"Muraji-no-Kimi" Wooden Tablet Excavated from Paekche’s Capital: 1998 Korea, Buyeo Hyeonnae-ri Site Excavation Baggage Tag

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The wooden tablet excavated from the Hyeonnae-ri site in Paekche’s northeastern capital Buyeo is a baggage tag inscribed with just the name of the person “Naniwa no Muraji-no-Kimi”. The archaeological site where this wooden tablet was excavated in 1998 was a government office in an area south of the office which administered Paekche’s finances, itself situated in a commercial hub which benefited from the use of the Penmagan waterways for the transport of goods.

“Naniwa(那爾波)” refers to “Naniwa(難波)”. In those days Naniwa was the gateway to the outside world, and people involved with foreign diplomacy liked to use Naniwa as their first or family name.

Generally speaking, the meaning of “連公” (Muraji-no-kimi) is as the characters suggest: “連 + 公” — “Muraji” was a name used by the Yamato royal family and “kimi” is an honorific title. However, wooden tablets from the Ishigami site in Nara Prefecture feature inscriptions of names such as “Ohoyake-no-Omi KaXX” (大家臣加□) alongside “Isonokami Oo-Muraji-no-Kimi”, while for “Sendai Kuji Hongi” and “Shinsen Shojiroku”, “Kimi” is only ever attributed to “Muraji”, making it impossible to interpret “Muraji-no-Kimi” solely as an honorific name relating to “Muraji”. It is perhaps best to consider that “Muraji-no-Kimi” was an insignia from a previous historical stage to the “Muraji” of 684. The era of the wooden tablet can also be argued to be the same period as the wooden tablet of the Ishigami site and “Meika-ban” (ancient Buddhist banner) of Horyuji Temple, which are considered to be from the middle of the 7th century, which tallies with the observation of the archaeological excavation from the 1998 Hyeonnae-ri site (that it is mid-7th century). In the case of history books, literary collections and documents produced during the 8-9th centuries, as well as genealogical documents from different eras, the “Muraji-no-Kimi” insignia relates without exception solely to the family’s nominal or genealogical “ancestor”, so it can be argued that it was created as a kind of record to be handed down to each clan.

If one considers the close relationship between Japan and Paekche of the mid-7th century, the possibility would seem to exit that this wooden tablet was made by a Japanese official resident in the Paekche town of Sabi. However, the wooden tablet clearly exhibits the following three characteristics: 1. It is a small baggage tag with just a name inscribed on it, of which numerous other examples exist from ancient Japan. 2. The inscription “Naniwa” (那爾波) is more or less the same as the “Naniwa” (那祢波) which appears in ancient ballads collected in the “Nihon-Shiki”. 3. “Muraji-no-Kimi” is a characteristic insignia of a name from before the middle of the 7th century in ancient Japan.
Taking the above into account, I would argue that there is a greater probability that the tablet was made in Japan, was attached to some commercial goods as a baggage tag and brought to Paekche, and that the tag became detached after arrival.

Whatever the case, there is enormous significance to the fact that for the first time a wooden tablet with a Japanese name inscribed on it was discovered at an ancient Korean site.

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