THE SEVEN-BRANCHED SWORD

The Seven-branched Sword, that is preserved at the Isono-kami Shrine, is believed to be the sword that is spoken of in Nihongi as having been sent by the Paekche court to the Jingū’s court in 372. Nihongi portrays Prince Homuda as a son of Jingū Regent and the heir apparent to the throne at that time.

According to the Nihongi record for the year 366, the Paekche court had dispatched scouts to a Kaya state in 364 to gather information about the passages to the Japanese islands. The movement of the Paekche people to the Japanese islands must have occurred not long after 366. According to the Nihongi record on the extensive pen/insular military activities in 399-70 involving the Yamato soldiers, Paekche generals, King Keun Chogo and the Crown Prince Keun Kusu, Prince Homuda [the founder of the Yamato kingdom] and his followers seem to have departed the Korean peninsula sometime during 369-70.

The sword seems to have been bestowed upon Homuda who was undertaking the conquest of the Japanese islands, apparently as a symbolic gesture of well-wishing for his endeavor and solidarity with his new kingdom. The inscription on the Seven-branched Sword says that the sword was manufactured in May 369, and the Nihongi record says that the sword was delivered to Homuda on September 10th, 372, most
likely soon after he had landed on the Japanese islands. Taking account of the fact that so many people from the Korean peninsula had already gone across the sea to settle down in the Japanese islands, an official evidence to testify visually the mandate of the Paekche court bestowed upon Homuda as the ruler of the new kingdom was presumably expected to enhance the cooperation of the old settlers and facilitate the conquest. King Keun Cho-go died in 375.

The full translation of the inscription on the sword may be read as follow: “On May 16th, the 4th year of Tae-hwa [369], the day of Byung-O at noon, this seven-branched sword was manufactured with hundred-times-wrought iron. As this sword has a magical power to rout the enemy, it is sent [bestowed] to the king of a vassal state. Manufactured by □□□□. Never has there been such a sword. The Crown Prince of Paekche, who owes his life to the august King, had this sword made for the king of Yamato [or the king of vassal state]. Hope that it be transmitted and shown to posterity.”

Naturally, most Japanese scholars have tried to turn the inscription around and cast Paekche as the “vassal state” by reading the inscription “respectively presenting the sword to the Emperor by the Paekche King.” Ueda Masaaki (quoted by Saeki, 1977) is rather an exception among Japanese historians because he “has maintained that the Seven-branched Sword was ‘bestowed’ on the Wa ruler by the king of Paekche.” Ueda “based his interpretation on the argument that the term ‘koo’ [howang] appearing in the inscription is written in the commanding tone of a superior addressing an inferior, exemplified by the sentence reading ‘Hand down [this sword] to [your] posterity.’”

The Paekche court at first seems to have treated Homuda as the king of a vassal state, as was inscribed on the Seven-branched Sword. King Chinsa (385-392), a son of Keun Kusu, in particular, seems to have treated Homuda as inferior to himself. According to Nihongi, Homuda dispatched four generals to Paekche and severely reprimanded Chinsa in 392 for such unwarranted treatment, which perhaps came to be inscribed in the Kwang-gae-to’s epitaph as “Wa coming in the year 391.” Homuda also reproved severely the new king Asin (392-405), a grandson of Keun Kusu, in 397 (or in 396) for such an attitude. I speculate that Homuda, the founder of the Yamato kingdom, and Keun Kusu, the Crown Prince and later King of Paekche, belonged to the same generation, possibly with some age difference, and hence Homuda could not stand such unwarranted attitude of young Paekche kings of the later generation.

Paekche had managed to maintain the upper hand
friendship of big brother King.”

