Keyhole Tombs and Political Structure in Fifth-century Japan

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This paper approaches the political structure of the central polity and its relationship with local polities in fifth-century Japan from the perspective of keyhole-shaped tombs. By the fifth century, the political structure of the central polity grew to be complex to the extent that it maintained a rudimentary form of bureaucracy, which also seems to be reflected in mortuary patterns, most notably the presence of baicho. Besides the presence of baicho and the giant size of the keyhole-shaped tombs, the central polity located in Kawachi/Yamato distinguished itself from other local polities by various means, such as the use of special stone coffins and the monopoly of iron armor. However, the power of the paramount chiefs in the central polity was not strong enough, and low-ranking elites could remain somewhat autonomous. While it seems that bureaucrats served a paramount chief in the central polity, the bureaucracy at that time was rudimentary and not specialized in function.

I. Changes that took place from the fourth to fifth centuries

A. Locations of the largest keyhole tombs shifted to southern Kawachi/northern Izumi (present Osaka Prefecture) from Yamato (present Nara)

1. The shift was merely a reflection of a change in burial place, and the central polity remained in Yamato throughout the fifth century (Mizuno Masayoshi, Kondo Yoshiro, etc.)

2. The shift was a result of a change in the lineages of the paramount chiefs from Yamato to those of southern Kawachi/northern Izumi (this change also correlated to a change in the symbol of authority, from bronze mirrors to iron armor) (Tanaka Shinsaku, Fujita Kazutaka, etc)

3. The central polity was a confederacy of different elite lineages located in Yamato, Kawachi, Izumi, and other regions of Kinai, which took turns occupying the position of a paramount chief. The central polity was always located in Yamato, because rituals continued taking place on the Miwa Hill of Yamato throughout the fifth century (Shiraishi Taichiro)
B. Other changes
1. Increase in the size of the largest keyhole tombs from 300-meter class to 400-meter class
2. Material symbol of authority changed from bronze mirrors to iron armor
3. Appearance of “satellite tombs” (baicho 陪冢), surrounding a giant keyhole tombs
4. Nagamochi-type 長持 sarcophagus adopted as coffin of very high-ranking elites
5. Technology of stoneware production introduced from the southern Korean peninsula at the beginning of the fifth century
6. Beads production concentrated in Yamato (formerly based in Hokuriku and San’in)

C. Aspects that remained the same
1. A keyhole tomb remained the burial place of a paramount chief
2. Pit style burial chambers remained in use for paramount chiefs
3. Haji 士師 earthenware pottery continued in use, even after the introduction of the sue 須恵 stoneware pottery

II. Aspects of the central polity
A. Elite social hierarchy as evidenced by stone coffins
1. Nagamochi-type sarcophagus was the symbol of the paramount authority
2. Because stone quarried in Harima was preferred, local elites in Harima were allowed to use nagamochi-type sarcophagi
3. Split-log and boat-shaped stone coffins adopted by local elites in regions rich in stones for coffins
4. Cist coffins (consisting of pairs of stone slabs) were used in small tombs

B. Aspects of the central polity
1. The central polity was itself a confederacy in nature
2. Furuichi 古市 (southern Kawachi) and Mozu 百舌鳥 (northern Izumi) were by far the most dominant politics
3. While the largest keyhole tombs were located in Furuichi and Mozu (Osaka region), dominant polities still remained in the northwestern and southwestern Yamato basin (historically known as the home of the Katsuragi clan) throughout the fifth century

C. Interpreting political structure based on the Furuichi and Mozu tomb-mound groups
1. Each generation of the leaders of the Furuichi and Mozu polities alternately occupied the position of a paramount chief
2. Multiple elite lineages eligible for a paramount chieftainship
3. Keyhole tombs of various sizes concurrently existed, suggesting a hierarchy within the elite class (tombs of more than 250m, and those of 150m)
4. Satellite tombs near giant keyhole tombs suggest the status of direct vassals or bureaucrats serving the paramount chief
5. A paramount chief was served not only by his/her direct vassals but also by lower ranking elites

III. Archaeological Evidence for a Political Structure

A. Nature of archaeological data
   1. Excavation of the largest keyhole tombs designated as “imperial mausolea” is still strictly prohibited
   2. Areas adjacent to the imperial mausolea (outside the designated areas) can be excavated→it may be possible to determine relative dates based on haniwa
   3. “Satellite tombs” of the imperial mausolea are being excavated→giving insight into the burial contents of imperial mausolea
   4. Keyhole tombs of the 150m class have been excavated, and some destroyed (both Furuichi and Mozu tomb groups are located in heavily urbanized Osaka)

