Inariyama Kofun and the Sakitama Kofun Group in Japan as seen from China

Wei Wang

Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100710

Abstract

There is a gold-inlaid 115-character inscription on the iron sword unearthed from the Inariyama Kofun, the earliest tomb in the Sakitama tumulus group of Japan. It records that the sword owner Owake no Omi was “Sword-bearers’ Chief (maybe captain of the guard)” of the King Wakatakeru and assisted the ruler in “assisting in the governance of the realm.” The Sakitama Kofun group was built in the late 5th to the 6th centuries with the Inariyama Kofun as the initial structure. These large-sized keyhole-shaped kofun must be the burials of rulers of the Musashi area, i.e. the tombs of the members of the wealthy and influential family who generation after generation acted as the king’s “Sword-bearers’ Chief” and enjoyed backing from the Yamato royal power in their dominating the Musashi area. In other words, the support from the Yamato royal power may have been one of the important factors that enabled the rulers of the Musashi area to control this land.

Keywords: Inariyama Kofun (tumulus); “Inariyama Sword”; Japan–politics and government–Yamato Period; “sword-bearers’ chiefs”.

Introduction

The iron sword unearthed from Inariyama Kofun in 1978 bears a gold-inlayed inscription consisting of 115 characters. The inscription notes that the owner of this sword was a “Sword-bearers’ Chief” who was “assisting in the governance of the realm” of King Wakatakeru. The discovery of this inscription drew wide attention both in academic circles and in Japanese society at large. Who was buried in this kofun? Was he a military governor assigned by the Yamato Court to Sakitama, or a local aristocrat who had a strong relationship with the Yamato Court? Inariyama Kofun is the oldest in a series of the keyhole-shaped kofun constructed by successive generations of high-ranking aristocrats in the Kita Musashi (the old name of Saitama) region; what is their historical background? The explorations of these are important research issues may lead to a better understanding not only of the ancient history of Saitama Prefecture, but also of the history of Japan in its wider East Asian contexts during the 5th and 6th centuries CE.

Figure 1 Plan of the restoration of Inariyama Kofun and its surrounding moat.
portion circular), representing the highest-ranking type of mound tomb during the Kofun Period. By contrast, all kofun built in this part of Japan before Inariyama were much smaller, and their plans were either circular or square; Inariyama is the earliest keyhole-shaped specimen.

3. Inariyama Kofun yielded numerous and exquisite grave goods. Two tombs have been found at the top of the tumulus. They featured gravel-lined grave pits with boat-shaped wooden coffins (Figure 2), inside and outside of which large amounts of grave goods were unearthed. The wooden coffins were lined with textiles; the occupants wore silver ear ornaments and belts adorned with gilt bronze buckles and plaques decorated with dragon design in openwork (Figure 3); bronze mirrors with banded décor of deities and beasts, wrapped in textiles, had been placed underneath their heads, iron swords with gold-inlaid decoration or inscriptions on their left sides, and sabres, swords, spears, and quivers filled with arrows on both sides of their heads and torsos. Near their feet, iron keikō (lit. “hanging armor”) and traces of decayed leather armor were discovered (Figure 4). Outside the coffin, a set of horse fittings, iron arrowheads, and iron tools such as axes, tongs and knives were found.

4. The most noteworthy grave good found in this kofun was an iron sword with a gold-inlaid inscription of 115 characters. To date, the only two other comparable specimens are an iron sword with a silver-inlaid inscription of 75 characters unearthed from Eta Funayama Kofun in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu, and an iron sword with a silver-inlaid inscription of 12 characters mentioning “the King bestows…” from Inaridai Kofun No. 1 in Ichihara City, Chiba Prefecture.

5. The projecting sacrificial altar attached to the tumulus is in an unusual position. It was constructed on one side of the intersection between the square front and circular rear portions of Inariyama Kofun. Such sacrificial altars (tsukuridashi) are rare in Kofun-period burials, and this instance is the only one in the Sakitama Kofun Group.

6. The moats surrounding Inariyama Kofun are rectangular in plan. Usually, the plans of the moats surrounding the keyhole-shaped kofun are similar to that of the kofun themselves, which are usually in the shape of an escutcheon; but the moats surrounding Inariyama Kofun do not follow this rule. In the entire Kantō region, only five kofun with moats of this shape have been found so far, among which Inariyama Kofun is the largest.

7. Inariyama Kofun features boat-shaped wooden coffins in association with gravel-lined graves. This mode of burial is mainly seen in the northern part of Saitama Prefecture and the southern part of Gunma Prefecture, across the Tone River, but it is rare in other regions; instances mostly date to the middle to the late 5th century CE.

8. Inariyama Kofun was surrounded by
large-sized cylindrical haniwa with six rings of appliqué ridges. In the Kofun Period, large- and medium-scale kofun usually had cylindrical haniwa aligned on the inner sides of the moats and placed on the tumuli. Large-sized haniwa with six rings of appliqué ridges are popular at the large-scale kofun in the Kinai region, which was the center of the Yamato Court (they occur, for example, at Konda Gobyōyama Kofun in Osaka Prefecture, which is 425m long; Uwanabe Kofun in Nara Prefecture, which is 255m long; Imashirotsuka Kofun in Osaka Prefecture, which is 190m long; etc.), as well as at some large-scale kofun in Kyushu and the Kantō region.

