

# Gyeongju, a City of History

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## Gyeongju, the Capital City of Silla

Gyeongju served as the capital city of Silla, an ancient Korean kingdom that endured for a nearly a millennium (c. first century to 935 CE). During its tenure as the Silla capital, the city was known by a variety of names, including Seorabeol (徐羅伐), Geumseong (金城), and Geumgyeong (金京). Silla developed out of Saroguk (斯盧國), a small-scale early state based primarily in the Gyeongju Basin that emerged around the late second century BCE. Saroguk engaged in a fierce competition with its neighbors—early states that were similar to it in size and nature—before successfully consolidating the region and accordingly modifying its system of control. This ultimately led to Saroguk's development into an ancient kingdom in the mid-fourth century CE. With the founding of the Silla dynasty, the former Gyeongju Basin territory of Saroguk became firmly embedded as the site of its capital and was never once relocated.

In the seventh century, Silla and Tang Chinese forces managed to conquer Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE) and Baekje (18 BCE–660CE), two ancient Korean kingdoms with which Silla had contested since the fourth century, and successfully established the first unified kingdom on the Korean Peninsula. Following this multifold expansion of Silla's territory and population, plans

were made to abandon the narrow confines of the Gyeongju Basin and transfer the government to a more suitable area for a capital city. Dalgubeol (達句伐), an inland location 70 kilometers to the west of Gyeongju, was the candidate site for this new center. However, this plan was soon abandoned and no other relocation was ever attempted. It can be presumed that the Silla ruling establishment, conservative in nature and with deep ties in the Gyeongju region, had been strongly opposed to this effort. However, another factor that may have influenced the decision to maintain the capital on its existing site could have been the practical observation that a location closer to the coastline, as opposed to a deeply inland area, would provide better prospects for the kingdom. This belief may be manifested in the way in which Silla's history subsequently unfolded, with the significance of maritime endeavors increasing dramatically following unification. As such, it appears that the decision concerning the location of the Unified Silla capital may have paradoxically resulted from an openness towards change on the part of the Silla elite who had emerged victorious in the war of unification rather than stemming from an attachment to their traditional power base.

It is rare for the capital city of a kingdom to be maintained in the same location for a thousand years, as was the case with Gyeongju. A similar example could be the capital of the Roman



Fig. 1. Daereungwon Tomb Complex

Empire, which remained the same from its beginnings as a small city-state, through its unification of the Italian Peninsula, its regional expansion, and its emergence as a grand and prosperous empire spanning the Mediterranean world and beyond. The cradle of this empire, the city of Rome, remained its capital for many centuries. Although Silla did not similarly become an empire with hegemony over much of a continent, simply the fact that Gyeongju functioned as a capital city for such a long period of time is in itself of great significance and a phenomenon worthy of study.

It is interesting to note that, as did its capital city, Silla's royal palace remained rooted in a single site. The royal palace was established on a long, narrow platform-like area formed naturally alongside the Namcheon River (南川) as it flowed through the southern part of the Gyeongju Basin. With the addition of earthen walls in the fourth century, the fortified site came to be known as Wolseong Fortress (月城). Around the late fifth century, the seat of government was temporarily transferred to Myeonghwalsanseong Fortress (明活山城) above the eastern reaches of the city in anticipation of an attack by a formidable

Goguryeo army. This provided an opportunity to repair and embellish the area within and outside Wolseong Fortress. After a 13-year absence, the Silla royal court was reestablished within Wolseong and remained there for the rest of the kingdom's existence. There was a brief attempt to build another royal palace complex in the mid-sixth century at a site not far from Wolseong Fortress, perhaps because it had become too cramped to house all of the buildings and institutions that Silla had come to require with its rapid development.

The spot earmarked for the new royal palace was a marshy location close to both the center of the capital city and Wolseong Fortress. At the time, the area was known as *Yong-gung* (龍宮, meaning 'dragon palace') since it was fed by a spring and waterlogged throughout the year, conditions traditionally associated with dragons. However, after the completion of foundation work at the site, which involved the infilling of the boggy land, the plan was suddenly abandoned and a decision was made to erect a Buddhist temple on the site. According to written records, this was due to the appearance of a yellow dragon (*hwangryong* in Korean). It is likely, however, that there

is another reason for this change and the story of the dragon was invented to justify the shift in policy. The temple that arose on the site after many years of construction was named Hwangryongsa Temple (皇龍寺) and came to take on a central role in Silla Buddhism. The temple complex grew into the largest of any in the kingdom. Although the details of why the site came to house a temple instead of a royal palace remain unclear, the fact that plans to build a new palace had been initiated in the first place could be taken as an indication that problems concerning the availability of space had arisen due to the constraints on the site of Wolseong Fortress.

