Epidemic and Prophet Beasts

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Prophet beasts are anomalous creatures that allegedly foretold the future such as good harvests, epidemic, etc., explained how to prevent evil, and then disappeared. They appeared in surimono, nishiki-e, etc. from the last half of the Edo period and attracted the interest of common people. All have grotesque figures: jinjahime and himeuo with female faces and bodies of fish, kudan with human faces and bodies of cows, amabiko with monkeys’ faces and three feet, etc. The illustrations of the prophet beasts were demanded among common people, mainly to prevent bad disease, and their magic effects were expected. Rumors about the prophet beasts often spread, even after the Meiji period, and had an impact. This article introduces materials on himeuo and amabiko collected by the National Museum of Japanese History and discusses the relationship between the epidemic and the prophet beasts.

Chapter 1 deals with jinjahime and himeuo that allegedly appeared in Hizen-no-kuni Hirado in 1819 (Bunsei 2), confirming that they have shapes common to monstrous fish and ningyouonzu that became popular in 1805 (Bunka 2), and then clarifying both common and different contents in each of their illustrations. For the prophecy of good harvest and epidemics in particular and the contents of the prevention of evil explained by jinjahime and himeuo, it is clarified that they add new ideas while borrowing preceding knowledge.

Chapter 2 indicates that the epidemic in Edo in the summer of 1819 was closely related to the subject of jinjahime, and describes how the rumor spread while reacting quickly to people’s fear about the disease. This chapter also discusses an aspect of the activities of a person who was responsible for the signs of people’s fear and sold many pieces of surimono of prophet beasts by cleverly trumpeting their effects, based on essays of the early modern times and the newspaper articles of the early Meiji period.

Chapter 3 deals with the articles from the last half of the Meiji period, when not only epidemics but also words of war appeared in the contents of prophecies, particularly focusing on the rumor that kudan was born during World War II and foretold the end of the war. This chapter also mentions how prophecy had an aspect of an expression of fear held in people’s minds.

Key words: Prophet beast, Epidemic, Jinjahime, Himeuo, Kudan, Amabiko