Keyhole-shaped Small Tumuli in the Kantō District

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In western Japan, the construction of keyhole-shaped tumuli decreased dramatically in number with the coming of the 6th century. In eastern Japan, to the contrary, the boom seems to have reached its peak then. The object of this paper is to look for the cause of this contrast, mainly by discussing the situation in the eastern Kantō District.

In this district, keyhole-shaped burial mounds continued to be built as graves of chiefs, following on from the earlier period. On the other hand, smaller and scallop-shaped burial mounds became an outstanding feature of group tumuli. In these, the burial facilities were usually set up in the fore-square part, under the original ground level. This is greatly different from the keyhole-shaped burial mounds which were the graves of chiefs, where the rule was for burial facilities to be set up in the rear round mound, and above ground level. Such keyhole-shaped small burial mounds are extensively found in the three prefectures of Tochigi, Ibaraki, and Chiba. The burial facilities of mounds in Tochigi prefecture were basically derived from the adit-type stone room. However, box-type stone coffins were the principal type of burial facility in Ibaraki and Chiba prefectures. The latter has attracted much attention under the name of “irregular typed tumulus”.

I can mention in passing that it is assumed that the keyhole-shaped burial mound functioned as a place of ceremony for the succession of the chief’s spirit. In this sense, this shape of tumulus had significance in that it represented the community-like relationship between the chief and his people. However, the formation of a chiefs’ association actualized the class differential between chiefs and people. Nevertheless, the government of the Yamato Court, which was not powerful enough in the 6th century, aimed to maintain its ruling system over the people by means of a community-like relationship in eastern Japan.

In due course, the government of the Yamato Court incorporated into its regime the class of local small chiefs, who still felt tied in unity to their people. The author assumes that it was these small and medium tumuli, or more particularly the above-mentioned keyhole-shaped small burial mounds, that were thus constructed.