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Trade of Sue Stoneware and Formation of Ancient State in Japan

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Description

In Japan, a state-level, society emerged in the latter half of the seventh century, A.D., having adopted the Chinese-style bureaucracy, called the Ritsuryo system. The state grew to be centralized when the Heijo Capital [modern Nara City] was chosen to be the permanent capital of Japan in 710. Not only the political system but also the structure of ceramic production changed at the same time [1]. This was particularly the case in the production of Sue stoneware. The stoneware was fired in a kiln, and it was technology adopted from the Korean peninsula at the end of the fourth century, A.D. Until the sixth century, intensive production took place at the Suemura kilns, under the control of the central polity of Yamato, and their products were transported to various areas in Japan. Local copies of the Suemura products were produced at other areas, but the scale of production was very small [2,3].

In the seventh century, however, the local productions of Sue stoneware became more active in various regions of Japan, and their distribution became local as well [4,5]. On the contrary, Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region of the Pacific coast of central Japan, were transported not only to the Heijo Capital, but also to eastern Japan [6-8]. This widespread distribution of Sue stoneware the produced in the Tokai region is a characteristic phenomenon of the seventh century. The author believes that, by analyzing the spatial distribution of the Tokai Sue stoneware, we can approach some aspects of the ancient Japanese society.

In the Tokai region, there are four major kilns, namely from north to south, Minosue kilns in the southern Gifu Prefecture, Bihoku kilns and Sanage kilns in the central Aichi prefecture, Kosai kilns in the western Shizuoka prefecture. While the Minosue, Bihoku, and Sanage kilns are located somewhat inland, the Kosai kilns are located close to the Pacific Ocean. Although their productions began on a small scale from the latter half of the fifth century to the beginning of the sixth century, the production grew to be a large scale in the seventh century. Japanese archaeologists have pointed out that this increase in the scale of production was a result of reinforcement by the state [6,9]. After that, the number of kilns decreased in the latter half of the eighth century.

The Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region are distinguished from those produced in other regions by the choice of very fine raw material clay, scrupulous care paid to shaping or finishing surface, and characteristic shapes such as flask bottle and long neck bottle. It is, however, difficult to differentiate between those fired at Sanage and those fired at Bihoku from the standpoint of raw material clay and vessel morphologies. Consequently, in this paper, the author treats these two categories as one group.

Spatial distribution of the Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region changed from the seventh to eighth centuries. It is chronologically divided into three phases: phase 1: the early to middle seventh century; phase 2: the late seventh to early eighth centuries; phase 3: the middle and eighth century. In phase 1, large number of bottles were deposited in graves, and bowls were few. Sue stoneware fired at Sanage and Bihoku were often found in inland areas such as the old provinces of Mino and Shinano [modern Gifu and Nagano Prefectures], and the author considers that these were transported by mountain paths and rivers [10]. A pattern of the spatial distribution of Sue stoneware fired at Minosue is almost the same as Sanage and Bihoku, but quantities were few. On the contrary, the Sue stoneware fired at Kosai were found in large quantities in the coastal regions of the Pacific, such as the old provinces of Sagami, Kazusa and Shimousa [modern Kanagawa and Chiba Prefectures]. Because the Kosai kilns maintained easy access to the Pacific Ocean, a Japanese archaeologist assumes that these were carried by boats [6]. Because the Kosai wares are found in graves of presumably local elites, the possibility exists that the Kosai wares were distributed by the local elites. At the same time in the Kazusa province [southern Chiba Prefecture], the Kosai wares are found in areas where elite graves were absent, but middle- and low-ranking graves were dominant. This suggests to the author that low or middle-ranking elites were involved in trade as middlemen [11].

In phase 2, the Sue stoneware production in the Tokai region increased rapidly. The Tokai wares are found not only at the sites of palaces and capitals but also in graves in local regions

and particularly at the sites of local governmental compounds. For example, the Sanage and Bihoku wares comprise half of the assemblage of Sue stoneware table wares at the site of Asuka-Kiyomihara Palace, occupied by Emperor Tenmu from 672 to 694 [12]. Because the Sanage and Bihoku wares decreased in the Mino and Shinano provinces, it is likely that potters of Sanage and Bihoku switched their main customers to the palaces and capitals [10]. As to the Minosue kilns, the Sue stoneware stamped as "美濃国 [Mino-koku, meaning Mino province]" were produced. Because that inscribed Sue stoneware are found in the Heijo Palace, one of Japanese archaeologists who participated in excavations of the Heijo Palace suspects that the Minosue wares were brought to the capital as tribute [7]. In contrast, Sue stoneware fired at Kosai are largely found at the sites of local government offices as well as in graves. A possible background to these phenomena is that, as the state bureaucracy and the local administrative organization developed, larger numbers of bureaucrats and officials came to be hired, which resulted in higher demand for Sue stoneware [8,12].

It is also noteworthy that, while Sue stoneware bowls and bottles fired at Kosai are found in the graves and at local government offices in Sagami, Shimosa, and Kazusa provinces, flask shaped bottles and long neck bottles fired at Kosai are mainly found in the graves in Mutsu province other northeastern regions which were not governed by state. This leads the author to two hypotheses: 1] a special value came to be attached to flask shaped bottles and long neck bottles in the northeastern frontier regions; and 2] a trade system independent from the centralized state was in operation in these frontier regions [11].

In phase 3, the Sue stoneware production decreased at the Tokai region, and the spatial distribution was no longer widespread. These were only supplied for neighboring areas. Although long neck bottles fired at Sanage and Bihoku are still found in the Heijo Capital, the quantities are much smaller than in phase 2. The quantities found in other areas are also slight. At Minosue, Sue stoneware inscribed with "府 [fu, meaning local administrative facilities]" or "寺 [tera, meaning a temple]" were produced instead of those stamped as "美濃国" in phase 2 [13]. Similarly, the Sue stoneware fired at Kosai were rarely found in the remote areas in this phase. The author speculates that, as the production systems of Sue stoneware in the capital and in eastern Japan further developed in the middle eighth century and after, long-distance circulation of the Tokai Sue stoneware became no longer necessary.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the distribution of the Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region from the seventh to eighth centuries, the author argues for the following two points: First, from the late seventh to early eighth centuries the Sue stoneware production could not cope with the high demand resulting from the rapid increase in the number of bureaucrats and officials. As a result, Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region were circulated in the capital and eastern Japan. Second, the distribution of Sue stoneware fired at Kosai were transported to various regions of eastern Japan through the hands of local chiefs and low- or middle-ranking elites. Furthermore, these were distributed to peripheral regions of northeastern Japan by independent, local trade systems. This indicates that the central polity did not control over the entire distribution systems in the process of state formation, and there was some room for local chiefs to act independently from the center. Previously, Ishimoda Sho [1912-1986], a prominent ancient Japanese historian, pointed out that local chiefs remained to play an important role even after the state became centralized [14]. The author's research into distribution of Sue stoneware produced in the Tokai region has made considerable contribution to the important point raised by Ishimoda.

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