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A SURVEY OF RYUKYU ISLANDS PREHISTORY *
— A Memorandum on Ryukyu Archaeology —

Hiroe TAKAMIYA

In the years following World War II, the Ryukyu Islands have become of great interest to archaeologists. One might say that archaeological studies of the area have recently made considerable advances in comparison with pre-war conditions. Many field projects have lately been undertaken to solve both local and Japanese problems. Accordingly, much has come to be known about prehistoric cultures in these islands. But the problems so far solved are still local in nature. Archaeologists' efforts made it clear, for example, that the earlier cultures are usually found along the elevated coral-reefs of central hilly areas (a few exceptions are seen in the islands off the mainland of Okinawa), whereas later sites are more profuse in coastal sand-dunes. Beside the qualitative and quantitative differences in artifacts associated with this geographical difference, there is also evidence for some changes in ecological adaptation. In fact, many other intriguing facts have been brought to light by post-war archaeology.

Historically speaking, however, archaeology in the Ryukyus is still in its incipient stage of data-collection. There are many important problems that await solution by future research. They are, to take a few, the identification of prehistoric races who lived here, the question of pre-pottery cultures, the emergence of agriculture, and the relations to adjacent cultures, especially in regards to the southern origin theory of the Japanese people. There are many others. Of these problems, it will be of utmost importance to establish a firm chronological framework for its known prehistoric age since this is fundamental to further study (Of course, we are not entirely in lack of it. In 1956, Mr. S. Tawada printed his tentative scheme of relative chronology. In it, he advocates four culture periods. But the value of his work cannot be fully confirmed since it was based on the classification of sherds collected

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mainly from midden surfaces. Nevertheless, his schema will be a good guide to further work because it gives a more or less clear picture of time sequence).

The above problems are in their nature not so simple as to be settled within a couple of years. Their solution may necessitate both considerable time and materials. As one step for further concentrated study, this paper aims to show broadly where archaeology in the area now stands, summarizing previous works briefly.

The history of archaeology in the Ryukyus began with Dr. Ryuzo Torii who excavated the Kabira shell midden of Yaeyama in 1904. In spite of its geographical importance for cultural transmission, however, subsequent exploration was not done for various reasons and only the four sites of Iha, Ogidô, Gusuku-dake, and Sachihijâ were investigated in the Taisho and early Showa eras. Thus ended pre-war archaeology, leaving many problems unsolved.

Today, we see that pre-war archaeology studied only two cultural phases, or rather two extremes in time span. The Kabira site of Yaeyama represents one. By excavation, stone tools such as hammers, pestles, axes, and pitted stones, a few shell artifacts of practical use, and pottery fragments were secured. Among the pottery sherds found, lug handles which were unfamiliar in those days caught Dr. Torii's attention. These handles are exclusively placed horizontally to the rim. He named the type "sotomimi (external lug) doki (pottery)", and put it in one typological class which he differentiated from that of Okinawa. He thought the Okinawan vessels to be equivalent to Jōmon pottery and thus labelled the sotomimidoki as a local type of Yayoi pottery which directly follows the Jōmon Culture. In the site many Chinese celadon fragments were found which date back to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. These periods are generally known in the Ryukyus by the great expansion of seaborne trade by the Shuri Government. The fact suggests that the site was constituted in an historical period, historical at least in the mainland of Okinawa.

The other cultural phase comprising the Okinawa sites of Iha (investigated in 1920 by Kashiwa Ōyama), Ogidô (in 1919 by Akira Matsumura), Gusuku-dake (in 1926 by Saneshige Komaki), and Sachihijâ (in 1932 by Sanehiko
Shimada), occupies the other end of the time scale. In this culture we find various bone and shell artifacts of ornamental nature that might probably be correlated with religious belief. Tools made of these materials also exist, but do not exceed half a dozen in kinds. Arrow points, whose occurrence has been incidental, were secured from the Gusuku-dake site. This is the only such case reported by excavation. In contrast to the abundance of such points in the Jōmon culture of Japan, such a sporadic find in the Ryukyus is in itself very curious. It may be due to the lack of adequate stone materials, or to exclusive dependence on rich wood resources that took the place of stone. In general, stone implements are few in variety and consist mostly of axes. Pottery vessels usually take the shape of kame (large mouthed jar) with flat base; tsubo forms (small mouthed) are seldom found. Vessels are decorated in large part with incised designs which spread parallel to the rim. Applique designs are found, but are rare. Rims usually bear projections in triangular or chevron form. As a whole, vessels are very brittle and tempered heavily with fine quartz or sand.

