The Medieval Town of Kamakura Viewed from the Perspective of Disasters

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Much detailed research has been undertaken on the urban development of Kamakura following an approach that uses documents and archaeology, and which has located the imperial palace and the residences of vassals, temples, commercial areas and graveyards. However, there has been little examination that has taken a close look at disasters. Thus, this paper is an examination of the occurrence of fires and earthquakes, the responses to these events, and restoration.

A study of the fire prevention system of Kamakura, which suffered repeated fires, shows that Wakamiya-ooji served the function of a fire prevention zone, with one means of fire prevention being the destruction of houses. There were also large fires that were acknowledged and recorded as “great fires causing extensive destruction and fatalities” that burnt down the central urban area on a large scale and fires that destroyed major facilities in Kamakura such as temples and shrines and the residences of the shogun and the Hojo clan. Fires that fell into the latter category and were recognized as “great fires causing extensive destruction and fatalities” were viewed as an evil omen for Kamakura itself due to the loss of Buddhist scriptures, and they instilled a sense of danger in the upper echelons of the shogunate. Also, the many earthquakes that occurred were accompanied by the occurrence of landslides in Kamakura, which was surrounded by valleys. When reconstruction took place, priests called “onmyo-ji” and monks from the Shingon sect played a prominent role in the rescue of people who had been buried or when rites were performed for the safe reconstruction of buildings, perhaps because of the belief in “tsuchi” involving the appeasement of the land deities. Earthquakes are also linked to the outbreak of social unrest and it has been possible to confirm the outbreak of disturbances in Kamakura on many occasions as a result of earthquakes, such as the Battle of Wada. One representative example is the disturbance that took place amid the turmoil of the large earthquake of 1293 when Taira-no-Yoritsuna and some of his warriors were killed. This incident is commonly interpreted as having been coincidental to the earthquake, but it is possible that it was brought about in association with the move by Sadatoki of the main Hojo line to override the belief in auspicious days called “sujitsu”. In a sense, this can also be viewed as a preventative me-asure aimed to stop the occurrence of disturbances following an earthquake.

Lastly, when considering the restoration of the town, although it is but one example, we learn that in the case of Enkakuji Temple, for construction work such as building roads it was decided to have the ordinary people who lived in the area bear the cost. This was underpinned by construction work undertaken separately by temples, shrines and vassals and we may conclude that restoration of the whole city of Kamakura took place.