Medieval Graveyards in the Uda Region, Nara Prefecture

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Recent excavations and investigations have made clear all aspects of some medieval graveyards in Uda, located in the southeast mountains of the Nara Basin. In addition to these graveyards which fell into disuse at the end of the Medieval Ages, there remain in this region other graveyards that have been continued in use since the Medieval Ages until the present day. The author, in this paper, integrates these two types of graveyards and examines the process of development of the funeral and grave systems in the Uda Region in the Medieval Ages.

Examples of graveyards the overall image of which has been clarified through excavations and investigations are: Tanihata Graveyard, Daïyama Graveyard, Yukitōge–minamiyama Graveyard, Noyama Graveyard, and Shimenzaka Graveyard, all of Haibara-chō, and Chikuma Graveyard in Ōuda-chō. The number of graves in each graveyard range from 20 or 30, up to 90; they all have a square area on the surface covered with stones, and most of them seem to have had stone towers such as gorintō (gravestone composed of five pieces piled up one upon another) or box-type stone Buddhist images, erected on top of those. Underground, beneath this stonework are crematory graves in which cremated ashes were placed to rest, facilities for cremation, burial graves, etc. These graves were used roughly from the 13th to the 16th centuries. There were more crematory graves before the 15th century and more burial graves thereafter. Stone towers also seem to have been erected from the 15th century on; from the 15th to the early 16th centuries gorintō were used, and in the later 16th century box-type stone Buddhist images were used.

Among the medieval graveyards that remain in use from the Medieval Ages to the present day, the graveyard of the Ōkura-ji Temple in Ōuda-chō contains 30 to 40 small gorintō, and the same number of box-type stone Buddhist images from the Medieval Ages, together with a large gorintō erected in Shōhei 正平 6 (1351), as a general memorial tower for the whole graveyard. Cinerary urns for cremated ashes have also been discovered in this graveyard, which indicates that crematory graves were maintained in the Medieval Ages. On the other hand, 40-odd small gorintō and a similar number of box-type stone Buddhist images, as well as a large gorintō in one corner, remain in Nishigami Graveyard at Nyudani, Utano-chō. There are a considerable number of medieval graveyards that have been conserved to the present day, and in the Medieval Ages they all seem to have been similar in appearance, content and character to the excavated graveyards. It is also considered possible that large gorintō once existed in the medieval graveyards that have been excavated, and that such large gorintō were erected as the symbol of the whole graveyard, before small gorintō were erected in the later Medieval Ages.

All these medieval graveyards in the Uda area are thought to have been the family
graves of local warriors and influential farmers of this area. Behind the fact that crematory graveyards of this kind came to be administered in the 13th and the 14th centuries, there may have been active approaches by lower priests of the Ritsushū 律宗 or other sects. Later, these graveyards gradually changed into burial graves. In the later 16th century, when the ruling order changed with the Oda-Toyotomi governments, the medieval graveyards of this area, which were chiefly comprised of graves for the local warrior class, faced a revolutionary turning point. Most of them were discontinued, and were integrated into the newly-established village community graveyards; some of them changed into regional graveyards that contained the graves of local common people. The change was from graveyards bound by a blood relationship to graveyards bound by a territorial relationship.

Along with the reorganization of graveyards, the funeral and grave systems also changed dramatically; this was the establishment of the double grave system in which the body was buried in the burial grave of the village, which was separate from the visiting grave of each family. One of the reasons for the establishment of this system was probably to restore the inconsistency between the disposal of the body, which was dealt with by the village as a unit, and ancestor worship, which was carried out in family units. The tradition of disposing of the body as the part of mutual aid within the village seems to have existed before the Early Modern era in the agricultural villages of this area. On the other hand, however, ancestor worship through the erection of stone towers which had been practiced among the local warriors in the Medieval Ages, spread among the common farmers; this resulted in the establishment of the double grave system.