The Organization of Medieval Porcelain Production as Seen through the Suzu Kilns on Noto Peninsula

YOSHIKA Yasunobu

Excavation of Medieval (12th to 16th centuries) sites has progressed rapidly in recent years. Along with this, the major questions in Medieval archaeology have shifted away from ceramic typology and chronology to explication of how production and shipping were organized. Conditions are right for a rewriting of Medieval industrial history.

The Suzu kilns were located on the Noto Peninsula, on the Sea of Japan side of Honshu. These kilns produced procelain throughout most of the Medieval period, and their market spread over the Hokuriku and Tohoku districts into Hokkaido. Through analysis of the potting technology and changes in the kilns themselves, this paper attempts to get a better idea of how the potters lived and of the character of the managers that gave them unity, and it also attempts to clarify what caused the Suzu kilns to decline and be abandoned as the Echizen kilns rose to prominence in the 16th century.

Research data are still insufficient and many central questions remain unanswered. The following is a summary of results to date.

(1) Production and marketing: Many kilns have been found along the small rivers and streams of the Wakayama sho (estate). The myoshu (rich peasant) who had this region as his economic base was most likely the immediate manager of production. This myoshu probably paid a kujisen (business fee or tax) to the powerful shrines and temples in exchange for permission to exploit the forests that provided the wood so essential to the kilns. It is not yet clear to what extent the potters were subjected to the myoshu. However, besides farming under the regional myoshu, the potters probably also engaged seasonally in porcelain production.

(2) Causes of the decline of the Suzu kilns: In the late 15th century, low-priced wares improved in quality and became available in greater quantities. At the same time there was a greater demand for extremely high quality wares. Most likely the Suzu kilns were not able to achieve the reforms in organization and technology necessary to adapt to this more competitive market.

If these conjectures are not seriously in error, an understanding of the system through which Suzu porcelain was at one time marketed throughout nearly one-quarter of the country will prove to be invaluable to Medieval research.