A Study of Migrant Workers Engaged in Reclamation Construction in the Seto Inland Sea Region in the Early Modern Times

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In the coastal area along the Seto Inland Sea in Hagi Domain (Yamaguchi Prefecture), large areas were reclaimed for rice production in the late early modern times. A prior analysis of labor for reclamation construction revealed that it had consisted of contract workers migrating in the Seto Inland Sea region, their boats called “Ishibune” and construction management agents called “Ishigashira.” This paper reviews the characteristics of labor for reclamation construction by analyzing the construction of mounds held up with stone walls. As banks to enclose rice fields, stone walls and sand mounds were constructed by migrant worker groups called “Ishibune (Ishigumi)” and “Sunabune,” respectively. The entire construction process was managed by a leader called “Ishigashira,” under whom there were contract workers to manage multiple sections. One section was 20 ken (36 meters) long and constructed by several groups (Ishibune and Sunabune), each of which was composed of migrant workers from the same area. The reason why not only stone walls but also mounds were constructed by specialized groups was because it was teamwork: a task requiring a group of people to complete. In other words, banks were constructed by groups led by respective leaders who understood specifications, procured materials, planned work schedules, and supervised workers in the field. The mobility as a group integrated with the leader was also essential because they worked underwater. Although individual tasks (e.g., piling up stones and making sand mounds) seem to have been rather simple and easy for anyone to do, the entire process required teamwork, which determined how to recruit and organize workers for construction.

Key words: reclamation construction, Seto Inland Sea Region, Ishibune, teamwork (working as a group), migrant worker group