

Burials of kings or of tribal leaders? Interpreting the evidence from monumental tombs in southern Japan

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In recent decades, Japanese archaeologists have carried out a great many new excavations and have added immensely to knowledge of Japan's prehistoric and historic past, but interpretation of this vast body of evidence has aroused controversy. Here the Institute's newly appointed lecturer in Japanese archaeology examines the much debated question of how hierarchical societies developed in Japan between 200 BC and AD 300.

The Yayoi period (c. 400 BC to AD 250/300) is widely regarded as a unique period in Japanese history. It saw the beginning of systematic paddy-field (wet-rice) agriculture, which was introduced from the Korean peninsula and ignited a process of increasing social stratification in larger, more integrated and hierarchical social units.

From the vantage point of the present, people often seek to idealize the past and to create imaginary continuities between

then and now. In the case of the Yayoi period, the Japanese often try to recognize in it the roots of their modern industrial nation. During the Yayoi, various technological ideas and material items were imported from the Korean peninsula. For example, bronze weapons and other implements, and the technology of bronze making, were initially introduced from there. However, these innovations were rapidly adopted and modified to fit local socio-cultural, economic and political conditions. Bronze weapons, such as daggers and spearheads, quickly lost their original functions and became ritual items. A perception widely shared among the general public in Japan is that, since the end of the Second World War, Japanese industry has been successful in importing ideas from abroad, refining them and exporting them back. Those Japanese who identify with the image of modern Japan as a successful industrial nation readily see parallels between themselves and the Yayoi people, despite the fact that there is no meaningful historical continuity between that period and the present.

Sometimes this tendency to use the past in Japan to reinforce present-day perceptions takes a different direction, by depicting Yayoi society as having been more advanced and sophisticated than the archaeological evidence indicates. It is widely accepted that the hunter-gatherer society of the preceding Jomon period (c. 10 000 to 400 BC) was organized upon communal principles, with minimal social differentiation. However, it is often argued that, once the Yayoi period began, social stratification increased very rapidly, and that by the end of the Early Yayoi phase, around 200 BC, king-like figures had already emerged. In support of this claim, reference is often made to the dead who were buried in pottery-jar coffins, with bronze items and other grave goods, in monumental tombs in northern Kyushu (Fig. 1).

A serious problem with this interpretation is that the nature of these king-like individuals has not been examined closely enough. Thus, questions such as whether their status was achieved personally or ascribed to them, and whether they

formed dynastic lines of inheritance, have not been fully investigated. These questions need rigorous investigation in terms of general anthropological theory in order to help us understand Yayoi social organization and compare it with other early agrarian societies elsewhere in the world. However, many Japanese archaeologists are reluctant to introduce comparative anthropological concepts and data into their interpretations of the archaeological evidence. This is partly the result of a deep-rooted Japanese tradition of defining archaeology as a subdiscipline of history.

With the above reservation in mind, we can now attempt to reconstruct the social organization of the Yayoi period from the evidence of mortuary archaeology, specifically from my research on the jar-burial cemeteries of northern Kyushu.

Burials of kings?

Jar coffins are a characteristic feature of the Yayoi culture of northern Kyushu. Their style changes through time and it is possible to classify them into temporal types and establish a fine-grained typo-chronology (Fig. 2). By using this method we can accurately reconstruct the processes by which individual jar-burial cemeteries were formed and trace changes in their spatial organization (Fig. 3). Burial jars also protect from decay the skeletal remains they contain, and DNA samples have been successfully extracted from them.¹ Jar-burial cemeteries provide the archaeologist with invaluable information for the investigation of Yayoi social structure and its transformation.

The deposition of bronze weapons in cemeteries began about 200 BC, at the end of the Early Yayoi phase. Jar burials with bronze weapons and other grave goods, such as jade beads and necklaces made of glass and stone beads, often form rectangular cemeteries (here referred to as compound cemeteries), some of which are covered by an earthen mound.