雄略五年夏四月 百濟加須利君 盖鹵王也 百濟新撰云 辛丑年 盖鹵王遣弟昆支君 向大倭侍 天王 以修兄王之好也 （NI: 471）

6 三国史記 百濟本紀 第三 辰斯王 六年九月 王命達率 眞嘉謨 伐高句麗 拚都坤城 虏得二百人

7 應神 八年 是以遣王子直支于天朝 以脩先王之好也（NI: 367）

8 廣開土王碑文 百深 新羅 舊是屬民 由來朝貢 而倭以辛卯年來 渡海破百深 烏利 羅 以為臣民 以六年丙申 王躬率水軍 討伐漢國… 而漢主因退獻出男生口一千人 細布千匹 殭王自誓 從今以後 永爲奴客 太王恩赦始 迷之愆 錄其後順之誠 於是得五十八城 村七百 將漢主弟井大臣十人 旋師還都

The King Kwang-gae-to’s stele was erected by his son, King Chang-su (413-91), in 414 in commemoration of his predecessor.

9 In Sin-myo record, there are three missing letters between the word “Paekche” and the letter “ra(la).” Indeed it is a real curiosity that most Japanese scholars could simply fill up the missing three letters following Paekche to make them read “Imna, Silla.” First of all, no one can ever deny that the militarily against Koguryeo until September 390 (when King Chinsa let General Jin Kamo capture a Koguryeo castle and 200 prisoners), but the appearance of King Kwang-gae-to the Great (391-413) in Koguryeo completely reversed Paekche’s fortunes in the battlefield. King Asin belatedly recognized the urgent necessity, for the very survival of Paekche, of the help from the new Yamato kingdom still fresh in its conqueror’s vigor. King Asin decided to send his crown prince Chonji to the Yamato court in 397 in order to transform the unnecessarily created ill will between the two courts into an active alliance. The inscription of Kwang-gae-to’s stele suggests that the efforts by Asin and Chonji were apparently successful. The Koguryeo army led by King Kwang-gae-to devastated Paekche in 392 and 396, but later saw as valiant warriors the Yamato soldiers fighting alongside of the Paekche soldiers in 400 and also in 404.

KING KWANG-GAE-TO’S EPITAPH: CORRECT TRANSLATION

The story that Japan had a unified and powerful state as early as the third or fourth century, possessed a colony called Mima-na on the southern peninsula, and controlled Paekche and Silla used to be based on the anachronistic and incoherent bits and pieces of episodes and fantasies recorded in Kojiki and Nihongi. There are, of course, no records which suggest any such possibility in any Korean or Chinese chronicles. Nonetheless, the Japanese made a discovery in 1882 which could be viewed as an objective support for their claim. It is a single line in the inscription on the epitaph of King Kwang-gae-to, a copy of which was brought to Japan by Sakao Kagenobu, an army officer and intelligence agent of the Japanese General Staff Office. This is the famous Sin-nya (391) Record. Japanese historians interpret the line of inscription in the following fashion: “Since the year of Sin-nya, Wa came and crossed over the sea, and conquered Paekche, Imna and Silla, and thereby made them [Wa’s] subject.” This translation constitutes the so-called unshakable “evidence” in support of the dogma of almost every Japanese historian working on this period that the Yamato kingdom had already existed in the fourth century as a unified and powerful state, and furthermore had militarily controlled (or even colonized) South Korea.
According to Hatada (1979): “Prewar [Japanese] history textbooks were based on the records of the Nihon shoki and said that Japan had controlled ancient Korea, whereas postwar texts were based on the King Kwang-gae-to stele inscription, but still accepted Japan’s control of Korea. Thus the basis for the view that Japan had controlled Korea moved from an unreliable ancient chronicle to the reliable stele inscription. Though the history texts written after the surrender were vastly different from their prewar counterparts, in this one respect there was no change, and King Kwang-gae-to’s stele was the basis of the argument.”

According to Ledyard (1975), Paekche “came under heavy and continuous battering from their Koguryeo cousins in the north, and were quite severely in trouble during the 390's and 400's. Help from their brothers in Japan may have been the only thing that saved them – in any case, this is what I think it means on the Kwang-gae-to’s Stone when it says that the Wa came across the sea and fought in Korea.” Hence, one may understand the statement that “Wa conquered Paekche, Imna and Kara and made them their subjects” as reflecting the feeling of contempt that Koguryeo must have held for Paekche’s dependence on Wa soldiers, and therefore could have decided to inscribe on the monument, with contempt, that Paekche, together with Imna and Kara, were conquered by Wa and became its subjects.