An examination of the layout of East Asian cities that share ideological roots in Chinese practices reveals that there were two different conventions for siting a royal palace: it could be located either at the center of the capital city or at its northernmost point looking southwards over the city's well-ordered districts. Ancient cities generally adopted the former pattern, but starting in the late fifth century this gradually came to be replaced by the latter system. Drawing upon this, it can be suggested that the plan to relocate the royal palace to a more central location might have resulted from a desire to adjust the layout of the capital city, given that Wolseong Fortress was located too far to the south within the Gyeongju Basin. However, any plan to amend the layout of the city would have had to be fundamentally rethought with the abandonment of the palace relocation plans. The unique solution to this was to build several secondary compounds throughout the capital city in order to supplement the main palace at Wolseong Fortress. Due to the constraints of the natural platform-like area upon which Wolseong Fortress had been built, it was difficult to expand the perimeters of the royal grounds with the emergence of new needs. Wolseong Fortress was narrow along its north-south axis and spanned wide on its east-west axis. It was flanked by the Namcheon River (南川, also 蚊川) to the south, and to the north was a burial ground that had been in use for approximately 150 years and featured large earthen mounds. These constraints on the site also influenced the unique and unprecedented appearance of the Silla royal palace.

Both the Silla capital city and royal palace were, in this way, ingrained within the same place. In this sense, Gyeongju provides an unprecedented opportunity to observe the accumulation of one thousand years of Silla history and trace its development. Recent findings from active archaeological investigations have contributed to improving the understanding of this ancient site.

The Silla dynasty came to an end in 935 with its surrender to the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), which had been established in the Songak region (around present-day Kaesong in North

Korea) at the furthest periphery of the Silla Kingdom. It had proclaimed itself the historical successor to the Goguryeo Kingdom. Goryeo adopted a policy of absorbing the Silla elite, and the final Silla king, Gyeongsun, was granted the position of Sasimgwan (事審官), reserving for him administrative control over his former capital of Geumseong. It was at this point that Geumseong was renamed Gyeongju (慶州), meaning 'district (州) of happiness (慶)', indicating how Silla's surrender represented for Goryeo the opening of the unification of the Later Three Kingdoms.

The cultural standards of Silla during its period of florescence in the eighth century were held in high esteem by the Tang dynasty of China, which referred to it as a 'Kingdom of Gentlemen' (君子國). The deep pride and self-esteem of the Silla ruling class is displayed in their deliberate referrals to their capital city of Geumseong as 'Donggyeong' (東京 or 東都, meaning 'Eastern Capital'), a reference to 'Xijing' (西京 or 西都, meaning 'the Western Capital') as a term for Changan (長安), the capital of Tang China. In the early Goryeo period, Donggyeong was granted the official administrative name of Gyeongju in an effort to enhance the city's status.

During the Goryeo period, the former early Silla territory came to be known as 'Gyeongsang-do Province' (慶尙道), a name created by combining the 'gyeong' (慶) from Gyeongju with the 'sang' (尙) in Sangju, Silla's main provincial city. During the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), Gyeongju at one point functioned as the political and administrative center of Gyeongsang-do Province. In later times, the Gyeongju-based scholar Choi Jaewoo (崔濟愚, 1824–1864), who felt threatened by the influx of western civilization collectively referred to as 'Seohak' (西學, meaning 'western learning'), founded a new religion in a conscious attempt at resistance. This new creed was called Donghak (東學教), and its canonical text was *Donggyeong Daejeon* (東經大全). The fact that this attempt to resist Western influences emerged in Gyeongju illustrates how the historical legacy of this ancient capital city had been maintained. *Samguk sagi*, the official historical record of the Three Kingdoms focused on Silla, and *Samgukyusa*, an unofficial historical record of the Three Kingdoms, were both written during the Goryeo dynasty. These two texts were reprinted upon the founding of the Joseon dynasty and once again in 1512. In both cases, the reprinting took place in Gyeongju. This can also be seen as a reflection of the city maintaining its historical and cultural traditions.



