Satsuma No.11 tumulus: 
its historical context and significance

KITAYAMA Mineo¹

ABSTRACT
The Satsuma No.11 tumulus, located in Takatori town in the southern part of the Nara Basin, is a burial mound of the Early Kofun period (the fourth century AD). The excavation of this tumulus in 2007 (January-March) by the Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara prefecture, revealed two burial facilities on the rectangular platform of the burial mound yielding various grave goods that demonstrate the social status of the persons buried in the tumulus. As a result of excavation and analysis of finds, it is argued that the tumulus reflects social structure in the fourth century AD.

KEYWORDS: keyhole-shaped tumulus, grave goods, social organisation, Kofun period, Japan

Introduction and the location of the tumulus

The Satsuma No.11 tumulus is located in the Satsuma area of Takatori town, in the north of Nara prefecture in the southern part of the Nara Basin (Figure 1, Plate 1). The tumulus stands on a hilltop that overlooks an alluvial fan. The height from the base to the top of the hill is about 6m. The burial mound has its main axis from north to south, and its rectangular platform faces north towards the end of the hill.

The tumulus looks over an alluvial fan created by the Matsuyama-gawa River and the Kibi-gawa River. Mount Hiburi is situated to the north of the hill on which the tumulus stands. The Matsuyama-gawa and the Kibi-gawa Rivers flow westwards to join the

¹ Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara prefecture, 1 Unebi-cho, Kashihara city, Nara prefecture, Japan 634-0065 (ktymm@hotmail.co.jp)

Category: Report Received: 19 November 2013; Accepted: 13 December 2013
Soga-gawa River, which passes by to the west of the tumulus, heading through a narrow valley to the east of Mount Kunimi towards the Nara Basin. Thus the location of the tumulus suggests a relationship between the tumulus and the plain along the Soga-gawa River.

**Excavated features**

**Shape and construction of the burial mound**

The burial mound of the tumulus is keyhole-shaped in plan, consisting of a circular mound and a rectangular platform, and measures 27.5m in total length (Figure 2, Plate 2). The rear side of the circular mound is cut by a ditch. Excavations suggest that the mound was built by cutting into the original geographical feature of the hill, not by piling up soil. The construction method of the circular mound has not been confirmed since this area was not excavated.

**Burial facilities**

Two burials were found in this tumulus, the west and east burials. Both comprised a pit containing a wooden coffin (Figure 3, Plate 3). The west burial is 2.3m long north to south and 2.0m wide east to west (these measurements are maximum estimates since the burial had been partly damaged). The coffin in the west burial was cylindrical and wooden, made by a hollowing technique, buried in a pit dug into the mound (Plate 4).

The east burial was located about 1.5m east of the west burial. The east burial was 2.3m long north to south and 0.8m wide east to west. Although it was badly preserved, this burial seems to have also comprised a cylindrical wooden coffin made by a hollowing technique, judging from the observation of the stratigraphic sections. The base of the coffin seems to have been gently curved (Plate 5).

**Finds**

The main objects excavated in the burials are, in the west burial, a *shumon-kyo* bronze mirror (Figure 3, Plate 6) (no. 1 in the illustration), glass beads (nos. 2-36), an iron sword (no. 37), an iron hoe (no. 38) and an iron sickle (no. 39); and in the east burial a *hokakukiku-kyo* bronze mirror (no. 40), comma-shaped beads (nos. 41-46), a glass bead (no. 47) and an iron *warabite-tosu* knife (no. 48).
Figure 2. General plan with locations of trenches and reconstructed base of the mound
Some artifacts were also found outside the burial pit, including a fragment of bronze mirror (no. 49), a bangle-shaped stone object (no. 50), a sword-shaped stone object (no. 51), cylindrical beads (nos. 52-55), comma-shaped beads (nos. 56-78), mortar-shaped beads (nos. 79-80), glass beads (nos. 81-94) and Haji ware pottery (nos. 95-101). These artifacts, except for the pottery, most likely formed part of the assemblage of grave goods. They originated either in the excavated burials on the rectangular platform or in a possible further, unexcavated, burial on the circular mound. These objects were probably disturbed from their original position as a result of grave-robbing.

Two Haji ware pots were identified. Pot A has a composite neck and pot B probably had a straight neck. Most of the fragments found clearly belong to these two pots. It seems likely that these pots were originally placed around the burials. It is not clear, however, whether these pots were complete or broken when deposited.

**Historical context**

**Date of construction**
The typological features of the grave goods point to dates between the later part of the Early Kofun period and the beginning of the Middle Kofun period. What is probably the main burial on the circular mound most likely dates to before the beginning of the Middle Kofun, as the burials excavated on the rectangular platform are thought to be later than the main burial on the circular mound. In addition, the pot with a composite neck also indicates a date in the Early Kofun, assuming that this pot was deposited at the time of the construction of the burial on the circular mound, which corresponds to the later part of the fourth century.

**Implications**
Based on the results of these excavations, we now consider the significance of the Satsuma No. 11 tumulus in the Early Kofun period (the fourth century AD) for our
Figure 3. Burial facilities and grave goods from Satsuma No. 11 Tumulus
understanding of this period in the Nara Basin.

In the early part of the fourth century, a large cluster of tumuli were built in the eastern region of the Nara Basin, while only a few were built in the other parts of the basin (○ in Figure 4 [see after References]). In contrast, the number of tumuli in the eastern region decreases during the late fourth century, and a number of tumuli appear in the northern, western and southern regions of the basin (● in Figure 4). The southern region, however, has less tumuli compared to the northern and western regions.

