Non-Catalogued Pottery and Earthenware

——The Mortar in Western Japan——

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Pottery and earthenware were seldom catalogued in medieval or modern times. There were few types of kitchen utensils, although a great quantity of them have been excavated. Mortars are representative of the kitchen utensils used in Eastern Asia and it seems that the origin of the mortar traces back to 4000 B. C. in China.

In Japan, until about the 12th century, there were no scratched comb lines on the inside of earthenware mortars. At the beginning of the 13th century, however, sharply scratched comb lines on the insides of mortars became very common. Until the 14th century the “Toban style”, which didn’t have scratched comb lines, was the predominant style. These earthenware mortars were fired in kilns in the east of Harima province, being the Uozumi Kiln, Kanda Kiln and Miki Kiln. I have identified 2413 pieces of Toban style mortars at 471 sites across Western Japan. The primary Uozumi Kiln was located on the A-kashi coast (Hyōgo prefecture), being a suitable sight for distribution. Due to this it was the main production sight for earthenware mortars from the 12th to the 14th century. Mortars imitating the Uozumi style were also made in some other regions.

From the 15th century the Bizen style was widely used and many such pieces have been excavated throughout Japan. The Bizen style wasn’t used by people of every class. Rather, it seems they were used by people of a special class.

On the other hand, mortars were made and used in various places and, in every region of Western Japan, there have been found smoked or reddish brown unglazed mortars. These were of a lower quality but good enough to be serviceable. Such mortars were fired in up-draught kilns. In medieval times there were also tunnel kilns in which “Sue ware” was fired. These kilns fired, for the most part, a variety of jars and mortars. At the end of the 16th century the structure of the kiln changed. A dragon kiln was introduced by
potters from the Korean peninsula, making hard, high quality earthenware mortars possible.

I would like to call this medieval time period, “The Age of Mortar Culture.” A mortar is a magical utensil which is used for mixing, improving quality and making many different kinds of food. In present times we rarely see mortars in stores, the present day being part of the ceramic revolution. “Mortar culture”, beginning in medieval times, has created an entire cooking culture in Japan. Present Japanese culinary culture could not have developed without it. Moreover, the mortar lead to the development of a new utensil, the “sekkai”, which is used for the scraping out of remnants from the insides of mortars or the scraping off of remnants from a wooden pestle. The mortar, the wooden pestle and the “sekkai” are the trio which have formed “mortar culture.”