

Ancient Korea and Japan as seen through Metalcraft: A New History of Interregional Relations

The Kofun period on the Japanese archipelago (circa 3rd century - 7th century) is considered to be a transitional historical stage, when societies based on chiefdoms began to mature into societies based on statehood. Among the factors affecting the growth of the state of Wa, the central polity on the Japanese archipelago, perhaps the most important was the influx of cultural products and resources that arose through exchanges with various polities located on the Korean Peninsula. The introduction of iron materials, sophisticated cultural products, and all manner of technologies directly affected the ways in which the Wa kingship exercised regional control through the exchange of goods, and had an extremely significant impact on the intrinsic development of Kofun-period society.

This corresponded to the “Three Kingdoms period” when the Korean Peninsula was divided among the three nations of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, along with the Gaya confederacy, and a state of tension prevailed, frequently punctuated by fierce inter-regional conflicts on the peninsula. In this highly charged atmosphere, the establishment of relations with the nation of Wa, across the sea, is presumed to have functioned as a sort of deterrence by which to favorably advance negotiations with neighboring polities. Examination of *toraikei* archaeological relics (i.e., relics “of foreign derivation”) found on the Japanese archipelago reveals a situation marked by the coexistence of materials of extremely diverse provenance, and this is believed to be the result of attempts by various groups on the Korean Peninsula to establish relations with Wa. In other words, a prerequisite for any truly comprehensive understanding of rela-

tions between Japan and Korea in the ancient period requires an escape from the conventional dualistic perception of the “Japanese archipelago” versus the “Korean Peninsula” as discrete entities.

In an attempt to clarify the history of inter-regional relationships in a way that considers Wa and the various polities of the Korean Peninsula in parallel, my approach in this book is based on an archaeological analysis of various examples of metal craftwork that were interred as funerary goods in each region. In particular, I focus on two types of metal craft work in my analysis, namely, pendant earrings and ornamental swords.

The pendant earrings discussed in the first half of the book represent the most ubiquitous crafted metal accessory found across the Korean Peninsula. As the basis of my attempt to conduct an inter-regional comparison of these artifacts, I have undertaken a detailed regional analysis of pendant earrings excavated on the Korean Peninsula, and elucidated the respective transition phases between regions. In Silla, the production of pendant earrings began against the backdrop of techniques passed on from Goguryeo in the early part of the fifth century. Earrings in Silla were used as intermediary goods for building relations with local territories. As Silla increased its influence over its local territories, the production of such earrings was expanded and they became more sophisticated in terms of design. In Baekje, where the production of pendant earrings also started early in the fifth century, pendant earrings were relatively simple in composition. Nonetheless, the adoption of advanced techniques, such as filigree, can be discerned in some of the pieces from this region at an early stage. In Daegaya, where earring production began in the mid-fifth century, later than in Silla and Baekje, the technological traditions employed in pendant earring manufacture were initially similar to those employed in Baekje, with more distinctive earring designs arising later. The production of earrings in Silla reached its

peak in the late fifth century when the kingdom achieved a range of distribution that extended to Baekje and Daegaya. The distribution of earrings from Silla throughout the alliance structures on the southern Korean Peninsula is considered to reflect Silla's efforts to establish strong relations with these neighboring polities, as well as the potential threat posed by Goguryeo to the north.

Conversely, evidence from Wa is more complex in that excavations on the Japanese archipelago have uncovered a mix of earrings with characteristic designs from all over the Korean Peninsula, suggesting the actual situation involved diverse contacts with the peninsula. However, with respect to pendant earrings featuring long chains as ornaments, which have conventionally been associated with Daegaya, the argument advanced here is that these should be evaluated as works manufactured in the Japanese archipelago by immigrant craftsmen from the Korean Peninsula. On the assumption that it recognized the value and prestige associated with the metalcraft being produced across the Korean Peninsula, I believe that Wa was also engaged in the local manufacture and distribution of metalcraft in the archipelago.

The ornamental swords that feature in the latter half of the book were blades that were originally used as weapons before being decorated with precious metals and elevated to well-crafted metalwork accessories that symbolized the prestige of their owners. In Silla, where the production of ornamental swords began in around the early fifth century, such swords were initially distributed throughout the Gaya confederacy, principally around Busan. The techniques employed in their production also propagated into the Daegaya region and other areas. However, from the middle of the fifth century, the establishment of a distinctive Silla sword design, characterized by swords with a ring pommel decorated with a trefoil or tri-circular motif, led to an increase in control over manufactories by the central polity, and consequently, an increase in the value of

swords as symbols of prestige was established. In Baekje, ornamental swords distinguished by extensive use of metal inlay and other techniques were manufactured from an early stage, and these products and technologies were subsequently transferred to Daegaya. Daegaya was intermittently influenced by Silla and Baekje in this way, because its own sword production capacity did not reach a peak until sometime during the second half of the fifth century. The sudden appearance of Daegaya-style swords featuring advanced decorative elements, such as dragon-and-phoenix-motif ring pommels, is thought to have occurred in response to an influx of Baekje craftsmen to Daegaya when the capital of Baekje was relocated to Woongjin after Goguryeo's invasion of Hanseong.

Although swords with decorated ring pommels were introduced intermittently to the Wa/Japanese archipelago from various sites of the peninsula from the fifth century onwards, the Wa-based manufacture of swords with dragon-and-phoenix motifs ring pommels such as those that had appeared suddenly on the Korean Peninsula began in the latter half of the sixth century. It has been postulated that swords from Wa featuring ring pommels with dragon-and-phoenix motifs bear some relation, in terms of their design, to similar artifacts excavated from the tomb of King Muryeong in Baekje. However, in terms of the technology employed in their production, they are considered to share features with swords from Daegaya that also feature dragon-and-phoenix-motif ring pommels. I consider the appearance of peninsular-style swordsmithing in Wa as being a result of an influx of swordsmiths and craftsmen from Daegaya who came to the peninsula due to the decline and destruction of their homeland.

This archeological consideration of metal crafts suggests that, rather than the conventionally accepted hypothesis of a unidirectional propagation of culture from the peninsula to the archipelago, the actual situation involved mutually beneficial exchanges based on the interests of each re-

gional group. That is, exchanges between Wa and the polities of the Korean Peninsula during the ancient period unfolded based on the respective intentions of each group against the backdrop of an ever-changing international milieu.