Kii Suido as an Inland Sea

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Waterborne transportation developed early in enclosed inland sea environments such as bays, lakes and straits, resulting in the formation of highly concentrated distribution networks that linked the many small ports that had been built. The area covering these inland seas and their coastal and inlying sections is called an “inland sea area.”

Inland sea areas changed over the centuries, and there is a particular need to focus on the relationship between lagoons and inland seas before the Early Modern period. Based on the proposition that Kii Suido is an inland sea and that local relationships generated by relations between the lagoon and inland sea reveal the existence of an inland sea area, this paper examines the historical significance of Kii Suido by showing the political and military activities and changes that took place there.

In ancient times, the place where a river entered the sea was called a minato, written using two Japanese characters meaning “water” and “gate.” Owing to its sandy coastline, estuarine lagoons formed easily in Japan, which is why the Japanese character for “lake” was sometimes used for the word minato. Estuarine lagoons were used as ports, and in the Middle Ages the existence of an intersection between lagoon and sea, that is, the islands and inlets that served as ports in lagoons, were important. Examples of these in Awa include Tsuda Island belonging to the Tomita-sho estate, the betsubu (Miyajima Island) of the Kayashima-sho estate, and Komatsu Island belonging to Katsuura-shiho estate. These islands that served as ports were used as ports on lagoons and estuaries that were “inlets” at the back of Kii Suido. In other words, although they bordered the sea they were river ferry landings. It is likely that goods transported from inlying ferry landings were taken to landings on estuarine islands by riverboat, where they waited for suitable tides and winds in order to be transported out to sea. Small boats used on both rivers and the sea were common in inland sea areas. By connecting estuarine ports on inland seas, these boats moved freely between inlying areas and the sea, thereby generating active flows of people and goods.

As for its role in the formation of inland sea areas, the central government became involved in estates on islands that served as ports and also sought to reorganize and integrate these islands by making their inhabitants vassals. Each community responded differently in line with their individual interests, which included cozying up to central government in order to benefit from what they had to offer, or opposing it. Political and regional histories need to be reconstructed around the relationships that existed between these communities and central government.

Key words: Inland sea, lagoon, port, waterborne transportation, communities