As outlined above, the Gyeongju Basin early state Saroguk developed into the Silla Kingdom by successfully consolidating its surrounding competitors. Afterwards, it conquered Goguryeo and Baekje to establish the first unified kingdom on the Korean Peninsula. From its beginnings to its demise, Silla lasted for approximately one thousand years. However, due to Gyeongju's location in the its southeastern corner of the peninsula, the city was somewhat of a cultural backwater. Silla's degree of political development was also stunted compared to the other kingdoms of the region. Nevertheless, Saroguk managed to emerge victorious from its struggle with competing polities of a similar nature, and Silla was also the ultimate winner of the struggle for hegemony over the Korean Peninsula. What made this possible?

This is a riddle that has yet to be fully solved. Likely, a number of factors led to this result, but it is difficult to identify the details involved. Nevertheless, there are two significant factors that can be noted, while taking into consideration the conditions in the other competing areas. One is the natural and geographical environment, and the other is leadership that proved capable of maximizing the potential of this environment.

We will begin by focusing on the former.

In the context of the Korean Peninsula, Silla and its forerunner Saroguk were located in the southeastern reaches and therefore unfavorably situated for contact with and adoption of elements from more developed cultures. Looking at Saroguk alone, however, it should not simply be assumed that this situation was purely negative. In some respects, Saroguk's location was more favorable than that of its neighbors, and in fact this may have played an important role in allowing Saroguk to outpace them and ultimately dominate the region.

Mountainous terrain covers more than 70% of the Korean Peninsula, and it features more significantly in the Korean landscape than does flatlands. The Taebaek Mountain Range (太白山脈 or 白頭大幹), which forms the spine of the peninsula, is situated close to the East Sea but branches off at several points in a westward direction as it extends from north to south. Located in the valleys formed by mountain ridges descending from the Taebaek Mountain Range are the headwaters of rivers that flow in a generally westward direction into the Yellow Sea. At a key point near the center of the Taebaek Range, a large subsidiary range splits off and trends southwest in a bow-shaped trajectory before reaching the southern coastline. This is the Sobaek Mountain Range which cuts across the southern portion of the peninsula to form a clear natural boundary. A clearly

distinct cultural sphere developed in the region to the east of this barrier. It is in this eastern region—commonly referred to as the 'Yeongnam' (嶺南) region since the Goryeo dynasty—that Saroguk, and later Silla, developed. This region's partition from the rest of the peninsula by its mountainous border led to the formation of a unique language, customs, and other cultural elements.

Fed by numerous streams draining the Sobaek Mountain Range to the north, the Nakdonggang River flows across the Yeongnam region and forms alluvial plains before emptying into the Korea Strait in the Gimhae area. The banks on either side of the Nakdonggang River provide favorable living conditions and were consequently home to a considerable portion of the region's population. This river has been called the lifeline of the Yeongnam area since it functioned as the main artery for transportation and connected inland and coastal areas. Gyeongju is located away from the Nakdonggang River region and therefore has long been regarded as suffering from unfavorable geographic conditions. This may be true in terms of the Nakdonggang River. However, a shift in viewpoint and a closer examination of the evidence indicates ways in which Gyeongju's location was in fact quite fortuitous.

Firstly, Gyeongju was a strategic hub for regional land transportation. In order to enter the Yeongnam region from the far side of the Sobaek Mountain Range, a mountain gap such as the Jungnyeong (竹嶺) or Joryeong (鳥嶺) Pass must be traversed. Transportation routes naturally formed along the passageways provided by these passes, and the structure of the land was such that the southwards routes naturally converged at Gyeongju. For this, the Gyeongju Basin can be regarded as a node where various routes merge. In ancient times, the northern reaches of the peninsula were home to more developed cultural elements. In times of political upheaval, the populations of these northern regions would flee to the south, bringing with them the products of more advanced civilizations. These migrating groups were highly likely to pass through Gyeongju. The area may have provided an ideal spot for these migrating groups to gather and for the cultural elements that they carried to accumulate. It seems evident that its geographic background played an important role in establishing the foundations for Saroguk's growth.

