A Study of Medieval Japan Seen in the Context of the Development of Hand Mills

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Many of the goods consumed in medieval Japan could not have been manufactured without powder milling technology. Typically, hand mills (grain and tea hand mills) were used for milling and grinding. Such tools have been excavated from various sites, and they are still used in the present day. Nevertheless, there have been few studies to compare the chronological or geographical distribution of hand mills.

A description of suinuyō (a stone mill used to grind tea leaves) included in Daisō Shozan Garan oyobi Kiga no Zu written in 1241 and now possessed by Tofuku-ji Temple has been considered as the first written source that mentions medieval hand mills. However, archaeological sources have not been adequately examined. Therefore, this study collects and examines information on hand mills unearthed from notable medieval sites in Japan.

The results show that the earliest archaeological evidence of medieval hand mills dates back to the 13th century, which coincides with their first appearance in written sources. Moreover, archaeological sources imply that the number of hand mills remained low in the 14th century, increased in the 15th century, and peaked in the 16th century or afterwards. The analysis of spatial distributions of excavated hand mills shows a tendency that they are hardly found at the centers of residences or in cities or “city-like” settlements. Many have been unearthed from rural areas, rather than urban areas. This finding suggests that hand mills, or milling tools, may have been rarely used at the centers of residents or in urban areas.

Focusing on the analysis of tea mills, previous studies have claimed that hand mills were developed and distributed mainly due to the introduction of a tea-drinking custom and the spread of the tea ceremony. This study, however, attributes the wide spread of hand mills not only to the establishment of a tea-drinking custom but also to various other reasons that increased the demand for milling tools, such as the spread of wheat production and powdered foods. Presumably, the main factors that lay behind the spread of hand mills include the introduction of a tea-drinking custom and the Zen Buddhist sect, the development of vegetarian dishes, the ritualization of samurai practices, the use of flour to produce sōmen and sakubei noodles as luxury gifts and presents, the spread of crop production, and the popularization of flour.

Key words: medieval site, hand mill, tea mill, stone processing, powdered food