Issues Related to the Early Keyhole-shaped Tombs in the Eastern Provinces: To Reconstruct the Image of the Kofun Period

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In the eastern provinces, keyhole-shaped tombs appeared late, and the dominant style in the early period was a rectangular-shaped tomb – These arguments are a major factor to define the image of the Kofun period in eastern Japan. What underlies this is the commonly accepted theory that the Yamato government gradually expanded its rule over the provinces and established control over eastern Japan later than over western Japan. There also seems to be an underlying implication that the eastern part of Japan had its own world where there was a counterforce against those who built keyhole-shaped tombs in western Japan. In contrast to this theory, there is another prevailing theory of cultural stagnation in the eastern provinces. Was the Kofun period in the eastern provinces really peculiar?

Keyhole-shaped tombs were built in the early Kofun period even in the eastern provinces, such as Bonten-yama Tomb in Ibaraki Prefecture and Akiba-yama Tomb II in Kanagawa Prefecture. Early rectangular-shaped tombs, such as Komagata Otsuka Tomb in Tochigi Prefecture, had many points in common with the contemporary keyhole-shaped tombs. Early keyhole-shaped tombs were built simultaneously one after another throughout the Japanese Islands, including the eastern provinces. This fact casts doubts on the prevailing theory that the Yamato government expanded its rule step by step.

Firstly, in the early Kofun period, there was a network of community chiefs, ranging from eastern Japan to Kyushu, to acquire people equipped with high technology as well as goods unavailable in respective areas such as iron goods and mirrors. Secondly, for chiefs establishing this network, keyhole and rectangular-shaped tombs functioned as an expression of their identification, a sense of bond, in a certain hierarchical order. At the top of this hierarchy reigned a central government composed of dominant chiefs from the Yamato River system area (the Yamato government). Thirdly, it is unlikely that there were regional political blocks using keyhole and rectangular-shaped tombs as a medium. In other words, it cannot be recognized that there was a political society of the eastern provinces allied with the Yamato government.

Dominant chiefs in Kinai played a leading role in managing the redistribution system of prestige and elite goods. In the early Kofun period, there was a wide community bound by merit, meaning that a smooth management of the system led to the community’s reproduction that benefited the chiefs. In the community, there was a widely shared ideological unity of keyhole-shaped burial rituals, whose core was
formed by dominant chiefs from Kinai. Chiefs from the eastern provinces in the early Kofun period also played an important part in it.

Key words: Keyhole-shaped tombs, rectangular-shaped tombs, the rule over the eastern provinces, the eastern provinces stagnation theory, the historical view of the eastern provinces