

Briefing Memo

The Reconsideration of the Seinan War History: From the Results of Excavations

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Foreword

On March 27, 2013, the ruins of the Seinan War, composed of nine places such as Tabaruzaka-koen (park), Tabaruzaka-hondo (main road), a total length of about 1.3 Km, the Hutamata-uryuda battery site and the Takatuki Cemetery of the Imperial army, which straddle Ueki-cho and Gyokuto-cho of Kumamoto city, were designated as a Japanese national historic sites. This is because the Council for Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology made the determination that landscape around the ruins has not changed much from that time and a great many bullets, shell fragments and trenches have been excavated, which reveal actual battle conditions, and have estimated that the ruins were important in understanding modern Japanese political and military systems. Why were the ruins of the Seinan War designated among, so to speak, tens of thousands of war ruins? The excavation of the ruins in the whole area of Tabaruzaka which has been carried out since 2008 by Kumamoto city and Gyokuto-cho, has exerted a great deal of influence on the decision. The results of the excavation will probably prompt the reconsideration of the Seinan War history (especially regarding the history of operational combat).

In the past, the Seinan War history was dependent on hear-say, reference documents and topography or geographical features, so that the investigation was insufficient in some cases. As a result, there was a tendency for the concrete and individual circumstances described there-in to be unclear and to have little academic value. Therefore, where combat was actually carried out and how it was fought is unclear in many cases. In this background, the present excavation has revealed the concrete, undocumented state of the war, vividly showing us the real situation with a strong objective persuasiveness.

In this paper, I would like to consider what influence the excavation of the ruins of the Seinan War has had on the military research of the Seinan War (especially on operational combat).

1 The excavation of the ruins of the Seinan War

The Seinan War, the last civil war in Japan, took place in the South Kyushu region in 1877, around 130 years ago, between the members of the samurai class (the rebel army of Satsuma) led by Saigo Takamori and the government army (the Imperial army). According to “Kumamoto shi no Bunkazai Dai 5 Shu Tabaruzaka” (The Cultural Treasure of Kumamoto city Vol. 5 Tabaruzaka) compiled by the Kumamoto City Board of Education, a ruin which meets with one or more of the conditions shown below is called a ruin of the Seinan War and those ruins distributed throughout the whole area of Southern Kyushu. The conditions are: (1) a trench site, etc. confirmable as a ruin on current land surfaces, (2) the confirmable dispersion of relics such as bullets and cartridges, (3) some past excavations including a trial or an investigation for confirmation conducted for structural remains and relics unearthed or gathered, (4) the existence of sites of a field hospital or a hospital relating to the Seinan War, a cemetery of the Satsuma or the government army or a monument built right after the War. Among the ruins of the War, the Tabaruzaka area, designated as a national historic site, was the fiercest battlefield and it contains the remains of many war ruins.

The excavation in Tabaruzaka area (mainly from Tabaruzaka through Yokohirayama to Hankouyama) has been conducted step by step by Kumamoto city and Gyokuto-cho since 2008 aiming to discover definite structural remains and relics related to the ruins of the War, and, moreover, confirm that the site had been preserved in good condition and, as a result, prove their high value from an academic perspective. In concrete terms, “Structural remains” mean a trench site which shows the existence of a

position and an impact mark of a shell, etc., and the investigation covers the details such as specifying positions, scale, appearance, structure, contents of the remains, the direction opposing sides faced each other and the excavation conditions of relics, and confirms from which direction a bullet or a shell is fired. “Relics” include cartridges (containers filled with a bullet’s propellant) and percussion caps (which ignite gunpowder in a cartridge), making it possible to definitely infer that firearms were fired there, or else concentrated excavations of bullets and cartridges. Excavation of bullets, cartridges, percussion caps and shell fragments is important evidence indicating that combat was undoubtedly carried out there. These actual excavations included the verification of structural remains and the investigation of the dispersion of relics by trenching (trial) and the analysis of collected relics.

The details of the excavations carried out so far have been compiled into the following documents.

- The Board of Education, Kumamoto city “Kumamoto shi no Bunkazai Tabaruzaka I - IV” (The Cultural Treasure of Kumamoto city Tabaruzaka Vol. I - IV)
- The Board of Education, Gyokuto-cho “Gyokuto-cho Seinan Sensou Iseki Chousa Sougou Houkokusho” (The Ruins of the Seinan War of Gyokuto-cho Comprehensive Investigation Report).

2 The major findings of the excavations

The major findings of the investigation of four sites, where a notably fierce battle seemingly took place among the excavation sites, are outlined as follows.

