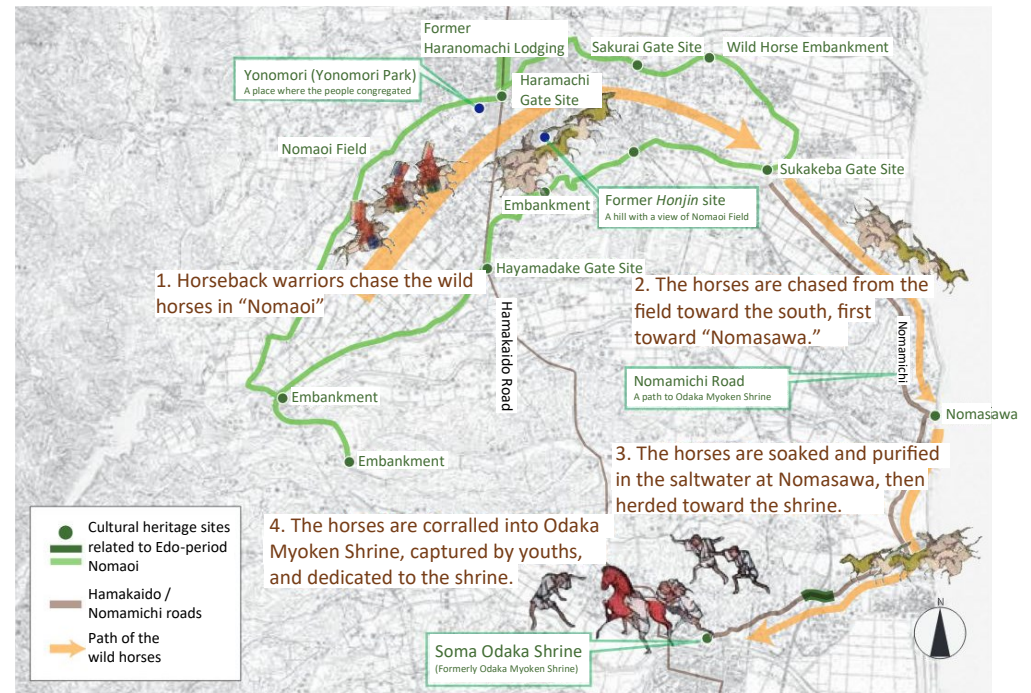
Colored illustration of Nomaoi on paper (private collection)



Framed image of Soma Nomaoi (Soma Odaka Shrine)



Folding screen depicting Soma Nomaoi (Minamisoma Museum)



Course of events of Nomaoi during the Edo period

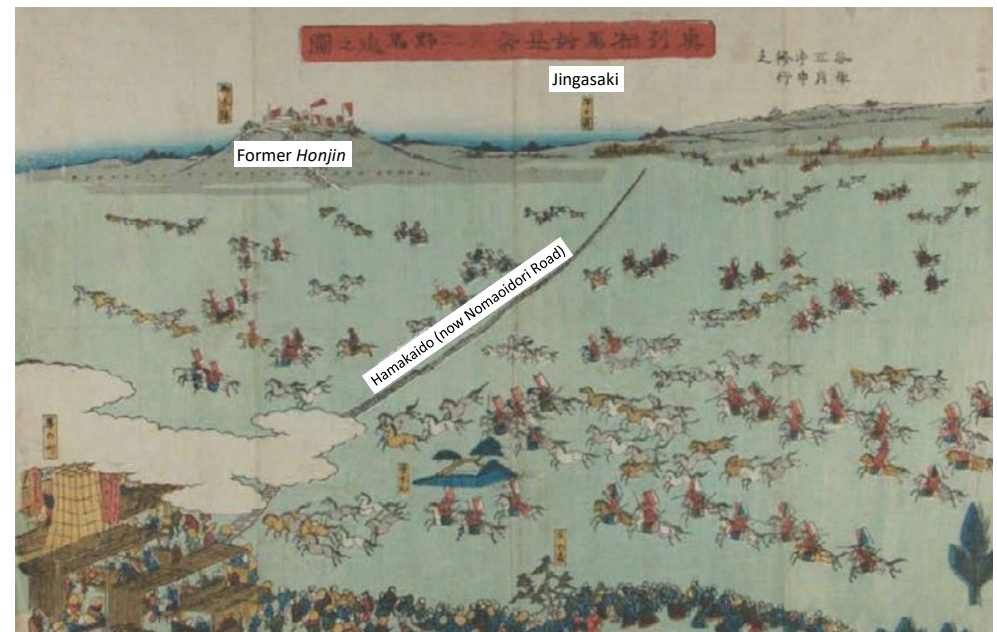


Illustration of the Oshu Soma Myoken festival Nomaoi; illustrated by Hiroshige

H Soma Nomaoi (Hibarigahara) Festival Grounds

The current Soma Nomaoi Festival Grounds also go by the name of Hibarigahara. Nomaoi's various contests take place here, including the evening horse race on the first day and the armored horse race and sacred flag competition on the second day. It was part of the wider Nomaoi Field area during the Edo period, and remains a territory of the three Soma shrines.



H Yonomori Park

A hill that became a tourist attraction in the Edo period, where a large number of sightseers would gather. Illustrations from that time often depict Yonomori bustling with a crowd of people. Before World War II, the evening horse race on the first day of Nomaoi would take place at the horse-riding ground at the foot of Yonomori.



H Site of the Hayamadake Wicket Gate

Site of one of the wicket gates at the entrances to Nomaoi Field in the Edo period. Sites of wicket gates like this one were established in several places in the field's embankments, but very few remain today.

This gate in particular is deemed to have been the chief entrance on the south side of Nomaoi Field from the town area. The Ishigakizumi embankment remains intact at this spot.



O,H Nomamichi (Wild Horse Road)

During Nomaoi in the Edo period, wild horses that grazed in Nomaoi Field were corralled along this road toward the ceremonial site of the wild horse capture at Odaka Myoken Shrine (Soma Odaka Shrine). Now all that remains is the portion of the road along the hill ridges at the boundary between the Haramachi and Odaka Wards.



H Wild Horse Embankments

In order to prevent any damage to the crops by the wild horses, the 3rd Nakamura Domain lord Soma Tadatane called together the farmers in 1666 and built embankments around Nomaoi Field. These embankments are called *nomadote*. A number of them still exist within the city within areas like Sakurai Kofun Park and Azumagaoka Park. The embankments were accompanied by ditches to prevent the horses from jumping over them.



Nomadote within Azumagaoka Park

O Sacred Water

Known as *goshinsui*, this water flows from the grounds of Soma Odaka Shrine. It was known as miracle-working water that was effective on horse-related injuries, and a talisman dipped in this water was once presented to the shogunate family. It is still used at the wild horse capturing event *nomakake* today to help heal any injuries sustained by the youths who participate. The sacred water of Hiwashi Shrine in Odaka Ward was once also used for the same purpose at *nomakake*.

