“Bokusho Doki” and the Shape of the Characters
— Aspects of the Characters in Ancient Villages —

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“Bokusho Doki”, or earthenware with characters written in Chinese ink, excavated from the remains of ancient villages, is a valuable source of data for shedding light on village communities in ancient times.

Until now, Bokusho Doki has been taken as an indication of the level of diffusion of characters in olden times. A new perspective has been lent to consideration of the major question concerning the significance of Bokusho Doki in the remains of ancient villages. In my previous paper, an analysis was made of specific village remains, and in this paper, an analysis is given from a broader viewpoint, focused on the shape of the characters on Bokusho Doki.

The results of the analysis are outlined as follows:

1) A very limited number of common types of Bokusho Doki characters are found on remains from various parts of Eastern Japan.

2) Not only are common characters used, but there is a similarity between the shapes of the characters on Bokusho Doki found in various places. Furthermore, widespread distribution of modified original characters can also be seen.

3) Special characters developed in China, such as “Sokuten-Moji”, and “Tensho-Tai” are widely diffused in various parts of Japan, giving rise to similar characters of a distinctive shape thought to be unique to our country.

The limited number of common characters shows that they were not selected by peasants in Eastern Japan from among the characters they had acquired to put on Bokusho Doki. Also, modified characters and special characters unique to Japan produced under the influence of “Sokuten-Moji” or “Tensho-Tai” have been identified over a wide area.

From the above findings, it is presumed that in villages in Eastern Japan at the time, they used the characters almost consciously as symbols on the earthenware on the occasion of certain religious services or ceremonial activities. In other words, fixed forms of characters or semi-symbolic characters, incidental to the religious formalities, were put on the earthenware.
In conclusion, the results of analysis focused on the shape of the characters would appear to show that Bokusho Doki excavated from the remains of ancient villages reflects a form of religious or ceremonial service to God or Buddha in the communities, and cannot always serve as an indicator of the level of character diffusion.