

Towards the use of geomythology explaining myths and legends through geological science

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Introduction

Local communities often preserve histories passed down through generations, regardless of whether they originate in the East or West. These are commonly referred to as myths and legends. However, the term “myth” is not confined to the humanities; in geology, the concept of geomythology—examining these narratives scientifically—is gaining attention. This trend stems from the observation that people’s interest in their local natural environment is heightened through the use of myths and legends. Its effectiveness is also increasingly recognized in geopark activities. In Japan, the book “Tales of the Earth and People” (Sogensha) was published last year.

The Intersection of Folklore and Geological Perspectives

Many works have long discussed the relationship between people and the land. Within folklore studies, however, it is important to note that certain landscape features evoke a sense of the divine and inspire sacredness, referred to as “sacred terrain.” These features are explained as having been protected since ancient times as “landscapes of the gods” or “seats of the gods.” Diverse landforms—caples, lakes, caves, megaliths (iwakura), waterfalls—constitute these terrain elements. This understanding reflects the recognition that geology and topography are not separate from humanity; rather, they live within the lives of the people inhabiting that environment. It also points out that the degree of this recognition and the manner of engagement depend on the spirituality of the individual.

The expression “natural objects that evoke a sense of the divine within the landscape and inspire sacredness,” as noted by folklorists, is somewhat vague. However, sacred terrain is closely linked to geological events. Furthermore, disasters caused by earthquakes, floods, and volcanoes instill fear of nature in people. Many myths and legends feature volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis that instantly devastated local communities.

Words used in folklore

Here, I wish to clarify the terms “myth,” “legend,” and “folklore.” The word ‘myth’ (myth, mythology) we use derives from the ancient Greek word mythos (mythos), meaning “story.” Because it encompasses unverified “stories and narratives” in contrast to logos (logos), which refers to words that logically explain things, the definition of myth derived from this root has also led to diverse interpretations. Regarding this point, we should prioritize examining the underlying phenomena through natural science to understand how groups and societies perceived the natural landscape.

The word “legend” derives from the Medieval Latin legenda, itself stemming from the Latin legendus (meaning “to be read”). Legends are very similar to myths, but unlike myths, legends recount historical facts that occurred in the past, not necessarily limited to ancient times. Folklore is understood as the transmission of long-standing customs, traditions, beliefs, legends, skills, and knowledge within a community to subsequent generations.

Toward the Dissemination of the Geomythology

As previously discussed, oral traditions such as myths and legends should be understood as the common phrases used in everyday situations of ancient peoples without writing, serving as the most efficient

means of communication for conveying and receiving information. What is important is that we should note how ancient people perceived and sensed scientific phenomena relevant to the present within the traditions (myths and legends) concerning the landforms created by geological processes. Therefore, the significance of geomythology lies in explaining the ancient view of nature using our current understanding of nature.

Geomythology, which seek to reinterpret the wisdom of our ancestors through modern science and apply it to contemporary society, can be considered an important method for widely disseminating science-based regional understanding to the public.

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