

# The Development of Rock-Cut Tombs in the Japanese Archipelago

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## Abstract

The ruins of burial chambers cut into hillside slopes or bedrock have been found around the world. Notable examples include the rock-cut tombs in Egypt's Valley of the Kings in the New Kingdom period, the underground Etruscan tombs in Italy dating back to the 8th to 1st century BC, underground rock-cut tombs across Central Asia, and the large cliff tombs constructed for Han dynasty nobility in China.

Small burial chambers bored into hillside slopes, called rock-cut tombs, have also been found in the Japanese archipelago. Dating back to the end of and after the Kofun period, the rock-cut tombs in Japan share the same clustered quality as other tombs of this period.

There was a hierarchical quality to the different types of tombs constructed during this era, which included large burial mounds, smaller burial mounds, and, the most common, rock-cut tombs with no accompanying burial mound. Burial mounds comprised stone rooms that served as the direct burial chamber for the remains and coffins made of boards. The configuration of rock-cut tombs was similar to that of the stone rooms in burial mounds.

Large numbers of newer small graves may indicate clusters of tombs in which the group responsible for the local development of the area was buried. In addition, a large number of iron weapons are found among the goods buried in the rock-cut tombs in Japan, which indicates that the period in which they were built was one of tension.

## Introduction

The archaeological history of the Japanese archipelago may be divided into the Paleolithic Era (c. 28,000 – 14,000 BC), the Jomon Era (c. 14,000 – c. 900 BC), the Yayoi Era (c. 900 BC – c. 250 AD) and the Kofun Era (c. 250 – c. 700 AD); meanwhile, all periods following the appearance of written historical documentation in Japan are collectively categorized as “the historical era” (rekishi jidai). This division of history into eras is a feature distinctive to Japan, and is characterized by a certain inconsistency of nomenclature.

The Paleolithic era is the period in which humans created stone tools based on striking/chipping methods which developed during the Pleistocene Epoch based on standard methods found all over the world; during this period, human society was based on the hunter-gatherer economic model. The presence of Paleolithic stone tools in Japan was first noted in the 1940s, when they were discovered at the Iwajuku archaeological site in Gunma Prefecture. When the stone tools were originally excavated at the site, it was at first not clear whether they could be considered to be unambiguous examples of Paleolithic tools; however, as research progressed following the initial discovery, the tools were indeed confirmed to be Paleolithic in origin.

Conversely, the historical period when stone tools first started to be made by grinding methods is categorized as the Jomon Era, a period for which the appearance of pottery is considered one defining characteristic. The name “Jomon,” used to describe this historical era, means “cord-marked,” and comes from the cord-like patterns applied to the surface of the pottery of this period. Although pottery started to be used in the Jomon Era, the society of the time did not make the transition to the production economy during this era and continued to practice a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, unlike in many other parts of the world during the same period.

Surveys carried out at the Omori Shell Mounds in Tokyo under Edward Sylvester Morse in 1877 ascertained that this site dates back to the Jomon Era, a discovery that became the starting point for archaeological research in Japan.

Agriculture in the Japanese archipelago started from the Yayoi Era. The name of this era comes from Yayoi-cho, the area which in 1884 was the site of the first discovery of the pottery of this era, distinguished by a different design from the cord-like patterns of Jomon Era pottery. At first, the Yayoi Era was defined based on the presence of pottery featuring this different design; later,

however, the categorization of the era changed, with evidence of agriculture instead coming to be seen as the defining characteristic of the Yayoi Era. Agriculture in the Japanese archipelago commenced from the agricultural techniques which were conveyed from the southern Korean Peninsula to the northern Kyushu region, and gradually spread to various parts of Honshu. Large numbers of tombs in which mirrors made in China were interred along with the dead as burial goods have been found which date back to the second half of the Yayoi Era, suggesting the presence of important people who governed small regions all over western Japan. It has been ascertained from written records from China that tributes were paid from Japan to the ruling Chinese dynasties in the years 57 AD, 107 AD and 239 AD; identifying the characteristics of the relics which were given in tribute has become a key issue in research.

The results of research conducted in recent years suggest that the start of agriculture in northern Kyushu dates back to around 900 BC; however, no clear evidence of the use of iron tools has been found. The use of bronze and iron tools in the Japanese archipelago is believed to date from around the middle of Yayoi Era, with these metals being utilized for agricultural implements, hand tools and weapons.

The Kofun Era is when large-scale kofun (tumuli) were built for rulers in various parts of the Japanese archipelago. The Ashikaga-koen tumuli were in 1886 the subject of an academic study into tumuli by Shogoro Tsuboi.

During this period, large-scale tombs were constructed over large areas based on certain recognizable rules, with the highest status being accorded to zenpo-koen-fun, or “keyhole-shaped burial mounds.” The formation of these mounds, which exhibit a keyhole-like shape combining both circular and square shapes when viewed from above, is unique to Japan. Keyhole-shaped burial mounds make up around 5,000 of the estimated 300,000 tumuli discovered in Japan, while most tumuli are categorized as enpun, or “circular burial mounds,” which form a circular shape when viewed from above.

Keyhole-shaped burial mounds make an appearance in around 250 AD, with construction ceasing around 600 AD. After this, ho-fun, or “square burial mounds” which have a square shape when viewed from above, hakka-ku-fun, or “octagonal burial mounds,” and enpun, or circular burial mounds, were constructed for the burial of rulers, until around 700 AD when the creation of megalithic tombs for rulers ceased altogether.

Following the first appearance of the tumuli used as burial places, the

coffins were buried by being lowered in from above: in some types, the wooden coffin in which the body had been placed would be covered with stones within the tomb, while in others the coffin would be packed in clay or simply placed within the tomb as it was. These burial customs changed with the advent of new customs which were brought from the Baekje Kingdom in the southwest of the Korean Peninsula at the end of the 4th century, in which yokoana-shiki-sekishitsu, or “stone burial chambers,” were built by tunneling into the rock, with their entrance opening up in the side of the mound face.

Burying bodies in this manner allowed the same tomb to be used for a number of burials, by opening and closing the horizontal entrance that was set in the side of the rock. The tombs also suggested that the concept of burial was undergoing change at this time as well. Based on the belief that the spirit of the deceased person would live in the next world in much the same way as they had lived during their lifetime, food and drink began to be buried with the person.

During the 5th century, stone burial chambers were constructed only in the Kyushu region; however, during the 6th century their construction spread to various parts of Honshu. Yokoanabo were places to bury the deceased, which were constructed by digging holes horizontally into the sloping side

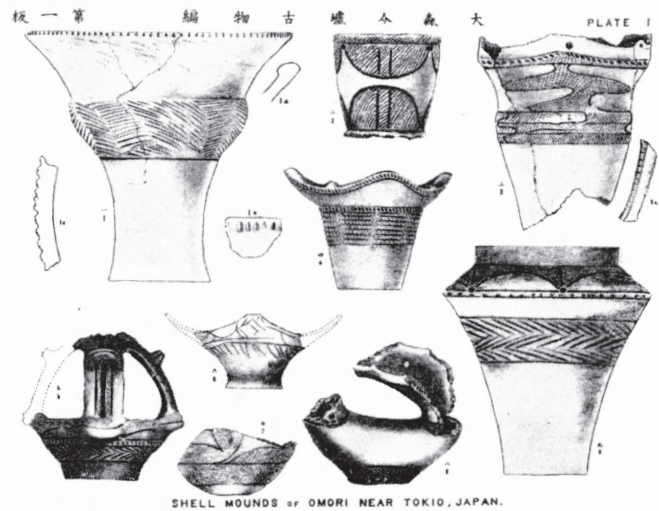


Fig. 1 Relics excavated from the Omori Shell Mound

of naturally-formed cliff faces or hillocks in imitation of the structure of the prototype tunnel-connected stone burial chambers that were first constructed in northern Kyushu. Since their first appearance, the rock-cut tombs were constructed not for people belonging to the highest rank but for those whose status put them at the lowest level of the regional ruling classes.

