

## Editorial Note

### Towards an Understanding of the Ancient City of Gyeongju

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#### The Necessity of Understanding Gyeongju

Any large city will inevitably develop its own distinct tone and character. Just as Rome was not built in a day, conurbations form gradually over time, albeit with variations in the period involved, with the condensation of culture and accrual of countless individual lives. Cities gain their current state through a repeated process of the gathering and dispersal of people. Permeating every city is the culture of its residents and the turbulent lives they pursue. As the joys and sorrows of all classes of people blend together into a single place and settle upon each other in layers, they form horizons within the ground. Not all the facts can be revealed on the surface. However, the culture of a city must encompass the full reach from what shows on its skin to the unseen qualities that lie underneath. So it is that every city comes to possess its own unique character.

The depth of a city's culture depends on the extent of its accumulated historical experience. Naturally, the longer such culture collects, reaching

down to its very foundations, the richer and more profound the ambience of a city. It is not possible, therefore, to get the full flavor of a city by simply gazing at its surface. The city of Gyeongju was selected as the special topic for this volume since it lends itself particularly well to this exercise of gaining a proper understanding or truer picture of a historical city.

Based on the evidence in written records, Gyeongju is a highly unusual historical city for remaining the capital of the ancient Silla Kingdom over the extraordinary period of a thousand years. For this reason, Gyeongju has always attracted special interest among Korea's many cities. As the city that bore witness to the birth and demise of Silla, it is infused with the history and culture of this ancient kingdom to its very roots. In that sense, Gyeongju can be called the manifestation of Silla's history and culture. Stripped of the legacy of Silla, it would be reduced to an empty city without a heart. Any discussion or study of the city is largely devoted to the history and culture of the ancient kingdom. In other words, it is difficult to understand Gyeongju without first understanding Silla.

Historical records state that Silla was founded in 57 BCE and fell in 935 CE with its surrender to Goryeo forces that had arisen in the northwestern fringes of the kingdom. If we take these records at face value, Silla lasted for nearly a millennium. Of course, it did not remain static over such a long period of time. Any country is bound to evolve and develop through a long series of ups and downs. Starting as a small state with a simple political structure, Silla expanded gradually over time by annexing neighboring states of similar political and economic stature. The nation's culture and the political organization and social structure upon which it was based grew to match its scale and centrality. Consequently, while the period as a whole may be referred to as the Silla era, it is further divided into stages of a distinct nature and substance. Given this, these periods should not be conflated or treated collectively in any discussion of Silla's history and culture. Over its path of growth and development, Silla continued to experience significant internal changes and the true picture of its history and culture is only revealed by following the flow of these progressions. Before examining Gyeongju, therefore, the course of Silla history must first be understood.

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## The Course of Silla History

The thousand-year history of Silla can be divided into several stages or time periods. This can be approached in various ways according to the standards applied. For the sake of convenience, the overall era is simply divided here into three periods on the basis of changes in the name: Saroguk, Silla, and Unified Silla. While further subdivision of each period is possible according to changes in their respective internal situations, this basic division should be sufficient to allow a general idea of the overall progression of Silla history. To enhance understanding, the following offers a simple overview of the nature of each period along with the substance of and changes in its culture.

The first period is referred to as Saroguk. Starting as a small state in the Gyeongju basin, Saroguk experienced a process of continuous growth

and development and eventually emerged as the Silla Kingdom. Small states of a size similar to Saroguk began to arise nearby. Controversy remains over how to tie these states together and what to call them collectively, as well as on how to properly define them in terms of the nature of their political systems. For decades they were considered to have a strong tribal nature and were therefore referred to as tribal states. In the 1970s, however, the negative connotations of this term were widely recognized. Various alternatives were invented, including *seongeup* (walled town), chiefdom, and *eumnak* (statelet). These early Korean states varied in terms of territory, population, and population density, but the names mentioned above were all suggested based on early Chinese city-states called *yizhi* or the city-states of ancient Italy and Greece known as *polis*. Based on records and archaeological materials, the most appropriate term to apply to Saroguk would be *eumnak*, which refers to a joint state composed of several highly distinctive units.

