Three Issues Concerning the Ryukyu Islands during the 7th to 12th Centuries

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Archaeology in the late 20th century had considered the society of the Ryukyu Islands in the 7th and 8th centuries to be stagnant and primitive with a hunter-gatherer economy; a society left behind by the new state formations in East Asia. Since the mid-1980s, the study of bibliographical sources has given rise to an alternative view of the Southern Islands as having an advanced hierarchical society; however, until the late 1990s to the early 2000s archaeological evidence to confirm this hypothesis had not been found. The situation changed significantly with the "discovery" of several sites with massive quantities of turban shells, and the finds of archaeological digs at the early Ryukyu Royal Mausoleum Urasoe Yodore, and at the Gusuku sites on Kikai Island. The examination of Ryuku society in the 7th and 8th centuries, and the start of the Gusuku Era, and the formation of the Ryuku Kingdom is giving rise to heated debate. From among the contending arguments concerning the social image of the Ryuku Islands in the 7th to 12th centuries, this paper considers the following three issues: 1) explanations of sites with massive quantities of turban shells; 2) a theory of hierarchical society in the Amami Islands; and 3) Gusuku sites and the formation of the Gusuku culture and people. To broaden the possibility of the research on this unclear period, the paper also presents a hypothesis: centering on the Gusuku sites of the Kikai Island, where between the 9th and 12th centuries a “prototype of Gusuku society and culture” including farming techniques typical of the Gusuku Era was established; increasing population pressure due to the development of typical Gusuku farming led to a migration to the Ryukyu Islands throughout the 11th and 12th centuries, and the consequent ushering in of the Gusuku Era.

Key words: Sites with massive quantities of turban shells, turban shell trade, hierarchical society, Gusuku sites, Gusuku Era people