

Relationships between Silla 新羅 and Yamato 大和

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Introduction

A notable number of women ruled in the Silla kingdom of Korea and in Yamato of Japan, in roughly the same time periods. Is this incidental, or might some connection be implied? Connections are of course notoriously tricky – how can we infer anything about migration of people or diffusion of ideas, about trade, warfare, or other contact between polities, when similarities are found? The specifics escape us if based on archaeology alone, and documents are often open to various interpretations. Nevertheless, in this paper I will note that in both Silla and Yamato women were eligible to rule, along with other cultural traits that I infer belong to the similar Central Asian cultural ancestors of both groups, and explore whether closer ties can be suggested. One avenue is to consider the antecedents of both Yamato and Silla, another is to examine the possible existence of a Silla colony in the Japanese islands.

When addressing questions of relationships between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands in the time period of state formation, it requires repeating that archaeologists and historians need to step back from the nationalism that clouds many approaches to state formation in this region. Gina Barnes made a giant step in this direction by referring to “peninsular societies” and “insular societies” rather than Korea and Japan.¹ Neither existed as entities in the time period in question. We should all follow her lead.

Prior Work on Three Kingdoms and Yamato

There has been little of interest in the connections between the Kingdom of Silla on the Korean peninsula and the formation of the state in the Japanese islands, while interactions with both Paekche 百濟 and Koguryō 高句麗 have been studied in book-length format.² The (largely discredited) “horse rider” theory, which posits “nomads” from the Manchurian polity of Puyō 扶餘 by

1 Barnes 1993.

2 Hong 1992, Covell and Covell 1984.

way of Paekche, was another attempt to explain archaeological discoveries in Japan, but without attending to the archaeology of the supposed antecedents in those polities. While there is general agreement that the concept of horse-riding nomads from Puyō is an exceedingly simplistic and unlikely way to explain the explosion of amounts of horse equipment (and presumably also horses) in the Japanese islands, influences or immigrants from the Korean peninsula are usually implicated in the arrival of large numbers of horses used by the elite in the islands. Newer archaeological discoveries allow glimpses into the complexities of population movements in East Asia which alleviate the Puyō/Paekche problem, but they add few new perspectives on the shifting polities within the Korean peninsula.

Michael Como pursues another kind of connection between the peninsula and the islands. His interest is in the Hata 秦 family from Koguryō, especially the influence of that family on the textile industry in Yamato, and the implications for women of the ideology presumably brought by them to the Japanese Islands.³ Gina Barnes has offered a new perspective on the ideology of the Yamato state, noting the popularity of the Han 漢 Chinese deity, the Queen Mother of the West, especially as this deity is figured on mirrors found in Japan.⁴ Both Como and Barnes note the correlation of goddesses, shamans, and women. Joan Piggott concentrates on the queens and empresses of Yamato, and has arrived at similar conclusions about the equality of women among the elite.⁵ My own work shows that in the Silla polity rank was more important than gender in selecting a ruler.⁶ Anders Carlqvist discusses the land-pulling myth of Izumo 出雲, which declares that some of Izumo's land was "pulled" from Silla.⁷ He interprets the tale from an Izumo perspective, while I use it to discuss Silla.

These connections are all useful ways to think about the mix of cultures that became the Yamato polity. I am not suggesting that I have a startling new perspective on state formation in Korea and Japan. I have no overarching picture of Yamato, either, only another view to add: that of Silla's relationships with early polities in Japan, which may lead to a better understanding of the issue of gender equality in Yamato and Silla, as well as throwing some light on the way these states became organized.

3 Como 2009, 155-192.

4 Barnes 2007, 197.

5 Piggott 1999, 41.

6 Nelson 1991, 1993.

7 Carlqvist 2010.

The Evidence

To begin building a picture of Silla's interactions with early Japan, I consider three categories of evidence. The first is archaeological: tomb shapes, artefacts such as belts and crowns, and materials, especially gold and glass. The second category is documents, which may conceal as much as they reveal, but are nevertheless important. The third category relates to social structure, suggesting that the family structures of ruling elites who migrated into both the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands are similar and related. Some of the elites brought characteristics from cultures farther north: shamanism, sun worship, horse-riding, and categories of artefacts and materials established by elites to distinguish themselves from the commoners, perhaps villagers already living and farming in the locations into which the elites intruded.

