Rituals Involving Dotaku Bronze Bells

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Cranes and human faces appear on some of the dotaku bronze bells used in Yayoi rituals. Wooden birds have been found occasionally during excavation of Yayoi sites. And examples of clay vessels with engravings of boats bearing feathered priests sailing toward cranes are also known. It seems reasonable, therefore, to conclude from this that birds played a role in the religious beliefs of the Yayoi people.

The literature of the 8th century (the Kojiki, Nihon shoki, and Fudoki) and the legend of the 13–20th centuries attribute the origin of farming to a bird that took in its mouth a rice stalk and brought it down to the human world. This myth probably predates the beginning of rice farming in the Yayoi Period, judging from the presence of wooden bird figures already in Early Yayoi.

There was no guarantee that the rice harvest would be plentiful every year. Sometimes the harvest was quite insufficient to meet the needs of the people. The explanation for a poor harvest was that the spirit of the rice had gone away. Therefore, it was necessary to call the spirit back before planting the rice seeds the following year. In reality, this meant calling back the birds. But since birds might not actually come, the people called them through a ritual. The wooden bird figures were used during this ritual. Further, since the world of the birds was across the sea, the priests donned bird outfits, boarded a boat, and went out to meet the birds. The clay vessels with scenes of birds and humans in bird outfits in boats give realistic representations of this ritual.

Consequently, the cranes engraved on dotaku bells must be illustrations of the bird that brought the rice spirit. The eyes and nose on dotaku bells are the faces of the priests, and at the same time they are the faces of the god. In other words, they most likely symbolized the priest (i.e. god) ensuring that the birds would not go away and that no evil spirits would endanger the birds. Explained in this way, it is possible to see the ringing of the dotaku bell as the ritual calling of the birds and the protection of the birds (i.e. rice spirit) from harm.