## 1. A brief history of research into rock-cut tombs

The history of research into rock-cut tombs in the Japanese archipelago dates back to the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868 – 1912), when archeology was introduced into Japan as a scientific discipline. Records have been found dating back to the Edo Period (1603 – 1868) which describe rock-cut tombs, with the majority of these stating the belief that the cave had been carved out as dwelling-places for humans in ancient times. It was also believed during the Edo Period that the tunnel-connected stone burial chambers constructed by building stone into walls and ceilings had been created as dwelling-places; structures which were built with ceilings and where the presence of relics was not confirmed were also thought of as dwellings during this period.

In 1877, the same year that the survey of the Omori Shell Mounds was undertaken, a survey of the Kuroiwa caves in northern Saitama (an inland

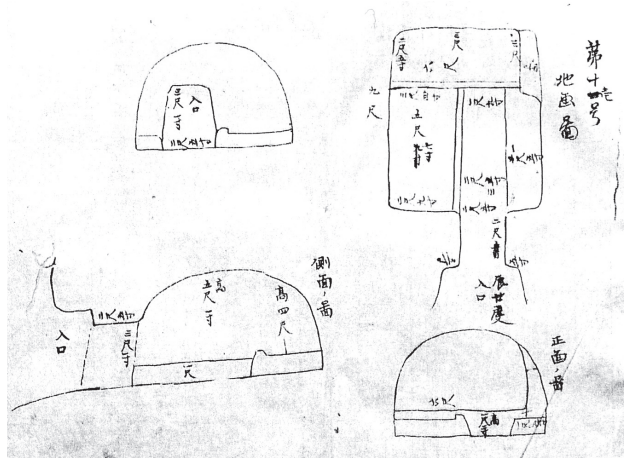


Fig. 2 Kuroiwa rock-cut tomb

area of the Kanto region) was undertaken by a local researcher. This survey, the first study ever undertaken into such caves, clarified the existence of 16 caves. The results of the survey stated that the caves had in fact been constructed as dwellings for people in ancient times, a conclusion which took into account the beliefs held in the local area and was further influenced by the ideas of European archeology, which had just been introduced into Japan at this time.

Then, in 1887, a large-scale survey was carried out of the Yoshimi Hyakuana (“hundred caves”) caves located close to the Kuroiwa caves, under the direction of Shogoro Tsuboi, who later went on to become a professor at Tokyo Imperial University Science University. More than 230 caves were found to exist in the site, which was designated the preeminent historical site for rock-cut tombs in Japan; it continues to be a protected site to this day.



Fig. 3 Yoshimi Hyakuana rock-cut tomb cluster

Influenced by his research into written historical records, Tsuboi proposed that the caves were constructed as dwelling-places by an indigenous people who were not the people from whom the Japanese population of today is descended, before later going on to be re-used as tombs by a different race of people who were the ancestors of the modern Japanese.

A debate then developed within the world of archeology, with Tsuboi's view that the caves had been used as dwellings being contested by Mitsutaro Shirai and others who proposed the counter-argument that these structures were in fact burial places. The argument stimulated interest among researchers in a number of places, leading to the discovery that these caves in fact existed all over the Japanese archipelago.

Until the 1890s, the mainstream view among archaeologists was that the caves had been used as dwellings, influenced by Tsuboi's stance as university professor. After the death of Tsuboi in 1913, however, the true nature of the caves as burial places became established fact among archaeologists as more and more articles that were confirmed to be human remains and burial goods were found in newly discovered rock-cut tombs.

It was also Shogoro Tsuboi who conducted the first survey of stone burial chambers constructed from stone built up into walls. This survey looked at tumuli which were discovered when a public park was being created in the city of Ashikaga in Tochigi Prefecture in the northern Kanto region. Tsuboi's survey was a follow-up of a survey of two tumuli in the area undertaken by local researchers. Human skeletons that had been buried and a large number of burial goods were discovered in the stone burial chamber, which served as a burial area; from this, it was concluded that the stone chamber had in fact been constructed as a burial place for a person who served as a leader in the local region.

From this point, stone burial chambers which during the Edo Period had been considered dwelling places for the indigenous inhabitants of Japan now began to be thought of as burial places, and all research following this date has been based upon this essential premise.

From the 1930s onwards, research into rock-cut tombs began to take up the question of the rank of the people who had developed tombs during the Kofun Era. Although large numbers of human skeletons were found buried in the rock-cut tombs discovered in the vicinity of Tokyo, the capital city, relatively few burial goods were discovered alongside these. From this fact, in addition to the simple structure exhibited by the tombs (created by digging

horizontally into the rock or soil in the sloping face of a plateau), it was surmised that rock-cut tombs were probably of people belonging to a relatively low social rank.

It is since the 1960s that research into rock-cut tombs has made the most progress, including the identification on a region-by-region basis of those areas where the spread of rock-cut tomb construction is concentrated. A systematic overview of the transitions in the construction of rock-cut tombs in the eastern Kanto region (in the east of the Japanese archipelago) was compiled by Naotada Akaboshi, who conducted research in this area continuously since early on in the history of rock-cut tombs research. Akaboshi's research viewed the structure of rock-cut tombs as sourced in the structure of the houses the people lived in, and revealed the process of simplification of the structure of the roofed rock-cut tombs over the course of the years.

Conversely, Kiyoshi Yamamoto, whose research was based in Izumo in the Sanin region (in the west of the Japanese archipelago), viewed the pottery excavated from rock-cut tombs as evidence for an age of rock-cut tomb construction, and noted changes in rock-cut-tombs with different structures. He also surmised that rock-cut tombs had their origins in Japan's stone burial chambers, and suggested that these structures had first appeared in the Kyushu region.

Finally, in the Tohoku region, Kazunori Ujiie carried out research from the 1960s onwards, based on his surmise that the spread of rock-cut tombs into the north of the Japanese archipelago was connected with the expansion of the ancient central government of Japan, which was extending its reach into new territories in Tohoku.

Full-scale research into rock-cut tombs developed from the 1970s onwards with the start of large-scale studies of such tombs in Kyushu. A survey undertaken of more than 1,000 rock-cut tombs at the Takenami rock-cut tombs in Fukuoka Prefecture revealed that the construction of the earliest prototype rock-cut tombs here dated back to the 5th century.

The structure of the rock-cut tombs that had been known hitherto consisted of a genshitsu or "burial place" which, like the stone burial chamber, was used to enshrine human remains, plus a sendo or "passageway," with the floor of the burial chamber being constructed at a high level and the passageway laying at a lower level; in these early rock-cut tombs, however, it was revealed that the burial chamber floor lay at a lower level than that of the passageway.



This structure is believed to have developed in imitation of the early stone burial chambers which were introduced from the southern Korean Peninsula to northern Kyushu, and which feature an entrance positioned at the top and steps leading down into the burial chamber. It is considered to have developed as one example of a variety of burial places which feature horizontally-aligned entrances and which were used for multiple burials.

Since the 1990s, the progress of research in many areas has focused on the spread of rock-cut tombs. Katsuhiko Hanada has used the sources gathered from a number of surveys of various rock-cut tombs to calculate the approximate dates of construction of these tombs based on the relics excavated there, revealing that the construction of such sites started in Kyushu and then spread into Honshu.