Regarding the size of burial mounds, there are a number of large tumuli longer than 100m in the eastern region dating to the early part of the fourth century as indicated in Figure 5 (see at the end of the paper). Even in the later part of the fourth century when the number of tumuli decreases, this region has some remarkably large tumuli. In the same period, large tumuli that have a size equal to those in the eastern region appear in the northern and western regions. In contrast, the southern region is distinguished by tumuli less than 60m long in this period.

In terms of grave goods, fourth century tumuli are usually contain a number of bronze mirrors, iron weapons, stone objects, as typified by the Sakurai-Chausuyama tumulus (no.8 in Figure 5) or the Mesuriyama tumulus (no.7 in Figure 5). It is generally believed that such large tumuli longer than 200m with many grave goods represent the burials of chiefs or social elites.

Plate 3. West burial (left) and east burial (right)
In contrast to these large tumuli with many grave goods, the tumuli in the southern region of the Nara Basin are distinctly small. The largest burial mound in this region is the Niizawa No. 500 tumulus (no. 3 in Figure 5) with a length of 60m, and the others are less than 30m long. However, the number and quality of the grave goods from the Niizawa No. 500 tumulus are comparable to the large tumuli in the eastern region. The Taniguchi No. 1 tumulus (no. 2 in Figure 5), the Kamotsuba No. 1 tumulus (no. 5 in Figure 5), and the Satsuma No. 11 tumulus (no. 1 in Figure 5) are also fully equipped with a standard fourth century set of grave goods, although less numerous than in the large tombs. Based on this evidence, it seems that the concept of the burial ritual represented by the uniform sets of grave goods was shared among tumuli regardless of the size of the burial mound.

Many archaeologists who specialize the study of the Kofun period assume that the size of a burial mound reflects the politico-economic power of the buried person, based on the amount of labour invested in the construction of burial mound. Tsude Hiroshi (1991) interprets variation in the size of burial mounds as reflecting social differentiation and the ranking of social power during the Kofun period. Based on his interpretation, the eastern and northern regions of the Nara basin was where the most powerful elites lived, with the western region being home to the middle class of social elites and the southern region representing the lowest ranks.

The interpretation by Tsude was until recently corroborated by the distribution of large settlements. For example, the large settlement at the Makimuku site, which dates to the early part of the fourth century, is located near the large tumuli in the eastern region, and the Sugawara-Higashi site appeared in the northern region during the late fourth century when a number of large tumuli were built in the same region. These examples clearly demonstrate that the distribution of large tumuli was associated with large settlements in these regions.

However, recent excavations also have revealed a large settlement at the Akitsu site in the southern region. Although the excavation at the site is still in progress, this is clearly one of the largest settlements in the Nara Basin, with houses accompanied by large-scale
fences or enclosure walls which are unusual at other settlements. The discovery of this site indicates that the relations between large tumuli and large settlements attested in the eastern and northern regions cannot be the case in the southern region where no large tumuli are present. Therefore, Tsude’s interpretation does not appear to be applicable to this region.

The example of the southern region suggests that the presence of large tumuli does not necessarily represent economic superiority of one region over the other regions. Although we need to discuss more fully how the distribution of tumuli can be related to the economic conditions of a given region, it is clear social structure and organisation cannot be properly understood if arguments depend only on the size of burial mound.

It is highly likely that the size of burial mounds demonstrates the power of the social elites who built the tumuli and were buried in them according to the amount of labour invested in their construction. In this sense, the interpretation of the size of burial mounds as representing the social ranking system remains an important aspect in discussing social structure and social organisation during the Kofun period. However, burial practice, including the construction of burial mounds, cannot give the entire picture of Kofun period society. It is possible that some social elites or chiefs chose not to demonstrate their social power by the construction of large tumuli. The example of the southern region, where there was an economically important settlement but no large tumulus, is evidence for diversity the display of social power during the Kofun period.

Kofun society is clearly distinguished by the development of interrelated social powers and social competition as demonstrated by the construction of tumuli of various sizes. The entire social structure and organization of the Kofun period however, needs to be considered from various dimensions, not only the size of burial mounds. Future study should be oriented towards understanding the social organisation of everyday life reflected in settlements.

The Satsuma No. 11 tumulus has a small burial mound measuring less than 30m in length, and the grave goods, although varied, are limited in number. However the
significance of this tumulus in Kofun society is by no means negligible when the economic and political contexts in which this tumulus was constructed are taken into the consideration by relating it to nearby settlements and to a broader regional perspective across the Nara Basin.

Preservation

The Satsuma No. 11 tumulus is situated partly on land purchased by the Nara prefecture for road construction (the rectangular platform) and partly on private land (the circular mound). The remains in the area owned by the Nara prefecture were due to be destroyed and levelled for the road, but the results of the excavation have caused a change to the original plan so that was survives of the tumulus will be preserved. The remains on the private land, however, may be threatened in the future. It is therefore necessary to take administrative action in order to preserve the remains of the tumulus in their entirety.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Aoyagi Taisuke, Mr. Suzuki Hiroaki, Mr. Uesugi Akinori, and Mr. Yamashita Daisuke. All plates are copyright of the Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara prefecture, and are reproduced with permission.
References


Figure 4. Distribution of major tumuli and settlements in the Nara basin
Figure 5. Size distribution of major tumuli in the Nara basin (nos. 1-55 in Figure 4. Length of 9, 33, 41, 50, 52 unclear)