Changes in the Appearance of Graveyards in Yamato in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods

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This paper considers changes in the types of use of graveyards, that is, the process of change in their appearance that occurred in Yamato during the Medieval period and Early Modern period. The study is based on the results of studies of graveyards in Nara Prefecture that have been in use from the Medieval period through to the present day carried out in relation to one of the National Museum of Japanese History's basic research themes "Historical Analysis on Basic Beliefs in Local Societies".

Even today, there exist in the Nara basin many instances in which several large villages from the Early Modern period encompass a local graveyard and run it as a large communal graveyard. Most of these were established as graveyards by the middle of the Medieval period, and during the second half of the same period the erection of gravestones that were five-tiered stone monuments that symbolized the five main elements (earth, water, fire, wind and air) of esoteric Buddhism became common. It is assumed that some time after the beginning of the Early Modern period, these communal graveyards were divided into separate graveyards for each of the villages and that in the early stage of that period the adoption of a dual grave system became common whereby a distinction was made between the burial area where the remains of the dead were buried and the gravestone area. Still, it is no easy task to locate materials for examining the way in which these graveyards were used during the Medieval period.

In contrast, in the Uda district in the southeast of the Nara basin it is normal even today for graveyards to be operated in the earlier form of a communal graveyard, and until very recently the dual grave system was customary. There are many examples of archeological surveys of medieval graveyards in this region, which have shown that a single grave system had been adopted whereby remains were either cremated or buried and a gravestone erected over the site. It is believed that these were family burial plots of the samurai class and that they disappeared with the rise to power of the Toyotomi regime. However, nearly all the graveyards that are in operation in the region today were established during the Early Modern period, so that virtually no graveyards that continued operating from the Medieval period into the Early Modern period can be found. In other words, a huge change took place in the Uda region as the family graves of the samurai class from the Medieval period came to be replaced by graveyards that served local villages.
Communal graveyards in the Nara basin area differ from the medieval graveyards of Uda in that by the Medieval period they were already local communal graveyards. This probably is due to the creation of communal graveyards that came about with the systemization of funeral services as a result of efforts by priests of the Buddhist Ritsu Sect around the 13th century centered on local burial grounds thought to have been established during the Heian period. It is believed that these later became local graveyards that were a fundamental structural unit of Early Modern villages that became established under a new system of control. Even though both the Nara basin area and Uda underwent a huge change over to the dual grave system from the single grave system around the beginning of the Early Modern period, this can only be the product of a contradiction that was created by the disposal of remains being taken care of in the village while gravestones for worshipping ancestors were built at family homes.

As seen by the above, the appearance of graveyards itself was subject to huge change in Yamato from the Medieval period to the Early Modern period. In conclusion, this paper argues that these huge changes were caused by the complex interaction of factors related to religion and folk beliefs, social factors that saw a huge social change occur when groups based on blood ties were replaced by groups based on residence and the establishment of the Ie system, as well as political factors in which the formation of the regime in the Early Modern period was accompanied by the establishment of villages.