From Figure into Sign

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It is widely acknowledged that several numbers of pots of Yayoi V (2c. AD), Kinki district in particular bear seemingly incidental geometric design. They are, namely, circular, rectilinear, triaxial, arc in shape. An ordinary interpretation is that they have been appeared as a series of signs of some unknown purpose.

Prior to these signs, a series of more expressive figures is depicted on Dōtaku (bronze bell) as well as pottery in Yayoi IV (1c. AD). A considerable range of variation is involved in the combination of these figures. Two major strains can be mentioned however: deer appears to be the major figure in the one, bird in the other. Further subdivision reveals such combination as deer with silo, and with bird in the former, bird and/or feathered man with boat, and with silo, in the latter. It can be conceived that these figures are the representation of a series of myths and ritual feasts.

Notable variation is observed among the signs of Yayoi V: from the very intricated to the most simple ones. Similar variation is involved among the figures of Yayoi IV; from the most expressive ones to those close to signs. A seriational shift can be observed, in which a figure is simplified in sequence. Thus the author believes that it is feasible to see a link between the figure and the sign, when a close comparison is made between the least expressive figure and the most intricated sign. The comparison seems to suggest a series of shifts: deer turns into circle, silo into rectilinear lines, boat into arc. This enabled the author to infer that the myths and/or rituals of the same context have been survived through Yayoi V, only to be abolished in Yayoi VI (3c. AD).

Following interpretation can be provided for the shift mentioned above. Prosperous figurative representation in the earlier stage would reflect laborious pottery production to prepare for an agrarian feasts. Consequent rituals, of course, would have devoured much labour to be executed in great precision. Least prosperous geometric representation in the later stage would, naturally, reflect the decline of such rituals. This can be paraphrased as a decline of communal feasts. It can be paralleled with a transition in Dōtaku.
The so-called Auditory Dōtaku in the earlier stage, in which sonic function has been preponderant among the others, are provided with figurative representation, to be deviced in agrarian communal feasts. Such representation are totally nihiliized among the so-called Visibility Dōtaku which are megalosized to give oppressive impression to the attendants of political ceremonies. The transition is the one of the results of out-growth of a political operations sponsored by the chieftains. The process is represented on, in another respect the development of the incipient tumuli, constructed to dispose the chieftains and their kin.

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