Historical Significance of Kofun in the Terminal Stage:
An Example of Local Government in the 7th Century

HIROSE Kazuo

In the Setouchi region in the 7th century, a number of chieftains were given the task of developing political bases with a focus on several river basin areas: the mid reaches of Ashida River in the south of Bingo Province, the Ibo River in the west of Harima Province, and the Nuta River in the east of Aki Province, and the lower reaches of the Saba River in the west of Suo Province. These areas were nodal points between traditional river transport and the newly constructed Sanyodo (overland roads) covering a wide area. For these areas development of a unified water and land transport network for commercial goods, the general populace and information was a significant change, and such development was promoted directly in response to the troubled diplomatic relations (war) between Silla and the central government. In this paper such a political situation was thoroughly discussed through analysis of kofun in the terminal stage as well as the aspects of keyhole-shaped kofun in the final stage found in Western Japan. More specifically, the following points were analyzed: discontinuity in the genealogical record of chieftain tombs in the 6th to 7th centuries; horizontal stone chambers typical of the Kinai region and stone burial chambers with a side entrance; strong connections with the center of the Kinai region as shown by megalithic structures or the use of cut stones; locations with limited arable land; and coexistence with a government administration office under the ritsuryo system in the same area.

Moreover, in the northern part of Kyushu, three areas showed similar trends to the above – Iki Island, the Munakata area, and the Miyako Plain in the Buzen area, where kofun at the terminal stage including megalithic kofun, and a large number of collections of massed kofun and tunnel tombs, were built as well as prominent keyhole-shaped kofun in the 6th century. This finding indicates that sea traffic continued to ply concurrently with construction of the Sanyodo, and Iki Island served as the front line of aggressive diplomacy and defense, Munakata was the port of departure, and Miyako Plain the supply base. In this connection, in the upper reaches of the Tama River in the eastern part of Japan, a nodal point between the traditional water transport of the Tama River and the newly constructed Tosando Musashi-Michi road was developed as a political base. This development was made in a slightly different way to the more usual involvement by central government; however, a common point is the formation of a political center to serve a number of outlying chieftains who needed a base in which to stay and meet their counterparts.

Key words: Kofun at the terminal stage, Sanyodo, horizontal stone chamber typical of the Kinai region, megalithic kofun, political base