The Yeongsan River Basin, Baekje and Wa, from the Perspective of the Kofun

Kim Nakjung

In the southwestern Korean Peninsula, some tombs were built based on the burial practices of Yamato in the fifth and sixth centuries. While recent studies are elucidating the background of these Japanese-style tombs, this article broadly examines the background of Japanese-style tombs built in the southern and western coastal areas of the Korean Peninsula in the early fifth century and keyhole tombs built in the Yeongsan River Basin in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.

Japanese-style tombs built in the southern and western coastal areas of the Korean Peninsula in the early fifth century were characterized by their nearness to the sea and their burial practices informed by those of small and medium-sized tombs in the northern Kyūshū region. These characteristics imply that the occupants of Japanese-style tombs had not assimilated into the local culture and were buried as foreigners. They seem to have been Japanese immigrants who played a substantial role in negotiations between Yamato and Baekje or other kingdoms in the Yeongsan River Basin. Moreover, the diversity in grave goods unearthed from local-style tombs in the southern and western coastal areas indicates the existence of local clans thriving with marine trades. The active engagement of such local clans based in major hubs along trade routes seems to have strengthened diplomatic relations between Yamato and Baekje or other kingdoms in the Yeongsan River Basin.

Keyhole tombs and local-style burial mounds built in the Yeongsan River Basin in the late fifth and early sixth centuries have similarities and differences in their burial practices. Although most previous studies suggested that they had been exclusive or opposed to each other, the fact that all of the clans that built these tumuli participated in a regional network of various trade routes and accepted new burial practices from Yamato and Baekje implies that these two styles of tumuli coexisted without excluding each other. From the perspective of local clans themselves, the selection between keyhole tombs and local-style burial mounds was a mere result of their decisions on what new burial practices to adopt and what relations to build with the central government of Baekje and Japanese immigrants.

In this sense, Japanese-style tombs in the Yeongsan River Basin are principally attributed to chiefs of local clans who had close relationships with Baekje and Yamato. Given that these local clans interacted so actively with Baekje and Yamato and that some of immigrants may have settled in the
basin, it is also worth considering the possibility that some of the chiefs interred in Japanese-style tombs originally came from Baekje or Yamato.

Key words: Yeongsan River Basin, keyhole tomb, Japanese-style tomb, immigrant, Kofun period