

ANALYSIS OF SILLA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS THROUGH GYERIM-RO TOMB NO. 14 AND HISTORICAL RECORDS

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Abstract

This paper examines the reality of Silla's dynamic foreign relations and Eurasian civilizational exchange in the 5th and 6th centuries, focusing on the "Golden Dagger (Treasure No. 635)" excavated from Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 in Gyeongju in 1973. The Gyerim-ro Golden Dagger preserves Western-style metalwork styles such as granulation and cloisonné, suggesting a direct link with the nomadic civilizations of Central Asia and the Black Sea coast. In this study, the influx route of Eastern European garnet is traced through scientific component analysis of the dagger, and its lineage is identified through iconographic comparison with murals in the Kizil Caves of the Xinjiang region, China. In particular, departing from the existing Roman-centric perspective, this paper explores the possibility that Sasanian Persian metalwork technology was introduced to Silla through Central Asian Sogdian networks or maritime routes. Additionally, it critically examines the latest theories suggesting that glass vessels excavated from **Hwangnamdaechong** (the largest royal double-mound tomb in Gyeongju, dating to the 5th century) go beyond simple Roman glass and inherit the lineage of Sasanian Cut Glass. Furthermore, it analyzes Yoshimizu Tsuneo's "Theory of Western Artisans' Settlement" and organically connects and analyzes the civil attendant statues (warrior statues) of royal tombs from the Unified Silla period and Arabic geographical records. Through this, the study aims to prove that Silla was not merely a simple terminus of the Silk Road, but a core hub of the Eurasian network where human and material resources were actively exchanged.

Keywords

Silla, Gyerim-ro Golden Dagger, Silk Road, Granulation, Cloisonné, Kizil Caves, Sasanian Persia, Sasanian Cut Glass, Yoshimizu Tsuneo, Eurasian Civilizational Exchange.

Introduction: Traces of Eurasia Found in Gyeongju

In 1973, an artifact that surprised the world was discovered at the Gyerim-ro construction site in the thousand-year-old ancient capital of Gyeongju. Gyerim-ro

Tomb No. 14, excavated at this location—the center of the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla periods—contained funerary objects that differed from the general patterns of existing Silla tombs. Among them, the most peerless existence is the "Golden Dagger (黄金寶劍)," designated as Treasure No. 635.

This dagger is a 36cm-long short sword, decorated with granulation (attaching microscopic gold grains onto a gold plate) and cloisonné (inlaying red gemstones) techniques. In particular, recent scientific analysis has revealed that the garnets embedded in this dagger originated from the Bohemia region of Eastern Europe, far away, rather than India or Sri Lanka. It was also confirmed that the shape of the dagger perfectly matches the short swords carried by warriors in the murals of the Kizil Caves in Central Asia.

These findings suggest that the Golden Dagger was more than a simple import; it was a product of a "hyper-regional global network" where Eastern European raw materials met Central Asian technology to reach Silla. This is because there were no cases of production in Silla or the adjacent Chinese continent using such extremely unfamiliar methods at the time. This is a highly advanced metalwork style enjoyed by nomadic peoples of the distant West, specifically Central Asia and the Black Sea coast. Notably, the fact that the shape and decorative patterns of this sword are almost identical to artifacts excavated from Borovoe, Kazakhstan, provides significant implications. This strongly supports the possibility that the dagger was not transmitted sequentially through China, but was directly introduced to Silla via the Silk Road, the main artery of East-West exchange.

Furthermore, in terms of the structural aspects of the burial, the fact that the head of the deceased was placed in an East-West direction rather than the traditional North-South direction, and the adoption of a unique joint burial system (墓制) where two adult males were buried together, suggests that the interred was not a simple Silla aristocrat. It is presumed that he was either a person of Western lineage or a key figure who maintained close diplomatic relations with Western nations and deeply accepted their culture.

Accordingly, this study intends to clarify the specific origin of the gemstones embedded in the dagger based on scientific component analysis results and perform an iconographic comparison with the daggers depicted in the Kizil Caves murals of Xinjiang, China, to trace the place of manufacture. Furthermore, it will review the "Theory of Western Artisans' Settlement in Silla" proposed by Japanese art historian Yoshimizu Tsuneo (吉水常雄) from a new perspective. Starting with this Golden Dagger, this paper aims to specifically analyze the international foreign

relations established by Silla through the warrior statues (武人石) of Silla royal tombs and Arabic geographical records, thereby proving that 1,500 years ago, Silla was a core terminal of the vast civilizational exchange network penetrating the entire Eurasian continent.

