The System of Reburial in the Yayoi Period

HARUNARI Hideji

In the early Yayoi period in eastern Japan, there existed a common reburial system, in which the body was ossified by some method or other, and some of the bones were placed in a jar to be buried. The various sites considered to be connected with reburial show a wealth of variety, because various stages of the reburial process have remained at different sites.

Reburial followed the following processes: burial, — exhumation, — bone selection, — placement in a jar coffin, and reburial in cemetery, — burning of the remaining bones. It also took the following form: immediate dissection without burial, — bone selection, — etc. The body was first separated into bones and flesh; then the bones were fragmented by splitting or burning. Fragmenting the bones to leave no trace of their original shape may show the intention of preventing the resurrection of the dead, possessed by a dead spirit or an evil spirit. In other words, there existed an inordinate fear of the dead and other spirits in this period.

Also, at this time, accessories made of human teeth or finger bones were fashionable. The materials were taken from dead persons and pierced through, but this fashion seems to have been limited to certain people. They apparently wore the accessories as a symbol of succession to the status or position occupied by the dead person before death.

Analysis of reburial graves shows that a cemetery was composed of many small groups, with ten graves or so in each group. Therefore, it is deduced that the unit of the small group was successive generations of the same family.

Reburial graves came to an end around the middle of the Middle Yayoi period, replaced by square mound burial. However, examples of reburial are known from Kofun of the 6th century; so it can be supposed that identification has merely been delayed, because of the scarcity in the Later Yayoi period of graves that conserved human bones.