Rock-cut tombs spread into the east of the country after having developed a consistent and recognizable form in the western regions of Japan; Satoru Ikegami's study has clarified the process of the expansion of rock-cut tombs into the Hokuriku, Kanto and Tohoku regions.

## **2. Origins of the rock-cut tombs**

Since the 1960s, it has been believed that the rock-cut tombs found in the Japanese archipelago developed in imitation of the structure of the stone burial chambers found in northern Kyushu. This feature was made clear by a survey of the Takenami rock-cut tomb in northern Kyushu in the 1970s. Unlike in the structures of the rock-cut tombs which had been known up to that time, in these rock-cut tombs the burial chamber used to enshrine the dead person's remains lay at a lower level than the entrance part.

The situation of the tombs at the Takenami rock-cut tomb in Fukuoka Prefecture and the Uenohara rock-cut tomb in Oita Prefecture where early rock-cut tombs developed, suggest that these tombs exhibited characteristics which developed after rock-cut tombs first appeared and then underwent full-scale expansion, later appearing in the vicinity of Buzen in northern Kyushu.

However, in 2004, a survey was undertaken which reported on rock-cut tombs found in the region of Gongju (located in the former Baekje Kingdom in the southern Korean Peninsula) whose structure closely resembles that of the rock-cut tombs which first appeared in northern Kyushu in Japan. There is a growing need for a fundamental reexamination of the assumptions relating

to the first appearance of rock-cut tombs.

Gongju, which was the second city of the Baekje Kingdom, is located in the Geum River basin which developed after authority transitioned to this area in 475 from Hansung in the Han River basin due to oppression by the Goguryeo kingdom which occupied the northern Korean Peninsula during the Three Kingdoms Period in Korea. Gongju is now famous as the location of ancient tombs at Songsanri, Gongju, which were erected primarily for the royal family of the time.

A tomb of particular archaeological importance, in spite of the relatively small scale of its burial mound, which has a diameter of only around 20 m is the Tomb of King Muryeong, which underwent a survey in 1965; the tomb is constructed with a stone burial chamber created from brick as a result of the influence of the Southern Dynasty of China, while epitaphs inscribed with writing which were excavated from the tomb confirm that the tomb is the joint burial place of King Muryeong (buried in 523) and his queen (buried in 526).

A decorated sword excavated from the tomb has commanded considerable attention as a weapon which was bestowed by the Southern Dynasty of China in 521 as a symbol of the role of general, and is considered particularly interesting in Japan as a relic which could be considered a prototype of the ornamented swords which became widespread throughout the Japanese archipelago from the 6th century onwards.

The possibility that rock-cut tombs like those in the Baekje Kingdom in the Korean Peninsula might be found in Japan was raised from the 1940s onwards; however, this was unclear due to a lack of cases of relics actually being discovered. However, the Tanjiri rock-cut tomb which was excavated in 2004 shows clear similarities with the rock-cut tombs in the Korean Peninsula.

At the Tanjiri rock-cut tomb, 23 tombs were found to have been constructed in a hilly area 7 km to the northwest of Gongju, the center of the Geum River basin. Of the 23 tombs, 17 were found to have been constructed with rectangular burial chambers, with the length of the rectangle running lengthways from front to back (longitudinal rectangular burial chambers), while six are constructed with rectangular burial chambers with the length of the rectangle running transversely from side to side (transverse rectangular burial chambers). When the rock-cut tomb of Tomb No. 3 was examined, it was found to be trapezoid in shape, with the wall at the back possessing the greatest width at 144 cm, while the front side measures a mere 86 cm in

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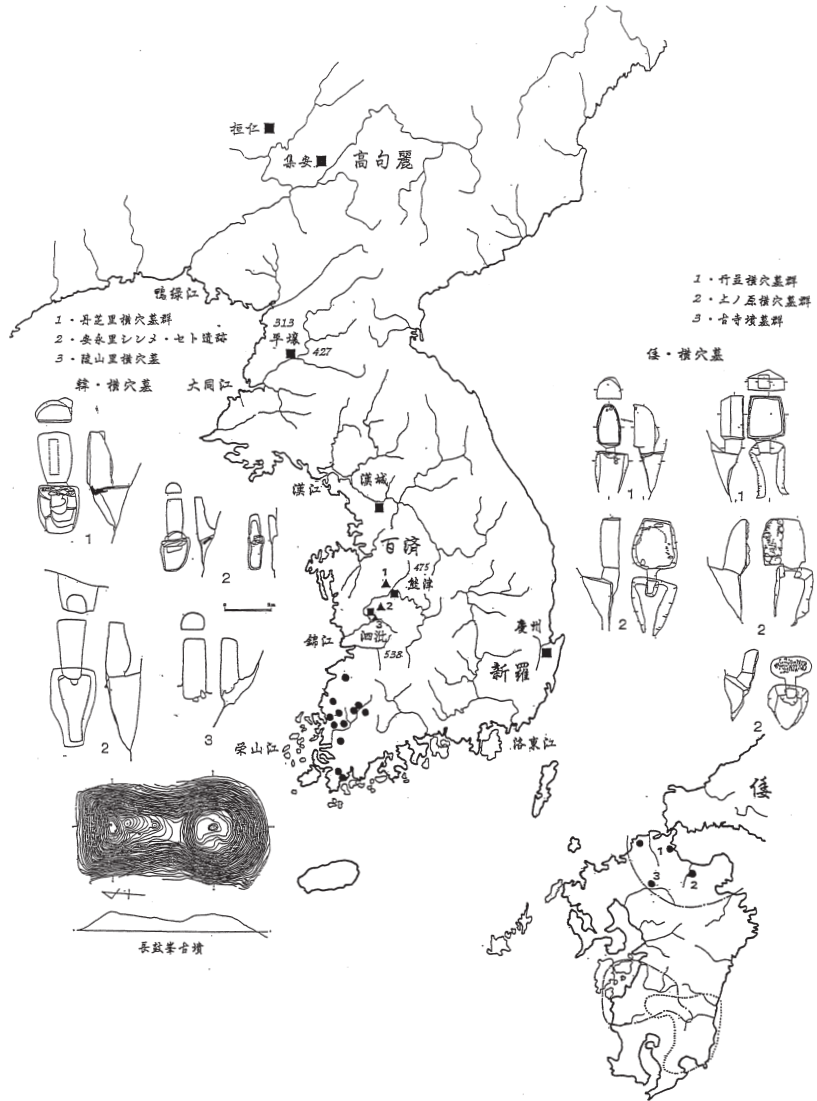


Fig. 4 Rock-cut tombs in the Far East of Asia

width, with the width shrinking from back to front over a length of 250 cm.

The most significant feature of the structure of the Tanjiri rock-cut tombs is the way the rock-cut tomb entrance points downwards towards the burial chamber. This feature of the construction is also found in the structure of the early rock-cut tombs found in northern Kyushu. Here, the far ends of the sendo passageways have been reported to reach depths of 50 – 180 cm at their furthest extent.

Among the 17 rock-cut tombs with longitudinal rectangular burial chambers (which represented the main type found at the site), it was ascertained that burials of more than one person had taken place at tombs No. 2, 4, 8, 10, 18, 19 and 21, as well as at tomb No. 3, where the skeletons of five people were excavated, the largest number at the site. Conversely, as far as could be ascertained, only single burials had taken place at the six rock-cut tombs with transverse rectangular burial chambers.

Based on the overall nature of the relics excavated at the site, the approximate date of the building of the Tanjiri rock-cut tombs, with the 23 individual tombs, is estimated as being the early Baekje-Ungjin period in the second half of the 5th century, when the Gongju area became the capital of the Baekje area.