1) Tabaruzaka-hondo Ninosaka

The only route through which horse-drawn carriages with cannon or military goods were able to pass is Tabaruzaka-hondo, a long and easy slope. It is said that close combat between the Government and the Satsuma armies occurred in the vicinity of Ninosaka along the slope.

As a matter of fact, a great number of Snider bullets and cartridges, friction primers (an instrument used to ignite cannon) and screws for ammunition boxes were discovered concentrated in the limited area north of Tabaruzaka-hondo in Ninosaka. Both armies used Sniders as rifles. This means that the Satsuma army probably attacked the Government army position where the concentrations of cartridges were dug out. In addition, the fact that friction primers were found there indicates that they equipped the position with cannons. That is, it is estimated that the artillery conducted fire support following the infantry’s attack. These investigation results proved that the artillery position existed in the vicinity of Ninosaka and the 1920 “Meiji Ju-nen Seinan Sen-eki Tabaru Kichiji Ueki Senseki-zu” (The war record map of Tabaru-Kichij-Ueki in the 1877 Seinan War) depicted accurately the state of close combat around the area.

Moreover, a moat-like ground depression, which seems to have been made earlier (pre-Meiji era) and the screws of ammunition boxes were discovered at the place where the cartridges mentioned before were dug out en masse. Presumably, the Imperial army utilized this small hollow, part of which had been left unfilled, as a hasty trench position. The existence of the screws of ammunition boxes might have indicated that they used the boxes to make a breastwork (a breast-high wall-like facility) to reinforce the position.



The bird’s eye view of the battle (an imaginary depiction):

Tabaruzaka, Yokohirayama, Hankouyama (Kichijitouge)

Extracted from “Seinan Senso gaido-bukku” (The Seinan War Guide Book)

by the Ueki-cho/Gyokuto-cho Cooperated Preservation and Utilization Council of the Ruins of the Seinan War

(<http://seinansensou.jp/wp-content/themes/seinansensou/img/otona.pdf>)

2) The Imperial army's battery in Hutamata-uryuda

Wheel tracks of carriages of "*Canon de montagne de 4 La Hitte*" (mountain artillery) and a number of friction primers were dug out in the Imperial army's battery site on Hutamata-daichi (high plain) about 100m above sea level, lying beside Ueki-daichi in Tabaruzaka. These indicate that artillerymen of the Imperial army fired in the direction of Tabaruzaka aiming at the Satsuma army. As a matter of fact, Tabaruzaka-hondo area can be observed from the Imperial army's battery site on Hutamata-daichi without any obstructions.

The Satsuma army's battery reportedly was positioned in Nakakubo on the high plain of Nakakubo (about 500m south of the Tabaruzaka museum) about 900m east of the battery site. In addition, Shells were found in the vicinity of Nakakubo. These facts also prove that the Imperial army fired in the direction of Nakakubo from the battery of Hutamata-uryuda. The "Artillery Drill Manual: War Time Duty of Field Artillery, Draft" by the artillery headquarters, which became a basis of the manual, stated that "At the start of a war, the artillery should occupy highlands about 2,500m distant from the enemy and, first of all, should fire on the enemy's artillery and observable enemy soldiers for the purpose of reconnoitering enemy movements and protecting the deployment of friendly forces." Presumably, based on the manual, they engaged the enemy artillery and supported the infantry, which was charging the enemy's position.

3) Yokohirayama

Yokohirayama, 144m above sea level, which was famous for the Imperial army's *Keishi-Battoutai* (a special attack force composed of members of a Samurai class) being thrown into attack, was a major position of the Satsuma army which was located south of Hutamata-daichi. As a matter of fact, it is well understood that Yokohirayama was the strategic point for cutting off the Satsuma army's retreat because Yokohirayama overlooks the whole area of Nanamoto south of Tabaruzaka.

Trench sites which are confirmable at present on the top of the mountain where Snider cartridges were dug out en masse, seem to have been the Satsuma army trench sites at that time. This fact seemingly proves that the Satsuma army, in which each soldier was said to usually be armed with his own combat gear, intentionally consolidated its firearms into breechloaders with effective fire and engaged in hard fighting for Yokohirayama, and also demonstrates that they attached great importance to Yokohirayama. In addition, Snider cartridges and unused bullets of Snider/Enfield rifles were excavated en masse in the terrace-shaped structural remains located at a place 130m above sea level, down to the north from the summit. The Satsuma army probably kept defending at the above two positions. In addition to that, from the edge of the slope north of this terrace, many cartridges and screws used for ammunition boxes were discovered in large concentrations. Moreover, along the small paths which linked the summit and foothills, cartridges were found dispersed, and sword guards and the gold buttons of a military uniform, which might have belonged to the Imperial army (*Keishi Battoutai*), were found.

