The Evolution of the Distribution and Marine Transportation in 15th-16th Century Japan: A Study of Port Sites in the Tokai Region

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In recent years, research related to marine transportation along the Pacific coast of eastern Japan has emphasized the detrimental impact of the 1498 earthquake on ports in the Tokai region. Anotsu (in present-day Mie Prefecture) and Motojima (in Shizuoka Prefecture), which flourished during the 15th and 16th centuries, are two examples of port sites that are often cited. However, further archaeological investigation on the age of these and other sites has revealed gaps in the periods in which these ports declined and disappeared, suggesting that a single natural disaster was not the decisive factor in their decline. Rather, the existence and later disappearance of several such ports reflect changes in transportation and distribution. The quantity of ceramic ware, dated to the 15th to 16th centuries, which far outnumbers those of earlier periods, excavated from port sites throughout the Tokai region, supports the idea of regional economic transformation. Moreover, a close examination of the rapid increase in ceramic use in these areas reveals the conspicuous presence of Haji ware, which was strongly influenced by Kyoto-style ceramics, in these areas, implying migration and settlement to the regions by people who were acquainted with Kyoto culture.

Archaeological data suggest that this series of phenomena occurred around the Meio era (1492-1501). The exodus to the outlying provinces by military governors, acting-military governors and private guards, who had primarily resided in the capital, during this period influenced the transformation of regional economies manifested by the large-scale consumption of ceramic ware, particularly Haji ware. The migration by the military governors and private guards that occurred during the political changes that took place in the Meio era following the wars and disturbances of the Onin and Bunmei eras was not restricted to the Tokai region. Accordingly, we can expect that archaeological studies of other regions will also confirm the existence of similar cases of regional economic transformation.