Looking at similarities between the Tanjiri and two groups of early tombs which are typical of early rock-cut tombs in northern Kyushu (Takenami in Fukuoka Prefecture and Uenohara in Oita Prefecture), there are similarities between these groups in terms of scale; however, whereas all of the early rock-cut tombs in northern Kyushu were clearly created with a sendo passageway as a corridor between the genshitsu burial chamber (which served as the burial area) and the entrance, which connected with the bodo (external path leading towards the grave), the Tanjiri tombs by contrast were created with the bodo path connecting directly to the burial chamber, with no internal sendo passageway between the two.

In comparing the construction dates of rock-cut tombs, it is currently judged that the tombs found in the Korean Peninsula are slightly later in date; however, it is to be expected that the question of the origins of rock-cut tombs will enter a new phase of development with the continued progress of surveys in the future.

Keyhole-shaped burial mounds, a tomb formation that is particular to Japan, are also found in the southern Korean Peninsula. With the clarification of the presence of 13 keyhole-shaped burial mounds in the Korean Peninsula,

primarily in the Yeongsan River basin, the possibility that this area could in fact be the origin of the keyhole-shaped burial mound style in Japan has also been raised in the past.

The date of construction of these burial mounds is believed to be between the late 5th century and the early 6th century; it is thought that the period of construction was limited to the period when the region maintained its independence at the time of the Baekje-Silla War. The stone burial chambers, which were used as burial places then spread from northern Kyushu, and the nature of the people buried in the tumuli have become questions for research.

In the late 5th century, rock-cut tombs and keyhole-shaped burial mounds (both of which are believed to be connected with Kyushu) were constructed in this area of Korea, with the rock-cut tombs being constructed in the Baekje Kingdom region and keyhole-shaped burial mounds featuring stone burial chambers being constructed in the area nearby. This fact is a key point when considering the origins of rock-cut tombs.

### **3. The development of rock-cut tombs in the Japanese archipelago**

The rock-cut tombs which appeared in northern Kyushu in the late 5th century had spread as far as the Tokai region of Honshu by the early 6th century. Looking at individual regions, rock-cut tombs spread into the Kawachi region in Osaka by the middle of the 6th century, to the Izumo region in eastern Shimane Prefecture, to the Kaga region of Ishikawa Prefecture in the late 6th century, and the Kanto region by the end of the 6th century.

Rock-cut tombs are a type of tumuli that appeared during the later stages of the kofun (tumuli-building) period in Japan; however, unlike in the case of tumuli where a stone burial chamber was constructed, the rock-cut tombs did not spread universally throughout the Japanese archipelago. The main distribution of sites in Kyushu is found in the central and northern regions, while in the Chugoku region they spread primarily in the Izumo area and the surrounding areas in Shimane Prefecture.

In the Kansai region, the construction of these tombs was concentrated in the Kawachi region of Osaka, with a limited distribution in the areas of Nara Prefecture, Kyoto Prefecture and Hyogo Prefecture. Within the Hokuuriku region, the tombs spread primarily in Ishikawa Prefecture and reach the

western half of Toyama Prefecture, while in the Tokai region they have been found primarily in the Totoumi area and surrounding areas in the western half of Shizuoka Prefecture.

The rock-cut tombs in the Kanto region are distributed primarily along the coastal regions, being found in Kanagawa Prefecture, the Tokyo area, Chiba Prefecture and Ibaraki Prefecture, while being more limited in distribution in Saitama Prefecture and rare in Gunma Prefecture, both of these being inland areas. Looking at the Tohoku region, the tombs are concentrated around the coastal areas of Fukushima Prefecture and Miyagi Prefecture; depending on the region, they also spread into mountainous areas.

Rock-cut tombs did not spread into Iwate Prefecture in northern Tohoku, and were not constructed in the inhabited areas of Emishi, where human populations are known to have differed ethnically from mainland Japan.

Of the early rock-cut tombs of the late 5th and early 6th centuries, cases accompanied by burial mounds have been ascertained. These cases can be considered cases in which rock-cut tombs developed as a type of tunnel-based burial space. Where these were ascertained in the Kyushu area, the first rock-cut tombs constructed were accompanied by burial mounds mainly of the circular type, while cases of the keyhole-shaped burial mound type were also ascertained.

In the age of tumuli-building, an era characterized by the creation of megalithic tombs for local rulers, the creation of keyhole-shaped burial mounds is understood to be a symbol of the status of the person. The construction of rock-cut tombs which are small in scale yet are accompanied with keyhole-shaped-style burial mounds may be interpreted as a sign that the person buried was accorded the status of the lowest level of the regional ruling class.

Of the rock-cut tombs built in the early 6th century, the Asada rock-cut tomb in Yamaguchi City has attracted particular attention. All the rock-cut tombs constructed in this site are accompanied by circular burial mounds, and the rock-cut tombs attached to these were constructed based on an awareness of already-existing burial mounds. It has been ascertained that after the human remains were buried in the rock-cut tombs, the long passageways which were dug out at an angle were filled in once again, and the memorial service for the deceased person would be carried out over the mound.

The construction of the rock-cut tombs accompanied by burial mounds in the Izumo area is limited to the early years of the appearance of such tombs in this area in the late 6th century. In the Izumo area, burial mounds in

the zenpo-koho, or “conjoined rectangle” style (consisting of two conjoined rectangles, one larger and one smaller), had traditionally been constructed to bury people from the local chief class; their appearance was not limited to the period when tumuli first appeared, but continued into the late tumuli-building period of the 6th century.

In later years, these zenpo-koho, or “conjoined-rectangle-shaped,” burial mounds were built in eastern Izumo, while keyhole-shaped burial mounds were constructed in western Izumo; looking at similarities among rock-cut tombs accompanied by burial mounds, it seems that there was a regional separation, with conjoined-rectangle-shaped burial mounds and rectangular tombs being constructed in the Matsue City area in Shimane Prefecture in the center of the eastern Izumo area, and keyhole-shaped burial mounds and circular tombs being constructed in the Yasugi City area of Shimane Prefecture at the eastern tip of the region.

The rock-cut tombs accompanied by conjoined-rectangle-shaped burial mounds and rectangular burial mounds are distinguished by the Shimada-ike rock-cut tomb in Matsue City. The conditions of the installation of rectangular tombs under the conjoined-rectangle burial mounds suggest the scale of the burial mounds and the construction of the rock-cut tombs, while the arrangements for burial can be ascertained from the rules within the rock-cut tomb-building groups.

In these rock-cut tombs, fragments of large pots that were brought to the conjoined-rectangle-shaped burial mounds as offerings have been brought into the rock-cut tombs individually, suggesting that fragments of pottery were treated as items possessed by the spirits of ancestors.

Furthermore, distinctive decorated swords were placed in tombs as burial goods exclusively in the rock-cut tombs of the easternmost area of Shimane Prefecture, allowing a glimpse into the connections that existed at this time between established local powers in these districts and certain powerful forces which formed a central part of the government.

