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The King is Dead, Where is the King?

On Silla's "Royal" Tombs of the Maripkan Period

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Abstract Royal tombs of Silla's maripkan period are an enigma in plain sight. They have been excavated and analyzed; yet it remains a challenge to identify the occupant or to distinguish a royal tomb from other elite burials. The strong reliance on traditional historiography and subjective criteria in determining royal graves appears to be an obstacle to achieving an understanding of the ancient situation.

The present study uses the only clearly identifiable royal tomb of the Three Kingdoms period on the Korean peninsula – the burial of the Paekche king Muryŏng and his consort – as a reference point for examining royal self-portrayal and representation. It is argued that Muryŏng's tomb expresses basic elements of an over-regional elite culture and of royal representation. A comparison with tombs from Kyŏngju suggests that the ruler's position was closer to that of a *primus inter pares* and that power was less centralized during the maripkan period.

Keywords Paekche, Silla, Muryŏng, Royal Tombs, Grave Goods

1. Introduction

The *Samguk sagi* (三國史記) or 'History of the Three Kingdoms', one of the two most important sources about the Three Kingdoms period on the

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Korean peninsula, mentions the names of eighty nine rulers for the three eponymous kingdoms of Koguryŏ, Paekche and Silla from the earliest foundation date in 57 B.C.E. until 668.[1] Although popular history books and information boards next to burial mounds may suggest otherwise, currently there is only one royal grave of the Three Kingdoms period that can be without any doubt ascribed to a historically known ruler of that time, namely the tomb of Paekche's king Muryŏng (r. 501–523). The tomb discovered in 1971 in the tumulus field of Sŏngsan-ri in Kongju is, although haphazardly excavated and not as well documented as it should have been, certainly one of the most significant archaeological finds in East Asia. Other mounded burials, particularly in Kyŏngju, once the center of the Silla kingdom, have been interpreted as royal tombs as well. Grave goods including crowns, earrings, belts and other exceptional objects, many made of precious metals, and the monumental size of these tombs seem to support this interpretation. However, the absence of inscriptions or other indicators that point to the identity of the grave owner poses challenges to connect historical and archaeological sources (Cha 2017, 2–3). Disagreements among scholars about the absolute chronology of the excavated tombs, with differences of up to one century, worsen the situation and inevitably lead to diverging interpretations of the identity of the interred individuals. Additionally, only a fraction of the graves that could be the last resting places of rulers have been unearthed. In this light all ascriptions of a historically known ruler to one of the excavated and even unexcavated tombs is unlikely to produce useful results.

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1 The transliteration of Korean words, except for the names of the cited authors, follows the system of McCune-Reischauer.

Obviously, clear criteria are needed for classifying certain tombs as "royal" and to distinguish them from other elite graves. A number of approaches have been proposed, but ambiguities and uncertainties remain. One reason for this is that the accounts in historical sources are often accepted too readily. To avoid relying on traditional historiography and to derive information on royal self-representation from a reliable contemporary source, this study uses the tomb of King Muryŏng as a reference point for identifying elements that may indicate the royal status of a tomb occupant in Silla and potentially in other contemporary polities on the Korean peninsula. This is possible, despite regional and polity-related differences, due to the existence of an over-regional elite culture which developed similar ways of representation as a means of distinction from commoners and to signal affiliation with the elites of other polities.

The aim of the present study is not to solve the complex problem of royal burials of the Three Kingdoms period. Rather, it attempts to highlight certain issues connected to currently discussed approaches and to point to a possible alternative explanation derived from the archaeological record. In a first step a brief introduction to the state of research on royal burials, the available sources and the method and theoretical considerations employed in the present study are presented. The next section is dedicated to the discussion of Muryŏng's tomb and the elements of royal representation in Paekche. From this background, the following part of the study is comparing and discussing elite burials, particularly from Silla, before the implications of the results are discussed.

2. Sources and Research on Silla's Mounded Tombs

2.1. Comments on the Historical Sources

Before King Muryŏng's tomb and the elite culture of the Korean peninsula can be discussed in more depth, an overview of the current state of research, a brief reflection on the theoretical background, and an outline of the methodology applied in this study are necessary. Archaeological research on the Korean Iron Age/Proto-Three Kingdoms Period (c. 100 BC-300 AD) and the Three Kingdoms Period (c. 300-668) is strongly influenced by historical sources, particularly the *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, sometimes to the extent that the archaeological record is merely used to illustrate or confirm the narratives of the traditional historiography. From the perspective of archaeology this is problematic on many levels, as the potentials of archaeological research are not fully utilized and too much trust is granted to the veracity of sources which were compiled many centuries after the events they describe, and which include apparent biases and information that does not stand up to closer scrutiny (see e.g. Best 2016; Davey 2016). Clearly, it would be a mistake to reject the historical sources altogether, but it appears to be necessary to be much more critical and also to question long-accepted narratives, especially if they are not backed or even contradicted by the archaeological record.

