Regional Structure of the Yamato Polity:
An Analysis Focusing on Small Mounded Tombs and Settlements

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This article aims to explain the regional structure supporting the Yamato polity and its transition in the Kofun period as the history of social dynamics, including not only political but also population and production dynamics. To this end, in addition to the conventional analysis of tombs built for chiefs, such as keyhole-shaped mounded tombs with a quadrangular or round rear portion (collectively referred to as “keyhole-shaped mound”), this article examines the comprehensive structure of burial practices including small-tomb clusters, the rise and fall of settlements that maintain the tombs, and their mutual relationships.

This study starts with the analysis of keyhole-shaped tombs and small-tomb clusters and their spatial relations with settlements in the southern Okayama Plains. The results show that keyhole-shaped tombs are classified into three categories: small ones included in small-tomb clusters; medium ones located near small-tomb clusters; and large ones located independently from small-tomb clusters. They are likely to have reflected the hierarchy of power, from local leaders up to influential potentates directly connected with the Wa dynasty. Among them, the small tombs of local leaders are considered to have formed the basic unit in the regional community, as indicated by the analysis of the relationships between tombs and settlements.

Such small-tomb-based lineages were developed and maintained across the Okayama Plains in the early and middle phases of the early Kofun period, but many declined and disappeared in the late phase of the early Kofun period and the first half of the middle Kofun period while keyhole-shaped tombs were increasing in size and decreasing in number. This transition coincided with a rapid decline in the number of settlements and dwellings, which implies that potentates connected with the Wa dynasty established direct control over the regional community by filling up the gaps caused by the declining population. Under their dominance, the number of settlements and dwellings was restored in parallel with the revival of small-tomb clusters and small- and medium-sized keyhole-shaped tombs based on the clusters in the second half of the middle Kofun period. It is also highly likely that the restoration of population revitalized the regional community and induced the rise of new local leaders.

In the first half of the late Kofun period, the number of settlements and dwellings decreased again, and many small-tomb-cluster-based lineages became extinct. The second half of the late Kofun period,
however, saw a resurgence in the number of settlements, dwellings, and small-tomb-cluster-based lineages. After this population restoration, the Wa dynasty started to develop the ritsuryō system of the matured state.

These trends of the construction of keyhole-shaped tombs are likely to have been caused by social dynamics resulting from population fluctuations due to environmental changes and other reasons, rather than reflecting the history of political changes as has been believed.

Key words: Settlement archaeology, chiefly mounded tombs, Wa dynasty, keyhole-shaped mounded tombs, Kibi district