One other factor that should be taken into consideration is proximity to the East Sea. Gyeongju is located in the southeastern corner of the Yeongnam region, which means that it was not far from the coast. Gyeongju had to be traversed to reach the inland areas of the Yeongnam region from the East Sea coast. Its geological structure includes a number of

fault systems, including the Ulsan Fault and the Yangsan Fault. Several of the tectonic lines formed by these fault systems meet in the Gyeongju Basin. The Yangsan Fault passes through Gyeongju and extends through Angang and Shingwang towards Yeongdeok. The Ulsan Fault extends from the Ulsan Bay area and passes through Gyeongju and Geoncheon on its way towards Yeongcheon. It can be expected that the site where these tectonic lines meet would prove to be a strategic transportation hub. Indeed, Gyeongju is connected to a northern inland transportation route which extends beyond the Sobaek Mountain Range, as well as to eastern and southern routes that reach respectively to the East Sea coast and the mouth of the Nakdonggang River.

Although Gyeongju is located at a distance from the Nakdonggang River watershed, it served as a gateway through which the various products of maritime culture had to pass in order to reach the region's inland areas. In this sense within the context of the Yeongnam region, Gyeongju's location can actually be considered quite propitious. This awareness comes with a change in perspective from considering the Korean Peninsula as a whole to the Yeongnam region in particular. It is this foundation that provided Saroguk, which originated in the Gyeongju Basin, with a critical advantage that helped it to grow into a much larger political entity and successfully gain dominion over competing political groups of a similar nature. This geographic edge also played an important role in Silla's efforts to become the ultimate victor in the struggle for unification that began with the political crises that sprung up in the northern regions of the peninsula in the early fourth century. This perspective is supported in both the archaeological record and written sources.

In terms of the overall Korean Peninsula, the southward migration of the people and products of a more advanced civilization had been a general trend up until the early fourth century when the Han Commanderies of Lelang and Daifang fell to attacks from Goguryeo forces. It is around this time that Saroguk actively utilized its advantageous location as a transportation node and gateway between the inland and eastern coastal areas to consolidate its neighboring polities, thereby developing into Silla. This represented a qualitative leap in terms of its nature as a political entity. Although details of this process have yet to be fully revealed, the extraordinary capabilities of the elite in organizing and manipulating human, military, and economic resources would certainly have played a major role. This aspect became clearer as Silla's fierce competition with Goguryeo and Baekje intensified.

## Driving Force behind Silla's Development and Unification of the Three Kingdoms

As described above, the fortuitous geographical conditions in the Gyeongju Basin played a key role in the Saroguk phase, but these conditions did undergo some changes in the next phase of Silla's evolution. Each of the early states that had been developing independently throughout the peninsula came to be involved in regional struggles for political consolidation, which ultimately led to the emergence of ancient states. By around the mid-fourth century, three main kingdoms had appeared: Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla. Gaya, unable to overcome the divisions within its polities, remained a confederacy. In other words, the 'Three Kingdoms' had been established.

From this point onwards, the geographic location of Silla in the southeastern part of the Yeongnam region, cut off from the rest of the peninsula by the Sobaek Range, came to take on a different meaning compared to in the earlier Saroguk phase. Silla's capacity for development was choked off by difficulties in communication and exchange with the world beyond the Sobaek Mountains. The most advanced civilization of the time was the North and South dynasties of China. The Three Kingdoms of the Korean Peninsula contended in adopting the products of this advanced civilization through their contacts with China. The unfortunate geographic situation of Silla meant that they fell behind in this regard and immense efforts had to be made to overcome this limitation. In response, Silla chose a strategy of cultivating its human resources and increasing their competency in foreign relations. A pool of skilled individuals and a national diplomatic capacity cannot be nurtured overnight—a steady accumulation of experience and the human resources to apply it is required. It appears that while working to overcome the handicap of its geographic position over a long period of time, Silla naturally came to understand the importance of strengthening its diplomatic service.

A tripod firmly supported by its three legs is extremely stable and cannot be easily tipped over. The situation in the Three Kingdoms was similar. Whenever one of the kingdoms grew more powerful, the other two would ally to sustain the balance of power and keep the more powerful kingdom in check. When two kingdoms were equally strong and a third weak, each of the powerful kingdoms would attempt to woo the weaker player over to their side. This was the status quo throughout the Three Kingdoms Period from the fourth to the seventh century. Faced with two powerful rivals, Silla generally took the initiative in proposing cooperation with either of the other two in order to secure its survival. Goguryeo and Baekje, whose elite shared a

belief in their common ancestral roots, competed fiercely and ultimately became involved in a war of mutual annihilation. In order to dominate the other, each of these kingdoms actively pursued alliance with Silla. Silla's position became increasingly advantageous as the struggle between Goguryeo and Baekje intensified since they enjoyed the option of choosing a side.

