The Sacred Site Structure of Ancient Shrine Groves (4):
The Case of Ōmiwa Shrine

TANAKA Atsuko

Mount Miwa, whose graceful cone rises in the southeast of the Yamato Basin, has been an object of worship since ancient times. At its foot is Ōmiwa Shrine, supreme shrine of the former Yamato Province and reputedly the oldest shrine in Japan.

As is well known, Ōmiwa Shrine has a haiden (outer worship hall) but no honden (main sanctuary) to house the kami or deity to which it is dedicated. The lack of a honden actually reflects the earliest form of enshrinement, as the mountain itself is the shintai (kami body). It can be worshipped from afar throughout the Yamato Basin, and the sunrise over its peak has particular significance in the ancient faith practiced at Mount Miwa.

This study examines the peoples who lived in the Yamato Basin in the Kofun (250-538 AD), Yayoi (300 BC – 250 AD), and Jōmon (1400-300 BC) periods in terms of their relationship to that faith.

Excavations have found evidence, in the surface layer, of habitation by the Tenson tribe during the Kofun period. They established themselves in the Yamato area and founded the Yamato dynasty after conquering the Izumo tribe, against a background of alliance and intermarriage with the Ama tribe. There is no evidence of their having any interest in the shrine; the traces of their religious belief consist of giant tumuli or burial mounds for their leaders.

The middle layer contains evidence of the Izumo tribe, who lived in the Yayoi or Pre-Kofun period. Their large moated settlement at Karako-Kagi in the Yamato Basin became the center of unified Yayoi power until it fell before the invading Tenson.

The oldest layer contains relics of the Ama tribe, who lived in the Jōmon period. They held Mount Miwa to be a deity and worshipped the sunrise at the winter solstice. Traces of their religious rites include iwakura (rock formations believed to be the abode of a deity) and magatama (comma-shaped beads).

Schematically, the archeological record is as follows:

1. Surface layer: Tenson tribe (Kofun period)
2. Middle layer: Izumo tribe (Pre-Kofun period)
3. Oldest layer: Ama tribe (Jōmon period)
SUMMARY

Mount Miwa itself is associated with the Ama, Sai Shrine, an affiliate of Ōmiwa Shrine with a sacred healing spring, is associated with the Izumo, and the nearby Hashihaka tumulus, together with many other tumuli in the vicinity, including those of the emperors Sujin and Keikō, are associated with the Tenson.

Thus, the Yamato Basin contains stratified evidence of three ancient peoples, the Tenson, Izumo, and Ama, and their deities.