B. Temporal changes in tombs in Furuichi
   1. Early: Tsudo-Shiroyama 津堂城山 keyhole tomb (208m) at the end of the fourth century; nagamochi-type sarcophagus excavated
   2. First quarter of the fifth century—paramount chiefly tombs: Princess Nakatsu’s 仲津媛 Mausoleum (286m), Furuichi-Hakayama 古市墓山 (224m; nagamochi-type sarcophagus)
   3. Satellite tombs for Furuichi-Hakayama: Nishi-Hakayama 西墓山, where large quantities of iron arrowheads and other weapons were excavated; Nonaka 野中, where eleven sets of iron armor were excavated
   4. First quarter of the fifth century—tombs of intermediate ranking chiefs: Nonaka-Miyayama 野中宮山 (154m), Komuroyama 古室山 (150m), Ootori-zuka 大鳥塚 (109m)
   5. Second quarter of the fifth century (paramount chiefs): Emperor Ojin’s 応神 Mausoleum (420m), Emperor Ingyo’s 允恭 Mausoleum (227m), and Prince Yamato Takeru’s Mausoleum 白鳥陵 (188m)
   6. Satellite tombs for Emperor Ojin’s Mausoleum: Ariyama アリ山 tomb, where large quantities of iron weapons were discovered; Konda-Maruyama 琴田丸山 tomb, where a gilt bronze pommel and cantle of a saddle were discovered (now denoted national treasures)
7. Second quarter of the fifth century—tombs of intermediate ranking elites: excavation of a pit-style burial chamber at Kurohimeyama 黒姫山 keyhole tomb (144m), which yielded 24 rather unmatching sets of iron armor.

8. Seems that intermediate ranking elites became more powerful in the second quarter of the fifth century.

9. Emperor Chuai’s 仲哀 Mausoleum (238m) from the third quarter of the fifth century marks the end of the dominance of the Furuichi polity.

C. Changes in tombs in the Mozu group over time

1. Beginning: Chino’oka 乳の岡 keyhole tomb (155m) at the end of the fourth century, with a nagamochi-type sarcophagus discovered therein.

2. First quarter of the fifth century—paramount chiefs: Emperor Richu’s 履中 Mausoleum (365m).

3. Satellite tomb of Emperor Richu’s Mausoleum: 七覧 tomb, where 7 iron helmets, 6 iron cuirasses, 130 iron swords, more than 100 iron arrowheads, a gilt-bronze belt buckle, and a very early type of stirrup were excavated.

4. First quarter of the fifth century—tombs of intermediate ranking chiefs: Mozu-Otsukayama 百舌鳥大塚山 (159m, with eight clay coffins; also one iron cuirass in Coffin No. 1, five cuirasses and other parts of armor in coffin No. 2).

5. Second quarter of the fifth century—paramount chiefs: Haji-Nisanai 上師尼サンザイ (288m, accompanied by satellite tombs), Gobyoyama 御廼山 (186m, accompanied by satellite tombs, including Katomboyama カトンボ山, Emperor Hanzei’s 反正 Mausoleum (148m), Itasuke イタスケ (146m).

6. Second quarter of the fifth century: Emperor Nintoku’s 仁徳 Mausoleum (486m), including satellite tombs and with nagamochi-type sarcophagi in the frontal mound, as well as a gilt-bronze riveted cuirass and a gilt-bronze helmet with a visor.

D. Introduction of corridor-style burial chambers for low-ranking elites

1. Traditional pit-style burial chambers remained in use in tombs of paramount chiefs.

2. Corridor-style burial chamber originated on the Korean peninsula, and was first introduced to northern Kyushu at the beginning of the fifth century.

3. In the Kinai, probably early burials of low ranking elites involved in diplomatic activities with the Korean peninsula.

4. In Kinai, goods deposited with the dead suggest that they were not burials of Korean immigrants.
5. Intermediate- and low-ranking elites seem to have remained relatively autonomous?
6. Example in Furuichi group: Fujinomori 藤の森 tomb, circular mound 24m in diameter, middle fifth century, western neighborhood of Ojin’s Mausoleum
7. Example in Mozu group: Tozuka 塔塚, a square mound of 30m per side, more or less square floor plan, very distinct from that of Fujinomori (trial and error design?)
8. Both Fujinomori and Tozuka burial chambers are characterized by corbelling technique— influence of the Kyushu type?
9. Example of late fifth century in Furuichi group: Takaidayama 高井田山 Tomb in Kashiwara City

E. Possibility of rudimentary bureaucracy as interpreted /evidenced by satellite tombs
1. Approach from historical records: section on Japan in the Chinese official Liu Sung dynastic history 宋書 mentions the title of “general” 将軍
2. The inscription on an iron sword discovered at the Sakitama-Inariyama Tomb mentions the title “Chief of the Swordsmen” 武卒人首
3. Satellite tombs interpreted as burials of bureaucrats (西川宏 Nishikawa Hiroshi 1961; hypothesis further developed by 藤田和尊 Fujita Kazutaka 2002)
4. Nonaka tomb as good evidence for an early bureaucracy: the discovery of 11 sets of iron armor and 373 iron arrowheads there suggests that whoever was buried in the tomb was a warrior or someone in charge of military administration. This is better evidence, qualitatively and quantitatively, than in the case of Otsukayama of the Mozu tomb group, a 150m-class keyhole tomb. Furthermore, the discovery of 81 jasper model of daggers for ritual purposes at Nonaka indicates that the interred also had a priestly role
5. Katomboyama カトンボ山 tomb in the Mozu group: it is a satellite tomb for Gobyoyama, and finds there included 360 jasper daggers, 725 jasper beads, two bronze mirrors, all suggesting management of rituals (i.e. a priestly function), while 20 functional iron arrowheads suggest a military role as well.
6. Given the above, we posit that bureaucrats were not yet fully specialized

IV. Summary and Conclusion
i. Paramount chiefs of the mid-fifth century were more powerful than those of the fourth century
ii. Lower class elites remained somewhat autonomous
iii. Paramount chiefs were probably assisted by bureaucrats specializing in particular roles
iv. But bureaucrats were not yet fully specialized