

Distribution patterns of chiefly burial mounds in the Kofun Period western Japan

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the long-term trend of investment in chiefly burials with a wider view to explain the socio-political change during the Kofun period Japan (3rd century A.D. to 6th century A.D.).

To achieve the goal, the author examined the distribution and transition of keyhole-shaped burial mounds, focusing on the series of them which are thought to represent local chiefly lineages, in western Japan.

In the early stage, many clusters of burial mounds appear in such main areas as northern Kyūshū, middle Setouchi, and central Kinai, demonstrating that each community there began to invest in Kofun construction.

The middle stage sees the magnification of some mounds usually surrounded by smaller ones, together with the disappearance or decline of neighbor clusters inherited from the former stage. This indicates that the synthesis of labor from some adjacent communities was achieved to construct the complex of majestic burial mounds as their ritual centre.

In the later stage, many local clusters of mounds appear again. They show the reduction of scale, however, suggesting that the labor for chiefly burials was dispersed and saved due to their degeneration of nature into domestic tombs.

As a result, the author declares that the diachronic trend observed above cannot be interpreted in the traditional models in which political transition is considered the most significant factor, but in terms of the long-term change in meaning of burial mounds in society during this period.

Keywords: Burials; chiefs; spatial analysis; social change; Kofun Period Japan.

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