

Tsukuriyama Kofun - the fourth largest ancient tomb in Japan

Kofun is the name given to old tombs in Japan, constructed between the early 3rd and early 7th century. Kofuns, burial mounds or ancient tombs, had displayed various shapes through history. The most common shape of them is a keyhole shape, consisting of a circular part and a rectangle part, in a three-stepped way. Generally, a coffin was located under the circular part.

The largest ancient tomb is Daisenryou Kofun (486 m in length), the second Gondagobyoyama Kofun (425 m), and the third Kamiishizumisanzai Kofun (360 m). These are all located in Osaka and are supposedly the tombs of the Emperors. The Imperial Household Agency designates more than 800 kofuns including the above three as the tombs of ancient imperial family members and their relatives, which are not open to the public under the control of the Imperial Household Agency.

Tsukuriyama Kofun is the fourth largest tomb having a length of 350 m and a height of 30 m, which is located in Okayama, far from Osaka. As this tomb is not designated as one of the tombs of the imperial family, you can climb up its mound freely without permission of the Imperial Household Agency. It means this is the largest tomb in Japan you can actually climb up. And it is thought to have been built earlier than the three tombs mentioned above. What does this mean? Maybe, here in Okayama (Kibi region), it is thought that there was a big community competing with the Yamato Dynasty which has been succeeded by the current imperial family. This area is really a region that was civilized in the early stages of Japanese history.

As Tsukuriyama Kofun has not been excavated until now yet, we don't know who is under the ground of the circular part and whether there actually remains a coffin. Tsukuriyama Kofun is still wrapped in mystery.



Chokkomon (Symbolic Patterned Carving of Kofun Period)

The largest ancient tomb, Daisenryou Kofun has three ditches (moats) around it. Tsukuriyama Kofun was supposedly also moated (refer to G on the map).



Daisenryou Kofun
(Tomb of Emperor Nintoku)



Tsukuriyama Kofun

Two thirds of the mound was a natural mountain and one third was artificially made by manpower. The whole inclined surface of the mound of those days was covered with stones and the cylindrical terracotta clays (Haniwa) were set around each edge of the three-stepped stages. In Tsukuriyama Kofun, about 6,000 cylindrical terracotta clays were found. Each cylindrical clay has a height of about 50 cm (refer to B).



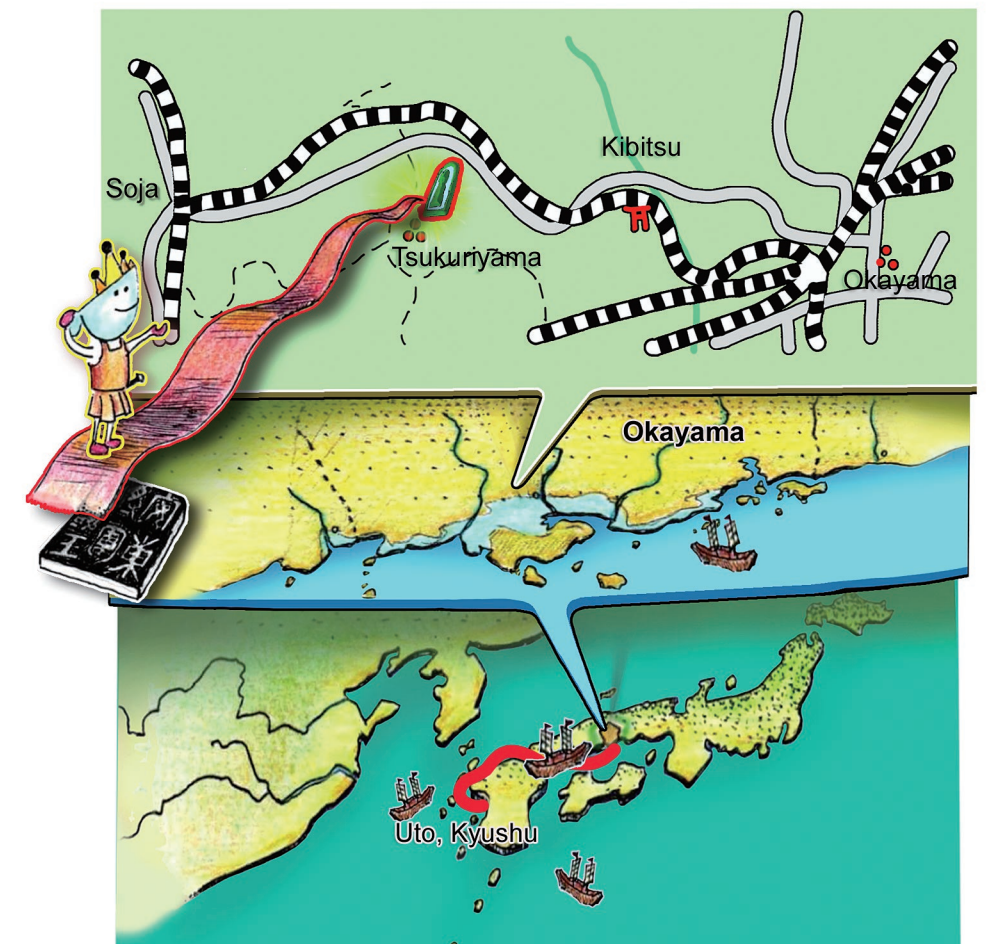
Goshikizuka Kofun (Kobe) (reproduction)

You can see a stone coffin (refer to A) on the top of the rectangular part. The stone coffin was not excavated from this mound. They say that it was transported from one (refer to F) of the small kofuns near here, but nobody knows exactly where and when it was transported. However, the stone used for this coffin is produced only in Kumamoto, Kyushu. So, maybe, this coffin was transported from Kyushu by boat. Away from the main body of the coffin, there is a broken piece of its cover. Inside the cover, you see a brilliant red color. This pigment is made from colcothar.

Tsukuriyama Kofun has six smaller burial mounds (No.1 to No.6) attributed to the followers or family members, where many excavated articles were found such as house-shaped terracotta clay (D), horse-shaped buckle (C), accessories (E) and so on.

In the excavated articles from No.1, we can find an influence from the culture of the Korean Peninsula. The person buried here is supposed to be from the Korean Peninsula. In No.5, there actually remained a stone chamber tomb and its stone wall was decorated with patterned carvings (E) (it was removed from here for the purpose of preservation in 2011). The same pattern is also found in the stone coffin in Kyushu and this pattern possibly has some meaning. The person buried here is supposed to be from Kyushu.

According to the above, it is thought that the Tsukuriyama Kofun was made by collective power of Kyushu, Korean Peninsula, and the other neighboring regions.



photos by
Archaeology Dept. of Okayama University (Survey Map of Tsukuriyama Kofun)
Okayama City Board of Education (B, D, E)
Imperial Household Agency (C)