An Analysis of Environmental Vocabulary in Place Names Recorded in the Middle Ages: Based on the “Sanyasakai Chumon” of Yunoura Village, Aso-gun, Higo Province

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Up until now, place names recorded in historical documents have mainly been used as important aids for reconstructing historical landscapes. As a result, while attention has gathered on historical place names that are keys to this reconstruction, it must be said that there has been little use of place names whose localities are difficult to identify. However, place names should not be seen merely as symbols denoting locations, but should be seen as verbalization of knowledge of the land. If we attempt an analysis of the elements of the meanings of place names from this perspective, we will most probably be able to make effective use of a greater number of recorded place names. In particular, we can regard place names related to the natural environment as expressions of a thorough knowledge of the environment by the inhabitants. Analysis of knowledge of the environment using place names as aids has already been done using names for local neighborhoods and popular names that are an intimate part of the everyday lives of inhabitants. However, even with recorded names, if we are able to use groups of names that have been put together regionally and quantitatively an analysis of the vocabulary of place names should prove helpful in gleaning information on knowledge about the environment and use of the environment among inhabitants at a specific time in history.

In this paper, I conduct a vocabulary analysis of recorded place names using the “Sanyasakai Chumon” from Yunoura village, Aso-gun, in Higo Province as primary material. This record of names contains many place names with natural elements and it is also easy to understand the mutual association between the place names it records. I examine what sort of knowledge the people of the middle ages – the subject – had of the environment – the object – and how they constructed their living spaces. My study has yielded the following three main findings. First, the living space for Yunoura village during the middle ages was bounded by a road called the “Oomichi”, (lit. main road) which vertically connected the outer ring of the Mt. Aso crater with settlements on the foothills, spanning an altitude of 400 meters, and a horizontal road called the “Yokomichi” (lit. horizontal road) that connected the two. Second, living in a topographical environment in which there were repeated avalanches of rocks, vol-
canic ash and mud as well as flooding, the inhabitants of Yunoura village had systematic knowledge of flash points at times of natural disaster and were selective when locating settlements and in their use of the land. Third, for place names with natural elements there is a huge gap between the middle ages and today. To explain this, in addition to the effects of external environmental changes, it is also necessary to take into account internal changes in the people possessing knowledge of the environment and the institutional and social frameworks that regulate place names.