Castles and Cities of the Japanese Archipelago in Ancient Times

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In each of the periods of the history of the Japanese archipelago there existed bases for protecting villages, towns and cities, or fortifications that enclosed entire communities. With settlements situated on hills surrounded by trenches dating from the Yayoi period as the archetype, barricades and military installations with features unique to the periods in which they appeared have come to light. While castles from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period are representative examples, further explication is required as there is still insufficient understanding of the actual conditions, changes and diversity of these facilities through the ages.

During Japan’s period of ancient statehood dating from around the 7th through the 9th centuries, hilltop castles were built in western Japan, castle towns and barrier stations were built in the center of the archipelago, and castle stockades were built in eastern Japan. The histories connected to all of these developments are now known. The majority of ruins known about through documents have been subject to archeological surveys, with some ruins not mentioned in documents also having been discovered. The history of these kinds of large facilities of the ancient period maintained through huge outlays of labor and expense are intricately connected with the characteristics of this period in which interchanges between Japan and foreign countries gained momentum. Given the limitations of historical documents and insufficient archeological findings, theoretical understanding up to the present time has severely undervalued these constructions without having a clear picture of what they were actually like. This paper gives examples of substantial installations that were built out of necessity in various regions throughout the Japanese archipelago for the unification and defense of the state and for the defense of cities, towns and villages. Representative examples from Dazaifu, Heian-kyo and one example of a castle stockade in eastern Japan are described in this paper. However, there are still many aspects of the universal existence of defense installations and their historical development that are far from clear. This paper shows that between the 7th and 8th centuries and between the 10th and 11th centuries in certain regions there were towns and villages where circumstances required that they be defended. This paper presents a new perspective as a result of a re-examination of the actual conditions of these defensive installations and their relationships with castle towns and cities during the ancient period.