Cast-iron Articles in the Ancient and Medieval Ages

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The author collected data on pots and kettles of the Ancient and Medieval Ages based on the objects excavated from consumption sites, molds excavated from production sites, and articles handed down and owned by temples and shrines; though the number of cast-iron articles left as historical materials is limited because, when broken, they were recycled into ground metal. The objects can be broadly classified into “hagama” or ridged pots, pots A, pots B, pots C, pots I, and iron bowls. The change in shape was examined for each vessel type over the period of the 9th to 16th Centuries. The following changes occurred in the types: In Ancient times, “hagama” or ridged pots and pots I already existed. Throughout the Medieval Age, ridged pots, pots A and C were produced and used, while pots B appeared in the 14th Century, and gradually came to be the main type of pot. Furthermore, the type of vessel used differed according to the area. In the region centering around Kinai, ridged pots, pots A and B were all used together. In various regions of Western Japan outside the Kinai area, pots A and B were the main vessel types. On the other hand, in Eastern Japan, pots C were the main type used for boiling throughout the Medieval Age. While Buddhist tools were made of bronze in Western Japan, here some of them were made of cast iron; iron Buddhas and iron bowls. Ridged pots used for divine water-boiling service and handed down in the Kinki District may be classified according to their ornamentation, shape, inscription, etc. and they were distinguished as the products of casting workers in the countries of Kawachi, Yamato, and Yamashiro. The area of distribution of the products in the latter half of the Medieval Age was more or less limited to the one country.

It was the artisans called “Imonoshi” (casters) in the Medieval Age who produced these cast iron articles. Based on the results of investigations of iron casting sites, it can be supposed that most of these artisans cast both copper and iron. Iron foundries were attached to iron smelting workshops in the Ancient Age. In the Medieval Age, however, many of them were located around the production areas of casting sand. In the latter half of the Medieval Age, some came to be located on the peripheries of cities. Considering the size of fixed capital required for production, it is estimated that few casters ran mobile operations, even if some might have traveled commercially.