Aspects of the Districts Bordering the Japan Sea in the Tohoku Region from the Kofun Period through to the Asuka and Nara Periods

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Archaeological evidence from the Kofun period through to the Asuka and Nara periods, discovered in the districts bordering the Japan Sea in the Tohoku region, was examined comprehensively. Particularly, the following four points were examined to give an overview: 1) aspects of late Yayoi period; 2) the construction trends of kofun (ancient burial mounds) in the southern Tohoku region; 3) aspects of post-Jomon culture centering on the northern Tohoku region; and 4) “kofun in the terminal stage” developed from the 7th century onward in the northern Tohoku region. Moreover, concerning an outline of the josaku (government fortification) sites, and the Emishi territories, the author confirmed the study results of historical bibliographies. Based on this acknowledgement, while comparing the characteristics of Japan Sea side districts with the Pacific seaboard districts, the relation between a change in archeological evidence and the Emishi territories found in historical bibliographies was examined, and then the perception of domains by the national administration promoting the ritsuryo codes was considered.

Up until the first half of the late Kofun period, construction trends of kofun in the Japan Sea side districts basically show similar variations to those seen in the Pacific seaboard districts; for this reason, it can be considered such changes were made in conjunction with political transformation throughout Japan. However, after the second half of the late Kofun period, regions can be classified into two types – regions with the continued construction of kofun, and those with no construction – giving obvious differences among regions. At the terminal stage, regional differences became more noticeable compared to the Pacific seaboard districts. Closer to our own times, aspects unique to a region were strengthened; therefore, it cannot be considered that local control by the central government was strengthened.

Archaeological evidence of post-Jomon culture found in the Japan Sea side districts is distributed up to the Niigata Prefecture area, which ranges over a considerable distance. At those places considered to be important for sea traffic, sites are found that indicate the interchange of post-Jomon culture and kofun culture. These points offer the strong possibility that sea lanes were in an important position on the Japan Sea side districts, along with a possibility that those people who led the post-Jomon culture played a major role in this positioning.

The Emishi territories found through examination of historical bibliographies hardly corresponds
to the cultural differences seen in the archaeological evidence. In the Japan Sea side districts, almost the entire area of the Yamagata Prefecture, Aizu Basin in the Fukushima Prefecture, and the eastern half of the Nigata Prefecture, all of which are assumed to be the Emishi territories, were areas where kofun culture was spread. There is a clear difference between them, which is larger compared to the Pacific seaboard districts. This fact demands the fundamental reconsideration of the current concepts concerning cultural differences found from distribution of archaeological evidence and differences among human groups. Exclusive cultural identity does not come first; it should be thought that a boundary between “them” and “us” is formed by focusing on any perceived “difference.” Based on these examinations, it is possible to consider that the term “Emishi” as used by a nation promoting the ritsuryo codes was coined from a particular perception of another group to create a boundary.

Key words: Kofun culture, post-Jomon culture, josaku, Tohoku region, Japan sea, sea traffic