On the Change of Local Society in the 7th Century: Towards an Integration of Research on Kofun and on Settlements

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The change of local society in the 7th century is generally viewed as the evolution of local government through the installation of a province-county-village system and the formation of the supporting government offices, production and factory sites, and religious facilities, as well as the spread of the ritsuryo system. On the other hand, it is also well known that the burial system of the Kofun period remained, and particularly in the early 7th century collections of massed kofun (burial mounds) were frequently built. To clarify how the shift from the political system in the Kofun period to the ritsuryo system affected local society, or what kind of political reform such changes to local society reflected, a field examination mainly of the Harima region was conducted.

Firstly, it was found that in the central area of Taka County, a large number of kofun were built at the foot of Mt. Myoken with a hierarchical layout centering on the Higashiyama massed kofun; this layout differs from other areas where an individual kofun was built for each settlement. Taking into consideration the rise and fall of a settlement, large scale immigration and development in the early 7th century was assumed; it was also presumed that the establishment of miyake (territory or its base controlled by the Yamato court) played some part in this process. Focusing on the western part of Kamo County, adjacent to Taka County, late kofun and the rise and fall of settlement sites were compared, and as a result it was possible to infer that settlements newly developed in the 7th century sought out remote sites for tombs at the foot of a prominent mountain; in this case as well, it was possible to assume that the establishment of miyake motivated this tendency. As described above, it is presumed that the development of miyake would contribute to the formation of such large-scale collections of massed kofun.

Through the case study of the Harima region, it is also possible to reconsider the theory of collections of massed kofun. In this regard, it is effective to compare a “burial ground at a mountain site” where large-scale collections of massed kofun were built at the foot of a prominent mountain with the “burial ground of a village” where small-scale kofun were built in sight of the village. It can be assumed that burial grounds at mountain sites corresponded to the development of miyake, and the village burial grounds corresponded to traditional settlements. A situation in which local society was made up of a mix of these two patterns can be seen, and this offers a clue to clarifying the true picture of a local community and its evolution to a more complicated society during the 6th to 7th centuries.
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