One problem of the traditional historiography is, for instance, surrounding the foundation dates of the three kingdoms, which are too early for Paekche and Silla from an archaeological perspective (e.g. Barnes 2001; 2004). Similarly important is the development of the political and administrative structure of the polities. The historical records rather

implausibly imply a fully developed state organization of the kingdoms immediately after their foundation, but the same sources also contain mentions of administrative and organizational changes over time pointing to a long-term development of the polities to centralized statehood (e.g. Kim 2017). Anachronisms and retrospective biases are expectable in ancient historical sources, but they become a problem when they dominate implicitly or explicitly the interpretation of the past situation. Instead of assuming the existence of a well organized, consolidated power structure for polities such as Silla, Paekche and Kaya before and in the 4th and 5th century, the archaeological sources can be also and perhaps even more plausibly interpreted as indicative for early states in their formation processes implying the existence of internal and external power struggles, decentralized structures, and fluid hierarchies (see e.g. Ju 1996; Lee 1997; Müller 2019; Woo 2025).

As mentioned above, the absence of inscriptions next or inside graves that may be the last resting places of the kingdoms' rulers poses problems for the identification of royal burials in the Three Kingdoms period. Disagreements on the absolute chronology and the fact that not all potential ruler burials have been unearthed are adding to the uncertainty to such a degree that the widely used practice of connecting certain tombs with historically known rulers is a highly unproductive endeavor (see also Lee 2007). While disagreements on the chronology may be settled in future research, another problem is much deeper rooted. Apparently, it is not only impossible to name the owner of a certain tomb, but it also appears to be difficult to distinguish royal burials from other elite graves (see also Kim 2017, 114).

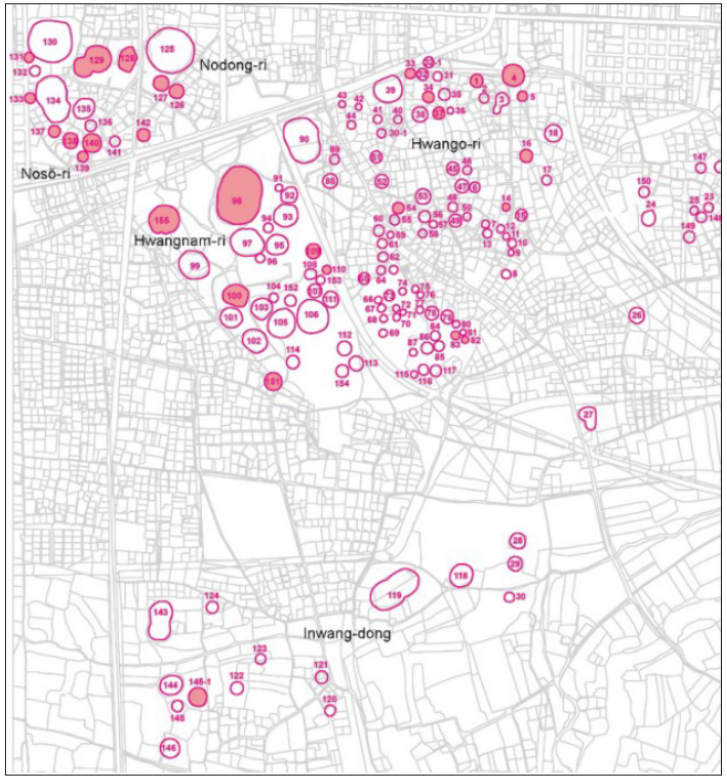
2.2. Approaches for Identifying Royal Tombs