Body I: The Reality of East-West Exchange through Archaeological Artifacts

The value of the Golden Dagger found in Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 does not lie simply in its brilliance. This artifact is decisive material evidence showing that Silla in the 5th and 6th centuries was incorporated into the vast civilizational exchange network of the Eurasian continent. The true internationality of the dagger becomes clearer through scientific analysis. According to the results of precise appraisal by the National Museum and the scientific community, the origin of the garnet, the red gemstone embedded in the dagger, was confirmed to be Eastern Europe (such as the Bohemia region of the Czech Republic). It is a marvelous discovery that Eastern European raw stones from tens of thousands of kilometers away were used, rather than India or Sri Lanka, which were geographically much closer at the time. This proves that raw stones collected in Eastern Europe, which was under the influence of the Roman Empire, were transformed into artworks through Central Asian craftsmanship and reached the Silla royalty via a "hyper-regional global supply chain" traversing the Silk Road. Here, it is noteworthy that recent research results indicate the manufacturing technique of the Golden Dagger is closer to the technical traditions of Sasanian Persia, the supreme technical power in metalwork in Eurasia at the time, rather than Byzantine traditions. The symmetrical gemstone arrangement in the center of the dagger and the "Medallion" style are typical characteristics of Sasanian Persian metalwork. This suggests that Silla did not simply accept Roman products passively, but that the high-tech craft culture of Persia was delivered to suit the tastes of the Silla royalty through the hands of Sogdian merchants.

Another decisive piece of evidence revealing the origin of the Golden Dagger is found in the murals of the Kizil Caves in the Kucha region of Xinjiang Province, China. Murals in tombs such as Kizil Cave No. 69, created in the 6th and 7th centuries, depict Western warriors known as "Tocharians" and the patterns and shapes of the short swords they carry on their waists are highly consistent with the Gyerim-ro Golden Dagger. In particular, the decoration at the end of the scabbard and the arrangement of the palmette patterns show that this dagger was a symbol of the highest class, popular among Central Asian aristocrats or high-ranking warriors at the time. This implies that Silla's Golden Dagger was not an accidental influx, but a result of direct exchange with the core powers that dominated Eurasia at the time.

The palmette pattern, a three-leaf design engraved in the center of the dagger, is also an important clue. This pattern is a typical Western iconographic motif that originated in ancient Greece and Rome and spread through the Byzantine Empire. The discovery of an artifact combining Eastern European gemstones and Western iconography in a 6th-century Silla tomb is quite exceptional. At the time, Silla was in an expansionary period, merging Gaya and advancing into the Han River basin, and the Silla royalty actively accepted rare Western goods to symbolize their authority. In addition to the Gyerim-ro dagger, glass vessels excavated from Hwangnamdaechong are also undergoing active reinterpretation. Hwangnamdaechong, the largest Silla royal tomb located in the Daereungwon Tomb Complex in Gyeongju, is a double-mounded tomb (consisting of South and North mounds) dating back to the 5th century. As a representative "wooden-chamber tomb with a stone mound," it has yielded tens of thousands of prestigious artifacts, including golden crowns and various luxury imports, serving as a critical archaeological site for studying Silla's early international trade. Among the finds, the glass cups are particularly noted for their sophisticated Cut Glass technique. Regarding the sophisticated cutting technique of Sasanian Persian glass, S. Carter (1988) emphasized the technical maturity of its geometric patterns (cited in Yoshimizu Tsuneo, 2002). Unlike Roman glass made by blowing, the cut technique—mechanically carving geometric patterns into the glass surface—was the exclusive domain of Sasanian Persian artisans. According to research supporting that the manufacturing technique of Hwangnamdaechong glass vessels is specific to the Sasanian style (S. Carter, 1988), such techniques symbolize the highest technical perfection of the era beyond simple decoration (cited in Yoshimizu Tsuneo, 2002). This serves as strong evidence that Silla in the 5th and 6th centuries was forming very sophisticated and direct material exchange networks not only with the Roman cultural sphere of the Mediterranean but also with the Persian Empire, the powerhouse of West Asia.

Meanwhile, Yoshimizu Tsuneo (吉水常雄) pays attention to the face-patterned mosaic glass beads excavated from the Michu Royal Tomb district. Inside a small bead with a diameter of 1.8cm, the face of a Westerner with white skin, blue eyes, and a mustache is exquisitely engraved. Yoshimizu argues that these beads were produced with advanced glasswork technology from the Black Sea coast or Egypt, and that the person in the bead was likely a metal/glass artisan of Western origin who stayed in Gyeongju at the invitation of the Silla royalty to directly manufacture high-tech artifacts like the Golden Dagger (Yoshimizu Tsuneo, 2001). This is an interesting point suggesting that Silla went beyond simply importing goods and directly recruited core Western technicians to produce national artworks.

Furthermore, the analysis of the interred in Tomb No. 14 is also important. One of the deceased had a sturdy frame exceeding the average physique of Silla people, and the East-West orientation is a feature commonly found in the funeral customs of Central Asian nomads. This implies that not only goods but also "people" with professional skills or diplomatic purposes directly entered Silla, supporting the possibility that the interred was a technician of Western origin or an envoy from a Western nation that maintained a strong alliance.

Body II: Westerners Seen in the Warrior Statues of Silla Royal Tombs

The internationality of Silla becomes even clearer in the 8th and 9th centuries after unification. The appearance of the warrior statues (武人石) guarding the Wonseong Royal Tomb (Gwaereung) and Heungdeok Royal Tomb on the outskirts of Gyeongju is not that of East Asians. The deep-set eyes, high-bridged nose, and thick, curly beard covering the jaw perfectly reproduce the ethnic characteristics of Sogdians or Arabs from Central Asia.