The conditions found in the rock-cut tombs accompanied by burial mounds, confirmed throughout the Tokai region to the southern Tohoku region, are that few burial mounds accompany individual rock-cut tombs, with burial mounds being constructed as a symbol of the rock-cut tomb group as a whole in many cases there. Typical examples are the Ichigao rock-cut tomb in Yokohama City (Kanagawa Prefecture) and the Koboyama rock-cut tomb in Shirakawa City in Fukushima Prefecture, all of these being examples

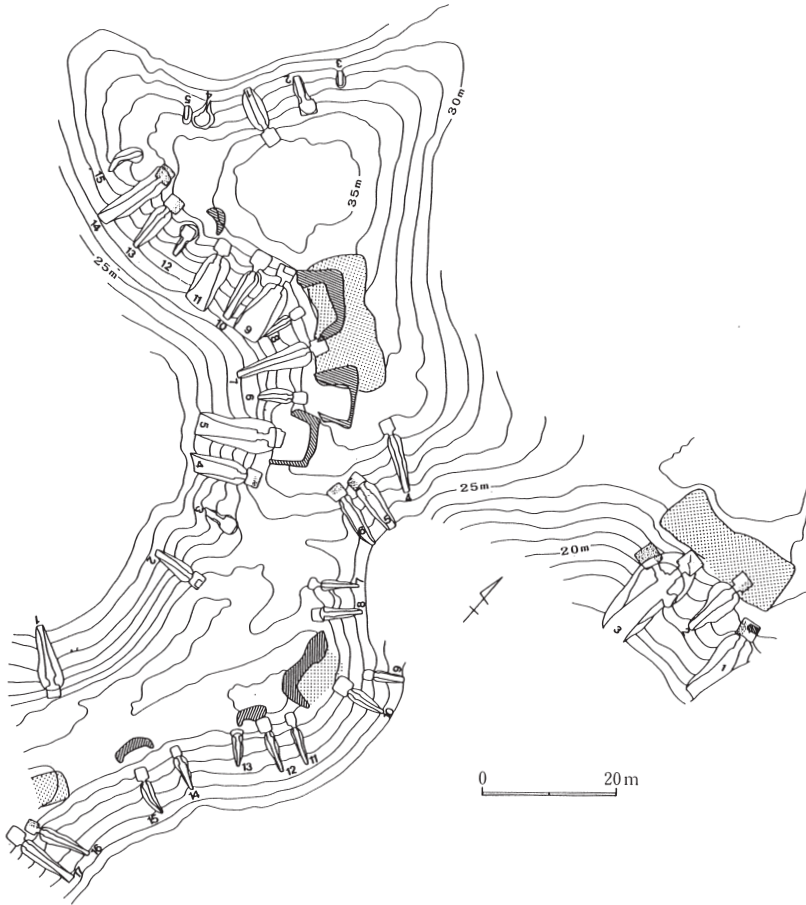


Fig. 5 Shimada-ike rock-cut tombs, Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture

of the early phase of rock-cut tombs in this region.

In the case of the Yonemitsu rock-cut tomb in Chiba Prefecture, the early examples of small rock-cut tombs built in the late 6th century are accompanied by circular burial mounds; these were not found during the stage of the large rock-cut tombs which make up the majority of rock-cut tombs in this region.

It is thought that the existence of rock-cut tombs accompanied by such burial mounds is due to the influence of the rock-cut tombs in their region



of origin, from which such tombs then spread out into various parts of eastern Japan, and that after their initial spread, such mounds disappeared as the design of the tombs developed particular local characteristics.

#### **4. Spread of the rock-cut tomb construction style**

After rock-cut tombs first appeared in northern Kyushu in the late 5th century, these structures spread to various regions, where they developed their own distinctive regional styles, such as the adoption of structures which imitated the structure of the stone burial chambers already found in various regions.

In the Higo area in the Kyushu region, the early stone burial chambers, which first spread to the northern Kyushu area from the southern Korean Peninsula at the end of the 4th century, developed a consistent and recognizable form through the adoption of a particular construction style in the late 5th century, leading to the name of “Higo-style stone burial chambers.” Distinguishing features of this type are the tomb’s shape, which is characterized by squared shapes, and the use of three *kanza*, or “coffin platforms,” created from slabs of stone, where the remains of three people would be enshrined in each chamber, laid along three sides of the chamber, namely the back, the left and the right, while the ceiling formed a domed shape with its apex at the center of the room.

These Higo-style stone burial chambers were constructed as tombs for the chiefs of individual local districts within the Higo region; meanwhile, rock-cut tombs were adopted as burial places for the important members of the group governed by each chief. These structures were built in imitation of the structure of the Higo-style stone burial chambers that were built as burial places for the local chiefs.

These Higo-style rock-cut tombs spread far across the region, extending as far as the periphery of the Osaki Plain in northern Miyagi Prefecture. The Higo-style rock-cut tombs took on other elements after spreading into northern Tohoku, with changes being made to the structure of the long passageway. Rock-cut tombs with coffin platforms resembling those found in the Higo-style tombs were also constructed in the Tone River basin in eastern Kanto. However, the way in which the long passageway was added does not suggest any direct link with the Higo region; investigations into the pottery and other items excavated from rock-cut tombs suggest that the coffin

platforms appeared as a result of inter-regional exchanges with Tohoku.

Rock-cut tombs also appear in the northern parts of Oita Prefecture in northern Kyushu. The rock-cut tombs observed within the Tobiyama rock-cut tombs in Oita City had developed a recognizable form, termed *buzen-gata*, or “Buzen-style rock-cut tombs.” In this style of rock-cut tomb, the burial chamber is rectangular in shape; the back half of the chamber is set at a higher level and a coffin platform with a rim around its front side has been created; there is a roofed ceiling with eaves jutting out on the upper section of the walls.

These Buzen-style rock-cut tombs spread from northern Ibaraki Prefecture in eastern Kanto into southern Fukushima Prefecture. Decorated pictures of humans, figures mounted on horseback and the like are portrayed in large numbers on the inner walls at the Izumizaki rock-cut tomb cluster. Decorated tumuli in which pictures are portrayed in color on the inner walls of the stone burial chambers and on the outer and inner walls of the rock-cut tombs were common in the Kyushu region in the 6th century; elements of the decorations allow us to ascertain that these are rock-cut tombs in the Kyushu style.

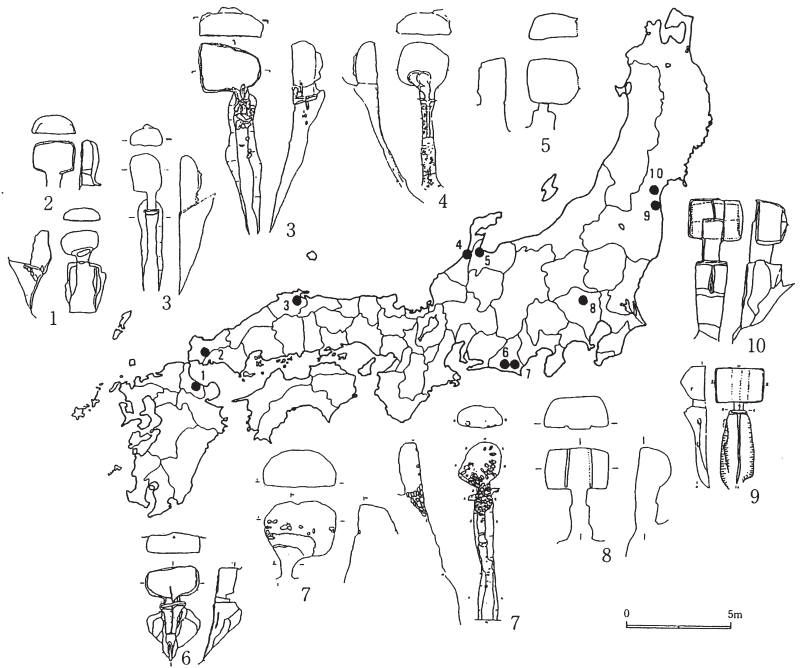
In eastern Japan, decorated rock-cut tombs had a limited distribution, with Buzen-style rock-cut tombs spreading into northern Ibaraki Prefecture and thereafter into Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures. The pictures portrayed in these decorated rock-cut tombs change over time from the end of the 6th century through the early 7th century, shifting from representational images of humans and figures mounted on horseback into simplified designs with circular and dot-shaped elements and the like as the tombs spread to the north.