In the mid-fourth to fifth century, Silla maintained close ties with Goguryeo – the more powerful of the other two kingdoms at the time – and used it as a protective shield. Under Goguryeo's umbrella, Silla actively adopted products from this more advanced civilization to create a springboard for political development. Via Goguryeo, Silla was able to adopt advanced cultural elements from a wide range of regions, including Central Asia and the Northern Steppe regions, and even from as far as Rome to the distant west. With Goguryeo's guidance, Silla was also able to dispatch, at least for a time, envoys to Earlier Qin in northern China, thus making its presence known on the international stage for the first time.

However, the above arrangement eventually became an obstacle for Silla. Goguryeo's role as a protector led to excessive political interference, as well as posing a difficult economic burden. In response, Silla attempted to improve its relationship with Baekje, with whom it had continuously maintained a hostile status, in an attempt to counter Goguryeo's interference. Silla subsequently managed to maintain a friendly stance with Baekje for more than a century, notwithstanding the occasional crisis. During this period, Silla applied Baekje's assistance to forge a formal diplomatic relationship with Liang, one of China's Southern dynasties, and was introduced to their developed culture. Through this medium, Silla was able to make great strides both politically and culturally.

Over time, however, this amicable relationship between Silla and Baekje also began to experience internal conflicts as well. Silla must have made the determination that it would not emerge the winner if its arrangement with Baekje remained static. Accordingly, as soon as its improved internal foundations were stabilized, Silla set out to conquer the Hangang River region, an area disputed by all three kingdoms. This manifested Silla's drive to self-reliance and to free itself from the influence of the other kingdoms. The Hangang River region had been the cradle of Baekje and was of strategic geopolitical importance as the site of exchanges in all sorts of products and people.

As can be expected, Silla's conquest of the Hangang River region made enemies of both Goguryeo and Baekje and was therefore an extremely risky enterprise. However, this great gamble would ultimately advance its fate. At first it would have been difficult to foresee Silla's future success since it had

acquired two powerful enemies in a single stroke. Its actions may have initially seemed reckless and the results of an impulsive greed. However, given the events that followed, Silla's decision appears to have been quite strategic and based on a calculation of the favorable odds involved. Silla's long experience with the other two kingdoms made it confident that Goguryeo and Baekje would not form a coalition and attack. Given this, Silla appears to have decided that it could defeat each of the kingdoms on an individual basis. Silla's actions appear to have been based on a precise analysis of internal conditions in Goguryeo and Baekje, as well as of broader international dynamics. Silla had gambled its fate on control over the Hangang River region because it judged that a great advantage would follow. In this regard, we must note that it was control over this region that allowed Silla to establish direct diplomatic relations with both the Northern and the Southern dynasties of China. The ability to independently maintain exchanges and diplomatic relations meant that it could actively adopt the new products of developed civilizations to its heart's content. In doing so, Silla overcame its geographical disadvantages and achieved a longstanding goal.

It can be expected that when Silla, the relatively weaker side, made adversaries of both Goguryeo and Baekje, it had already been making plans to establish friendly relations with China across the sea in order to keep these two foes in check. The manner in which Silla actively approached the North and South dynasties and the unified dynasties of Sui and Tang can be taken as evidence. An era in which Silla played an important diplomatic role in the greater East Asian arena had begun. This new international dynamic well suited Silla, which was accustomed to surmounting its geographical limitations by making strategic use of Goguryeo and Baekje as needed. Silla could now apply its foreign connections not only as a channel for importing advanced cultural elements, but also to exercise its diplomatic capacity to the fullest. Silla established close relations first with the Sui dynasty and then with the succeeding Tang dynasty, eventually forging a military alliance. This served to lay a foundation for Silla's ultimate victory in the struggles between the Three Kingdoms.

Unlike Goguryeo and Baekje, which had maintained a rigid diplomatic policy grounded in tradition, Silla did not passively accept the limitations of its geopolitical status and worked actively to overcome it. This proved the decisive factor that allowed Silla, the weakest of the Three Kingdoms, to emerge as the eventual hegemon. An institution responsible solely for international relations was founded, and great efforts were put into cultivating the personnel needed to fulfill these diplomatic duties. Consisting exclusively of young men, the

*hwarang* organization (花郎徒) was founded in an effort to foster the human resources required in this new era. As the overall situation evolved, the *gukhak* (國學) was established as a central institution of higher learning for educating a new generation of Silla youth in the principles of Confucianism. This was part of the wider endeavor to overcome the limitations of Silla's position. In this sense, it can be said that Silla's geographic handicaps actually stimulated its will to overcome adversity, thereby contributing to the basis that made the unification of the Three Kingdoms possible. Of course, this could not have been possible without leadership at the grassroots level and beyond.

