Changes and the Significance of Decorated Kofun: The Formation of the Concept of Spirits

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From the 5th through to the 7th centuries during the middle and latter stages of the Kofun period, many decorated kofun were built in northern and central Kyushu, mainly in Fukuoka and Kumamoto Prefectures, but also in Saga and Oita Prefectures. Drawings and motifs were drawn on stone coffins and stone chambers where remains rested, as well as on horizontal stone chambers and horizontal tombs where these coffins and chambers were put. Then, during the 7th century, this practice spread to San'in, Kinki, Kanto, Tohoku and other regions throughout the land.

In the 5th century, the pictures and motifs created in decorated kofun were mainly chokkomon (geometric patterns of curves and intersecting lines), mirrors and weapons. Some of these were made into sawtooth and concentric circle patterns, to which shields and hands were added. By the 6th century, representational drawings of boats, people and horses had been added. At the beginning, the drawings were made in relief to create a three-dimensional impression. This was followed by line drawings, and by the time that this practice peaked, a shift had taken place to colorful drawings full of bright colors.

The concept of protecting remains from evil was a common feature among these varied drawings and patterns. By the 6th century, the concept of the separation of soul and body had also been added. In conjunction with this, there arose a common belief that the souls of the dead, who had been transported by ship or horse, continued to keep evil spirits away from the horizontal stone chambers. In the 6th and 7th centuries, these stone chambers served as dwellings for the souls of the dead. To put it another way, the kofun themselves were the other world situated amid the everyday world. This world was sacred space that people were allowed to freely enter at will.

Key words: protecting remains from evil, the concept of the separation of soul and body, the concept of the other world around the sea, the horizontal stone chamber, the change of the keyhole-shaped tombs