Mounded Tombs

The observation that the mounded tombs of Korea and Japan are distantly related to the kurgans of the steppes, through the peoples who inhabited the northeastern steppes as well as forested Manchuria, has been made so often it hardly needs to be documented further.⁸ Additional characteristics of steppe society – horseback riding, the worship of white horses, archery, and shamanism, as traits of some Central Asian cultures, are often noted as they appear in early Korea and Japan as well. It is not necessary to insist that each of these traits exists in every case, but the similar origins of much culture of early Korea and Japan are evident.

Iron Age Eurasian steppe cultures were unambiguously using horses in mounted warfare at least by the early first millennium BCE.⁹ While women in early Japan and Korea may not have been warriors, it is very clear that in the Silla kingdom women of all classes rode horses, as did men.¹⁰ At the very least, mounted warriors made a difference in the outcome of battles, and in the success of those they represented. Horses and mounded tombs appear together in Kyōngju archaeology, along with golden jewellery and regalia.

Antecedents of the Kim 金 family of Silla lived in the region of present-day Kyōngju, exploiting the local iron ore for their own advantage,¹¹ and having

8 E. g. Okauchi 1986.

9 Hanks 2009.

10 Nelson 2008.

11 Ilyon 1971, 56.

access to exotic trade goods. The concept of mounded tombs as they are first found in Silla was clearly an import to south-eastern Korea, since earlier elite burials in the vicinity of Kyōngju are not very different from local Mumun 無文 burials, except for the presence of exotic trade goods. Presumably the Kim family arrived in Kūmsōng 金城 (now Kyōngju), with the discovery of gold. The *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (1146, “Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms”) describes the first Kim ancestor appearing as a boy in a golden box at the very beginning of Silla, providing a supernatural origin like those established for the Sōk 昔 and Pak 朴 family progenitors. This tale seems to be an attempt by the Kim clan to assert legitimacy, claim their position as “sacred bone” (Kor. *sōnggol* 聖骨), and justify their almost complete control of the kingship after the fifth century. Mounded tombs, horses, and gold artefacts appear to begin with the Kim family in Kyōngju. But if the Kims of Kūmsōng were not there from the beginning, where did they come from?

Mounded tombs are characteristic of Koguryō and Paekche as well as Silla, but Silla’s tomb mounds have a style of their own, and appear to spring full blown in Kūmsōng. The Great Tomb at Hwangnam (Kor. Hwangnam *taech’ong* 皇南皇南大塚), believed to be the earliest of the Kyōngju mounded tombs on the basis of its artefacts, is also the highest, as well as the largest overall (including the two overlapping mounds). Either the chronology is wrong, or earlier and smaller mounds have disappeared, or the Kim family suddenly acquired gold at the time of the woman buried in the north mound of Tomb 98. She had the most magnificent of all the gold crowns found so far in Silla tombs. Like the (Jap.) *kofun* 古墳 (ancient tumuli) of Japan, these tombs were not intended to be re-entered, as were the later tombs of Koguryō and Paekche. Therefore the Silla tombs were not looted.

Royal Regalia:

Crowns, Belts, Metal Shoes, Jewellery, and Horse Trappings

One obvious difference between Silla and the other Korean kingdoms is the quantity of gold at Silla’s command. Some artefacts that have been found in Japan (which are thought to be from Silla) are mostly gold or gilded objects, created by artisans with a high degree of refinement. The lavish use of gold can be traced to cultures of northeast Asia, and golden crowns and belts have their origin there as well.

