The Custom of Exorcism in the Yayoi Period

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Recently, the lower jawbones of pigs, pierced through by a bar or cord, or hung on a bar at the copula, were excavated from sites of the Yayoi period in western Japan, such as Nabatake in Saga Prefecture, and Karako-Kagi in Nara Prefecture. The prevailing opinion is that this custom was an agricultural formality introduced from the Chinese Continent.

Few examples of the pierced lower jawbones of pigs have been found on the Chinese Continent. However, the custom of burying lower jawbones or skulls of pigs in graves, or hanging them up somewhere, developed from the Neolithic Age in China. This custom has been handed down today among ethnic minorities in the southwestern part of China.

When someone dies, the Li Tribe of Hainantao sends off the spirit of the dead by killing a cow or a pig. They then put the lower jawbone of the killed pig on the coffin and bury it in the grave, or hang it on a pole above the grave. The Naxi Tribe of Yunnan Province hang the lower jawbone of pig on a wall indoors, to symbolize the peace of the family; when someone dies, they throw it away outside the village.

According to ancient Chinese literature, the pig is a symbol of fear; and the skull or lower jawbone of a pig will avert evil, and protect the spirit of the dead.

In the Neolithic Age in China, the custom of burying a cursing tool with the canine of a river deer or pig attached existed at the same time as, or before, the custom of burying the lower jawbone of a pig in graves. The reason for the use of the lower jawbone of a pig to send off or to protect the spirit of the dead can be found in the fact that the pig has a sharp, curved canine, like a hook. The effectiveness of a hook in warding off evil can be found in a certain tribe, in which the shell of Harpago chagra is hung at the entrance of the house as a charm. Also, the existence of a bronze cogwheel plaque with central boss fastened on to a shield is thought to date back to the Yayoi period. The lower jawbone of a pig might have been used to ward off the dead or evil spirits, because of the hooked canine and the fierce character of the pig. It is sometimes replaced by the lower jawbone of a sheep or deer, this being because the lower jawbone itself resembles a V-shaped hook.

In the examples from the Yayoi period, the lower jawbone of a pig was hung inside or at the entrance to the house, or at the entrance to a settlement. When someone died, or met with misfortune, they apparently thought that the dead spirit or an evil spirit was caught on the hooked part, and so threw it outside of the residential area, or, alternatively, buried it in the grave to protect the dead.

The custom of using the lower jawbone of a pig as a tool to avert misfortune is not know in the Korean Peninsula. However, it is obvious that this custom has its origin in the Chinese Neolithic Age, and was introduced to western Japan along with paddy-rice farming and agricultural ceremonies, by the people who crossed over to Japan in the early Yayoi period.