Aspects of Tumuli in the Later and Final Kofun Period in Northern Musashi

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At first, the author overviews how keyhole-shaped tumuli were constructed during the later stage of the Kofun Period.

Most of about 90 keyhole-shaped tumuli in northern Musashi seem to have been constructed in the later tumulus period, when construction of tumuli of this type increased dramatically.

In particular, it deserves special mention that some of the largest keyhole-shaped tumuli in the whole country at that time appeared suddenly in the Sakitama Tumuli Group in Gyôda City and the surrounding area in the north of Saitama Prefecture, where there had been no tumuli of remark up to the previous period; and that the construction of large keyhole-shaped tumuli continued for about a century. From the preeminent scale of their mounds, those buried are presumed to have been the highest chiefs of the newly-arising northern Musashi area, who ruled a wide area, and who were supported by the government of Kinai.

In addition, in the later Kofun period, a large number of small- and medium-sized keyhole-shaped tumuli appeared in various areas. These are thought to have been the tumuli of chiefs of sub-areas, ranking under the large keyhole-shaped tumuli. It may be understood that there was a transition from conventional scallop-shaped or round tumuli to keyhole-shaped tumuli.

However, at the end of the 6th century, or at the beginning of the 7th century, the construction of keyhole-shaped tumuli of any scale stopped. Instead, influential chiefs adopted large, round or square tumuli for their tombs. This movement coincided with the disappearance of keyhole-shaped tumuli of chiefs in Kinai, and subsequent tomb building activities, which indicates that the principle of control by local powers through the shapes of tombs, still remained effective.

Next, the prosperity and decline of group tumuli in the later tumulus period tells of the rise of small chiefs in northern Musashi. It was not uniform, but it showed individuality; some appeared simultaneously with the start of construction of large keyhole-shaped mounds; others appeared almost simultaneously with their extinction. The period during which the construction of group tumuli ceased also varied, but the construction of group tumuli in the main had come to a stop around the end of the 7th century.

These phenomena meant, at the same time, the discontinuation of the construction of tumuli, that is, the end of the Tumulus Period. Behind this is the fact that the rule of local powers through the funeral system with tumuli was reduced to a mere formality, both for the government in Kinai and for local powers.

In other words, the spread of the statute-based status system, which replaced the above rule, was forecast.