Introduction—Defining Tōhoku

Tōhoku in the Spotlight

The history of the Tōhoku region has come under the spotlight in recent years, particularly with the unexpected discovery of the Sannai-Maruyama archeological site, located in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan. Beginning in 1953, a team from Keio University (Tokyo) had already conducted several excavations of the area, but no major discoveries were made until the 1990s, when salvage excavations prior to the construction of a baseball stadium revealed that the entire area had once been a prehistoric settlement. In the summer of 1994, the remains of six wooden posts (chestnut tree boles) were unearthed, each measuring over eighty centimeters in diameter. This discovery, along with evidence of numerous pit-dwellings, grave pits, burial jars, and other assorted artifacts, led archeologists to declare that they had uncovered the largest Jōmon period (14,000 BC–300 AD) settlement yet found. The findings from the resulting excavation of the site brought about a revolutionary change in the way the Jōmon period had traditionally been viewed and led to a “Jōmon Culture Boom,” with the number of people touring Sannai-Maruyama topping half a million in 1996. Even after the devastation caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the site still saw about 300,000 visitors in 2013.

The discovery of Sannai-Maruyama has affected not only Japanese archeological tradition, but also sent ripples of change in the way historians approach local history from the Jōmon period till 1868. It has led historians to reassess subjects such as Emishi, Ezo and the Ainu from the viewpoint of the “north” rather than the “center.” As a result, Tōhoku’s history has been resituated in terms of its relationship to East Asia and the countries that border the Japan Sea, rather than being consigned to the role of remote frontier. This change in Tōhoku historiography has led to the publication of some groundbreaking research that has shaken the image of Japanese history itself. The advance in, and deepening of, our understanding of history within Japan, moreover, has transformed our approach to prefectural histories of the region. This can be seen in the mission statement of a project begun in the 1990s to compile a fifty-volume history of Aomori Prefecture, which sets out to “take the initiative in positioning the region in the world of the North, and to try to change the existing perception of Michinoku (Aomori).”
Situating Tōhoku in World History

The road taken by Tōhoku is undergoing a reexamination in modern and contemporary history; the region has a unique backstory that is not found in other regions of Japan. According to folklorist Akasaka Norio, who has led the charge for “Tōhoku-ology” (Tōhokugaku), “when the spell of ‘a homogenous Japan’ is broken and the idea of ‘many Japans’ is laid bare for all to see, our image of Japanese culture itself will be forced to undergo a fundamental transformation.” Akasaka sees Tōhoku as a gateway for this process, and “a privileged locus of intellectual struggle.” Moreover, Tōhokugaku, the journal founded by Akasaka, posits Tōhoku as “a land of possibilities” and advocates “a renaissance that begins in Tōhoku.” Meanwhile, Furumaya Tadao, who reexamined modern Japanese history from the so-called Ura Nihon (the area of Honshū on the Japan Sea side) region, has said that Tōhoku, “with its unique history and cultural system, has all the qualities of a different world.” Furumaya views the region positively because throughout modern history it never lost this sense of having “an identity as if belonging to a different world”; thus it is now “the basis for a new world view and set of values,” as well as for “a critique of modernity and economic rationalism.”

Terms such as “privileged” and “a different world” reveal the tendency of scholars to treat Tōhoku with excessive devotion and to view Tōhoku and Ura Nihon as separate entities, but it is this attempt to reexamine (modern) Japanese history that is important. This kind of stance focuses on the pluralism of Japanese society, and breaks free from the habit of viewing and evaluating regional history in relation to the center, a pattern that has bound Japan for so long. To sum up, a new way of thinking is steadily gaining ground, one that sees Tōhoku history for the benefit of Tōhoku itself, and places Tōhoku history in the context of world history, not Japanese history.

At present, projects to promote Tōhoku for a new era are progressing rapidly, assisted in part by the changes outlined above. A prime example is the Tōhoku Roundtable, sponsored by eight newspaper publishers in Tōhoku’s six prefectures as well as Niigata Prefecture. This series of seminars was established to provide opportunities to nurture human resources for the future of

2 Ibid.