A Background to Reburial: Correspondence to Environmental Changes in the Jomon and Yayoi Periods

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The periods between the end of Middle Jomon and Late Jomon and between Final Jomon and the beginning of the Yayoi period were periods of great cultural and social change in the Japanese archipelago. But what is the significance of the custom of reburial that was practiced at these junctures in our history that exceeds place and time? One change that is common to areas in which reburial developed is the decline of villages, that is, decreases in population. A study of environmental changes shows that cooling of the climate was a feature common to these periods of change. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a deterioration in the environment induced reburial.

There are no doubt various reasons for the emergence of reburial in the course of history. One reason is the occurrence of ancestor worship performed for the purpose of solidifying the bonds of a village or region with the dead as the linchpin. Reburial functioned as a starting point for the integration of villages that had been dispersed and had shrunk in size as a result of deterioration in the natural environment, and this was symbolized by the ancestors that were reburied and by the graves themselves. It cannot be said, however, that reburial always developed at times of an unfavorable environment, as illustrated by the Keiyo region where reburial developed during early Late Jomon when a re-warming of the climate formed a huge shell midden. Even if the natural environment did recover or villages started to grow, one may assume that the system of reburial that had become a fixed custom at an earlier time continued to function as a device for bringing the village together.

The washing of bones and burial practiced on the Amami islands of the Ryukyus signifies ancestor worship and is helpful when considering reburial in the Jomon and Yayoi periods. In this sense, reburial was carried out as a type of rite of passage. The period from Late Jomon through to the first half of the Yayoi period was a time in which rites such as the removal of teeth developed. The reburial system also took on stronger ritualistic elements during this time, or in other words, there was a strengthening of ancestor worship and rites of passage. The background to reburial lies in this ability to sustain life in the face of a harsh natural environment.