The most famous example of a compound cemetery is the one at the site of Yoshinogari (Figs 1, 4). The mound was used as a fort during the medieval period and was recently heavily ploughed, but its original size can be reconstructed. It measured approximately 40m by 60m. Fourteen jar burials have been excavated so far, eight of which contained grave goods. Jar burial SJ1006, situated at the centre of the rectangular mound, is the oldest burial in the cemetery. It contained a hilted bronze dagger and an ornament consisting of several glass beads. Each of the other seven burials contained a bronze dagger (Figs 5, 6). All the skeletons whose sex could be determined (of those buried with bronze weapons in northern Kyushu during the Middle Yayoi phase) have been found to be male,² which means that at least eight out of fourteen individuals buried at the Yoshinogari cemetery were male.

The discovery of the Yoshinogari site in



Figure 1 Northern Kyushu, showing the location of three cemeteries of the early Middle Yayoi phase mentioned in the text. (1) Yoshinogari, (2) Kuriyama, (3) Kuma-Nishioda.

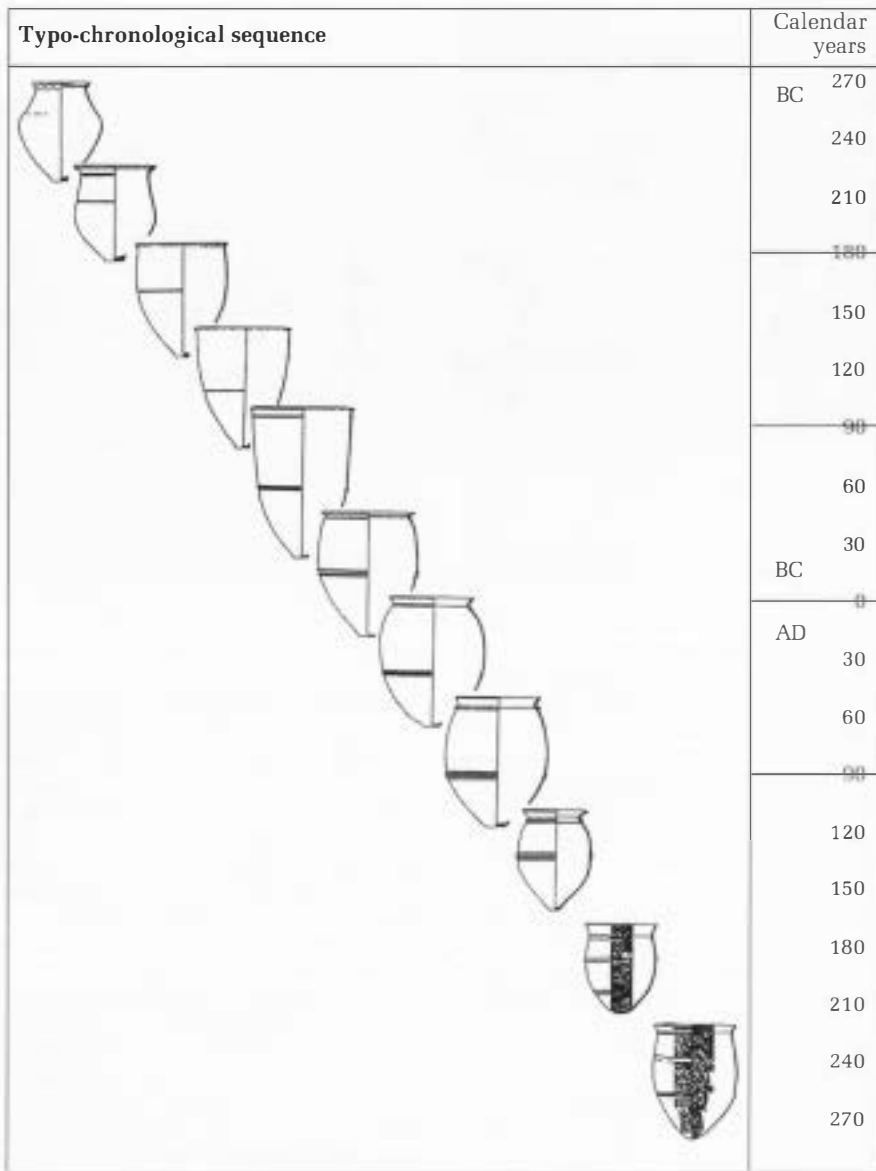


Figure 2 *Typo-chronology of burial jars. The calendric dates given are based on a combination of evidence from Chinese documents and dateable artefacts of Chinese origin found in the jars.*

