

Visiting National Heritage — Retrospecting History by Trip to Kyushu

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Introduction

Kyushu Island, the southern part of the Japanese archipelago, is well known for its hot springs, beautiful scenery, and fine local cuisine — all of which are good resources for tourism. Above all, it is one of the best places to learn about the history of Japan, as it is one of the most advanced regions of the country with the longest traceable history. You can visit a number of ruins from prehistoric times such as the Jomon Period (from about 10,000 years ago until the 4th century BC) and the Yayoi Period (from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD), which is before the Japanese imperial family succeeded in achieving rule over the nation in the 5th century.

Ruins in Kyushu also tell of the beginning of our relations with our neighbors through such evidence as the similarity of soldiers' graves, the architecture of housing, and the products of industry with those of ruins in China or Korea, the most advanced nations in Asia during those periods. Learning the history of relations between nations is an important step in advancing foreign policy to achieve mutual understanding, since I believe that foreign policy consists of efforts to build blocks on the foundation of past relations step by step.

Two ruins in Kyushu that I visited in August this year, Hashimuregawa and Yoshinogari, speak clearly of the beginnings of relations between Japan and its two main neighbors.

Photo: Author



The ancient village of Yoshinogari — a glimpse of Japan's remote past

Ruins of Hashimuregawa

The Hashimuregawa Ruins are located in the city of Ibusuki in Kagoshima Prefecture at the southern tip of Kyushu, an area well known for its hot springs with their source in Mt. Kaimon, once an active volcano. This 1,000-meter mountain, resembling Mt. Fuji in its beautiful shape, though much lower, has also made an important contribution to the advancement of Japanese archaeology.

In 1915, Moritake Nishimuta, a pupil at Shibushi Junior High School in Ibusuki, found two fragments of ancient earthenware, one with a pattern of rope markings and the other much simpler, in an area covered with volcanic ash on his way to school. After the fragments were studied by archaeological experts, a research team of archaeologists discovered the ruins there containing these two different styles of earthenware. Dr. Kosaku Hamada, the leader of the team, confirmed that the simpler earthenware, known as Yayoi ware, came from the upper layer of the earth above the layer of volcanic ash, while the other one with the rope-marking pattern, Jomon ware, known as "Ainu earthenware", came from the lower layer beneath the volcanic ash.

Until that time, 1918 or 1919, it was generally believed by Japanese archaeologists that these two different kinds of earthenware were produced at the same time, since two different cultures or races co-existed during the same period. But thanks to the volcanic ash having made a clear distinction between the two layers of earth where the earthenware was found, it was proved that each belonged to a different age. This was how for the first time in Japanese history it was proved that the Jomon Period preceded the Yayoi Period. This volcanic ash layer was created by the eruptions of Mt. Kaimon, the first one around 4,000 years ago, the second around 2,000 years ago, the third in 675 and the final one in 874. The last one was the biggest and we can learn about it from one of the oldest Japanese history books titled *Nihon Sandai Jitsuroku* (The True History of Three Reigns of Japan), edited by Michizane Sugawara, Shihei Fujiwara and others at the beginning of the 10th century. The entire village of Hashimuregawa was buried under volcanic ash, just as Pompeii in Italy was completely buried under ash and pumice by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD.

The remains of human bones discovered in the Hashimuregawa Ruins also tell us that men active during the Jomon Period were very different from those active during the Yayoi Period. The human body reconstructed from the remains of bones during the Jomon Period is

150 cm tall and bending forward, while the one for the Yayoi Period is around 160 cm tall and seems to be walking upright. Their faces also seem to be different: the former has a chiseled face and the latter has a flat one. Thus, different people created these two civilizations. Judging only by appearances, the former resembles Southeast Asians today and the latter resembles Chinese and Koreans in Northeast Asia.

Can we then assume that the Hashimuregawa Ruins show us an intersection between Southeast Asian civilization and Northeast Asian civilization between these periods?