While many manifestations of nomadic heritage are found in southern Korea, Silla’s gold crowns are the most striking of these artefacts, which, along with

gold belts, have been understood among Koreanists as objects symbolizing royalty and rulership. Ten tombs with gold crowns have been excavated from the Silla “kingdom” and altogether 155 mounded tombs have been described in Kyōngju, most of them unexcavated and apparently intact, but only five of them have tall gold crowns and gold belts.¹²

Gold jewelry is lavish in Silla, often made of pure gold and embellished with colored stones and glass. More utilitarian types of objects were gilded rather than being made of pure gold, which is too soft to be used alone. They include saddlebows and ceremonial shoes, both made with openwork decorative patterns. Horse trappings are frequently gilded. The ruling family and associated nobility can be visualized, shining in their gold accouterments and riding horses similarly resplendent in gilt bronze trappings.

Gold and Crowns in Central Asia

Western cultures have valued gold highly, but such valuation is not universal. In China, for example, jade was usually considered to be of greater value than gold. Archaeological evidence suggests that appreciation for gold is common to the steppe nomadic peoples from west to east along the northern steppe.

Gold artefacts, especially crowns, have been found in burials all across the steppe region. Several authors have remarked on the similarity of the Tillya Tepe gold crown from Shibaragan, Afghanistan, encircling a woman’s head, to the gold crowns of Silla,¹³ comparing sites to the east, mentions the gold crown of Tillya Tepe as similar to that of a Xiongnu 匈奴 noblewoman from Xigoupan 西沟畔 – both have dangles in front of the ears like Silla crowns. Another female burial with a golden crown was found at Kocklach on the north shore of the Black Sea. Gold crowns on female heads occur as late as the Liao 遼 dynasty (907–1125) of northern China.

The Tillya Tepe burial contained burial shoes with cut-out soles, a feature that is found not only in Silla and Paekche but also in the Pazyryk burials of Southern Siberia.¹⁴ Silver shoe soles with cut-out patterns were excavated at Shihuigou 石灰沟 in the Ordos region.¹⁵ Metal shoes or shoes with metal soles for elite burials appear to have been used widely by the steppe peoples.

12 Ju 2010.

13 Nelson 2010, Rubinson 2008, 58.

14 Rubinson 2008, 50.

15 Linduff 1997, 54.

Closer to Korea, the Xiongnu used gold and valued it highly.¹⁶ Immediately preceding the Silla period, a gold crown and belt very similar to those of Silla were unearthed in the vicinity of Chaoyang 朝陽, in Liaoning Province, China. It is interesting, and perhaps relevant, that the Choyangdong 朝陽洞 cemetery southeast of Kyōngju has a wood-coffin burial dated to the first century CE containing four Han dynasty mirrors.¹⁷ The relationship of the names seems potentially significant, since the dates are similar.

In Kyōngju itself the gold objects in Wōlsōngno 月城路 13-ga are the earliest known gold in Silla. They are dated around 350 CE.¹⁸ Naemul *maripgan* 奈勿麻立干 (r. 356–402) in 382 was called ruler of Saro 斯盧 (an early Chinese transliteration of Silla) rather than king of the Chinhan 辰韓, suggesting an important shift in perceptions of power.¹⁹ Ju Bodon proposes that the middle of the fourth century should be considered the beginning of Silla. Regarding Silla and its golden crowns, he states:

As we enter the 4th and 5th centuries, when the centralization and stratification of power had been established, the tombs of the highest order in terms of both quality and quantity are concentrated [...] in the downtown area of Kyōngju.²⁰

The Epi-Nomadic Tradition in Korea and Japan

A relevant chart of find places of the epi-nomadic tradition in southern Korea and western Japan was compiled by Barbara Seyock.²¹ Before 100 BCE her chart shows only two major sites in the southern Korean peninsula: Ipsilli 入室里 and Chuktongni 竹東里, and in both cases the “nomadic” artefacts are decorative. The number of epi-nomadic sites increases markedly in the years 100 BCE to 100 CE, with eight sites in Korea and two sites in Japan, both of which contain antenna swords. From 100–300 CE there are eleven epi-nomadic sites in Korea and five in Japan, represented mostly by antenna swords but in one case by belt plaques. This increase suggests both trade and gradually increasing immigration from the steppe or Manchuria, rather than a sudden large influx of people.