Records state that Silla, which emerged out of Saroguk, was founded in 57 BCE. As a general rule, however, records and details on the formative days of any state should not be taken at face value. Excavations of related sites have yielded materials suggesting that Saroguk appeared at a much earlier date. Estimates place the foundation of Saroguk around the latter half of the second century BCE. When relics excavated from Saroguk tombs are compared to those from preceding tombs, differences in a number of aspects can be identified. Most of the Saroguk tombs were made of wood, a departure from the stone tombs of the preceding period. Another point of comparison can be found in the grave goods that were placed to demonstrate the power and authority of the interred: the Saroguk finds are advanced bronze and iron wares and clearly distinct from the stone or crude bronze items of the preceding period. This difference is considered to be the result of a major cultural shift accompanied by political upheaval, and it is this cultural change that is interpreted as providing the momentum behind the foundation of Saroguk. Such developments took place not only in the Gyeongju basin, but simultaneously across multiple areas in the central and southern portions of the Korean Peninsula,

albeit with slight variations.

The newly founded *eumnaek* states quickly embarked on the road of progress, engaging in a fierce competition for survival while also forging ties with one another. They established a system allowing the exchange of goods based on comparative advantage and joined collective defense networks to stand together against the constant threat from outside forces. Once they began to engage in long-distance trade, they drew together even more tightly to reduce the cost of goods and minimize the risks involved. The scope of these *eumnaek* leagues grew over time until they formed sustainable, politically-based organizations. Each *eumnaek* state of the period maintained its own independent base but formed unions with the others for political, military and economic ends, resulting in what is commonly known as a confederacy. In the central part of the peninsula, three large confederacies known today as the Samhan (Three Han States) formed. The Jinhan confederacy was established around the first century BCE in the area east of the Nakdonggang River. The leading state, also the strongest, in the Jinhan confederacy was Saroguk. The number of *eumnaek* states comprising Jinhan fluctuated as some fell away and others joined, resulting in variations across time. Generally, however, during the first half of the third century Jinhan consisted of 12 states.

The second period is known as Silla. Starting in the late third century, changes in Jinhan began to take place centered around Saroguk. Around this time Jinhan, which had provided a window for the introduction of the advanced culture from the Nangnang (Ch. Lelang) and Daebang (Ch. Defang) areas located in the Daedonggang River basin, began to trade directly with mainland China. This was attempted a number of times, but it was less than 20 years before direct exchanges ceased once again, presumably due to political and social upheaval in the northern areas of China. In any case, the fact that Jinhan was the first state to attempt direct interactions with mainland China is considered evidence of some type of built-up energy erupting to the surface, leading us to infer that an internal process of change had been taking place. In 313–314, Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE), which had been expanding its territory based in the Amnokgang

(Yalu) River basin, captured the Nangnang and Daebang areas. The impact of the subsequent political and social upheaval quickly spread southward with the sudden mass migration of people from a more advanced civilization.

Ripples from the upheaval in the north fueled moves toward political union inside the Jinhan confederacy, with Saroguk emerging the final winner. Having long been the predominant state in Jinhan, Saroguk successfully pursued and achieved the goal of political dominion. The states confederated with Saroguk now lost their names and became subordinate regions. Meanwhile, Saroguk emerged as a totally new state in form and character and spanned a vast territory. Upon establishing a system of rule better suited to its new form, one of the first steps it took was to change the name of the confederacy from Jinhan to Silla. Moreover, the title of the supreme leader was switched from Isageum, meaning "one who has lived a long time," to Maripgan, which translates as "the highest among all chiefs." The territory occupied by the former Saroguk state naturally transitioned into the royal capital of Silla. The newly emerging ruling class began to build large tombs with high mounds to physically manifest their power and authority.

Although the emergence of Silla demanded fundamental changes in the ruling system, the existing order was not totally transformed. Community factors remained strong at the bottom of society. Despite the proclamation of the new name of "Silla," the former name "Saroguk" continued to be used as well. The centralization of power was tenuous and direct rule through the royal dispatch of officers to the different regions now incorporated into Silla was not achieved. Consequently, Silla had no choice but to practice a more indirect form of rule through powerful regional figures tied to the central authority. Such local leaders were not fully under the control of the central government, but held themselves in a semi-autonomous state. Although the clearly highest ruler in the country, the Maripgan had not yet risen to the status of a transcendental figure of absolute authority. Under these conditions, there were limitations on establishing a ruling order based on a centralized government with the king at the peak of the power structure. The complete

erasure of the existing community-based ruling order would inevitably require a lengthy process.