1989 evoked tremendous excitement among archaeologists and the general public. It was initially excavated in a rescue context ahead of industrial development, and an unprecedented extent of it was examined. As a result, the whole picture of a central place of Yayoi settlement was revealed, for the first time in the history of Japanese archaeology. The site was enclosed by a deep ditch and was occupied throughout the Yayoi period. Evidence of the production of bronze and iron implements and of many storage facilities was discovered; activities characteristic of central places in pre-urban settlement patterns. However, the popular appeal of the site derived from the fact that some features, such as a cluster of raised-floor buildings inferred to have been granaries, and unique structures inferred to have been watchtowers at the corners of the enclosure ditches, conformed to the description of the residence of a high chief called Queen Himiko, who is described in the Chinese dynastic chronicle known as *Weizhi*,³ compiled in the third century AD, as having extended her authority at that time over the western half of the Japanese archipelago.

We must assume that the references to the status of Queen Himiko and the nature

Figure 3 *Stages in the formation of the compound cemetery at Kuriyama between approximately 120 BC and 30 BC, reconstructed from the typo-chronology of burial jars. (A) stage 1, starting about 120 BC, (B) stage 2, (C) stage 3, ending about 30 BC.*





Figure 4 The compound cemetery at Yoshinogari under excavation in 1989. The largest burial pit (the supposed burial place of the “king” of a regional unit) can be seen at the centre of the mound.

of her authority reflect the Chinese origin of the chronicle. Long before the third century AD, China had developed a sophisticated system of bureaucratic government, and the emissaries who were sent by the Chinese emperor to bring his offerings to the queen, and the author–editor of the chronicle, would have interpreted what they saw and heard in terms of the state organization of the Wei dynasty. Therefore, the status and authority of Queen Himiko should be carefully examined from archaeological and anthropological points of view rather than by reference only to the descriptions in the chronicle. This cannot be done in this short article, but such questions as whether she ruled as chief of an early state or chiefdom, or of a

confederacy of chiefdoms, need to be investigated.

As already mentioned, the compound jar-burial cemetery of Yoshinogari was in use by about 200–100 BC, considerably earlier than the time of Queen Himiko. However, the conformity between the archaeological features of the site and the description in the Weizhi chronicle has led to a situation in which the males who were buried at the cemetery can apparently be described without hesitation as kings. Archaeologists are aware that the term “king” has anthropological as well as historical connotations, but they nevertheless allow it to be used to give visitors to the site (now designated the first national archaeological park in Japan) a readily

understood image of the dead who were buried there. However, as already suggested, archaeologists themselves have not managed to understand fully the nature and status of those who were buried at the cemetery. Thus, a misleading picture of the “cemetery of the kings” has come to be widely accepted by archaeologists without it being subjected to scholarly scrutiny.

Investigation and interpretation of the compound cemeteries

Since 1994 I have been studying mortuary practices and their social implications in the Yayoi period by reconstructing how the jar-burial cemeteries of the northern Kyushu region were formed. I have studied several compound cemeteries, such as the one at Yoshinogari, by examining the typo-chronological position of individual jars. The study has revealed two shared characteristics that are particularly significant:

- Most of the compound cemeteries are attached to the core sites of single flood-plain-scale settlement systems.
- The people buried in the compound cemeteries were often interred with grave goods such as bronze daggers, whereas grave goods are extremely rare in ordinary cemeteries associated with more peripheral settlements.