16 Bunker 2009, 287.

17 Choe 1982.

18 Lee 2010, 111.

19 Yi 2009, 51.

20 Ju 2010, 121.

21 Seyock 2004, 264.

Belts with dangling attachments are common in steppe graves. Gideon Shelach suggests, regarding the belts, that, “we can speculate that the elite and perhaps other segments of the society found them useful instruments in constructing their identities”.²² Emma Bunker makes a similar point.

Among the pastoral people, the need for personal identification, group recognition, and status was of paramount importance. Their artefacts consist primarily of personal items such as ornaments or tools and include belt plaques, necklaces, earrings, garment plaques, small tools and weapons designed to be suspended from belts, and horse and chariot ornaments.²³

Tubular beads and comma-shaped beads were found together in dolmens in Manchuria, most often a string of green or white tubular beads having a (Kor.) *kogok* 曲玉 (comma-shaped bead) in the middle of the front, giving it prominence.²⁴ Park mistakenly asserts that *kogok* were found earlier in the Japanese archipelago.²⁵ While beads of inferior material may have been made at a later date near the sources in Japan, the *kogok* shape dates back to early Bronze Age Manchuria.

Silla Lands and Silla Artefacts in the Japanese Archipelago

In searching for evidence of Silla presence in the islands, I found few instances where Silla was referred to specifically, but many that named certain families as “Korean.” This designation is not at all helpful in understanding the complicated and changing interactions among a number of different forming and shifting polities in the Korean peninsula, but nevertheless it may be helpful to understand the basic organization of these societies. To anticipate my conclusion, the clue is that leadership was family-based rather than polity-based, even though individuals were acknowledged as leaders, perhaps *ex post facto*. In the early days of state formation, status and alliances were not based on place, for loyalties would shift with a family, not necessarily with territory.

An early book on Japanese archaeology contains a drawing of Silla-style earrings from the National Museum in Japan.²⁶ Tsunoda Ryūsakyu 角田柳作 is quoted by the Covells as describing objects from Nintoku’s 仁德 (trad. r. 313–

22 Shelach 2009, 262-63.

23 Bunker 2009, 275.

24 Watson 1971, 131,136; Lee 2002, 133-35.

25 Park 2008, 131.

26 Munro 1911, 436.

399) tomb in Naniwa 浪速 near the Inland Sea as containing “Korean objects uncovered by storm damage in 1872”.²⁷ Could these earrings be among such objects? They are almost identical to jewellery in Silla tombs.

Kidder reports gold and gilt objects from the Inariyama 稻荷山 (Sakitama 埼玉) tomb in Gyōda 行田 City, Japan.²⁸ Artefacts included a gold crown, a pair of gilt bronze shoes, iron armour, horse trappings, and six bronze mirrors. This tomb is associated with a prince named Yūryaku 雄略 (trad. r. 456–479), to be mentioned again later.

Any of these sites could have been tombs of Silla relatives. Simple trade with Silla in gold items seems unlikely, but gold crowns and burial shoes closely associated with the leaders seem particularly inappropriate as trade items. Their presence implies instead the burial of rulers allied to Silla. It is worth discussing whether the region called Izumo in Yamato times was related to Silla, perhaps actually a colony.

Izumo and its Shrines

Evidence for Silla in the Japanese islands is fragmentary but suggestive. The “Land of the Reed Plains” in early mythology is believed to refer to Izumo.²⁹ Hong states boldly that Izumo was understood to be a colony of Silla.³⁰ Kidder writes of Yamato’s “obsession with Izumo”, which he believes is made understandable by the huge caches of swords and bells discovered in this region, including 39 bronze bells and 358 bronze swords.³¹ It seems that folklore and archaeology meet to demonstrate that Izumo was once the seat of a powerful leader.