The period of more than one hundred years between the first half of the sixth century and the foundation of the Silla Kingdom in the fourth century is considered a time when the internal foundations were being faithfully laid to prepare for centralized rule. This is clearly confirmed in both written records and archaeological evidence, and can be surmised from the fact that the size of tumuli in Gyeongju increased and the grave goods buried with the deceased became more luxurious and diverse. The clear expansion of the quality and quantity of relics indicates that the economic foundations of the country were strengthening and centralizing. The gradual reorganization of this system seems inevitable. The intention was to focus political power on the king, the Maripgan. Around 530, the title of Maripgan was abandoned in favor of Daewang, meaning "great king," a reflection of the heightened status of the ruler. As the basis for the stable succession of the system of rule, the class system was revised and various government offices and positions were instituted, including a 17-level ranking system for government officials to ensure the establishment of the new class and bureaucratic systems. To provide an institutional framework for these measures, a national code of administration (the *Yulyeong*) was proclaimed and Buddhism was adopted as the national religion and ruling ideology.

Throughout this process, the remnants of the previous order were gradually erased. It should be noted here that this was the point at which Silla's distinctive social ranking system, the Golpumje, or Bone Rank System, was instituted. This system not only enabled the ruling class to maintain their privileges, but also functioned as a mechanism for the political, social, and economic control of society as a whole. Silla society has hence been described as a "Golpumje society" or "Golpumje system society." As Buddhism took root in Silla, it provided ideological reinforcement for the ruling order established through the Bone Rank System. Of course, the basic structure and function of the Bone Rank System did not go completely unchanged, but with adjustments to accommodate political and social evolution the system was maintained until the fall of Silla.

The third period is known as Unified Silla. Of course, "Unified Silla" is not a name that was applied or used at the time. As one of the ancient Three Kingdoms of Korea, Silla struggled constantly with Goguryeo and Baekje (18 BCE–660CE) over survival and political integration. With assistance from Tang dynasty Chinese forces, it eventually succeeded in overcoming both rival kingdoms in the mid-seventh century and launching a unified nation spanning the Korean Peninsula. This integration of the Three Kingdoms is seen as a milestone event in that it laid the foundations for a nation of people within the same region and of a single culture. In this sense, some take Silla's creation of a unified state as the dividing line in Korean history between ancient and medieval societies.

The widely used term "Unified Silla" was created by modern historians out of a need to systematize the process of Silla's development based on its political unification of the Three Kingdoms. Hence Unified Silla fundamentally differs in nature to the terms Saroguk or Silla.

Some opposed the name Unified Silla on the grounds that it does not reflect the actual circumstances. This view comes from a negative evaluation of Silla that it did not in fact unify the Three Kingdoms and that considers its entire development process to be improper. There are two main reasons underlying such a viewpoint. First, the Balhae Kingdom, based in territory formerly occupied by Goguryeo and claiming to be its successor, was founded in 698 and continued into the early tenth century. This means that applying "Unified" to Silla's name can be considered problematic. The second reason is that Silla allied with Tang China to conquer the nations within its own region. The unification process can thus be deemed tainted and the use of the word "Unified" in the name likewise inappropriate. Underlying these negative perceptions is remorse over the lost Goguryeo territory, since Silla failed to absorb the full extent of its rival's lands. Those who refuse to accept Silla's actions as unification or disparage it as an incomplete unification oppose the use of any related terminology in the name. Alternatives such as Daesilla (or "Great Silla") have been suggested.

The views discussed above must respond to

certain questions, however. Although Balhae claims to have succeeded Goguryeo, it did not come into being until thirty years after the latter's fall. In addition, in those days the Three Kingdoms did not consider themselves to be nations with the same roots, and hence it is difficult to judge the validity of the unification based on the aid of foreign forces or other elements. Therefore, until some inventive alternative appears, it seems harmless to apply the name Unified Silla, considering that it was a clearly new and unique nation in terms of the scale of its territory and population and the level of its culture. At the time, Silla emphasized the unification aspect as well, using terms such as *iltong samhan* (lit. one unification, three Han states) or *iltong samguk* (lit. one unification, three kingdoms). Based on this perception, they divided the nation into nine provinces.

While the conception that Silla unified the Three Kingdoms might have detractors, there is no doubting that this was a period of tumultuous change. With the fall of the two nations that had engaged Silla in long-standing confrontations and rivalry, circumstances inside and outside Silla were transformed. Externally, a new East Asian order was forming with the Tang dynasty as its axis. At the time, Tang China would have been less of an ally than a competitor looking to dominate Silla as well. Although Silla succeeded in driving them from the peninsula, people lived under a sense of threat since no one knew when Tang might resume its aggression. Furthermore, refugees from Baekje who had crossed to Japan were constantly seeking an opportune moment to attack Silla and restore their nation. To assuage this crisis, Silla engaged in active diplomacy with Japan. While pursuing peaceful coexistence with other nations, Silla sought to ensure a stable internal foundation.