Silla's mounded tombs in Kyŏngju are an exemplary case for reviewing research on royal burials. This section does not provide a comprehensive overview of all authors and opinions involved in the discussion. Not included is the vast body of literature representing a major strand in Korean archaeology that aims to identify the occupants of certain tombs in order to obtain absolute dating anchors (e.g. see Kim 2011) for chronological considerations. Since the main concern of these studies is not to problematize the definition of royal tombs, they are of minor relevance for the present article. Thus, the following section provides a critical introduction to some of the methods and basic arguments explicitly concerned with the reconstruction of the social structure of Silla on the basis of the available archaeological record. The focus of these studies is the cemetery north of Wolsŏng (fig. 1), where a significant number of graves have been excavated and which has been the subject of extensive research. Some of these tombs, for instance the monumental double mound Hwangnam Taech'ong, are considered to be the burials of Silla's rulers and their consorts between the 4th and the early 6th centuries, the so-called maripkan period. Although works concerned with the ranking of tombs or the identification of royal burials are not as numerous as the chronological literature mentioned above, they have nevertheless been part of Korean archaeological research for many decades and are, without doubt, important contributions to understanding the Three Kingdoms period on the basis of the archaeological record. The methods used for identifying the royal burials of Silla range from reasonings based on plausibility, often in reference to the historical tradition, to systematic comparisons of the location, size and

equipment of the tombs.

A common approach is the analysis of the tomb furnishings and construction details in order to produce a ranking of the graves that may ideally reflect the ancient social stratification. In 1981 Byunghyun Choi, one of the most prominent researchers of the burials in Kyŏngju, published an analysis including all burials—not only the mounded tombs—in the area. Based on the burial construction and artefact composition, he distinguished six ranks (Choi 1981, 29–36). Burials of the first rank particularly contain objects made of gold such as crowns, diadems, caps, belts, shoes, crown ornaments, but also items of silver, for instance crowns, caps, crown ornaments, and white birch-bark hats. Additionally these tombs include large quantities of other objects among them are vessels made of precious metal and glass, elements of armor and swords. Choi notes that the artefacts show a high degree of craftsmanship. Burials of the second rank can be distinguished from those of the first rank by the reduced number of artefacts, the dominance of silver-made objects, the absence of vessels made of precious metal and glass as well as a less elaborated style and manufacturing of the equipped objects (Choi 1981, 29–32). In reference to the *kolp'um chedo* (骨品制度) or bone rank system, the hereditary social hierarchy of Silla's elite described in the *Samguk sagi*, he interpreted the burials of the first rank as of sŏnggol (聖骨) status. Remarkably, in his interpretation second-rank burials also belong to the sŏnggol, but because of their more modest furnishings and the increased use of materials perceived as less valuable, he assumed that these individuals held less power.

Another attempt that focussed on the mounded tombs in Kyŏngju by Pearson et al. (1989) is remarkable as it uses a multivariate statistical



[Figure 1] Map of the tumuli in the cemetery north of Wŏlseong in Kyŏngju.

approach—a cluster analysis. The authors included several parameters, for instance tomb size, number of artefact types, and use of materials, in their considerations. They also referenced the sumptuary laws issued by Silla's King Hŭngdŏg (r. 826–836) in 834 as a basis for estimating the value of the materials of the artefacts (Pearson et al. 1989, 7–9). The statistical analysis produced five groups or clusters, which were partly composed of subclusters. The first cluster, which shows the largest number and diversity of artefacts as well as the exclusive presence of gold cap ornaments and gilt bronze buckles of the horse harness, is interpreted as royal (Pearson et

al. 1989, 30–32). Remarkably, as in Byunghyun Choi's analysis, other objects that may be interpreted as royal regalia such as crowns and belts are not limited to this cluster. Although the authors emphasize the important fact that the caste-like bone rank system was in all likelihood not implemented at the time the mounded burials were constructed, they believe a less rigid predecessor is represented by their clusters (Pearson et al. 1989, 10). Nevertheless, the vertical hierarchy derived from their analysis leads them to conclude that Silla was, from the late 4th century onward, a centralized polity with elite groups of different lineages residing in Kyŏngju (Pearson et al. 1989, 138).