A tale of a Silla man Yōn’orang 延鳥郎, being magically taken to Japan to become king is recorded in the *Samguk sagi*. In their comment on this point, Ha and Mintz write, “Ilyon points out, that Japanese records contain no mention of a person from Silla becoming king”.³² He speculates that perhaps Yōn’orang became a daimyo, a Japanese nobleman on the coast of Japan facing Korea. But could Yōn’orang have been Yūryaku? Linguistically, it seems possible.

27 Covell and Covell 1984, 36.

28 Kidder 2007, 30.

29 Kidder 2007, 114.

30 Hong 2012, 22.

31 Kidder 2007, 114.

32 Ha and Mintz 1972, 57.

Other folklore connects Susanoo 須佐之男/素戔鳴尊, reported as the first ruler of Izumo, with Silla. The sacred treasures of Japan – the curved jewel, the sun-mirror, and short sword – are credited to Silla prince (Jap.) Ama-no-hiboko 天日槍 (Sun spear of Heaven). The divine treasures indeed are all found earlier in the Korean peninsula, and since they are related to both royalty and spirit, at least those ideas must be related in the two regions.

Kibi and Environs

In locating an area anciently called Kibi 吉備, Michael Gorman notes many artefacts that he believes point to a “Korean” origin of the early elite.³³ These objects include necklaces, earrings, and wrist bells. In this context it is interesting that while one edge of Kibi abutted the northern side of the inland sea of Japan, it apparently adjoined Izumo on its northern side. Several horse-shaped buckles from the Sakakiyama 榊山 tomb in Kibi (possibly that of a retainer) are similar to buckles widely found in southern Korea, and are particularly numerous in Mongch’on 夢村, the Silla fortress near Seoul.³⁴ Thus, the mysterious Kibi may also have had Silla connections.

The possession of lands on either side of the East Sea would have been an enormous advantage to Silla for trade and shipping. Various commodities were made in Izumo which could have been traded and shipped. The placement of shrines on coasts and islands suggests that trade was particularly important and needed supernatural protection.

An elite burial in the Tsukuriyama 造山 tomb group contains a stone spindle whorl, suggesting a female occupant. It is one of the earliest *kofun* tombs in the Izumo region. This tomb contains three mirrors, more than any other tomb in the complex, as well as iron swords and a knife. Beads are also notable, since they were locally made from a material known as Izumo stone. Shapes included both tubular beads and *kogok* (Jap. *magatama*).³⁵ A tomb in Himenoyama contains tubular beads that seem to form a diadem, leading to the suggestion that it was the tomb of a female shaman. I have argued extensively elsewhere for women shaman leaders,³⁶ and will not repeat the extensive evidence here.

33 Gorman 1999.

34 Kim, Im and Pak 1989.

35 Kidder 2007, 105.

36 Nelson 2008, 143-212.

The Great Shrine at Izumo is one of the earliest and largest shrines in Japan. It was and is an important shrine for all of Japan. All (Jap.) *kami* 神 (local spirits) in Japan are required to appear at the Izumo shrine every year in October, underlining the primacy of this shrine.

Three shrines to Sea Goddesses are found on islands near Izumo. One offering to a Goddess of the Sea at the Okinoshima 沖ノ島 site is a Silla gilded saddle bow, and another is a ring in the style of the queen in Tomb 98. Silla is certainly implicated in the movement of artefacts with royal meanings. According to the *Kojiki* 古事記 (712, “Records of Ancient Matters”) the proto-historic Jingu 神功 (trad. c. 169–269 CE) was descended from a Silla king.³⁷ This is relevant because Jingu was also associated with the Sea Goddesses.³⁸

Shamanism, Shrines, and Goddesses

Shamans are often depicted in the round on (Jap.) *haniwa* 埴輪 (clay figures) found on or near *kofun*. The clay shamans often wear *kogok* in the center of a chain of tubular beads, or with several such curved beads on a necklace. These representations offer similarities with shamanism in the Korean peninsula.³⁹ Joan Piggott suggests that the women of dual-gender pairs were shamans, and that their duty was in part sacerdotal.⁴⁰

The three shrines of Munakata 宗像 are interesting from a gendered perspective. Each is dedicated to a Goddess of the Sea. Although women are traditionally not allowed on the island of Okinoshima, a gold ring similar to one found in the grave of a Silla queen was found in the shrine. The three shrines to Goddesses of the Sea were clearly related to seafaring, and presumably to trade. Another such shrine has been excavated at Chungmakdong 竹幕洞, Puan, in North Chölla (South Korea), where activities of women shamans continue to this day.⁴¹ This series of sailing-linked shrines demonstrates the importance of trade and movement around the region.

