Lagoons before Land Reclamation and their Functions: Water Transportation in Tsubaki-no-umi and Shimousa

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This paper is a re-examination of the significance of development by means of an investigation into the landscapes and functions of lagoons before they were reclaimed by drainage that is underpinned by the acknowledgement that development is not always preceded by a lack of development. At the same time, rather than adopt an approach that centers on historical “events” such as development and disasters, it seeks to reveal issues of environmental history within the framework of the “routineness” of the interplay between man and nature that unfolds within a continuing society.

First, using the examples of Tsubaki-no-umi in Shimousa Province and its environs, which were reclaimed by means of drainage at the beginning of the Early Modern Period, I take a look at the relationship that their topographical features have with human activity. This investigation has revealed a number of phenomena. For example, diverse land use was possible on the flat land formed by rows of sandbanks that blocked off Tsubaki-no-umi, the site of Tsubaki-no-umi lagoon was suitable as a harbor, deep branch-shaped valleys formed on the Shimousa plateau, and there was an isthmus at the northern part of Tsubaki-no-umi.

It was within such a topographical environment that the Nitamagawa River had been used as a route for water transportation since ancient times in the sandbank flat lands and that on the sandbanks there were roads that ran east to west. New paddy fields were developed in the thirteenth century. Because the Tou-shi clan, which ruled Tou-no-sho, actively sought to take possession of Tsubaki-no-umi one would think that they would have used it. Moreover, on the basis of place names recorded in documents dating from the Middle Ages and the names of places in the area, we learn that it was used for water transportation. This water transportation route went from Tsubaki-no-umi on the Pacific Ocean through the isthmus on the Shimousa Plateau all the way through to Hitachigawa River and Katori-no-umi. Thus, by avoiding the treacherous sea off Choshi coast, it fulfilled a specific role as a route that linked west of Kanto with north of Kanto.

What is more, it appears that this route also linked up with the Teganuma-Kazahaya route, the Teganuma-Mama route and the Inbanuma-Makuhari route which went from Hitachigawa River through Teganuma and Inbanuma, then used the branch-shaped valleys cut deep into the Shimousa Plateau and came out at Sobu Bay (present-day Tokyo Bay). In this way, it linked two inland seas—Katori-no-umi and Sobu Bay.