The Historical Significance of the Late and Final Phases of the Kofun Period in Iki no Shima: Foreign Diplomacy and the "National Border" in the 6th and 7th Centuries

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There are more than 300 ancient burial mounds (Kofun) on Iki no Shima (Iki Island), many of which were constructed during the late and final phases of the Kofun Period. Six of these are large cave chamber tombs and include megalithic tombs. The construction of this huge number of tombs was not so much due to rapid internal development on Iki no Shima, but, for the following reasons, is more easily understood as owing to various external factors.

Firstly, in the period from the latter half of the 6th century to the first half of the 7th century not just rulers, but also many mid-tier families constructed tombs. It is a fact that construction of large keyhole-shaped tomb mounds, large round tombs and collective tombs began and ended during this period. Secondly, while some tombs had two chambers and others three, and there were variations in the scale of the stone chambers and the stone materials used, the same basic cave chamber tomb format was employed. This can be taken as a sign of a shared consciousness, transcending the social barriers between the ruling class and mid-tier families, and the heightening of an ideological sense of community. Thirdly, this pattern was not just confined to Iki no Shima. Within Kyushu the megalithic tombs of Souroku Kofun, Sasazuka Kofun, Hyouze Kofun, Oni no Iwaya Kofun, and Kakegi Kofun occupy the foremost position. During the period at the end of the 6th century, however, the megalithization of cave chamber tombs also extended to the ruling classes in northern and central Kyushu. The "collective consciousness" expressed by megalithic tombs developed among the powerful ruling classes on a regional scale.

In the latter half of the 6th century, perhaps because of its roots as a geopolitical location, Iki no Shima fulfilled a role as a front-line base in the defense of the national border, which was part of the military campaign against Silla. The Fukuoka Heiya ruler ordered numerous mid-tier families to relocate to Iki no Shima in order to take on responsibility for military and foreign diplomacy matters, while the ruling classes of northern and central Kyushu were given responsibility for military logistics. Such a division of roles was part of the central regime's national border policy, but through this state of affairs, could it not be argued that the ruling classes of northern and central Kyushu – which formed just one part of the nation – had helped to heighten an ideological sense of community? This seemed to me to be the context for the rise of collective megalithic tombs.

Key words: Iki no Shima, megalithic tomb, collective consciousness, Silla, national border defense