Of course there are alternative ways to interpret the Sin-myo Record. For instance, Cho (1984: 35-64) interpret it in the following fashion: “Paekche and Silla were formerly [Koguryeo’s] subjects. They have been paying tributes. The Wa came in the year Sin-myo (391). [The King kwang-geo-to] crossed over the sea and destroyed Paekche, [Imna and Kara] to make them his subjects.” According to Cho, the “sea” in the inscription must refer to the Yellow Sea along the western coastline of the Korean peninsula, given that it was the most convenient expeditionary route to the southwestern and southern parts from the northwestern coast.

Indeed, the inscription immediately following the Sinmyo (391) record reads: “King himself led a naval force in the sixth year, Byung-shin (396), and smashed Paekche.” It Sin-myo Record (391) was inserted to justify the invasion of Paekche, not Silla, by King Kwang-gaw-to in 396. The following inscriptions clearly state that Koguryeo and Silla maintained a friendly relationship, that Koguryeo never invaded Silla but rather helped it to repulse Wa troops, and hence Silla did not have to be implicated in the official excuse for the invasion carried out in 396.

Indeed, a later line of the inscription for the year 400 specifically records that King Kwang-gae-to annihilated the Wa troops by chasing them all the way to the Imna, Kara area and thereby rescued Silla. Reading it as “Im-na, Ka-ra” instead of “Im-na, Sil-la” is therefore more consistent with the fact that Koguryeo did not fight against Silla at that time.

We can also observe the expression “Imna, Kara” in the orthodox Chronicles of Chinese Dynasties, such as the record of Song-shu on the five kings of Wa.
subsequently records the acquisition of 58 Paekche castles, but never records that Paekche was conquered. In any case, the only way for the Koguryeo to attack Paekche with its naval force was to sail the Yellow Sea. If the Koguryeo force crossed the Yellow Sea in 396, there is no reason why they should not have crossed the Yellow Sea before.

The epitaph as well as Nihongi record the frequent participation of Yamato troops on the side of Paekche in battles against Koguryeo and Silla, just like the frequent participation of the Black-Water Mohe soldiers on the side of Koguryeo.10

FROM OLD TIMES, THE PAEKCHE HAVE RECEIVED BOWS AND HORSES FROM THE YAMATO COURT AND DEFENDED THEMSELVES AGAINST ENEMIES

According to Nihongi, the Paekche practice of using Yamato soldiers in intramural armed conflicts continued well into the sixth century. Nihongi records the statement made by King Seong-myung of Paekche in 544 who intended to request from Kimmei “an army with which to succor the Land of Imna” and also 3,000 troops to construct six fortresses along the frontier between Silla and a Kaya state. Nihongi records that Paekche sent envoys to Yamato “to ask for auxiliaries” in 547, and “three hundred and seventy men were sent to Paekche to assist in constructing a fortress at Toki-sin” in 548. Nihongi records that, in 553, “Uchi no Omi was sent on a mission to Paekche with a present of two good horses, two traveling barges, fifty bows, fifty sets of arrows, and an Imperial message, saying, ‘As to the troops asked for by the King, his wishes shall be complied with.’”

In 553, King Seong-myung sent a memorial to Kimmei, saying that “the lands beyond the sea are very scarce of bows and horses. From old times until now, they have received them from the Emperor, and have therewith defended themselves against their powerful enemies. I humbly pray the Celestial bounty to bestow on us a large supply of bows and horses.” In 554, “Paekche sent …to communicate with Uchi no Omi… We have just heard that thou, by command of the August Emperor, hast arrived in Tsukushi in charge of the troops bestowed on us by him. Nothing could compare much
more with our joy when we heard this. The campaign of this year is a much more dangerous one than the last; and we beg that the force granted to us may not be allowed to be later than the first month.’ Hereupon Uchi no Omi answered … ‘Accordingly there is being sent an auxiliary force numbering 1,000 men, 100 horses, and 40 ships …’”¹¹

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