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Archeological Excavation in the Near and Middle East

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Situated on the interface between Eastern and Western Culture, the Republic of Turkey possesses a great variety of historic remains. Among them, there are the Höyük, Tepe, an artificial mounds formed of more than 10,000 ancient settlement remains. The Anatolia Peninsula was transited by many peoples and its mounds accumulate layers of cultures, including the vestiges of many cities. A chronology of more than 10,000 years can be created excavating just one of these mounds. Producing these chronologies is a basic task of archaeological research. In the past, they had been compiled by American and European researchers. In the 19th through 21st centuries, they have spent what might even be thought of as excessive time and expense in compiling huge number — numbers of excavated relics and composing cultural chronologies. It may be said that they established the domain of Near and Middle East Archeology. When in 1972 I began doing excavations in Turkey, I found that there had been virtually no Japanese involvement in this basic archeological work.

In 1985, I started an archaeological survey of the Kaman-Kalehöyük ruins, located near the center of Turkey. Its aim was to create a cultural chronology of the area's ruins, and use it to elucidate the historical and cultural role played by Turkey in the narrow space between the Middle East and Southeastern Europe. I felt it would be difficult to create new historical perspectives if I were to advance my research using only the yardsticks provided by western researchers. To break new ground by carrying out an excavational survey in Kaman-Kalehöyük, I would have to resolve myself to working continuously at the site for a long period of time.

The most important work of archaeologists is of course excavating historical remains. These unearthed relics are vital to advancing archaeological research. Much of the material collected is potsherd, animal bones and the like. Taken alone, they do not tell us much. But, when great numbers of these artifacts are assiduously assembled, they gradually give us a picture of ancient cultures. This is possible only when the researcher stays constantly near the ruins and relics. It is something that cannot be achieved by merely doing one-month surveys over a period of a couple of years.

Collecting artifacts has been an integral component in pursuing my theme of creating a cultural chronology of Kaman-Kalehöyük. By collecting and compiling all of these artifacts, I believed it would be possible to find clues to solving the puzzles that have come to hamper the elucidation of this cultural history. In the process of this work, I made some milestone discoveries: One was that a high level of culture had existed in Greece and Turkey and other parts of the Near and Middle East in the so-called Dark Ages of the 12th through 8th centuries BC—a period whose culture and history has not been considered worthy of serious investigation. Another finding that emerged from my process of gathering artifacts was the possibility that the Iron Age had its beginnings in a considerably earlier period than the generally theorized 12th century BC.

When starting this archaeological survey of Kaman-Kalehöyük in 1986, we faced the immediate issue of where to sort out and store the artifacts that we would excavate. We felt strongly that we'd need to construct a permanent on-site facility for this purpose. Besides being a base for advancing our research, this facility would provide us a place to store our unearthed relics and place them in order of stratification in tracing the area's cultural transitions. I believe that having this spacious facility to store and lay out the artifacts we would excavate over a long period of time also allowed us to pick up the clues that help elucidate the nature of the Dark and Iron Ages.

Even with such a facility, we knew, however, if our work was not ongoing and sustained in its implementation that it would be difficult to achieve results of historical significance. We were well aware that what underscored the excavation results and research advances of western archaeologists was their establishment of research facilities in the world's major cities besides in the Near and Middle East and their maintenance of systems to provide ongoing support for long-term research strategies.

Since our first survey in 1986, we have conducted our excavation in Kaman-Kalehöyük under a consistent theme. In that process, we have been supported by three Grants-in-Aid: From 1997-1999, Scientific Research (A) for "Provenance Study on Objects Excavated in Anatolian Sites"; from 2002-2006, Scientific Research (S) for "Reconstruction of the Cultural Chronology in Ancient Anatolia – Kaman-Kalehöyük from Third to Second Millenium B.C.-"; and from 2010-2014, Scientific Research (S) for "Reconstruction of the Cultural Chronology in Prehistoric Anatolia." Thanks to this support, we have been able to make large strides in our research work.

As I've described, long periods of time are essential to ongoing archaeological research projects. Attempting to obtain results from short-term archaeological excavations cannot be called an effective research posture. Irrespective of the object of a study, there may be cases when it is possible to draw conclusions from digging in a very small space; however, solving issues germane to the skeletal structure of history and generating new historical perspectives is much more complex.

When conducting future archaeological surveys overseas, if we want to achieve results at the root of civilization's history, we'll need to stop doing a "short-term playoff" type of material collection and assembly and pursue a more genuine form of collaborative research with western archaeologists—one in which Japan doesn't just follow the West but plays leading roles in carrying out long-term research schemes. For this purpose as well, Grants-in-Aid shoulder a heavy responsibility, being integrally connected with the very fate of Japanese research in the humanities.