## The Geographic Environment and Silla Culture

As noted previously, Silla's geopolitical situation did not remain static, but was in fact fluid and responded according to the context of the times. It would therefore be a mistake to approach Silla's geographic position from a fixed determination—to assess it as being either fortunate or disadvantageous—without considering the process of conditions changing over time. From the perspective of the Yeongnam region alone, the placement of Saroguk was quite advantageous. It was able to apply local conditions toward its eventual development into the Silla state. On the other hand, Silla's placement in the southeast corner of the Korean Peninsula was a burden on this greater political entity and its expanded territory. It led to a lag in adopting the advancements of other civilizations and to difficulties in shedding the more retrograde elements of Silla culture.

The Silla elite took great pains to overcome this limitation, and the result was the skilled manipulation of its more advanced neighboring powers. Silla had no choice but to constantly observe and remain knowledgeable of the internal conditions in these nations and the state of international affairs. In so doing, Silla managed to naturally and steadily cultivate its diplomatic aptitude. When the time finally came to compete directly with Goguryeo and Baekje, it was able to use its accumulated capacity to great effect.

Migrants that arrived later in the basin brought with them elements of advanced foreign civilizations and played a key role in guiding Silla's growth and development. These newcomers rapidly infiltrated the Gyeongju Basin up until the early fourth century and won over the existing groups to gain hegemony in the region. The ethnic backgrounds of these earlier and later groups did not differ fundamentally. The Korean Peninsula and greater Manchuria at the time were populated by members

of a wide range of ethnicities, consisting of the Joseon (朝鮮), Han (韓), Ye (濊), Maek (貊), Yemaek (濊貊), Mohe (靺鞨), and more. These groups all emerged from a common ethnic base but came to be called by different names according to their area of residence. Mainly, it was the various branches of the Han (韓) people, such as the Joseon tribe, that arrived in the Gyeongju Basin in successive waves and merged into the existing population. This was facilitated by the area's location at the crossroads of various transportation routes.

The Gyeongju Basin is where two tectonic valleys running different directions met. One valley from Ulsan to Gyeongju merged with the other from Yangsan to Angang. A large stream originates in the southern part of the basin and flows north. Fed by numerous small waterways draining the mountain valleys, it forms a river that arrives at Pohang where it empties into the East Sea. The common name of this waterway is the Hyeongsang River, but it is referred to as Seocheon (西川, West Stream) while passing through the Gyeongju Basin. Bukcheon (鬮川, North Stream) and Namcheon (蚊川, South Stream), which respectively originate in the eastern and southeastern valleys of the Gyeongju Basin, flow west to feed the Seocheon. The area defined by these three streams served as the main urban center for the Silla capital.

This area was not originally ideal for human settlement. The transportation routes radiating out from the Gyeongju Basin made the area difficult to defend. In addition, wetlands formed by natural springs were scattered throughout this area, and the Bukcheon was prone to flooding. This meant that habitation outside the hilly zones of the area would have been difficult in the absence of adaptation efforts. As such, the population of Saroguk and of Silla in its early phase did not concentrate in the central portion of the basin. Their settlements were commonly established along the piedmonts or the hills and afforded a view of the lowlands below. Only a few burial mounds were constructed in the central area, which was devoid of residences.

As the Gyeongju Basin developed as the Silla capital from the fourth century onwards and Wolseong emerged as the royal residence, people began to congregate in the central flatlands. However, the residents of the capital at the time were not politically united. There were six local administrative units, which would later become the *bu* (部) districts, and each maintained its own semi-independent base. The important issues facing the Silla state were collectively debated and acted upon by a council consisting of representatives of each of the six *bu* districts. The sovereign, known as the 'Maripgan' (麻立干) presided over this council and acted as its chair in his or her capacity as the head of the *takbu* (喙部), the strongest of the *bu*



districts. However, the role of the Maripgan was simply that of a political leader. The ruler had yet to wield absolute power.