For Silla, unification presented a great opportunity to advance. Its dramatic increase in both area and population necessitated an equivalent change to its governing system. Embracing the people of Goguryeo and Baekje, Silla also assimilated the advanced cultural elements that they brought. Upon this foundation, Silla introduced further elements from Tang China, which enabled it to grow and develop further as a nation. Consequently, the

eight century is considered Silla's golden age. Even Tang China, the world's most advanced nation at the time, called Silla "the land of the noble man [*junxi*]," acknowledging the cultural heights it had attained. Although Silla had failed to absorb the full extent of Goguryeo territory, unification served as a launchpad for new development.

However, as soon as Silla reached its peak, it started on a path of decline. Though the country's internal and external environment and circumstances had changed, it clung to its former system and failed to make needed adaptations. It was particularly committed to sustaining the Bone Rank System, which had long provided the frame for the nation's politics and society. Despite some political accommodations, the Bone Rank System ensured the reproduction of a privileged class. This concentration of political power and wealth in the hands of the elite exacerbated the inconsistencies in Silla's social structure. With turmoil sweeping East Asia during the second half of the ninth century, regional forces with new objectives began to rise up against the central government. In the end, Silla surrendered in 935 to a new dynasty, Goryeo (918–1392), which had risen up at its farthest periphery. It then vanished into history.

### Meaning of the Way this Article is Presented

As mentioned above, Silla lasted for over one thousand years, passing through three major stages, or periods, before its final collapse. At each stage, the national state of affairs was reflected in politics, history, and diverse aspects of its culture. Through a few selected examples, it is possible to gain a broad picture of the circumstances and flow of Silla's history and culture. The following explores several points that highlight the realities involved.

The first point is the way Silla, based in the Gyeongju basin, started out as the weakest of the Three Kingdoms but managed to become the leading force and achieve unification. Without considering the other factors underlying Silla's original weakness, the focus in the past has solely been on its unfavorable geographical position. However, to achieve a more

refined understanding it is necessary to make certain distinctions. During the early Saroguk period its location was actually highly favorable compared to that of neighboring rivals. Not only was Saroguk situated at the meeting point of various inland routes, it was also close to the east coast and hence served as a gateway to areas further inland. Indeed, its location can be seen in this light as the major factor behind the successful rise of Saroguk. However, once Saroguk had absorbed its surrounding states and emerged as Silla, its location placed it at a great disadvantage compared to Goguryeo and Baekje in terms of contact and exchange with more advanced civilizations. In this regard, Silla could not help being the least developed of the Three Kingdoms. However, these limitations in fact served as motivation for development, and Silla made serious efforts to overcome them. To rise above its given situation, Silla actively pursued diplomacy, making use of one or another of its stronger neighbors as needed. It first turned to Goguryeo as an ally, then Baekje, and finally with the help of Tang forces it could conquer its two rivals and unify the Three Kingdoms. In short, Silla's success was a victory for diplomacy, an outcome owing much to the skills of the ruling forces who planned and implemented these policies.

The second point is the structure of the Silla capital. In the process of Saroguk's evolution into Silla, the state's original territory encompassing the Gyeongju basin and the surrounding areas was naturally named the capital. People and goods collected there as the political center of the nation and the residence of the king. Inevitably, the capital grew to be the key region for the country. As a rule in East Asia, when a nation grew in scale and economic power became concentrated in a certain place, or when a new dynasty emerged, the capital was transferred to a new location to suit these circumstances. Silla is highly unusual in that its capital was never once relocated. Efforts were indeed made after unification to found a new capital, but they never came to fruition. Even though it ended in failure, the fact that such a move was attempted means the original capital was too small to fully function as the capital of Silla after the unification of the Three Kingdoms and placed limits on systematic management. Consequently, by remaining in the same location for over a thousand years the capital developed a highly unusual structure. As it is difficult under these

circumstances to trace all the changes individually, an attempt will be made here to recreate the appearance of the capital when Silla was in its prime. Fundamentally, the space occupied by the capital did not completely change, but as it expanded into the surrounding areas the city developed a well-ordered road network and carefully considered its demarcations. The newly developed areas were planned to stand alongside the original organically formed city center. The coexistence of these two types of urban areas was a distinctive feature of Gyeongju. During the process of growth, the ruling ideology was strongly projected onto the city. A defense network was created to protect the capital and a transportation web linked the city with rural areas and the external world. It can be presumed that a huge investment of labor was required for this transformation of a naturally formed unplanned city into a planned urban center accommodating a large number of people and goods. Attesting to this is the fact that Silla established a government office in charge of the management of the capital and urban planning.