37 Hong 2012, 243.

38 Kidder 2007, 48.

39 Nelson 2008, 171-191.

40 Piggott 1999, 40.

41 Im and Nelson (submitted).

Elite Women as Rulers

Women buried with the trappings of power are found throughout the steppes. Several with gold crowns have already been noted. In a possible antecedent culture of Silla in the eastern part of the Northern Zone of China, the two female graves excavated at Nanshangen 南山根 “are much richer in artefacts than the three male graves”.⁴² In the cemetery at Maoqinggou 毛庆沟, gender and wealth or prestige do not seem to be related, since belt ornaments and plaques are equally distributed between men and women. But one of the richest graves at Maoqinggou was a female whose burial goods included horse gear. In Tomb 4 of Xigou 西沟, in the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, gold and semi-precious stone headgear and necklaces as well as gold and carved jade earrings are believed to constitute evidence of an elite female leader. In the Daodunzi 倒墩子 cemetery, four of the six catacomb burials (presumed to indicate status) were females. Animal plaques and cowrie shells in the second century BCE were found in the highest numbers in female graves.⁴³

In Japanese records we find that “women ruled frequently in prehistoric, protohistoric, and early historical Japan”.⁴⁴ Although sometimes women ruled alone, they might also be half of a “gender complementary chieftain pair”. In trying to tease out relations between Yamato and Silla, it is important to circle back and remind the reader that the Empress Suiko 推古 (r. 593–628) of Yamato was a member of the Korean Soga 蘇我 family through her mother. She was a legitimate ruler, who ruled in her own right, like those of Silla in the same time period. Joan Piggott points out that “insular rulership was frequently gender complementary and contrapuntal, with the female partner charged with sacral duties”,⁴⁵ which may be relevant to some of the non-ruling queens of Silla who are named in the *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (1285, “Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms”).

Social Structure

Not only with regard to rulership, but in terms of nobility, being a member of the elite was more important than being male or female.⁴⁶ In short, rank trumped gender. In Silla, women could be chosen to rule because of their place in

42 Shelach 2008, 101.

43 Shelach 2008.

44 Piggott 1999, 17.

45 Piggott 1999, 20.

46 Nelson 1991, 1993.

the kinship structure, which set them above all non-elite men. The Bone Rank System ensured that women were the equal of men within their own rank.⁴⁷ Piggott tells us that a “strategy of rank consolidation by royal endogamy” allowed the family of Great King Kimmei 欽明 (r. 539–571) to dominate the succession.⁴⁸ Empress Suiko was Kimmei’s daughter by a Soga consort – possibly a Silla relative. Suiko was a “double royal” female, who performed sacral duties as well as those of rulership, but the Soga family prominence ended with her reign.

Conclusion

While the relationship between Silla and Izumo remains speculative, and the further relationship with Kibi is another question mark on a string of inferences, it is nevertheless intriguing that queens could rule in Yamato as well as Silla, and Suiko was called an Empress until the demise of the last of the Soga family in Yamato. In Silla, queens continued to be occasionally selected to rule even after the Silla conquest of the peninsula. It is clear that the sense of family was more important than gender. Families were the building blocks of “kingdoms,” rather than individual leaders coming to power by their abilities only and representing the entire population. The leadership of women reveals the importance of kinfolk in jockeying for power in the forming of pen/insular states.

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⁴⁷ Nelson 2003.

⁴⁸ Piggott 1999.

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