The Concept of the Other World in Kofun

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This paper attempts to gain an understanding of the nature of kofun from the Early and Middle Kofun periods as tombs that sealed off bodies and as "pseudo other worlds" by reconstructing the behavior of people inside tombs and through an examination of ruins and artifacts.

At this time, it was believed that when a person died the soul boarded a boat and traveled to the other world. The body was sealed inside a coffin and kaku (outer casing) within which it was believed it did not lead a life comparable to when the deceased had been alive. The boat discovered inside the Suyama Kofun in Nara Prefecture was for reenacting in the real world the soul's journey to the other world during the funeral.

When the soul of the deceased had arrived at the other world by boat, it disembarked from the boat at the opening of the tomb (boat-shaped haniwa), performed a purification ritual (fence-shaped haniwa) and then lay in state in a dignified residence with the solid protection afforded by the top of the rocky hill it had climbed. Here, there was an abundance of food and drink and offerings of new food were made daily. The fukiishi (stone buttress), haniwa and food made of clay shapes set the scene for staging the other world. Haniwa figures of people and animals were added in the middle and later stages of the Middle Kofun period.

However, once horizontal stone chambers came into use, regional differences began to appear. In Kinki where stone chambers were widely adopted in Late Kofun, the stone chamber was a "closed stone chamber" that housed a "closed coffin". As such, the body was sealed inside the coffin as it had been in the previous period and the inside of the dark chamber did not become the space of the deceased. Although people stopped climbing to the top of the mound and setting the scene for staging the other world became a mere formality, kofun continued to be "pseudo other worlds" and the stone chamber inherited the function of the kaku.

But in northern and central Kyushu where stone chambers were adopted in Middle Kofun, stone chambers were "open stone chambers" that housed "open coffins", and as such they were spaces where the deceased continued to lead the same sort of life as they had while alive. This required a house for the deceased to live in addition to house-shaped haniwa. In some cases the ceiling of the dark chamber represented the heavens and a house-like structure was put inside the
chamber. In other cases the space of the dark chamber itself was the house where the deceased lived. The tale of the visit to Yominokuni in the Kojiki falls into the former category. Here, the other world above the mound and the other world inside the stone chamber coexist as two other worlds of different nature, one nestled inside the other. Genealogies of this sort of coffin and stone chamber can be found in China’s Northern Dynasties and in some parts of Koguryo.

Key words: kofun, the other world, boat, vertical burial chamber, horizontal stone chamber, the tale of the visit to Yominokuni