Production of Gaki-Earthenware in Western Japan

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In many sites extending over ancient to medieval times in western Japan, it has often been unearthed such Gaki-earthenware or gray earthenware as having quality and hue like roofing tile. Since these earthenware look dull and dark when compared with the ceramics, they have rather been left out of consideration. In medieval times, however, the Gaki-earthenware were widely used as daily vessels; it was assumed that they would throw a new light over the medieval history of ceramics.

The first appearing Gaki-earthenware in Japan were bowls. It was said that these Gaki-earthen bowls were a sort of improved black earthen bowls. As a result of chemical analysis of these Gaki-earthen bowls, it has turned out that they are characterized by high water absorption (10% or more), low specific gravity and hardness. Since further they are soft, their firing coefficient is not good in general. It is therefore supposed that they were manufactured at low price. Because their surface is of oxidized silver to imitate them into metallic vessels, it is assumed that they were manufactured and used as a new-fashioned vessels.

Judging from the manufacturing techniques of Gaki-earthen bowls which were reduce-fired, they are regarded to have been made by the newly-rising artisans, descendants of the original tile artisans. This manufacturing techniques has been widely adopted, since the 13th century, for such a wide variety of vessels as cookpots, caldrons and kettles, earthenware mortars, jars, basins, braziers, incense burners, flower vases, Buddhist altar fittings and so forth. They all have appeared as new-fashioned vessels resembling to metallic or ceramics. Gaki-earthenware first appeared about the middle of the 11th century in the advanced region surrounding the Inland Sea of Japan, “Kinai” (five provinces nearest to ancient capital) and kitakyushu, and their manufacturing techniques then spread gradually to their outskirts. However that there remained not a few regions where any Gaki-earthernware was manufactured.
The most characteristic feature of Gaki-earthenware production is found in it that as against the high-quality “tokoname-yaki” or “bizen-yaki” ceramics which were massproduced, their own quality was kept rather low. In other words, through small-scaled production, they appeared as low-cost, new-fashioned vessels as substitutes for highquality ceramics.

Due to their brittleness, however, they were then replaced by low-cost, higher-quality vessels and in the 15th century and afterwards gradually and by stages their production reduced and finally disappeared.