The spread of rock-cut tombs into the Izumo area can be assumed to have developed from northern Kyushu and the westernmost area of Honshu, and it has been ascertained that in the early stages, rock-cut tombs in a number of different styles were found. The rock-cut tombs that are unique to the Izumo area feature a structure that imitates that of the stone burial chambers adopted by the tombs of chiefs in the local area.

In the stone burial chambers which are characteristic of the Izumo area, burial chambers using quarried stone are characterized by house-like ceilings with a transverse rectangular shape, while the passageways are tilted from the center. Tombs in the conjoined-rectangle burial mound style in Matsue City such as the Furutenjin and Yamashiro tombs were constructed as burial places; as the date of construction increases, the shape of the floor plan of the burial chambers becomes increasingly square and passageways start to be added in the center.

Izumo-style rock-cut tombs imitate the construction of the early Izumo-style stone burial chambers, and are constructed within the major rock-cut tomb clusters. The burial chambers form transverse rectangles in shape and feature rimmed coffin platforms and roofed ceilings. Furthermore, some of these chambers contain side-opening stone coffins constructed from pieces of stone and opening along the side, highly characteristic of the Izumo region, and this indicates that the entombed was a person of high standing.

The spread of the Izumo-style rock-cut tombs is limited to the various parts of eastern Japan. One example is the Yoshimi hilly area in the north of



- 1 Uenoharu rock-cut tomb, Oita Prefecture
- 2 Asada rock-cut tomb, Yamaguchi Prefecture
- 3 Nakachikuya rock-cut tomb, Shimane Prefecture
- 4 Hijirigawa Terayama rock-cut tomb, Ishikawa Prefecture
- 5 Endo rock-cut tomb, Toyama Prefecture
- 6 Mukaiyama rock-cut tomb, Shizuoka Prefecture

- 7 Ooyori rock-cut tomb, Ofuchigaya rock-cut tomb, Shizuoka Prefecture
- 8 Yoshimi Hyakuana rock-cut tomb, Saitama Prefecture
- 9 Fukusako rock-cut tomb, Fukushima Prefecture
- 10 Sozenji rock-cut tomb, Miyagi Prefecture

Fig. 6 Expansion of Izumo-style rock-cut tombs

Saitama, located in the inland area of the Kanto region, featuring the Kuroiwa rock-cut tombs and the Yoshimi Hyakuana tombs, both well-known historical sites. The condition of the tombs in the Yoshimi Hyakuana tombs may be summed up as follows: (1) a structure featuring a transverse rectangular chamber, coffin platforms on both sides and a dome-shaped ceiling; (2) a rectangular burial chamber, a coffin platform on one side and a dome-shaped ceiling; and (3) a shift towards a structure with an oblong-shaped burial chamber, no coffin platform and an arched roof structure.

Regions when Izumo-style rock-cut tombs spread over a wide area were the southern Tohoku region and the area between the coastal area of northern Fukushima Prefecture to the vicinity of Sendai City in Miyagi Prefecture. Following the spread of this type of rock-cut tomb, the “long passageway” element was taken on and developed into designs particular to each local area; the burial chambers became rectangular in shape and the coffin platforms disappeared.

In the Toyama Prefecture area in the Hokuriku region, rock-cut tombs with a structure featuring a transverse rectangular burial chamber and a passageway that tilts to the side have been found in the Endo rock-cut tomb; other rock-cut tombs with related structures have been discovered over a wide area in the surrounding region.

Among rock-cut tombs of the Izumo type, researchers have confirmed the presence not only of rock-cut tombs with transverse rectangular burial chambers, but also of tombs with dome-shaped ceilings and rectangular burial chambers to which an angled passageway is attached. The rock-cut tomb style is considered to have developed based on the prototype represented by the stone burial chamber of Shiraishi Igami Tomb No. 1 in Matsue City, Shimane Prefecture. In Izumo, it has been ascertained that Nakatakeya Tomb No. 1 in Matsue City (which takes the form of a small conjoined-rectangle-shaped burial mound) and Iwayaguchi-kita tomb No. 1 in Yasugi City (which takes the form of a small keyhole-shaped burial mound) were constructed as burial places, and were also adopted by higher-ranking members of the rock-cut tomb-building groups.

The presence of small numbers of Izumo-style rock-cut tombs of this type can be confirmed in Ishikawa Prefecture and Toyama Prefecture in the Hokuriku region, as well as in western Shizuoka Prefecture in the Tokai region. While these can also be called “Izumo-style rock-cut tombs,” they extend into regions where different rock-cut tombs with a different structure

are also found.

The Takaida rock-cut tomb in Kashiwara (located facing the Yamato River in the southernmost tip of Ikoma-sanchi in the Kawachi region in eastern Osaka) is a typical example of the type of rock-cut tomb that spread into the Kansai region. Rock-cut tombs started to be erected in this region in the middle of the 6th century as a result of the spread of these structures from the Kyushu region. From the start, a unique roofed-ceiling structure was adopted with the larger tombs, featuring eaves jutting out externally; from the late 6th century, by which time rock-cut tomb construction was firmly rooted in the area, a consistent and recognized style of rock-cut tomb known as the “Kawachi-style rock-cut tomb” began to develop, in which stone coffins were created as fixtures primarily in the back of the burial chamber.

The distribution of the Kawachi-style rock-cut tombs was limited to the western parts of Shizuoka Prefecture in the Tokai region and the coastal areas of Kanagawa Prefecture and the Boso Peninsula in the southern Kanto region. In the coastal areas of Kanagawa Prefecture, burial chambers changed in shape from rectangular to trapezoid, while the construction of stone coffins added as fixtures along the back wall became a consistent and recognized style of this type of tomb.

Rock-cut tombs in which no special burial chamber was constructed and gravel was instead simply laid out over the floor spread into various regions of the Japanese archipelago. These spread from northern Kyushu, the area where rock-cut tombs made their first appearance, to southern Tohoku, with most being constructed with a rectangular shape and a dome-shaped roof. Drainage channels run around the periphery and center of the floor in the burial chamber in this type, forming a recognizable style. Rock-cut tombs found in various parts of Japan featuring this kind of structure may be supposed to have originated in Kyushu.

Multi-chamber rock-cut tombs constructed with not one but several chambers connected together are constructed in imitation of the already-existing stone burial chambers in the Kyushu region; based on the condition in relics excavated from these tombs, it may be reasonably supposed that the chamber at the back was used for the burial itself, while rites for the burial were carried out in the areas at the front.