These are the features revealed by pre-war archaeology. However, it was not known whether a time sequence was present among these earlier cultures, whether the Kabira-like culture of Yaeyama penetrated into the mainland of Okinawa, or, if it did, how the earlier cultures finally developed to that of the lug vessel culture. Since nothing was done during the 1940's these problems were brought over into the following decades. In addition, Miyako Islands, important because they are a bridge between Yaeyama and the mainland of Okinawa, have remained terra incognita to archaeologists.

After World War II, especially within the last decade, more than a dozen excavations were undertaken in the Ryukyus. Among them, investigations made in the Ōyama and Kanegusuku sites of Okinawa should be mentioned here since they not only clarified the cultural sequences of the earlier part of the Ryukyuan prehistory, but the Kanegusuku site has also yielded important materials in relation to the cultures of Amami-ōshima which serve as stepping stones to Kyushu.

The Ōyama site was registered as a “buried cultural assets” in 1956. This culture essentially belongs, chronologically speaking, to that into which the
previously mentioned Gusuku-dake is classified. In 1958, Prof. M. Kagawa and Mr. S. Tawada investigated the site by request of the Cultural Protection Committee. The site was formed along the coral cliff just behind Ōyama village which is in the western coast of central Okinawa. The site consisted of four unmistakable strata in which six types of ceramics were clearly distinguished. The lowest layer included a kame vessel with a rim to which four small oval plates are attached vertically and which is stippled in one or two horizontal lines (Type I), along with vessels with 2 to 4 stippled lines of larger type at the neck region (Type II). At the second lowest level, kame vessels with geometric designs of thin incised lines were obtained in addition to Type II vessels. In the third layer, types were abundant. Vessels with a horizontally raised band at neck (Type IV) were secured as well as types II and III. In the top (fourth) layer, there occurred so-called the Kayauchi-banta style whose main characteristic lies in its high rim without any incised designs (Type V) and vessels with a raised band attached to rim (Type VI). Their stratigraphical occurrence has thus shown the changes of design styles in a part of the earlier culture.

Such a sequence was also attested in the pottery vessels of the Kanegusuku shell midden excavated in 1958. The main feature of the above vessels is that the designs, if incised, are all made by a one-pointed stick, regardless of other variations. The importance of the Kanegusuku site lies in the facts that it yielded, in addition to the above types of designed pottery (including the Kayauchi-banta style), vessels whose incised designs were made by two-pointed sticks, and that the latter were secured only in the lowest stratum where none of the former types were discovered at all. This demonstrates that vessel designs made by two-pointed sticks precede those made by one-pointed sticks. Despite such a sequence, however, the other aspects of these two cultures show great homogeneity and even their pottery can be classified into one typological category in fundamental features. Hence, they may be grouped into the same cultural horizon, separated into the upper and lower periods respectively.

