

THE ROLE OF SPACE AND GEOGRAPHY IN THE FORMATION OF EARLY KOREAN STATES

Mark E. Byington, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University
April 8, 2022

Formation of early states in the Korea-Manchuria region, covering six early states.

States in the North:

- **Chosŏn** (朝鮮). Existed by the 4th c. BCE in the Liaodong region, but in the 3rd c. BCE its center was based in the area around Pyongyang on the **Taedong River** (大同江). Other major river systems were the **Ch'ŏngch'ŏn** (清川江) in the north and the **Chaeryŏng** (載寧江) in the south. Chosŏn was destroyed by the Chinese Han empire in 108 BCE and its territories were incorporated as commanderies, the principal being Lelang (樂浪郡). Much misinformation is circulating concerning the early Chosŏn polity.
- **Puyŏ** (夫餘). Formed ca. 3rd c. BCE in central Jilin Province, China, and controlled territories spanning central Jilin and the northeastern part of Liaoning. Its capital was at the Dongtuanshan (东团山) site in Jilin City on the north-flowing **Songhua River** (松花江). Puyŏ's southwestern territories centered on the **Dongliao River** (东辽河). Puyŏ became a dependency of Koguryŏ in the latter half of the 4th century.
- **Koguryŏ** (高句麗). Formed in the 1st c. BCE in the Huanren 桓仁 region of Liaoning with an early base on the **Hun River** (浑江). Around 200 CE its capital shifted to Ji'an (集安) in southern Jilin with its base on the **Yalu River** (鴨綠江). Koguryŏ's state development occurred primarily during its middle period when its capital was at Ji'an. In 427 the capital was moved again to Pyongyang near the site of the old capital of Chosŏn on the **Taedong River**, a region that Koguryŏ had occupied after it destroyed Lelang Commandery in 313. Koguryŏ remained based at Pyongyang until the state was destroyed by Tang and Silla in 668.

States in the South:

- **Paekche** (百濟). The state formed ca. late 3rd to early 4th centuries on the **Han River** (漢江) in Seoul. Its predecessor may have been Paekche (伯濟國), one of the 54 minor polities comprising the Mahan (馬韓) confederation in the southwestern part of the peninsula. Paekche's first capital of Hansŏng was probably the P'ungnap walled site (風納土城) on the southern bank of the Han River, with early elite burials at the nearby Sŏkch'ŏn-dong (石村洞) site. Koguryŏ's southern expansion forced Paekche to move its capital southward to modern Kongju (Ungjin) in 475. The capital was moved again in 538 to Puyŏ (Sabi) on the **Kŭm River** (錦江), where it remained until it was destroyed by Tang and Silla in 660.
- **Silla** (新羅). Formed as a state from the late 4th c. in the Kyŏngju region of the southeastern peninsular coast. Its capital was called Kŭmsŏng 金城 (modern Kyŏngju), where it remained until the state's destruction in the early tenth century. The early palace complex was at Panwŏl-sŏng (半月城). There were no major river systems in the area in which the state formed, but it benefitted from its geographical isolation surrounded by mountains and coast. Silla elite tombs

were massive mounds of stone and earth, many of which remained undisturbed until the past century, excavations yielding examples of Silla artistic achievements, including gold crowns.

- **Kaya** (伽倻). Formed ca. 4th c. as a confederation of minor polities in the former Pyŏnhan region; some scholars refer to it as a confederated state, but this is somewhat problematic. The early center was the Kūmgwan Kaya (金官伽倻) polity at modern Kimhae, probably the site of the earlier Kuya polity of Pyŏnhan. The polities comprising the early Kaya confederation concentrated in the **Naktong River** (洛東江) basin. An early elite cemetery is the Taesŏng-dong (大成洞) site in Kimhae. The later base of the confederation was at Greater Kaya (大伽倻) in Koryŏng. Kaya was gradually absorbed by Paekche and Silla, until Silla annexed what was left of it in 562.

Recommended Reading:

Barnes, Gina Lee. *State Formation in Korea: Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*. Psychology Press, 2001.

Best, Jonathan W. *A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006.

Byington, Mark E. *The Ancient State of Puyŏ in Northeast Asia: Archaeology and Historical Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016.

Byington, Mark E., ed. *Early Korea 1: Reconsidering Early Korean History through Archaeology*. Early Korea Project. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2008.

Byington, Mark E., ed. *Early Korea 3: The Rediscovery of Kaya in History and Archaeology*. Early Korea Project. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2012.

Byington, Mark E., ed. *The History and Archaeology of the Koguryŏ Kingdom*. Early Korea Project Occasional Series. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2016.

McBride, Richard D., ed. *State and Society in Middle and Late Silla*. Early Korea Project Occasional Series. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2010.

McBride, Richard D. "Making and Remaking Silla Origins." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140.3 (2020): 531–548.

Song Ho Jung. "Old Chosŏn—Its History and Archaeology." In Byington, Mark E., ed., *The Han Commanderies in Early Korean History*. Early Korea Project Occasional Series. Cambridge, MA: Korea Institute, Harvard University, 2013.