This suggests that those who were buried in the compound cemeteries were leaders of some sort. The fact that both the size of the pit of the central grave (e.g. burial SJ1006 at Yoshinogari) and the grave goods deposited in it are usually the most impressive in a given cemetery might suggest that the person buried at the centre was the chief of a regional community and that those buried in the peripheral positions were either subchiefs or members of the chief’s family. If they were family members, a stratified social organization would be implied.

However, the following characteristics refute this interpretation:

- Most of those buried in the compound cemeteries were male. As already mentioned, eight out of fourteen burials at Yoshinogari have been shown to be of males, and two well preserved skeletons from the compound cemetery of Kuriyama (Fig. 1) are also male. From these, together with other examples, it can be inferred that almost all the dead from the compound cemeteries whose sex can be determined are male.
- Because the compound cemeteries were in use over long periods of time (i.e. they were multi-phase cemeteries), they would each have to contain a succession of chiefly burials if they were the mortuary allotments of successive chiefs and subchiefs. However, the centres of the cemeteries were occupied by only one or two burials.
- Because without exception only one compound cemetery is attached to each



Figure 5 Bronze daggers from the cemetery at Yoshinogari. The longest dagger measures approximately 45 cm from end to end.

core settlement, it is unlikely that the successive chiefs of a regional unit constructed a series of compound cemeteries at the core settlement; and this and the previous point together suggest that those who were buried in the cemeteries are unlikely to have been the chief and the subchiefs or the chief and his family members.

- Finally, and most importantly, those who were buried in the compound cemeteries are likely to have been from different kin groups. This is suggested by the discovery that over 15 sequence types of mitochondrial (female-line) DNA are represented among the dead buried in the large linear cemetery and the compound cemetery of Kuma-Nishioda (Fig. 1).¹

The above points suggest that those who were buried in the compound cemeteries were chosen from among several kin groups who constituted a single regional unit of social integration at the floodplain scale. If that were the case, the compound cemeteries would have been monumental resting places for chosen individuals.

This interpretation leads to the question of by what criteria those male individuals were chosen. It is significant that the time when the compound cemeteries were formed (i.e. from the end of the Early Yayoi phase through the early Middle Yayoi, c. 200–100 BC) was the period that witnessed the establishment of single floodplain-scale settlement systems and an increase of intercommunal conflict. The former is evident in the emergence of large core settlements encircled by smaller satellite settlements on the floodplains of northern Kyushu, and the latter can be inferred from