A more recent attempt to rank the characteristic tombs with a wooden grave chamber covered by a stone and earthen mound in Kyŏngju and neighboring areas has been published by Su-Hyoung Choi (2013). Choi's analysis is based on the presence/absence data of three classes of grave goods. The first includes prestige items as part of the adornment such as crowns, earrings or necklaces, and the second comprises general prestige items like gilded horse harness or vessels made of precious metal or glass. A third class is composed of object categories which are also part of the grave equipment, for example agricultural tools or pottery (Choi 2013, 72–76). Although the burials can be grouped from lavish to rather modest, the artefact composition shows, even in regard to the personal adornment, remarkable variations. In order to make the burials comparable, Choi defines the rank-groups based on the count of artefact categories for each of the three object classes. For instance, tombs of the first rank include at least 13 of 15 artefact types of the wearable prestige item class, at least 5 of 6 other prestige objects of the second class and 3 of 3 categories of the third object class (Choi 2013, table 5). Overall, Choi proposes six main groups

with subdivisions considered a direct representation of the ancient social hierarchy. In Choi's viewpoint the tombs of the first two ranks, which can only be found in Kyŏngju, represent the burials of the rulers and their families (Choi 2013, 90–91). Choi concludes that all ranks were strictly defined by the size of the tombs and their equipment and thus reflect a rigid social hierarchy. Considering the degree of abstraction and reduction used to level out variations in the equipment of graves belonging to the same rank, this interpretation is, however, not as straightforward as it may seem.

More generally, and not limited to analyses of burial data from the Three Kingdoms period, it can be observed that quantitative methods, regardless of the specific approach used, often struggle with the problem of making disparate data comparable. Even though the results of these analyses may reflect social divisions or hierarchies, it is rather unlikely, or at least unproven, that the defined groups represent entities that were perceived as such in the ancient reality.

Aside from focusing more or less exclusively on the grave equipment of the mounded tombs to ascertain their rank and identify royal interments, other authors have put more emphasis on the size and location of the burials. The insights of these studies are very promising as they may allow for classifying unexcavated or—as in the case of other polities—looted tombs. For instance Sangdeok Yoon has aimed to identify the royal tombs of Silla through an analysis of their shape and size (Yoon 2014). By comparing the mounded tombs from the early and middle Silla period he came to the important insight that early tombs had an oval and later tombs a round floor plan. Furthermore, he could show that the general size of the tombs decreased over time. He assumed that the biggest tombs

in each period are the most likely candidates for the last resting places of the rulers. Consequently, burials of a smaller size, even though they have yielded some of the famous golden crowns, such as mound 127 (Kŭmryŏngch'ong), 128 (Kŭm'gwan-ch'ong), 129 (Sŏbong-ch'ong) and 155 (Ch'ŏnma-ch'ong) are not considered as tombs of rulers or their consorts (Yoon 2014, 182).

In reference to Yoon's work Hyeoncheol Shim has elaborated on ascertaining royal tombs based on their size and location (Shim 2020). He defined three groups of tombs distinguished by the diameter of their widest axis in the floor plan: 70 m for group 1; 50 m or above for group 2 and below 50 m for group 3 (Shim 2020, 125–127). Since the number of tombs that fall into the first group is less than the number of historically known rulers of the maripkan period, Shim consequently concluded that rulers also must have been buried in tombs of the second group (Shim 2020, 127). Another criterion of potential ruler burials discussed by Shim is their prominent and independent location in relation to other tombs. He also commented on artefacts indicative of royal burials, drawing on the furnishings of the monumental double mound Hwangnam Taech'ong, which is one of the tombs that are widely accepted as the last resting place of a Silla ruler and his consort. In Shim's opinion the furnishing of royal tombs stands out due to the use of precious materials and redundant artefact depositions. Artefacts that indicate royal burials include headgear of various types, such as crowns, caps, and crown ornaments made of gold, silver or gilded bronze. Furthermore, the interment of vessels made of nonferrous and precious metals, lacquer or glass are typical, as well as horse trappings with openwork decorations and inlays. Additionally, the presence of objects of foreign origin is a strong indicator (Shim 2020,

128–132). Shim's considerations aim to take many different pieces of information into account, and his arguments are also based on detailed interpretations of the historical sources. Nevertheless, the suggested identifications of royal burials are not very different from those proposed by Yoon and other authors, as basically the largest tombs are labeled as royal (Shim 2020, 139–144).