The contribution of post-war archaeology is not confined to the visualization of earlier cultural sequences, but is also investigating the later cultures (professionally this would be called the late period. However, the final names
for chronology are not chosen. Hence, the term "later culture" is used tentatively). As to this culture, Prof. N. Kokubu did research on the Komesu site of Okinawa and the Shimashiyama site of Kudaka island in 1956, Drs. Bird and Ekholm of the American Museum of Natural History investigated the Noguni shell midden in 1959, and in the winter of the same year I dug a small trench in the Akajangā site. Some cultural sequences are observed among these sites, but as a whole they appear to be part of a single culture. To mention the main features of this culture; sites are formed in the sand-dune area of beaches; ornaments made of bones or sea shells decreased decidedly and finally disappeared completely; stone tools appear to increase in kinds, but the decrease of stone axes is conspicuous. Designs on vessels tend to disappear (usually more than half of the pottery vessels secured in these sites are plain ware), and if decorated, they are markedly simplified. Geometric designs, which are characteristic of the earlier culture, change to simple curved chevrons, and even these are rarely found in this period. Vessels with pointed bases emerge in this period.

The earlier and later cultures have thus been much unfolded, but it is not yet known how and where they fuse together. Knife-shaped coins of ancient China (known as mei-to-sen; about 200 B.C.) were found in the shell heap of Gusuku-dake that has recently been destroyed completely by quarrying. Judging from the pottery sherds reported by the last excavation, the culture is thought to be one of the one pointed stick design pottery period of the earlier culture. These coins were thought to be buried not far later than the time they were minted. In the Noguni site (one of the later culture), the Kaigen-tsuho (also Chinese coins: 621 A.D. to about 950 A.D.) were uncovered near the bottom of the shell midden. According to Drs. Bird and Ekholm who conducted excavation at the site, these coins provide a maximum age for the site. Between these two cultures, then, we see about 800 to 1,150 years of time span. This period provides us with the least information. Whether cultural change in this period was unilinear, whether a cultural horizon should be set up, or whether change in this period is negligible for chronological ordering, is entirely dependent on future research.
It is now generally known that, in Yaeyama, the type of lug vessels found in the Kabira site is widespread both in time and space. This was attested by C. W. Meighan and me in 1958 in the research of Nakamori at Hatoma island, and by the Waseda University Team in 1959 which made researches on several islands. They went so far as to establish a tentative chronology for that region. The present distribution of lug pottery and other features associated with it make it appear that the Yaeyama area constitutes one prehistoric culture area.

Except for occasional occurrence of lug pottery, nothing has been known about the culture in Okinawa. Whether this culture was established in Okinawa as in Yaeyama depends on future investigation. Nevertheless, this does not negate correlation with Okinawan prehistoric culture. Judging from the data secured from the reconnaissance made this summer, the Yaeyama culture of lug pottery, which usually accompanies trade sherds of Chinese celadon, appears to be contemporary with the period which directly follows the shell midden culture in Okinawa. In other words, this culture can be sought in early castle sites. This is also suggested by the facts that so far lug vessels were reported from castle sites such as Fensa and Kanegusuku (although only one specimen each), and not elsewhere with exception of the Noguni shell midden; and that pottery vessels of castle sites are usually fired hard, tempered heavily with coarser quartz or shell fragments, and appear to take a bowl shape, characteristics that are all shared with the Yaeyama vessels.

The earliest occurrence of lug pottery in Okinawa is reported from the upper layer of the Noguni shell midden, as mentioned above. In the north of the Ryukyu Islands, an additional occurrence was reported from the Omonawa No. 2 shell midden of Toku-no-shima which is earlier than Noguni in cultural sequence. Therefore, in studying lug pottery of Yaeyaman type, we should not confine ourselves to castle sites alone. But in this castle period, the pottery with the Yaeyaman features appear to become ubiquitous. The relation to the Yaeyaman culture may therefore be traced by the exploration of castle cultures.

Although no real cord-marked pottery was ever discovered in the Ryukyus,
it has been generally accepted since R. Torii and A. Matsumura that the prehistoric culture of the Ryukyus is a local manifestation of Japanese culture. But the genesis of the native civilization still remains unsettled. Dr. A. Matsumura early in 1920 stated in his report on the Ogidō Shell Midden that the Iha and Ogidō cultures of Okinawa (by far the earliest found) can be regarded as essentially the equivalent of the Late Jōmon cultures. Since his evaluation, few new interpretations have been made by Japanese archaeologists, resulting in more or less the same evaluation except for Mr. I. Yawata who inclined to look at them as early as in the Early Jōmon. Today, the Ryukyu Islands have been explored to a certain extent, and, in addition, the data of Amami-ōshima, which connects the Ryukyus with Kyushu, are also increasing. The present situation has made it easier, although still only partial correlation, to see more or less definitely the position of the Ryukyuan culture in the Jōmon periods.

