

# Rituals related to burial mounds and the idea of ancestral spirits

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the symbolism of chiefly burial mounds in Kofun Period (from the middle third to the sixth century A.D.) in Japan. Kofun (mounded tombs) are the place where dead elite was buried and mortuary rituals were practiced. Mortuary rituals generally contain the motif of “death and rebirth”. The author considers that the keyhole-shaped mounded tomb represents the country of the dead in the form of a jar, the square arrangement of *haniwa* clay cylinders on the top of the mounded tomb represents the residence of the dead, and the burial chamber represents the private house of the dead. He infers further that all of these representations are related to the symbolism of the womb, which implies that the dead chief returns to the womb of the mother earth and then is reborn as an ancestral spirit. Mortuary rituals practiced on the mounded tombs are thus considered to be for the rebirth of the ancestral spirits. Such concept of spirit is different from that of China, and cannot be interpreted as an influence from China. The author also considers that the mortuary ritual was important not only for the dead and his/her relatives but also for the community. The mounded tombs should reflect, therefore, the socio-political relationships of the dead chief with his/her community, and with the central polity of *Wa*. The former is shown in the size of the tomb, while the latter reflected in the distribution pattern of bronze mirrors. Inconsistency between the two aspects suggests complex relationships over power between the local chiefs and the central polity of *Wa*.

**Keywords:** Keyhole-shaped mounded tomb; mortuary ritual; symbolism; ancestral spirit; political relationship; Kofun Period of protohistoric Japan.

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