Another approach for identifying the royal tombs among the many burials in the city center of Kyŏngju, combining chronological considerations, the supposed development of the cemeteries, and historical tradition, also comes from Byunghyun Choi (Choi 2014). Important are his suggestions that the tomb clusters observable in the cemetery north of Wolsŏng are not only the product of topographic conditions but also of the presence of different social groups and lineages (Choi 2014, 133). He combines the size, position, and spatial alignment of the tombs with the historical tradition in order to identify the owners of allegedly royal tombs. Although the deep knowledge gathered from decades of intensive research transpires from the interpretations, the basis for certain identifications is not necessarily compelling (see also Park 2016, 4–5) and would not be possible without extensive use and trust in the traditional historiography. Particularly noteworthy are Choi's statements about the implications of archaeological finds that suggest the existence of high-ranking individuals who are not mentioned in the historical sources, such as the inscribed sword fragments and other items from Kŭm'gwan-ch'ong referring to "King Isaji" (see, e.g., Kim 2017, table 3), or the Naengsu-ri stele, which mentions several individuals with the title king (王, wang) (see, e.g., Choi 2014, 156–157). Remarkably, in light of these discoveries, Choi suggests that wearers of golden crowns, who were buried in smaller tombs in Kyŏngju, were not

the rulers, even though they may have carried the title king/wang (Choi 2014, 156–157)!

In studies that focus mainly on size and location, it is obvious that they tend to ascribe royal status to the biggest tombs, although they recognize a very important aspect of the burials north of Wolsŏng, namely that there is a general decrease in size over time. Since some of the biggest tombs in the cemetery remain unexcavated, speculations about the status of those tombs and even their occupants are currently no more than informed guesses. Even though it is very persuasive to assume that the rulers were buried in the biggest tombs, this is not necessarily the case. Cross-culturally, one of the most prominent examples is the three great pyramids on the Giza Plateau in Egypt, which show a decline in size from the oldest to the youngest, but all of them were grave monuments of ruling kings (Goedicke 1995). A smaller grave is also not necessarily an indicator of lower authority or power of the buried individual. The relevant question is what function funerals and burials actually served for the burying community. If we assume that one of the main purposes for the ruling elite was the establishment of legitimacy—particularly important during the formation phase of a ruling lineage (see Cha 2017, 3)—then spatial proximity to the burial places of predecessors and ancestors may have been more important than constructing an independently located monumental tomb. In cases where succession was relatively uncontested, a more economical approach could be taken, resulting in less ostentatious furnishings and smaller grave monuments. In this sense, it is not implausible that smaller burials north of Wolsŏng were occupied by rulers as well (see Müller 2019). This is also suggested by Dae-hwan Kim, who has highlighted that the above-mentioned inscribed artefacts from Kŭm'gwan-ch'ong strongly indicate

that members of the ruling elite, and possibly the ruler, were buried in smaller tombs (Kim 2017, 104–105). Thus, instead of placing too much emphasis on tomb size, he proposed that another structural element is indicative of royal burial mounds. In his view, tombs with a wooden grave chamber above ground are typical of royal burials (Kim 2017, 105). This is because the characteristic stone mound, in which the wooden chambers are embedded, became in these graves a platform that served, in Kim's opinion, as an altar for the performance of burial rituals (Kim 2017, 115–116). This suggestion is particularly persuasive, as it aligns closely with the need of the ruling elite in early state formations to build legitimacy through the performance of rituals and ceremonies in front of a large audience.[2]

2.3. Tracing Royal Burials: An Alternative Approach

As aforementioned, the central idea of the present article is to take the tomb of King Muryŏng—the only confirmed royal burial of the Three Kingdoms period—as an example for defining elements of royal self-representation on the Korean peninsula in the late 5th and early 6th centuries. It must be emphasized that this article does not claim that Muryŏng's tomb can serve as a fixed model for royal self-representation of the time. Rather, it functions as a reference point for deducing some of the basic principles of the kingly ideal and royal self-representation directly from the archaeological record, without additional assumptions or reliance on the interpretation of historical sources. The obvious objection to this

2 A detailed outline on how the tombs may have been used to build legitimacy, influence collective memory and the relevance of visibility of the funeral in reference to Dae-hwan Kim's insights has been published in Müller 2021.

approach might be that Koguryŏ, Silla, Paekche and the Kaya polities were distinctive political entities characterized by their own cultural expressions, including material culture. For instance, the construction of Paekche's elite burials in the Ungjin period (475–538) allowed for constant accessibility of the tombs (see e.g. Oh 2024), which resulted in the large-scale looting of these monuments. Silla's mounded tombs were in contrast well protected due to their construction method. Apparently, diverging funerary rituals, religious beliefs, and other cultural factors were important filters for the quantity, material, categories, and quality of the grave equipment. Additionally, we may assume that the close spatial proximity of the polities and the resulting need of representing their own identity led to differing expressions of status and rank. Therefore, the question may be raised, how the content of Muryŏng's grave can be usefully compared with the tombs of other polities. The argument pursued in the present study is that the ruling elite of the polities in the Korean peninsula and beyond developed similar means of distinction including regional and over-regional components. This is because elite culture had a double sided function, it served as distinction towards the commoners within the elite's own community and at the same time it signaled affiliation to the elites of other groups. The phenomenon of "international" cultural expressions of the elite can be observed from prehistoric to modern times in settings from all around the world (see e.g. Vella 1975; Hanks 2002; Feldman 2002; Smith 2015; Daloz 2010; Manzura 2022). The polities in the Korean peninsula were embedded in a larger system, which Gina Barnes once has called the Yellow Sea interaction sphere (Barnes 2007, 1–4). This area of intensive exchanges and communication affected many fields of the involved polities, and a similar, smaller system was also present on the Korean peninsula,