In Ushuku shell midden of Ōshima, an Ichiki style of vessel fragment (a style originally noted in Kagoshima prefecture) was found among the lower-layer types of Ushuku vessels. In Omonawa No. 4 shell midden of Toku-no-shima, “Ichikinized” vessel sherds were obtained in the lowest level of the fifth layer where vessels with nail-impression design were also secured. The above two cases of cultural overlapping have substantiated that the early cultures of Ushuku and Omonawa No. 4 are Late Jōmon. As stated previously in this paper, in Kanegusuku, vessel designs made by two-pointed and one-pointed sticks are clearly distinguished in their stratigraphical occurrence, and it is verified that the former pottery preceded the latter. The Ichiki-ware layer of Amami and Toku-no-shima can be regarded as essentially contemporaneous with this latter period of Kanegusuku, in which we see not only the basically similar design construction, but the same design elements of nail impression, thin line design, stipples, and most importantly thickened rim vessels. The last feature is characteristic of the Ushuku ware in which the rim appears triangular in section. Most of Kanegusuku thickened rims are either hemispherical or rectangular, but triangularly thickened rims, although rare, were also found. Thickened rims, whether hemispherical, triangular, or rectangular in section, remain a feature not associated with two-pointed stick
design vessels. In this, the period of two-pointed stick designs must be put earlier than the Ichiki style of wares found in Ushuku.

The culture which follows Jōmon is known as Yayoi. Its occurrence was recently attested in Oki-no-erabu by Mr. S. Kawaguchi. He also reported a Yayoi pottery fragment found in Yoron island which is the southernmost island of present Japan and separated by a narrow channel of water from Okinawa. Although the integration of the Yayoi culture into Ryukyuan prehistory is not made clear yet, the distribution makes it appear that Okinawa cannot escape from its influence. The present data suggest that, if Yayoi culture be found, it will be sought for in the realm after the shell midden age. Here there is also another problem of Sue pottery which is often found in association with the castle culture.

Attention has recently been directed to foreign cultural influence by the occurrence, in the Ryukyus, of subjects usually associated with ancient Chinese cults. These were the tao-t’ieh and cicada-like shell artifacts found in the Hirota site on Tanegashima, and the dragon-like bone objects secured at Kanegusuku. These specimens, in addition to mei-to-sen obtained in Gusukudake, appear to suggest the contact with Chinese culture. How intensive was the contact has become not only intriguing but important problem to archaeologists today.

The shell midden culture is so far the earliest in the Ryukyus. It is essentially neolithic in nature and no pre-pottery culture which symbolizes the Old Stone Age culture has been established. But one find has been reported by the late Dr. S. Tokunaga who found several fossil deer bones in a coral fissure of Ie island. Among them, he could identify some which were modified by men. No pottery vessels nor stone tools beside the fossils were discovered in the site. The degree of fossilization is not always a criterion of antiquity, and we cannot give the precise antiquity of the fossils at present. After careful study, however, it is agreed that the Ie fossils belong to the preceramic (or rather pre-shell midden age) culture. Fossilized deer bones are often found in Okinawa, but the Ie fossil bones are the only case in which human workmanship was identified. The present situation makes the recognition of culture difficult. But it shows the possibility of the occurrence of pre-pottery
cultures in the Ryukyus. In Japan the Old Stone Age cultures were found in the Kanto Loam of open sites. Cave sites are also reported. Therefore, it is advisable to look into the plain area as well as caves in searching for pre-pottery cultures, since the prehistoric condition of the Ryukyus, if inhabited, appears to be not much different from that of Japan.

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