Production Activities in Shichijō-machi and Hachijōn-chō in Medieval Kyoto: Focusing on Copperwork

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According to historical narratives and written sources, such as Tōji Hyakugō Monjo (medieval documents preserved at Tōji Temple), Shichijō-machi and Hachijōn-chō in Kyoto were once home to merchants and artisans of copperwork and other crafts. In these districts, excavations have been frequently made, yielding concrete findings on artisans. In particular, many casting artifacts have been unearthed, which indicates the existence of the largest metalworking community in medieval Japan.

The distribution of remains of metalworking activities shows that the production of copper mirrors started in the northeastern block near Shichijō-machi and then concentrated in the southern block between Hachijō-bōmonkōji and Umekōji Streets during its heyday in the 14th century. These areas, however, sustained massive damage due to a civil war in the mid-14th century. Artisans were scattered, and the history of the metalworking community came to an end. The molds excavated from Shichijō-machi and Hachijōn-chō indicate that artisans designed new mirrors one after another and developed techniques to make them a reality during the 300 years between the rise and fall of these districts. Most of the mirrors distributed in Japan were produced in Kyoto, and many of them are considered to have been produced in these metalworking districts. Some of the mirrors were exported to the Chinese continent and the Korean Peninsula, and they were copied and imitated there. These findings indicate that artisans in Shichijō-machi and Hachijōn-chō had the most advanced technology in the Eastern Asia at that time.

These copper artisans fell into the “hyakushō” class (the masses), according to the tax ledgers for Inchō, the estate of Tōji Temple. Archaeological findings indicate that townhouses with a narrow frontage on the street were used as workshops and that these small workshops constituted this large metalworking community. In addition to these archaeological sources collected over a long period of time, written sources are analyzed in this study to reveal the nature of the artisans who supported the technical advancement of medieval Japan.

Key words: copper mirror, Shichijō-machi, Hachijōn-chō, copperwork, caster