

Why is Beppu (別府) Beppu?

(Article written by Hiroshi HOSHINO, June 1988 issue of Oita This Month)

Everything has a name and every name has a meaning. So are the names of the places. "Cambridge" originally means "bridge on the Cam River" and "Oxford"---"a river where oxen forded." In Japan, Kyoto simply means capital, and Tokyo---eastern capital. Of course, there are many names of unknown origin. For example, the derivation of "Oita" is still enveloped in mystery. Most likely, it comes from "spacious agricultural field." But except for mythological explanation, there seems to be no theory which explains clearly why Oita was originally called "spacious field." Now, how about Beppu?

Let's play a guessing game. What do you think is the original meaning of Beppu? Choose one of the following four.

- (1) Hot spring
- (2) Gentle slope
- (3) Separate office or the seat of a branch office of the provincial government
- (4) Land adjacent to an established manor

The answer

(1) True, the biggest feature of Beppu is hot spring. But don't you think it's funny that there are no other hot spring resorts bearing the name Beppu? Well, actually, there are many places in Japan with the same or similar names. Even though the pronunciation varies, there are many places with the name written 別府. Just to name a few, there is 別府 (Befu) in Fukuoka City and 別府 (Byu) in Nobeoka City. Neither of them have hot springs.

(2) This is another feature of Beppu. The mountains are about four five kilometers away from the coast, which gives the town of Beppu its spaciousness. However, linguistically, it seems to have nothing to do with the name Beppu.

(3) Seems plausible. In fact, a book of provincial history compiled in the Edo Period¹ has adopted this theory. Going further back in history, however, we cannot find any evidence backing up this theory.

(4) So, that leaves (4) as the correct answer. A vast area of the present-day Beppu was owned

by an influential Shinto Shrine Usa Jingu.

The landholding under the manor system started as an illegal institution in Japan. In 645, following a coup d'état in the imperial court, all the land and people of the nation were put under direct control of the Emperor. Common people were given a tract of land while alive and gave up a portion of their crop to the government as taxes. When they died, they gave back the land they plowed to the government. In other words, land was leased in their lifetime and the family possession of land was not allowed. This was a means to ensure the government revenue.

However, the population growth brought about a shortage of land to be leased and the government had to take measures to encourage the clearing of wilderness for cultivation. It was for that purpose that a law was enforced allowing individuals to hold the land they had leveled for cultivation for three generations. Clearing wilderness required a workforce and tools, so these individuals were actually influential entities like temples, shrines or aristocratic families.

The landholding right only for three generations was not attractive enough to entice people to cultivate more land. So, only two decades later the government issued a decree allowing the eternal possession of the land one had leveled. Once this decree was issued, powerful shrines, temples and aristocrats joined in the race of expanding their territories.

These territories run by big powers came to be called manors or "shoen" in Japanese. But at the beginning, they were still taxable by the government and once crimes occurred, the government authorities had rights to intervene to assure the strict observance of government laws. The manor owners didn't like this and they gradually acquired rights to refuse investigation and taxation by the government. In other words, they acquired immunity. But to do so, the owners had to exercise considerable political power. Those with less power also hoping to acquire immunity did so by nominally contributing their land to government officials and politically more influential manor owners.

If this practice went on without limits, the government revenue would decline considerably. Of course, the government had measures to counterattack this. In establishing a manor or acquiring immunities, the owners had to go through a due procedure. All the necessary documents had to be submitted and approved by the central government in Kyoto. No doubt it was time-consuming.

Now, in Beppu, there were manors owned by the influential Usa Shrine. The largest one was called Ishigaki Manor. There is still an area called Minami-Ishigaki in Beppu. Formerly, a vast area between the Sakai River and the Haruki River was called Ishigaki, literally meaning stone fence or wall. Because of the slope, the land was tilled in terraces and at the end of each terrace there was a stone wall. That was the arable part of Beppu and was first made into a manor. The Usa Shrine had acquired official permission to manage this area as a manor.

Until this vast area of Ishigaki Village became part of Beppu in 1935, Beppu City consisted only of the areas near and south of Beppu Station. Beppu was originally the name referring to the area near Beppu Station.

In ancient times, that area was not suited for cultivation because the land consisted largely of pebbles and what was worse, hot water gushed out here and there.

But as Ishigaki Manor expanded, they finally wanted to include that area as well. Now, when a manor was already established and when they wanted to annex adjacent areas to the manor proper for the purpose of obtaining land to raise cattle and get wood, they could forego the hairsplitting procedure to apply to the central government. Of course, as long as they stuck strictly to the law, they were supposed to do that. But gradually, a simplified procedure was introduced and by the time Beppu was included in Ishigaki Manor, the annexation was carried out by a provisional permission by the government of the province.

The official permit issued by the central government was called "kanpu" (official permit), whereas the provisional permit by the province governor was referred to as "beppu". So "beppu" originally meant a provisional permission issued by the governor of the province allowing the owner of the manor to annex adjacent areas for further economic activities of his manor. Later, the word came to be used to refer to the land itself thus annexed.

So, Beppu is not the only area which became a part of a manor through provisional permission. There were many such areas throughout the country. All places named 別府 has such an origin.

Notes:

1 Edo Period: 1600-1868 AD