as can be seen in the distribution of certain prestige and status objects, the construction principles of the tombs—particularly those belonging to the elite—and other indicators (e.g. Kang 2012; Kim 2009; Lee 2010, 2013). Thus, it is assumed that even though Muryŏng's tomb is first and foremost representing Paekche's royal culture in the early 6th century, in its essence, it is also a reflection of principles of royal self-representation in a larger, over-regional context.

As can be seen below, one obvious difference among many is that Muryŏng's tomb and its furnishings are rather modest, which may be perceived as a hindrance for comparison with more lavishly equipped tombs, for instance those from Silla. Nevertheless, the reduced equipment offers an insight into the essential elements of royal representation and elite culture beyond the extreme ostentation visible in the tombs of other polities. It has been already ascertained that the majority of status objects in the burials belonged to the category of personal adornment (Choi 2013, table 5). The above-mentioned artefact-based rankings of the tombs show this very clearly. However, in these works, there is usually no differentiation between elements of adornment that were actually worn by the deceased and objects of the same category stored elsewhere in the tomb. The latter may have been owned by the deceased during their lifetime, but they could also have been, for instance, gifts, pieces of booty, keepsakes, or the adornments of other individuals interred in the tomb. A study that makes the important distinction between worn and stored adornment for the furnishings of the Silla tombs in Kyŏngju has been published by Hee-joon Lee (2002). Lee has plausibly argued to focus specifically on the clothing as an expression of social status. The analysis included all artefacts discovered in the burials that were clearly worn or "carried" by the deceased. This

applies to different categories of jewellery and headdresses, as well as to swords placed next to the buried individuals. Lee also included caps and cap ornaments, which were often not worn by the deceased (Lee 2002, 73). Remarkably, the characteristic metal shoes were excluded from the analysis, because Lee did not believe that they were reflecting the actual dress of the buried individual (Lee 2002, 72). It remains an open question whether the adornment observed in the burial context is truly a representation of the dress worn in life and an accurate reflection of the deceased's status. Additionally, it must be kept in mind that the unearthed artefacts represent only a small fraction of the actual dress, and other possible—perhaps more prominent—signifiers of status, such as color, material, pattern and style of clothing, specific make-up and hairstyle, or accompanying servants and soldiers, are in most cases archaeologically not ascertainable. Nevertheless, focusing on the preserved dress elements allows for better comparability between the buried individuals than considering the entirety of the divergent and often redundant grave goods.

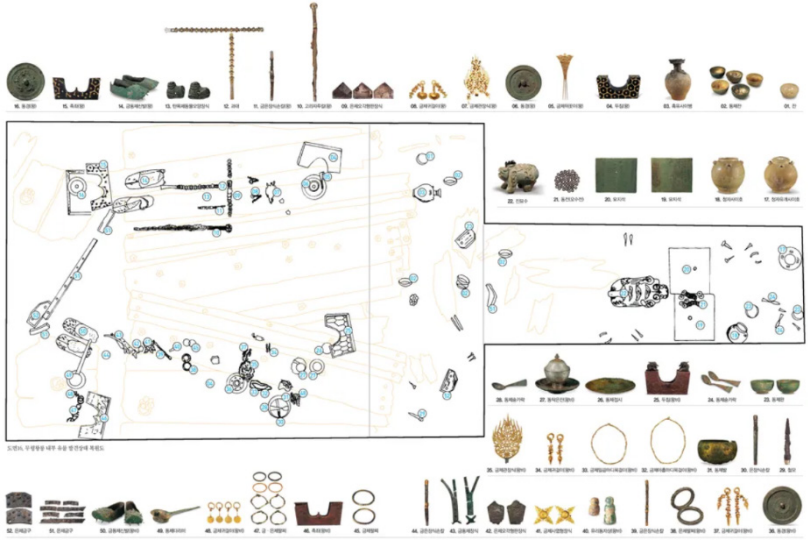
3. King Muryŏng's Tomb

The tomb of king Muryŏng and his nameless consort has been published and described in several reports (e.g. Gongju National Museum 2009; 2013; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021) and therefore only a brief description of the tomb and the grave furnishings is given in this section. Muryŏng's tomb is located on the southern slope of Mt. Songsan at the western edge of modern Kongju together with at least twenty other mounded burials. The tomb was discovered coincidently in 1971 in the course of drainage works

