Shoen and Villages and “Occupations” in Wetlands: Reeds and Water Chestnut Plants of the Heian Period through to the Early Edo Period

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Although the livelihood of farmers who lived on shoen (medieval manors/plantations) and in villages was based on the cultivation of arable land, that was not all they did. They also met their needs by using nature in areas that included shoen and villages in a near-natural state. When studying this usufructuary utilization of local nature by conceptualizing it as an “occupation” from a historical perspective, it is difficult to obtain a clear picture only from the period classified as “medieval history.” Using reeds and water chestnuts as examples, this paper makes a study based on historical materials dating from the Heian period through to the early Edo period. In Namba Bay, the reaping of reeds that were one form of vegetation found along the shoreline became popular from the Heian period, and though it increased in relation to urban demand, no exclusive areas were established for the use of individual shoen or villages. Although the usufructuary utilization of the shores of Lake Biwa was allowed from the Kamakura period, during the Namboku period these shores were incorporated into shoen, and peasants from the Okushima-sho estate established their own exclusive reed fields in opposition to the head of the estate. By the Sengoku period, the securing of exclusive reed fields for villages had become common. Although this meant that they renounced a variety of other resources, including boat transportation and fishing, villages and hamlets put up a strong case for the use of diverse resources, with the result that disputes and arbitration became a routine occurrence. In some cases it became a matter of relying on the authority of the feudal lord. Although there is evidence of the use of water chestnuts from the Nara and Heian period, in the latter half of the Heian period they were cultivated deliberately by inhabitants in flood lands, as seen in the example of Osato-gun in Musashi, and were meant for use as food to stave off starvation. In the Sengoku through to the Edo periods, water chestnuts were cultivated as commercial crops in wetlands in Owari and Settsu in anticipation of demand from urban centers, although fields were not established for the exclusive cultivation of this resource. Both reeds and water chestnuts were used as resources along coastal wetlands and beside lakes, and they were simply two of the diverse products found in these wetlands. There was local opposition to the establishment of areas specializing in reed fields, and though reed fields were established they were limited amidst local disputes and arbitration. There was very little inclination to restrict the use of wetlands to a specific resource, and we may conclude that diverse players and forms of resources evolved and were maintained amidst disputes and arbitration.

Key words: Reeds, water chestnut plants, shoen, villages, forms of resources