Ruins of Yoshinogari

The Yoshinogari Ruins are located in the Yoshinogari Valley about 40 minutes by car from Saga Airport in Saga Prefecture, in the northern part of Kyushu. They were discovered during the process of the prefectural government's large-scale industrialization project that saw the spread of large manufacturing plants in the 1980s. On Feb. 22, 1989, a research team of archaeologists discovered the remains of a large village, which in 1991 the government nominated as a special historic spot. It was decided the following year to develop a national historic park to preserve these ruins. At that time, there were views in academia that these remains could date from the Yamataikoku, a historical Japanese state thought to have existed in the 3rd century AD in the late Yayoi Period and ruled by Queen Himiko, who was referred to in an ancient Chinese history book titled *Gishi Wajin den* (Records of Wa People in the Book of Wei) written by Chen Shou in the 3rd century. There were even some views that the Japanese imperial family could originally be from this kingdom in Kyushu since the remains are so large, around 50 hectares, and were presumably protected by many soldiers. Although that view is not regarded as correct today, these remains are anyway evidence of an independent state existing in Japan at that time.

These ruins believed to be from the Yayoi Period show that the whole village was ruled by a king, as we can see a royal palace separated from the village and the people's residential area. There are also some barracks for soldiers and scaffolds for watch-keeping guards, as well as moats surrounding the village and the palace. This means the Yayoi Period in Japan was not a peaceful time but an age of battles and conflict among villages and states. The beginnings of agriculture that characterized the Yayoi Period in Japan probably created income inequalities and the wealthy villages would have needed to protect their own wealth against possible invasion by people from other villages who were suffering from poor crops or wanted to expand their territory. The *Gishi Wajin den* is correct in saying "then the country of Japan was divided into so many states and they were always fighting against each other."

There is also much evidence of the deep cultural influence of the Korean Peninsula and China. The remains of carbonized rice crops indicate the practice of rice farming, while the existence of silk clothing proved by remains of silk in the coffin of a seemingly wealthy man, as well as funerary urns and other kinds of iron ware and bronze ware, suggest the close relations between the Yoshinogari village and Korea and China. Silk and funerary urns were commonly used in those



Photo: Author

The shape of stone coffins — evidence of the cultural influence of China and Korea

countries at that time. There are also tombs in the ruins very similar to ones in the Korean Peninsula during the same period. The shape of a tomb can speak eloquently of history. After the Japanese imperial family succeeded in unifying Japan as a nation in the 5th century, the shape of a tomb for rulers became standardized, while before that in the Yayoi Period there were various tomb shapes, many of which had a striking resemblance to tombs in Korea and China. There must have been a mass migration from China and Korea during the Yayoi Period that brought such cultural products and customs to Kyushu.

You can guess the possibility of such a mass of immigration from those two nations to Japan during this period from the history of China and Korea as well. This period corresponds to a few changes among the ruling dynasties in China, such as from the Qin Dynasty to the Former Han Dynasty in the 3rd century BC, and the change from the Former Han Dynasty to the Xin Dynasty, as well as the change from the Xin Dynasty to the Later Han Dynasty in the 1st century AD. It is easy to imagine a mass of people defeated by a new dynasty leaving China as political refugees and moving to Japan on the occasion of each change of power, coming through the Korean Peninsula where each Chinese Dynasty had been strengthening foreign relations with Korean kingdoms during these periods.

Kyushu — Crossroads of Ancient Civilizations

It is hard to discover the truth during the prehistoric age, since very few verbal records were preserved. In the case of the Yayoi Period in Japan, the *Gishi Wajin den* is the only written record. We can only guess and imagine what could have happened from archaeological remains. But it would seem most likely, judging from the remains of these two ruins, that Kyushu Island used to be a cultural crossroads among different Asian civilizations. This is surely an important point to remember when thinking about the future of these three countries' foreign relations.

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