Chiefs in the Kofun (Tumulus) Period: Consideration of Multiple Burials in the Early to Middle Kofun Period

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The impression that “only one chief was buried in each tomb, such as a keyhole-shaped tumulus, of chiefs” has formed with little basis, and this impression has a close relation with the image of chiefs in Kofun period society. Contrary to this impression, it was rather more common that two to four bodies were buried in the mound tops of early or middle period tumuli, even though they were the tombs of the chiefs. Even in cases where multiple burials took place, however, they tend to be viewed as “main burials” and “subsidiary burials”, and herein is where the problem is found. The results of studies of many cases, however, suggest that, among subjects of multiple burials, similarities are more prominent than differences, and that the number of cases in which there are no significant disparities among buried subjects surpass the number of cases in which significant disparities are observed among buried subjects. In other words, it is hard to find decisive disparities that can be considered master-servant relationships among the buried subjects; rather, cases in which the buried subjects can only be considered to be homogeneous and coequal are predominant. Therefore, if one of the multiple subjects buried in the mound top part is called a chief, other buried subjects would have to be called chiefs as well.

Based on the above observations, the point of this paper is as follows: behind keyhole-shaped tumuli and other tombs of chiefs, two to four chiefs who had close relationships while having small or large differences, who had territories in basins of small rivers with depths of 1 m or less and that formed a physical or personal network for purposes such as obtaining goods that could not be self-supplied or through marriage coexisted in some limited areas. In other words, more than one chief formed a political community, and such a chief class was the basic unit for political collectivity in the early to mid Kofun period, either in the central or local government. The paramount chief jointly selected from among these chiefs represented the chiefs in the area and assumed a role in the political order between the central and local governments. Hierarchical relationships or degrees of kinship among the chiefs were exhibited in various ways through multiple burials.

Keywords: Tombs of the chiefs, multiple burial, main burial, subsidiary burial, network of chiefs