Outside Kyushu, these multi-chamber rock-cut tombs were constructed in the largest numbers as part of the Ho’ozan rock-cut tomb cluster in Ishikawa Prefecture in the Hokuriku region. In addition, the Nakata rock-cut tomb

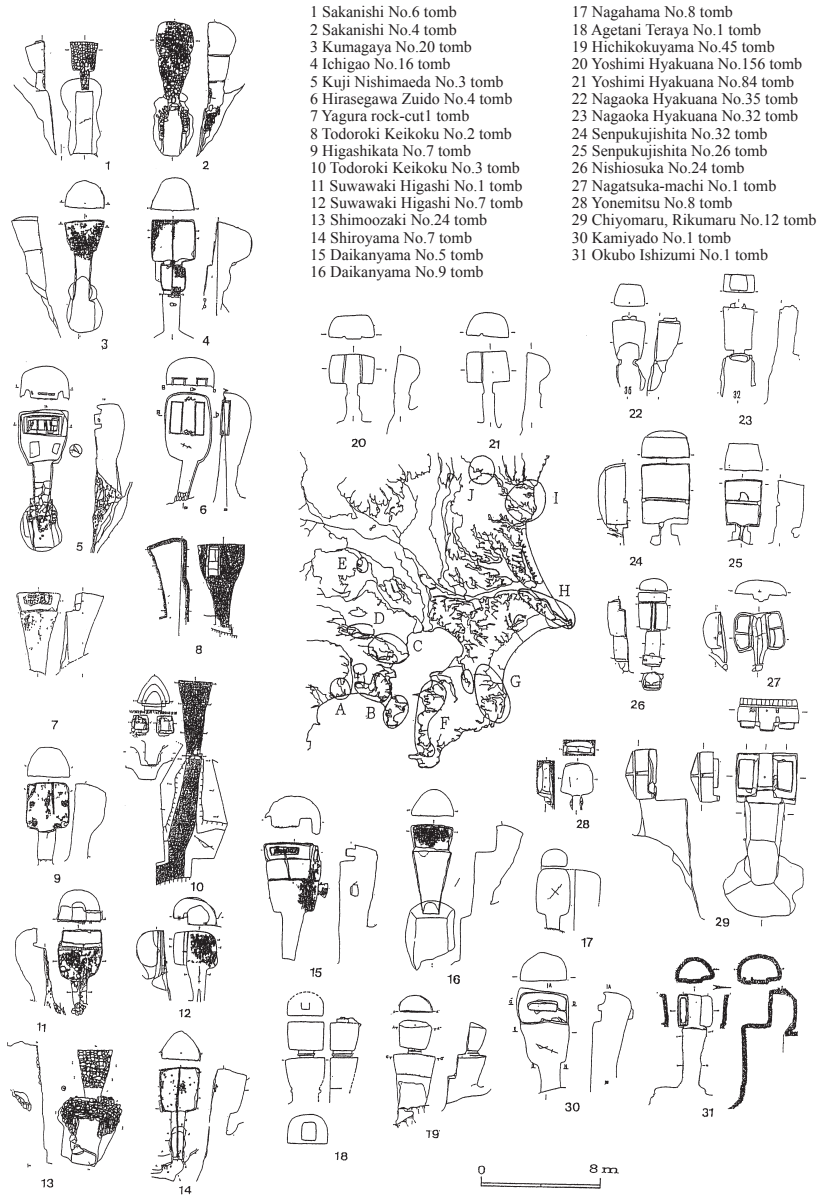


Fig. 7 The rock-cut tomb style found in the Kanto region

cluster comprising decorated tombs in Iwaki City in southern Fukushima Prefecture has drawn attention. A series of triangular patterns depicted in color (red and black) is depicted on the inner walls; the decoration style also suggests that this is a rock-cut tomb in the Kyushu style.

In the rock-cut tombs which expanded into western Shizuoka Prefecture in the Tokai region, the deceased would be enshrined and buried inside a stone coffin constructed from several stone slabs, and this is a characteristic feature of the region. In certain parts of southern Kanto as well, these assembled stone coffins would be enshrined inside the burial chambers of rock-cut tombs; such tombs can therefore be seen as “Tokai-type rock-cut tombs.”

The spread of these different rock-cut tomb types into specific regions rather than their concentration into a single area suggests as one factor the migration of human populations from the area where each type of tomb first originated. It may be surmised that the development of each type of tomb in each area was predominantly influenced by external factors such as the wishes of powerful central local groups (each of which formed an epicenter for the development of the tumuli-building culture in its respective region), rather than local factors linked with each particular area.

The end of the 6th century, the point by which rock-cut tombs had spread to various parts of eastern Japan, represented the end of social systems dominated by the keyhole-shaped burial mound style, and there are suggestions of aggregation in leadership structures in various regions during this period. At Saitama in the Kanto region, in the Saitama tomb where a series of keyhole-shaped burial mound structures measuring more than 100 m or more had been constructed as burial places for local chiefs since the late 5th century, the chief’s tomb constructed at the end of the 6th century has shrunk to around 70 m in size, while a number of other keyhole-shaped burial mounds measuring around 100 m in size are constructed in the nearby area.

This indicates that the previous leadership system was undergoing change and shifting towards a new structure, and that rock-cut tombs were introduced during this period as part of a new type of burial system. Rather than rock-cut tombs being used as the burial places for local entities which had become more powerful during this period, this change can be judged to be the result of the movement of new populations possessing distinctive new skills from other areas into this area, as indicated by this structural pattern.

## 5. Burial customs in rock-cut tombs

The rock-cut tombs constructed in various regions were erected as tombs by specific groups of people; looking at the similarities in the human remains found there enables insights into the burial customs carried out, which differed for each group.

In Type A tombs, the burial customs were completed with a single burial in a tomb unique to the person in question. The structures center on individual families from within rock-cut tomb-building groups, with the death of the head of the individual family forming the starting point for the construction of the tomb, and the remains of other family members being interred in the same tomb at later dates in succession.

When successive bodies were to be buried in an established tomb, they would be laid out in parallel if sufficient space for burial could be ensured; when there was not sufficient space for such arrangements, the remains would be put in one corner and gathered together until there was sufficient space to bury them properly. It appears that these burial customs were adopted among most of the rock-cut tomb clusters.

In such cases, a distinction is noted between the cases where children were included within the buried remains and those where children were not included. It is likely that in cases where the rock-cut tomb-building group had strong rules, only adults were interred in such places, while the inclusion of children reflected unique practices by individual families.

It is rare for rock-cut tombs to be constructed alone, with these structures most often constructed in groups of three to four tombs. These groups of three to four tombs differ according to whether they are (1) constructed as part of a single generation, or (2) constructed in succession. Clusters of type (1) are believed to reflect the involvement of local chiefs, probably as the result of the prevailing of rules created by rock-cut tomb-building groups which did not acknowledge the unique preferences of individual families.

Type (2) is based on the unique preferences of individual families within the rock-cut tomb-building groups, and it may be surmised that the rock-cut tombs thus built were used for several generations. It is possible that children who died when the head of the family at that time was in a state of good health were buried in the tombs constructed for the death of the previous head of the family, and any family members of family heads who could not be separated were buried there as well.



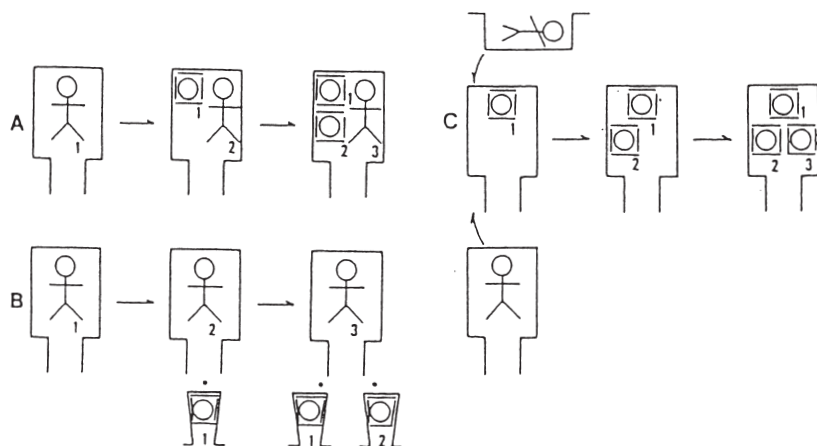


Fig. 8 Burial customs in rock-cut tombs

Among type (2), cases are found in which a number of tombs are constructed in the same generation. Among particularly powerful individual families in the rock-cut tomb-building groups, cases have been noted in which the head of the family was buried separately while other family members were buried in separate rock-cut tombs.