Analysis of the inscription of the Inariyama Sword

The 115-character inscription on the iron sword can be divided into two paragraphs. The first paragraph records the names of the seven generations of ancestors of Wo Wakë omi 乎獲居臣, the maker of this sword. The second paragraph reads, “From generation unto generation, we have served as the sword-bearers’ chiefs, down to the present time. When the great King Wakatakeru’s court was in the Shikii Palace, I, assisting in the governance of the realm, caused to be fashioned this well-wrought efficacious sword, recording my origins in service” 世々為杖刀人首, 奉事來至今. 獲加多支鹵大王在斯鬼宮時, 吾左治天下. 令作此百湅利刀. 記吾奉事根原也 (Translation by Murayama and Miller 1979).

I would like to put forward some opinions on the key terms and contents of this inscription.

The xinhai year mentioned in the inscription should be 471 CE, as suggested by some scholars before. The names of the seven generations of ancestors are all without surnames; this matches the situation in Japan during the later half of the 5th century CE, when the surname system had not yet been adopted. “From generation unto generation, we have served as the sword-bearers’ chiefs, down to the present time” is a noteworthy statement. “Sword-bearer” could designate two possible statuses: first, it could refer to the guards of the Yamato king; if so, the “sword-bearers’ chief” would be the captain of the Yamato royal guards. Alternatively, it could refer to military officials of the Yamato Court; if so, the “sword-bearers’ chief” would be the head of the military officials.

Under the first possibility, we can infer that the position of the captain of Yamato royal guards had been successively occupied by generations of ancestors down to the time of Wo Wakë Omi. If we just count each generation as 20 years, then this position was taken by this family for about 140 years. If this inscription is believable, some official positions in Yamato Court could be inherited within a certain family or clan. In memory of the honorable history of serving as captains of the Yamato royal guards for seven generations, the inscription author made this sword.

The “great King Wakatakeru” mentioned in this inscription should be identified as the person named King Wu in Chinese historical records and Emperor Yuryaku in the Kojiki. The “Shikii Palace” was his residence. The sentence mentioning these two is the proudest in the inscription, showing that Wo Wake Omi’s power and status were greatly promoted. This was presumably the reason why he composed this inscription.

The status of the occupant of the gravel-lined grave at Inariyama Kofun

Since the discovery of the inscribed iron sword, intense
discussions have been going on among Japanese academics focusing on the status of the occupant of this tomb. The three main opinions may be summed up as follows.

1. The tomb occupant was the author of the inscription and a high-ranking official assigned by the Yamato Court to govern the Musashi region.

2. The author of the inscription was a high-ranking official of the Yamato Court, who presented or bestowed this sword made by himself and bearing his family’s history to the ruler of the Musashi region -- the occupant of the tomb at Inariyama Kofun where the sword was found.

3. The tomb occupant was the author of the inscription and a native of the Musashi region; for seven generations, members of his family had succeeded each other in the position of the captain of the royal guards at the Yamato Court, and he was especially favored and trusted by the Yamato king. In memory of this he made this inscribed sword, which accompanied him into the grave after his death.

Among these three opinions, the second one is unlikely. An important souvenir recording the glorious history of one’s family would not be sent to someone else for any reason. As for the other two opinions, it is difficult to determine which one is more convincing; at present, Japanese scholars, especially those in the Kantō region, tend to agree with the third opinion. Indeed, some features of Inariyama Kofun mentioned above, such as the gravel-lined grave and the moats of rectangular plan, are absent or seldom seen in the kofun of the Kinai region but show characteristics peculiar to the Kantō region and especially to the ancient province of Musashi. At present, however, we cannot completely rule out the first possibility. In this connection, we should consider the following two points:

1. Large-scale kofun emerged suddenly in the Kita Musashi region in the later half of the 5th century CE; Inariyama Kofun was the first. All kofun locally built before that time were at the scale of 20–40m in length, and their plan was square or circular, rather than keyhole-shaped. As mentioned above, keyhole-shaped kofun were the highest-ranking type in the Kofun Period. If the occupants of Inariyama Kofun were really native nobles of the Musashi region, and if they had served as captains of the Yamato royal guards for generations, there should be earlier large-scale tombs of the keyhole-shaped type built for those ancestors in their alleged region of origin; but none earlier than Inariyama Kofun seem to exist either in the Kita Musashi region or in the Minami Musashi region or even in other nearby areas.

2. As mentioned, the use of large-sized cylindrical haniwa with six rings of appliqué ridges was popular at the large-scale keyhole-shaped kofun in the Kinai region, but rare in other regions. In addition to showing off the status of the tomb occupant when he was alive, this might also imply his close relationship with the Yamato Court, and his possible origins in that part of Japan.

