Medieval Earthenware with Engraved Inscriptions

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Some medieval earthenware bears engraved inscriptions consisting of a small number of Chinese or Japanese characters or sentences. These are roughly classified as follows: 1) Religious receptacles such as cylindrical sutra cases of mainly the latter half of the 12th century, inscribed with the name of donator, sutra text, and the purpose of the offering. 2) Buddhist or Shinto ritualistic implements specially ordered or contributed as temple utensils after 14th century; various utensils for the tea ceremony which was in fashion in the Azuchi and Momoyama Period, and jars and pots as utensils for daily use. The former group has attracted attention as providing material for the investigation of the social-and cultural-historic background to the construction of the Kyozuka (sutra mounds), by constructing the manner in which sutra burying procedures were carried out. The latter has been used not only as a chronical standard, but also as material to discuss the operating seasons of ceramic production in relation to agricultural workers.

However, the characteristic of the inscribed earthenware, or the meaning of the inscriptions, has not been thoroughly investigated, due to the difficulty in defining by whom and at which stage of the production process the inscription was made.

This paper aims to discuss 15 items of Suzu earthenware traded in the Northeastern Japan Sea area, and to discuss them from the viewpoint of the lifestyles of workers, by using related documents on various Medieval ceramic kilns such as Atsumi, Bizen, Echizen, Shigaraki, etc. as supportive materials.

At first, the production of religious utensils with inscriptions in the early Medieval age presupposes expert knowledge of Buddhist documents and ceremonies, judging from their shapes and designs. It can be supposed that painters of Buddhist images who travelled about the provinces with priests for Kanjin (soliciting contributions for pious purposes), or priests of local temples prepared the draft or themselves wrote the inscription. It is supposed that there existed skilled expert groups who led the ordinary workers (farmers) engaged in the production of everyday utensils.

On the other hand, examples of simple inscriptions in Hiragana (a Japanese
syllabary) without a formal year number on cylindrical sutra cases or five-storied pagodas (Gorinno) are seen in local and private religious procedures, the purpose being to perform a good deed. The diffusion of Hiragana among the workers can be guessed from improvisatory comic songs and calligraphies. Utilization of Katakana (another Japanese syllabary) was rare, and limited only to inscriptions which suggest the names of items, or magical words. Katakana was distinguished from other writing, as “characters to express words uttered orally.

Then, in the later Medieval age, especially after the 16th century, when the amount of material increases dramatically, inscriptions came to be seen on utensils for tea ceremony, such as tea jar, water jar, tea caddy, etc., together with large pots and jars, in addition to the conventional Buddhist or Shinto ritualistic utensils including flower vases, bottles, and images of Korean dog (a pair of guardian dogs at the gate of a Shinto shrine). Few of the inscriptions took the form of a well-arranged donation letter or supplication letter. Either the recipient’s name or the donator’s name was omitted, or only the description of the year occupied a large part of the inscription. The majority of inscribed earthenware was especially produced and donated to a temple or a Shinto shrine as “permanent utensils” by a worker or a representative of a group of workers (Kamamoto) as supplication for memorial service in honor of his ancestors or present family, or for improvement of pottery techniques. Some of them were “tailor-made” (especially ordered), as in the example of a large pot from the Bizen district. At this stage, it is judged that the workers themselves engraved the characters, either in Chinese or Japanese, and a considerable number of names of workers can be confirmed. This may reflect the transition toward a new production system after the 15th century, in which standardized everyday utensils for large-area distribution were manufactured at the same time as high-quality special goods.

In addition to the above, some earthenware bears inscriptions of “(east), west, south, (north)”, which were apparently magical characters relating to the ceremony for the purification of a building site, or privately-defined Nengo (name of era). Of the latter, there are examples which seem to have been ordered by local priests, or merchants who prayed for success in their commerce. Another example bears the name of a local temple combined with the written seal (Kaô) or crest of a local lord, apparently to demonstrate his prominence as a man of importance. Pseudo-inscriptions,
which were designed from characters, appeared at this stage. In this way, though the amount of material is limited, earthenware with inscriptions may be of help in understanding the true nature of the popular culture which was rooted in different regions in the Medieval Age, through the medium of the character culture. It is also expected that the earthenware with inscriptions will contribute to the construction of a historical image of popular culture, through cooperation with archaeology and philology.