With regard to the bullets dug out in Yokohirayama, a component analysis (a fluorescent X-ray analysis) was conducted. The Satsuma army reportedly manufactured bullets using metals other than lead to cover a material shortage. However, the bullets found in Yokohirayama are almost all made of lead and its rate is constant, showing that the Satsuma army in Yokohirayama still used formal bullets. On the other hand, the analysis of the bullets collected in battle fields of the last half of the War clearly indicates that they were made with mixtures of lead, bronze, iron, etc. in many cases, suggesting that presumably the fierce battle around Tabaruzaka consumed the Satsuma army's resources and exerted great influence on subsequent equipment and the state of the war.

4) Hankouyama

Hankouyama, 294m above sea level, which was on the way from Yokohirayama to Kichijitouge, was the key position of the Satsuma army. Actually, Hankouyama overlooks Kichijitouge and the whole area of Kitome, where the Satsuma army's headquarters was set up, can be seen in the distance. Huge stones are exposed everywhere in Hankouyama, and Snider and Spencer cartridges were found concentrated behind the rocks on the summit. It is supposed that the Satsuma army fired behind the huge stones as breastworks. Bullets were found circularly on the line 290m above sea level all over the mountain. However concentrations of cartridges and percussion caps, which indicate the place of firing, were mainly unearthed at the summit and along old roads toward Yokohirayama north of the summit. Bullets found there are mostly Snider types, whereas various kinds of cartridges were found around them, which indicates that three or more kinds of firearms were used in Hankouyama. In contrast, in Yokohirayama, the Satsuma army seems to have been armed with Sniders, the newest-model at that time.

Conclusions :Contributions to the research of a war history by the excavations

Though the excavations in the whole area of Tabaruzaka have been carried out only in the limited area of the battlefields, they have not only unveiled fierce combat between the Imperial army and the rebel army but have also brought forth much evidence and new discoveries for the war history of Tabaruzaka, which we have only vaguely imagined until now based on reference documents.

Let us clarify herein what major points of the existing war history research we should reconsider as a result of the excavations.

First is the Imperial army's tactics (or plan of campaign). In the "Nihon Heisei-shi (The History of a Military System in Japan)" compiled by the Association of Historical Geographers in Japan, there is a description, which makes us imagine a mobile warfare, such as "the Imperial army first engaged in firearm combat with skirmishers, and rear units followed them, attacking with bayonets, while the artillery unit supported them during the battle". However it was proven by an investigation that the imperial army's infantry actually fortified for attack, making breastwork with ammunition boxes and building hasty positions by utilizing existing hollows, and carefully prepared for attack as if it were the siege warfare of a fortress. Old battlefields, which were seemingly fortified for attack as such, were also found in the Yamagashira ruins in Ogisako (about 5km south-east of Tabaruzaka) where the battle of Kitome/Ogisako took place. Therefore comprehensive approaches will be required.

Next is the details of places where actual battles took place. The investigation clarified the detailed locations of the actual battle fields such as the Imperial army's and the Satsuma army's positions which were constructed in Tabaruzaka (Ninosaka), Yokohirayama, and Hankouyama but not yet documented and the direction of the Imperial army's attack, so that it has become possible to depict the locations of battlefields on a relevant map.

And third is the reconsideration of a commonly accepted view or theory. The Satsuma army was said to have mainly used Enfield Rifle Muskets but not to always have used a constant type of rifle and was even said to have engaged in the war with individually provided firearms, and was also said to have had ammunition supply difficulties, etc. This investigation, however, made it clear that the rebel army confronted the Imperial army by using the newest model of Sniders and formal bullets intensively in Tabaruzaka and Yokohirayama.

It is estimated from the investigation that the battle of Tabaruzaka and Yokohirayama was a decisive battle of the Seinan War in terms of logistics as well as fighting. The importance of Yokohirayama as well as Tabaruzaka will be recognized more than ever. In addition, the kind, shape and firing direction of each bullet dug out shows the actual firing conditions and rough shooting position, which enabled an estimation of how soldiers attacked (or defended).

From this point, in the research of the Seinan War history, the arrangement and correction of the existing findings would require taking these excavation results into consideration. Therefore it is also necessary to work diligently to administer the ruins of the Seinan War. In this sense, it is very significant to the research of war history that the ruins of the Seinan War have been designated as a Japanese national historical site.

(Completed on October 10, 2014)

Literatures

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