Process of the Formation of Port Towns

USAMI Takayuki

In the field of research into cities, temple towns and port towns are cited as representative forms of towns and cities that existed in Japan during the Middle Ages, though port towns have been the subject of far less research than temple towns. In this paper I will examine the periods in which port towns were established and the subsequent changes that occurred, through an examination of developments in marine transportation.

The period by which marine transportation had spread to all parts of Japan has been put at the end of the 12th century, though large-scale transportation did not occur until the second half of the 13th century through to the beginning of the 14th century. This is attributable to the development of the shoen system, and it was during this time that major ports were established in many regions.

This was followed in the latter part of the 15th century through to the 16th century by changes in the location of major ports, resulting in the formation of new port towns. The reason for this was a shift in the nature of marine transportation, whereby its function as a means of transportation for commodities representing land taxes imposed on peasants was replaced by a new role of transporting products from one region to another. During this period, warring feudal lords took control of distribution and this extended to port towns as well. This degree of control intensified during the early stages of the Early Modern period, which in turn brought changes to conditions governing the location of port towns.