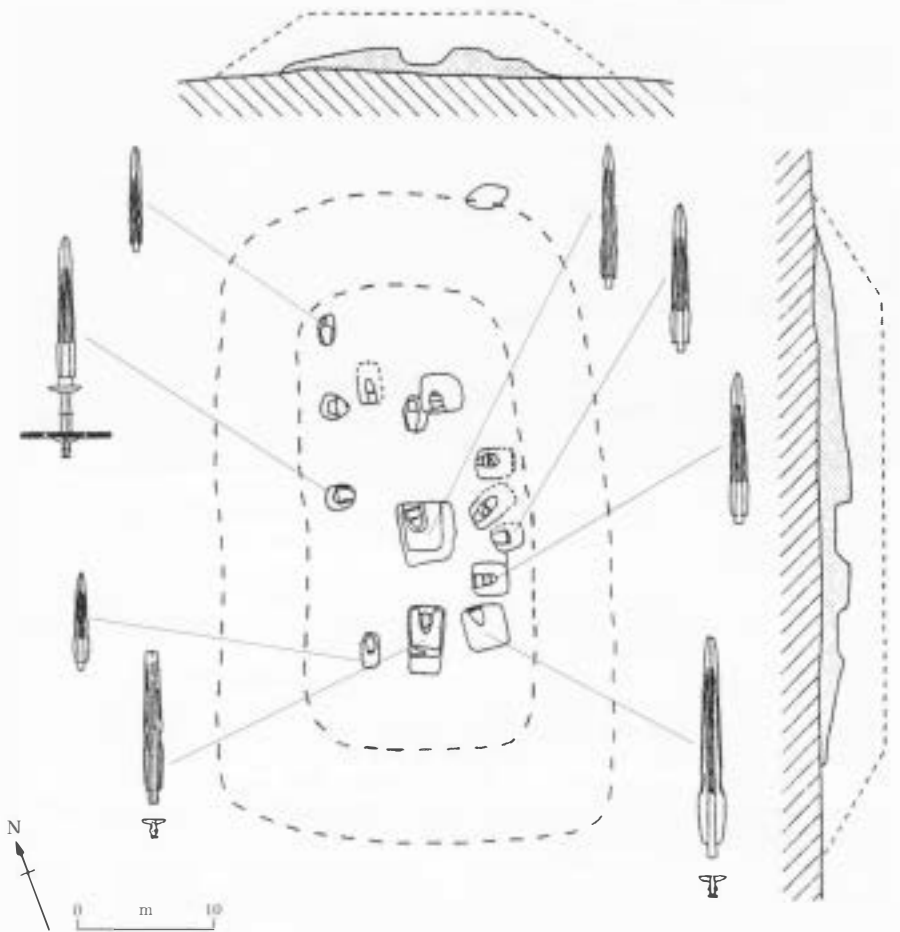


Figure 6 Plan of the cemetery at Yoshinogari showing the location of successive jar burials and the eight bronze daggers found in them (see Fig. 5). The dashed lines indicate the original areal extent and height of the mound (see Fig. 4).

a dramatic increase in the number of skeletons that bear traces of wounds – in many cases fatal – inflicted in combat.

Increasing population pressure following the introduction of systematic rice agriculture appears to have reached a threshold at the end of the Early Yayoi and the beginning of the early Middle Yayoi phases, when many small-scale settlements were founded, in previously uncultivated terrain, from the core settlements. This would have made difficult the maintenance of intracommunal ties, particularly between the core settlements and satellites newly split from them; and would also have raised intercommunal tension, particularly between settlements founded from different core settlements, over the ownership of land favourable for new paddy fields. At this time too, there is evidence for a development of the distribution networks of tools, such as stone axes and stone sickles, needed for paddy-field cultivation.

These developments are likely to have resulted in the emergence of communal leaders who mediated intra- and intercommunal relations, including conflicts, by organizing communal gatherings, by negotiating with the leaders of other communal units, and by leading their community in combat. Such leaders would have needed outstanding physical and mental abilities.

This image of male leaders who, we infer, were buried in the compound cemeteries, resembles the anthropological concept of the “big man”, a dominant figure, an impressive orator on intra- and intercommunal occasions, and physically strong enough to lead his people in combat. Big men in contemporary tribal societies achieve their social position by tirelessly mediating communal relations, negotiating over various types of exchange, and integrating communal members. By doing so they embody the cohesion and unity of their community.

It is not unreasonable to compare the chosen males who were buried in the compound cemeteries of core settlements with big men who represented the communal interests of the regional community. When community members gathered at a core settlement, they would have seen the mound in which their ancestral heroes were buried, and its monumental appearance would have reminded them of stories of the deeds of the ancestors and of the importance of communal unity.

Conclusion

The above interpretation of the compound cemeteries suggests that there was very little social stratification in the early Middle Yayoi phase and that it is inappropriate to refer to those who were buried there as “kings”: their status was achieved rather than ascribed or inherited, and their role was to represent communal interests. They emerged in response to new social and economic conditions, such as difficulty in

maintaining intracommunal ties and rising tension in intercommunal relations associated with population pressure. The appearance of rich jar burials and related phenomena in the archaeological record of the Middle Yayoi phase can be interpreted as marking an episode in the transition from tribal social organization to the system of chiefdoms that characterizes the succeeding Early Kofun phase of Japanese prehistory.

Notes

1. K. Shinoda & T. Kunisada, “Analysis of ancient Japanese society through mitochondrial DNA sequencing”, *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 4, 291–7, 1994.
2. This information was kindly provided by Yoshiyuki Tanaka of Kyushu University, Fukuoka.
3. For further information on the contents of the Weizhi chronicle, see pp. 218–21 in G. L. Barnes, *China, Korea and Japan: the rise of civilization in East Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).