which aimed to protect the already known tombs 5 and 6 from floodings.

The tomb chamber, constructed of decorated bricks, is reminiscent of elite burials from the Chinese mainland, underlining the proliferation of international styles and the local elite's aim for distinction. The tomb can be roughly divided into three parts (fig. 2). The first is the entrance: a 1 m-wide by 3 m-long passage leading into the chamber, which measures 4.20 m by 2.70 m. The entrance area contained among others a guardian statue known as Jinmyosu—another reference to Chinese burial customs (Gongju National Museum 2018, 33)—, two inscribed stone tablets and Chinese coins to symbolically pay the gods for the land on which the burial was constructed. Other objects were paraphernalia for the worship of the king and queen. The actual chamber is divided in two zones, a ca. 1 m wide sunken floor area, which contained some dispersed artefacts and a few objects used for rituals, and a slightly raised platform which was the location of two massive, black lacquer painted coffins made of Japanese umbrella pine—a tree none-native to the Korean peninsula (Gongju National Museum 2020, 24). The epitaphs in the tomb tell us that the king died in 523 and the queen in the year 526. Both were interred in the tomb after a temporary enshrinement in a bin hall (殯殿) for around two years (Lee 2020).

Altogether, including single beads that were part of necklaces, 2,906 objects were registered in Muryŏng's tomb. The artefacts worn by the king and queen as part of their dress can mostly be ascertained from their location in the tomb, although a few uncertainties remain. As is very often the case with burials on the Korean peninsula, no human remains were preserved. It is also important to note that not all objects seemingly placed inside the coffin belonged exclusively to the adornment category. Some grave goods may have been located on the coffins as well. Starting with



[Figure 2] Floor plan of Muryŏng's tomb with the most important artefacts (Gongju National Museum 2009, fig. 16).

the king it can be ascertained that he had a unique headdress composed of two separate but identical floral-patterned gold ornaments (fig. 2). It is very likely that they were attached to a headband or a hat forming a crown. Furthermore, he wore two golden earrings with hangers and green, comma-shaped jade endings. Large agglomerations of differently shaped gold and silver beads in the chest area suggest that the king wore multiple necklaces or a big bead collar made of several strands, perhaps similar to examples known from Silla. Around his waist, he wore a silver belt with a long gold and silver ornament. Located on the left side of his waist were a highly ornate sword decorated with gold and silver, with a phoenix protome on the pommel, and a sheathed knife with gold and silver plating. At the foot end, two large gilded bronze shoes with spikes and hexagonal patterns were found.

While the king's coffin included only a few additional items, such as a decorated headrest and footrest, as well as bronze mirrors, the queen's interment area is characterized by a larger number of items, whose original placement is not always clear. Nevertheless, her adornment can be reconstructed as follows: she wore a headdress like the king, consisting of two gold ornaments which were of distinctive design. Similar to her husband, the queen had intricately crafted earrings made of gold. Somewhat puzzling is that two pairs of earrings were found in the area where the queen's head supposedly rested—one pair on each side of the head. If the queen indeed wore these earrings, one identical pair would have been on her right and left ears. A large number of beads and complete necklaces made of gold wire segments suggest that the queen was adorned with several single necklaces and maybe a bead collar. Furthermore, she seemingly wore two pairs of armrings: one pair of silver rings with a deeply cut and very distinctive dragon design, and the other pair made of gold and decorated with a simple pattern of alternating ribs. Remarkably, the same pair of armrings was worn on the same side (Gongju National Museum 2019, 98; 109), which resembles the above-mentioned observation that the queen had a pair of identical earrings on each side. It can be assumed that this is reflecting a certain practice of the funeral ritual and not necessarily how the rings were worn during lifetime. Around the waist a knife in a sheath was discovered and another one around the legs. At the foot end, two gilded copper shoes with floral fretwork completed the queen's adornment. Additionally, the coffin contained, aside from ornamented head and footrests, highly crafted metal vessels, small glass figurines, and further elements of adornment, such as armrings and earrings, which were, however, seemingly not worn by the queen. Even though this is not directly