Behind this human exchange lies the movement of Sasanian Persian technicians or Sogdians who were closely associated with them. The fact that many Persian royals and technicians emigrated or moved east before and after the fall of Sasanian Persia (651 AD) is also confirmed in Arabic records. In this process, it is highly likely that Persia's high-difficulty glass cutting technology or metalwork skills were directly introduced to and settled in Silla. The warrior statues of Gwaereung can be seen as an embodiment of the reality of Persian-Sogdian human resources that actually existed within Silla society, beyond being simple guardian deities.

Regarding the identity of these warrior statues, two major academic hypotheses exist. First is the **Silk Road Mercenary and Settler Merchant Theory**, which views that Sogdians performed roles as royal guards or advisors for the Silla royalty based on their excellent martial arts and commercial abilities (Lee Hee-soo, 2003; Kwon Young-pil, 2005). Second is the **Buddhist Vajrapani Guardian Transformation Theory**, which claims that the iconography of Vajrapani statues in temples combined with royal tomb guardian rituals and was shaped by borrowing the strong appearance of Westerners (Kang Hee-jung, 2007).

Whichever hypothesis is followed, the fact that the Silla royalty adopted the intimidation exuded by their appearance as a national symbol shows that Silla society was open enough to incorporate foreigners into its system. Sogdians were legendary trading people who dominated the Silk Road, entering Silla's Ulsan Port via Chang'an of the Tang Dynasty to engage in commercial activities. Looking at the attire of the warrior statues at the Heungdeok Royal Tomb, boots suitable for long-distance travel, narrow-sleeved clothes, and a small pouch at the waist are

prominent – the typical appearance of a Silk Road merchant.

Moreover, the heavy weapons they hold in their hands are closer to self-defense weapons of Western warriors rather than the standard equipment of the Silla army at the time. Scholars presume that they were likely Westerners who actually served as personal guards for the Silla royalty. This demonstrates that Silla did not exclude foreigners but incorporated capable outsiders into the state system. The legend of "Cheoyong" appearing in the *Samguk Yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) can also be interpreted in this context, symbolically showing the process of Westerners merging with Silla culture.

Body III: "Al-Shila," the Land of Gold Recorded in Arabic Sources

Silla's foreign relations are also objectively proven through historical records of the outside world. In the 12th century, the "Tabula Rogeriana," a world map produced by the great Islamic geographer Al-Idrisi, clearly features the place name "al-Shila" at the eastern end.

Al-Idrisi recorded Silla as a "paradise where the air is clear and the water is good, and wealth is so overflowing that Muslims who enter once never want to leave." In particular, Arabs always mentioned "gold" when describing Silla; the description that "gold is so common that even dog chains are made of gold" makes one realize how strong an impression Silla's advanced metalwork culture left on Westerners (Al-Idrisi, 1154; cited in Jeong Su-il, 2002).

Although this map was completed during the Goryeo period, its content is the result of aggregating the actual voyage records and oral knowledge of Arab merchants who roamed the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea for centuries. Furthermore, Arabic sources record that Silla possessed a very pleasant environment for foreigners to live in. The repetitive description that Muslims settle forever because wealth is overflowing suggests that Gyeongju at the time was a global metropolis where various ethnicities and cultures harmonized. Such literary evidence, organically combined with artifacts such as the Gyerim-ro dagger or royal tomb warrior statues, confirms that Silla's internationality was the result of systematic and continuous exchange.

Conclusion: The Spirit of "Mangra Sabang" and the Modern Value of Silla's Foreign Relations

The Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 Golden Dagger, the Western warrior statues of royal tombs, and Al-Idrisi's map collectively point to the fact that Silla was an "open nation" that communicated with the world from the eastern tip of the Eurasian continent.

In the 4th year of King Jijeung (503 AD), Silla finalized its national name as "Silla (新羅)" and declared its national vision. The spirit of "Mangra Sabang (網羅四

方)," combining "Shin (新)," meaning "virtuous deeds become new daily," and "Ra (羅)," meaning "encompassing the four directions like a net," was a powerful expression of the will to actively accept external culture and digest it as their own. The dagger from Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 was the first signal of this open will manifested as material exchange, and the subsequent warrior statues and Arabic records show how deeply and widely that exchange expanded.

In conclusion, Silla's foreign relations were not blocked by the barrier of China. Silla people were not afraid of the rough seas and treacherous steppe roads; they welcomed foreigners and made their technologies their own. This receptivity was the driving force that allowed Silla to maintain a thousand-year dynasty and flourish a brilliant golden culture. The reason we pay attention to Gyerim-ro Tomb No. 14 today is not simply to find treasure, but to rediscover the open thinking of Silla people who dreamed of the world 1,500 years ago. The Golden Dagger silently testifies that our history was wide open toward the continent and the sea from the beginning.

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