In Type B cases, there was a custom of burying the first set of remains in an individual rock-cut tomb, while for successive burials the remains of the deceased would be gathered together and a small rock-cut tomb for reburial constructed, where the remains would be stored. These burial customs have not only been observed in northern Kyushu but also spread to other areas, being found occasionally in Tottori Prefecture in the Sanin region, and in high concentrations around Iwaki City in the southern coastal regions of Fukushima Prefecture in the Tohoku region. They have also been noted in southern Kanto. In general, this is a highly unusual burial custom; however, the fact that it has been found in regions widely separated throughout the Japanese archipelago may be considered another piece of evidence suggesting the far-reaching influence that rock-cut tombs had.

In Type C, a rock-cut tomb of normal scale was used for reburying remains; it can be surmised that in many cases, a rock-cut tomb of normal scale was usually used as the place for the first burial in which the remains would be ossified, and after the remains were interred, they would be gathered up and reburied, and stored in the rock-cut tomb.

This custom of reburying remains in a rock-cut tomb after the initial interment is surmised from the reburied remains found at Ozakoyama No. A2 tomb (Yonago City in Tottori Prefecture), based on the fact that the sand used to fill in the inside of the tomb differs in its characteristics from the bedrock on which the rock-cut tomb is constructed, suggesting that the remains had originally been buried in sandy ground.

Notable examples of cases where remains are reburied using a number of rock-cut tombs which are located close to one another are found in the Shimada-ike rock-cut tomb cluster in Matsue City in Shimane Prefecture, where the rock-cut tombs are also distinctive for the burial mounds which accompany them. The human remains excavated from rock-cut tombs which were laid out in parallel with several others were found to be samples in a good state of preservation at 2 + 3 + 0, 2 + 0, 5 + 0; it is believed that the rock-cut tombs where no human skeletons were excavated were probably used for the initial burial.

In the Ichijuku rock-cut tombs of Kimitsu City in Chiba Prefecture, there were certain rock-cut tombs from which human skeletons were excavated in spite of the fact that no human skeletons had been excavated from certain tombs located next to these.

In tomb No. 2, five human skeletons were excavated from the coffin No. 1 and ten from coffin No. 3. In tomb No. 9, eight skeletons were excavated from coffin No. 1 and four from coffin No. 2. From coffin No. 3, nine skeletons were excavated, bringing the total from tomb No. 9 to 21. In tomb No. 10, six skeletons were excavated from coffin No. 1, seven from coffin No. 2, 12 from coffin No. 3 and six from coffin No. 4, while one skeleton was excavated from outside the coffins, bringing the total number of skeletons excavated from tomb No. 10 to 32.

The numbers of human skeletons excavated from some of the rock-cut tombs in the Ichijuku rock-cut tomb were unusual compared with the numbers excavated from other rock-cut tombs. It is likely that the reason for this originates in a situation among the rock-cut tomb-building group in which the construction of the rock-cut tombs did not progress fast enough to allow individual families to be buried separately, while the fact that children's bodies made up a large number of the whole group meant that there was no need to limit the number of the deceased to be buried in each tomb.

This type of burial custom cannot be confirmed in many of the tombs; however, if weight is attached to the fact that such customs have been noted

in the Endo rock-cut tomb (Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture), this suggests that these customs spread over a fairly extensive area.

These several different burial customs have been confirmed in combination with specified rock-cut tomb styles. Such customs should be given due weight as one important element characterizing the particular features of the various rock-cut tomb-building groups.

## **6. Rock-cut tombs in clustered tomb construction**

During the late stage and terminal stage of the kofun (tumuli-building) age in the 6th to 7th centuries, the construction of rock-cut tombs was characterized by construction in clusters, a formation which may be considered a variety of the so-called “clustered tomb” style. Clustered tombs consisted of small tumuli, typically of the circular type, whose construction was limited within a certain range; this form of tomb-building was characteristic of the late and terminal stages of the kofun (tumuli-building) age.

It is thought that these tombs were built by newly powerful groups which rose to prominence during this period, and were the burial places for groups which were responsible for a wide range of working tasks. The excavation of distinctive burial goods from certain tombs in western Japan has allowed researchers to envisage the nature of the groups in question: for example, the excavation of iron waste from some sites suggests that these groups were involved with iron production, while the unearthing of fishing tackle in other places suggests that the tombs were built by fishing communities. In most cases, however, no particular types of livelihood can be identified.

In addition to the existence of the local chiefs' tombs, one distinctive feature of the age which has been ascertained is the tendency to bury large numbers of weapons along with the dead. The groups which were responsible for building the tombs were groups armed with weapons in the region, and the majority of the tombs can be envisaged as belonging to powerful groups which built their foundations on agriculture, with agricultural activities taking place under the control of the local chiefs.

The tomb clusters, consisting of several small tumuli clustered together, include clusters which are found to consist of three to four tombs as a fixed number forming a single unit. These units can be categorized as follows. Type A1 groups: tumuli clearly categorized as lying within the tomb areas

belonging to individual families, and built successively (one tomb per generation). Type B1 tombs: where several tumuli lying near each other were built in the same generation. Type A2 tombs: tumuli built successively, including cases in which a number of tombs were built in a single generation, among those tombs where a tomb area belonging to an individual family is specified. Type B2 tombs: tombs built successively, with a number of tombs of the same generation being clustered together.

Type A tombs have been confirmed among the tomb clusters found in the Kinki region, an epicenter of the kofun (tomb-building) culture as a whole. In other regions, Type B tombs have been observed among large tomb clusters as well as Type A tombs.

Differences between the groups that can be confirmed are seen in the in-

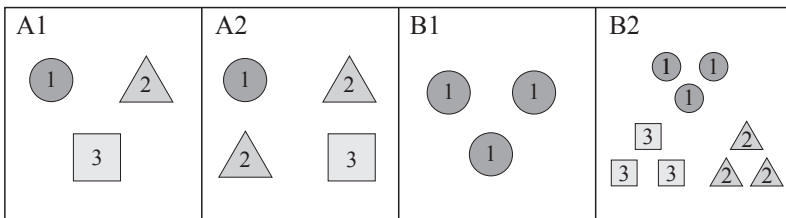


Fig. 9 Types of group units

dividual styles expressed by tomb clusters, reflecting the different kinds of societies found in each region. Similar trends are seen in the rock-cut tombs, with different characteristics being perceptible in such tombs compared to those which are accompanied by burial mounds.

As a basic rule, in regions where rock-cut tombs tend to be concentrated, there are relatively few clusters comprising tumuli that are erected with stone burial chambers, with the two kinds of structure being essentially erected in separate areas according to type. Marked differences in distribution are apparent if one compares the tomb clusters in southern Ibaraki Prefecture with the rock-cut tombs in the north of the same prefecture, or the tomb clusters of Saitama Prefecture with the rock-cut tombs found in Tokyo, or the tomb clusters of eastern Shizuoka Prefecture with the rock-cut tombs seen in the western part of the same prefecture.

Relatively few relics have been excavated from the rock-cut tombs compared with those unearthed from the tomb clusters constructed with stone

burial chambers in the same area. In particular, there are fewer weapons buried with the dead; although there are a few rock-cut tombs where weapons are found as burial goods, it is generally difficult to view rock-cut tombs as being the burial places of warlike groups. Rather, it appears that rock-cut tombs, unlike the tomb clusters, probably belonged to those groups which played the role of pushing forward economic development in their regions.

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