Of course, these phenomena could be explained by assuming, e.g., that the ancestors of the author of this inscription, although being captains of the Yamato royal guards, did not have comparably eminent positions; and that the author of this inscription, when occupying that post, was especially trusted by the Yamato king and therefore enjoyed higher status. To reflect that promotion, the Wo Wakë Omi inscription would have taken a series of steps, one of which was making this iron sword with its gold-inlaid inscription; another was building a large-scale keyhole-shaped kofun for himself at his home. It may have been precisely because of the close relationship with the Yamato Court that he was permitted to use a higher-ranking type of burial. Interestingly, the length of Inariyama Kofun, 120m, is exactly half that of Oka Misanzai Kofun in the Kinai region, the largest keyhole-shaped kofun from the later half of the 5th century CE; and it is one-fourth of that of Daisenryō, the mausoleum of Emperor Nintoku, the largest kofun in the entire Kofun Period of Japan. This exact proportioning of sizes cannot be mere coincidence, and it may reflect the tight relationship of the occupant of Inariyama Kofun with the Yamato Court.

No matter which opinion is correct, it is clear that in the later half of the 5th century CE, the Yamato Court had extended its sphere of influence to the Kantō region, including Musashi; and that the closeness of the relationship of the Yamato Court with the local aristocrats cannot be overestimated.

The historical background of the Sakitama Kofun Group

1. As mentioned above, Inariyama Kofun is part of the Sakitama Kofun Group. Kita Musashi, where Inariyama Kofun is located, did not have even one keyhole-shaped kofun during the 4th century and the first half of the 5th century CE; during that period, the largest tombs in this region were all circular kofun 60–70m in diameter. In the latter half of the 5th century CE, Inariyama Kofun was built; thereafter, several other keyhole-shaped kofun such as Futagoyama Kofun (138m in full length), Teppöyama Kofun (109m in full length), Shōgunyama Kofun (112m in full length), as well as Maruhakayama Kofun (102m in full length, roughly built at the same time as Futagoyama Kofun) were built in the 6th century CE. Together, these kofun form the Sakitama Kofun Group. If the occupant of the gravel-lined grave tomb at Inariyama Kofun was really the author of the gold-inlaid inscription, and if he was descended from a local group, then this situation reflected that since his time, the status of his family or clan had obviously been raised, and its members were now permitted to construct keyhole-shaped tumulus, which they had not been able to use before. However, the deceased aristocrats buried in these large-scale keyhole-shaped kofun should be the rulers of the Musashi region, who succeeded each other to the position of Sword-bearers’ Chief (or Captain of the Guards) at the Yamato
Court from generation to generation. Their rule over Musashi Province might have had the backing of the Yamato Court, which presumably was one of the key reasons why they could effectively controlled this region. Some Japanese scholars are in doubt over the relationship between the emergence of keyhole-shaped kofun in different regions of Japan and the expansion of the sphere of influence of the Yamato Court, but I believe that the construction of Inariyama Kofun yielding the iron sword with its gold-inlayed inscription, and the subsequent construction of large-scale tombs of the following generations of this aristocratic clan, confirms such a relationship. Generalizing on the basis of this evidence, we may say that the emergence of keyhole-shaped kofun as the highest burial type during the Kofun Period, wherever it occurred, attests the rule of the Yamato Court over the regions affected, and it can be seen as material proof of the expansion of Yamato’s sphere of influence.

2. We may relate the Sakitama Kofun Group to some historical facts recorded in the early historical records of Japan. In the 6th and 7th centuries CE, in order to maintain its rule over distant regions, the Yamato Court conducted the Kuni no Miyatsuko 国 造 system, by which several dozens of small provinces were founded, each of which governed by a Kuni no Miyatsuko, whose position was similar to that of the feudal lords of ancient China. These Kuni no Miyatsuko were usually the past local rulers; when appointed as Kuni no Miyatsuko by the Yamato Court, they became vassals of the latter and undertook various obligations, the most important ones of which were to levy warriors for and to pay taxes to the Yamato Court.

Most of the large and medium-size burials in the Sakitama Kofun Group were built in the 6th century CE; I believe that their occupants were very probably the Kuni no Miyatsuko of Musashi Province and their family members. As for those of Inariyama Kofun, which was built in the later half of the 5th century CE, they would be the earliest Kuni no Miyatsuko of Musashi Province or their forefathers. They might have been natives of the Musashi region, or assigned by the Yamato Court to this place from somewhere else in order to found the Musashi Province because of the merits acquired in assisting the Yamato kings.

In short, Inariyama Kofun and the iron sword with a gold-inlayed inscription unearthed from it not only provide invaluable materials for our research on the procedure and background of the emergence of the political power in the Sakitama region, but they also present clues for our explorations of the relationships between the Musashi Province as well as the entire Higashikuni (Eastern Provinces) region and the Yamato Court; more generally, they may bear upon our understanding of communication processes among the nations of East Asia.

Reference

Postscript
The original paper written by Wang Wei 王巍 was published in Kaogu 考古 (Archaeology) 2009. 12: 77–84 with five illustrations. The abridged version was prepared by the author, translated into English by Ding Xiaolei 丁晓雷 and edited by Lothar von Falkenhausen 罗泰.