All members of the six *bu* districts participated in common ancestral rites for the progenitor of Saroguk. Accordingly, all of their tombs were established within a common burial ground. The large but compact cluster of tombs located to the north of the palace (Wolseong) represents this shared facility for members of five of the *bu* districts (members of one of the six *bu* traditionally buried their dead elsewhere). Most of the tombs constructed within this burial ground demonstrate a distinctive internal structure that has led them to be called 'wooden chamber tombs with stone mounds' (積石木槨墳). Since this burial ground had been established in the central area of the capital city, its eventual growth posed a considerable obstacle to urban planning. A fundamental shift took place in the early sixth century with the development of a new government structure with the king at its apex. A subsequent reorganization of the urban layout became inevitable. Tombs now came to be sited in the western peripheries of the city and in other surrounding districts. The plan to relocate the palace to a more central position and the eventual construction of Hwangryongsa Temple in its stead, as described, were all part of this attempt to restructure the urban design.

022 The wooden chamber tombs with stone mounds constructed within a particular district in the Gyeongju Basin have long been a subject of great interest for their distinctive structures and grave goods that shed light on the origins of Silla culture. These tombs consisted of three main components: an inner core featuring a wooden coffin placed within wooden chamber; a stone cairn over the wooden structure; and a layer of earth that covered the stone structure. The distinctive nature of these tombs, which have no identified counterparts in the broader region, has led to the opinion that they must have originated elsewhere. This viewpoint has been hotly contested by those who argue for their indigenous development within the region. The artifacts recovered from these tombs are highly distinctive. In addition to large volumes of pottery, weapons, and horse tack, the richly furnished tombs have yielded numerous decorative ornaments made with precious metals. These include gold and gilt-bronze crowns, as well as golden earrings, belts, and shoes, all of which were prestige objects reflecting the authority of the deceased occupants of the tombs. Such metal artifacts do not appear in archaeological contexts predating the fourth century, which suggests that they were introduced to the region with the foundation of the Silla Kingdom around this time. Of particular interest are the recovered examples of Roman glassware in various forms and colors that originated in different

workshops throughout the Roman Empire. The majority of all the glassware found was not created indigenously and appears to have been imported. Some of it seems to have come from Goguryeo, but it is more likely that it was actually obtained through Goguryeo. In this sense, they can be regarded as material evidence of Silla's relationship with Goguryeo as noted in written sources. In addition, they shed light on the nature of Silla's adoption of advanced cultural products during the fifth century.

Silla's great interest in importing development through contacts and interaction with the outside world can be observed through these grave goods and the architectural structure of the tombs. While maintaining friendly relations with Goguryeo, the opening of routes along the Eurasian steppes allowed for the adoption of cultural elements from a vast area, including the Northern Steppes and even the Roman Empire. Such cultural elements played an important role in fueling Silla's development. By cutting relations with Goguryeo and establishing friendly connections with Baekje instead, the importance of the sea increased for Silla. Their gamble of seizing the Hangang River region was part of an effort to break free from existing geographic constraints. It also allowed Silla to gain a better knowledge of international dynamics and expand its perspective on the wider world, thus boosting its diplomatic capacity.

## Concluding Remarks

By overcoming its geographic constraints, Silla was able to emerge as the eventual victor in the struggle among the Three Kingdoms. Throughout this process, it achieved an understanding of the measures that it could pursue and further develop in order to actively surmount future obstacles. Of particular interest is the way in which Silla, as the weaker player, adroitly made use of its stronger neighbors. Through this experience, Silla was able to enhance its diplomatic capabilities and emerge triumphant. In this sense, the unification of the Three Kingdoms can be appreciated as a diplomatic victory.

It may be expected that Silla's geographic constraints in the southeastern periphery of the Korean Peninsula would have led the kingdom to lag behind its neighbors and become traditionalist. However, this did not prove to be the case, and it fails to explain Silla's eventual achievement of hegemony. Its backwater status actually encouraged Silla to more actively engage with the outside world and adopt elements from advanced foreign cultures. This provided the background for



the open but ambitious nature of the Silla people and their pioneering spirit. This can also be witnessed in the way in which Silla dispatched numerous students and monks to study outside the region, although in later times their destinations were narrowed to Tang China. The fact that quite a few Silla monks overcame the extensive obstacles to successfully journey to India for the purpose of study, or the presence of the great Silla seafarer Jang Bogo in the maritime canon of the ninth century can also be better understood within this context.

**Translated by Ko Ilhong**

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