The third point is the changes in the tombs of the ruling class found around the Gyeongju basin. Since people have continued to reside in the area after the fall of Silla all the way to the present, remains of Silla settlements or housing sites are not easily identified. Moreover, most of the actual objects that could illuminate aspects of everyday life have been lost. Fortunately, the tombs remaining here and there about the Gyeongju basin provide us a glimpse into the lives of the Silla people. The people of the time believed that life did not end at death but continued into an afterlife. They would try and replicate the former life of the deceased as closely as possible inside the tomb. The structure of tombs and the grave goods buried inside them naturally reflected the political, social, and cultural changes taking place outside. In particular, the size of tombs and the quantity and quality of the grave goods reflected the political standing of members of the ruling class and general social customs. Overall, the tombs started out underground but gradually rose above ground, growing much larger in the process, while grave goods became very high quality and vast in quantity. These developments are closely connected with the political situation at the time and with people's conception of the afterlife. With Silla's adoption of Buddhism as the state ideology in the sixth century, the

notion of life after death changed sharply. The soul and body were considered separate, and it was believed that when a corpse was buried in the ground the soul moved on to the Western Paradise. This led to a dramatic reduction in the size of tombs and the amount of grave goods. This was accompanied by other major changes since the riches that had previously been buried away in the ground were handed over to the temples to support their operation. In return, Buddhism provided the elite with support for their ruling authority. In this sense, studying tombs is an important means for learning about the history and culture of Silla.

The fourth point is Silla's metalcraft. Items made from metal can be divided into various categories according to their function and the materials used. In large part, they range from everyday goods such as dishes and household implements to accessories made of precious metals that reflect rank, power, or wealth; shamanistic implements and weapons; and ritual items for religious ceremonies. The materials applied varied, including gold and silver, bronze, jade with metal, iron, glass with metal, metal alloys, and gilt items. It is an interesting field since metalwork aptly reflects the aesthetics of the people of the time and their level of technical accomplishment. Major Silla metal items include those designed and produced by its own artisans, finished items imported from other countries, and replicas of these foreign goods. All of these objects are considered important in that they provide grounds for a more thorough understanding of Silla's cultural contacts and exchanges with other countries. They reflect trends in the tastes of Silla's people as well as changes connected to international relations. The civilizations of the nomadic peoples of the plains, Central Asia, and even Rome were introduced to Silla via Goguryeo. Through Baekje, major impacts came about through the import of culture from China's southern dynasties, Sui, and Tang. Silla compounded these influences to create a new culture of its own. As Buddhism took root in the country, related culture and technologies were adopted as well, further enriching and diversifying Silla. In the mid-eighth century Silla reached what is considered its golden age.

The fifth point comprises the stone Buddhist images on Namsan Mountain in Gyeongju. Namsan Mountain is a hill about 500 meters high located directly south from the center of the Gyeongju basin.

Boasting numerous valleys, it covers an area stretching four kilometers east to west and six kilometers north to south. Countless Buddhist temples once dotted every vale: the sites of some 150 large and small temples have been confirmed, as well as dozens of pagodas and stone lanterns that once belonged to these temples. The Buddhist images on the mountain number in the hundreds and range from free-standing granite sculptures to relief images carved into as many rock faces as possible. Silla was the last of the Three Kingdoms to accept Buddhism, and only following the martyrdom of a pioneering figure named Ichadon did it become officially sanctioned by the state. From that point it spread throughout the country and rapidly took root. Buddhism became integrated into politics, and the Silla king would sometimes proclaim himself to be Cackravartin, the ideal universal ruler found in Buddhist sutras, announce that Buddhism existed in Silla before the appearance of Sakyamuni in India, or claim to be a direct relation of Sakyamuni. Silla kings sought to recreate the Buddha Land, or the Buddhist Pure Land, in their territory. Temples were first built in the central part of the Gyeongju basin, but when a fortress was erected on Namsan Mountain to shelter the king in times of crisis, the mountain came to be considered a sacred space and temples began to be erected there. From this time until the fall of Silla, temples were continuously being built at the foot of Namsan Mountain. Over the course of centuries, diverse Buddhist sculptures were produced, all showing differences according to the evolution of beliefs, which accounts for their great diversity. The city of Gyeongju is thus a unique repository of Buddhist culture and faith and was recognized as such upon its addition to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

While it may be difficult to cover the totality of the historic city of Gyeongju drawing upon these excerpts from Silla history and culture, it is possible to gain an idea of the general outline. A more detailed examination of Gyeongju as a city that served as a capital for a thousand years must be reserved for another occasion.