The Iron Materials between Gaya and Wa Viewed from the Documents

Suzuki, Yasutami

Legends contained in WeiZhi (魏志) from the latter half of the 1st century about Chinese laborers engaged in procuring wood in ChinHan (辰韓) point to the extraction of iron and iron production. Then, in southern Korea during the 3rd century, in addition to the ruling class, the many residents who lived in small family units were engaged in pluralistic trade with Wei. Iron produced in PyonJin (井辰) was taken by Han (韓), Ye (汝) and Wa (倭), and was also supplied to NakLang (楽浪) and DaeBang (带方). This trade was also significant in diplomatic and military terms, and both the citizenry and the ruling class played a part in acquiring techniques for processing iron and sources of consumption. Although in Wa entities associated with the Wa King and the chiefs were involved in trade, according to the History of Wa, it appears that in fact it was groups of traders from Tsushima and Iki who took on this role.

It was through this acquisition, redistribution and payment for iron that the ruling class in the state of Kuya (狗邪), which lay at the center of PyonHan (井韓), established networks in the various Han states and also set up distribution mechanisms. From the 4th century onwards, this region became the center for a diverse culture which included ceramic ware, helmets and armor and horses, as well as a base for a great sphere of distribution in East Asia through trade conducted by the various ethnic groups.

The disturbances in Wa around the end of the 2nd century were battles between chiefs in western Japan over import routes for iron materials and products. These battles were waged by chiefs in the less developed societies of San’in, the Setouchi coast and Kinki against the leaders in northern Kyushu, where society had adopted classes as a result of interaction with NakLang and the various Han states. The result was the rise to power of the former through iron distribution and the transfer of technology. The royal authority in Wa which was formed in this way maintained unions with the ruling class in each area through the repeated acceptance, control and allocation of metal resources and visitors from the Asian continent, and it was this that strongly prescribed the fundamental nature of this royal authority. At about the same time, a hegemonic struggle was taking place in PyonHan as well over the procurement of iron, and this dispute was solved by installing the King of ChinHan. This
struggle over iron in PyonHan is likely to have affected Wa. Then, from the second half of the 4th century through to the 5th century amid a variety of circumstances in the Korean Peninsula that included wars, Wa's royalty was continually involved in taking over international routes with the support of Gaya (伽倻) and PaekChe (百済), which were themselves experiencing crises during that time. However, when in the late 5th century and the early 6th century iron refining became possible in the Japanese Archipelago, the relationship between Wa and Gaya, Gaya and Silla (新羅), and in turn relationships between the states of east Asia, underwent great change.