The Establishment of “Sō” Graves
Seen from the Medieval Communal Grave Sites

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In the Yamato Basin, there are common communal burial grounds called “sō” graves still in use, comprising several to several tens of villages, and it is obvious that their origin can be dated back to medieval. On the other hand, in recent years, medieval grave sites have been excavated one after another, and reports published on them. This paper clarifies the social backgrounds and actual dates in which the “sō” graves were established, dealing with the following two sites; the Haibara Daiōyama Site, which is a medieval communal grave site where they were stopped within medieval; and the Furuichi Castle Medieval Group Grave Site in Nara City, where the graves should normally have continued into the Premodern period.

First, at the Haibara Daiōyama Site, in the Middle Ages, the ruling (warrior) class round about in the county unified and were organized hierarchically. The present grave system in the area is the double grave system, with the burial grave within the fence, and the visiting grave allotted by family. The medieval graves in the site are attributed to the middle and lower levels of the ruling classes. The form of the graves reflects the situation whereby the country was unified, and there is no indication of any connection with the present grave system around the site.

The medieval graves in the Furuichi Castle Site are also graves of the ruling classes, and the form of the cemetery reflects the characteristics of the local Samurai warrior class. These graves were destroyed in the early 16th century due to the construction of the Castle; however, normally they should have remained as graves of the common people. This is supported by the fact that a few tombstones of the common people, such as boat-shaped gorintō are to be seen. In the Furuichi South Communal Cemetery, just close to the site, there are tombstones similar to those seen in the medieval grave site. There is also a monument inscribed with the Buddha's name in six characters dated Eiroku 9 (1566), which bears the names of 36 members of the nenbutsu-kō (pious association for the Buddhist invocaion). The Nenbutsu Temple that manages these graveyards was a temple at which the members of the nenbutsu-kō gathered, and the graveyard belonged to these people.

The sō graves were originally the graves of warriors or priests, like the medieval graves of the Furuichi Castle Site, but later, they became graves for the common people. The transformation into graves for the common people was backed by the “sō” or “kō” (pious association) of the village, and the formation of these organizations was a condition for the establishment of the “sō” graves. Therefore, the establishment of the sō graves can be divided into two stages: the first stage where they were the graves of warriors or priests, and the second stage where they became the graves of common people. The first stage was in the Heian or Kamakura Period, and the second stage in the later Period of the Civil Wars, that is during the later 15th or the early 16th centuries.