expressed by the adornment of the royal couple, it is also noteworthy that the general character of the tomb and some of its elements show a strong resemblance to older Chinese traditions. The reference to foreign origins and affiliations is a well-researched, cross-cultural phenomenon in the representation of the ruling elite in preindustrial societies (Helms 1988), which is also evident in the myths and material culture of the Three Kingdoms period (Müller 2018). Legitimacy, and thus authority, is generated through the connection—whether direct or indirect—to foreign places beyond the reach of the common population. Other items that may be considered outstanding, and thus part of royal self-portrayal in Muryŏng's tomb, include metal vessels and elements of figurative art.

4. The Royal Dress in Comparison

All of the enumerated artefacts, which were apparently part of the personal adornment of the king and queen during the funeral, have been identified as status objects in numerous studies. The headdress worn by both of them matches the general expectations that rulers and their consorts were distinguishable through crowns or similar ornaments worn on the head. However, as has been mentioned above, the mere presence of a crown or other headdresses is not a sufficient indicator to distinguish the buried individual as a ruler. It seems that people of the ruler's family as well as other members of the ruling elite may have worn crowns too (Choi 2014). In many analyses, the material of the crowns is considered a distinctive factor in determining the rank of their wearer (Perason et al. 1989; Choi 2013). Big golden crowns must have belonged—as it seems—

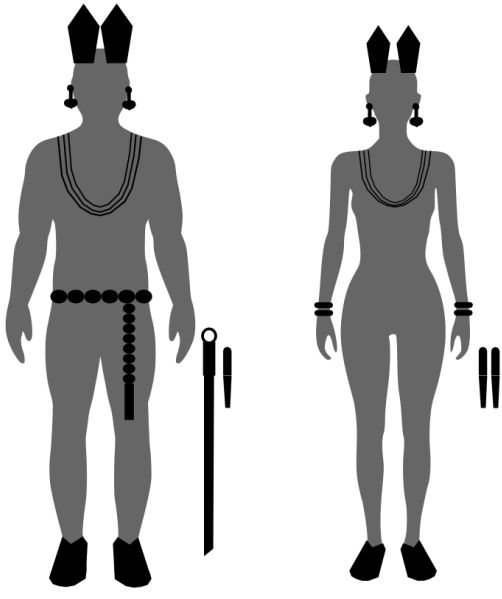
to higher-ranking individuals, and gilded bronze crowns to those with less influence. The question is, however, how onlookers could have distinguished between crowns made entirely of gold and those that were only gilded. Differences in the materials of the crowns and other status objects may also be explained by the availability of the metals at the time the objects were made.

Earrings made of gold with attachments are another status object which is, however, not limited to individuals wearing crowns (table 1). Comparisons show chronological differences but also different degrees in ornamentation and craftsmanship. Muryŏng's earrings and those worn by his wife stand out through their fine granulation and glass inlays. Necklaces, often including a comma-shaped bead or pendant, are a commonly observable object of status. In some mounded tombs of Silla, multi-threaded collars have been unearthed, which may have served a strong status-signalling function. As mentioned above, for Muryŏng's tomb several necklaces have been discovered, but not for all of them the position in the burial has been documented. Armrings made of silver and gold are another element that is strongly connected to high status burials (Choi 2013, 76). The silver specimens of Muryŏng's wife stand out due to their deep-cut ornaments. Belts made of metal, often with attachments, have been identified as another status marker for the highest ranks within the elite. Similar to the crowns, golden and silver belts may be perceived as representing a hierarchy of rank, but Muryŏng's belt clearly shows that kings also wore specimens made of silver, and not exclusively those made of gold. If gold and silver were indeed perceived as having different value—which is not proven for the period under discussion—the lack of available gold resources may have been the reason for producing certain status

items from silver. As mentioned above, B.H. Choi already observed the predominance of silver objects in his second group of burials in Kyŏngju, but assumed that they may have belonged to the upper stratum of the ruling elite.

Ring pommel swords in their basic version are an object class that appears also in less lavishly equipped burials (Choi 2013, table 4). Muryŏng's sword is indicative of the high status of its owner through the addition of gold and silver decorations as well as the high level of craftsmanship required for its manufacturing. The small sheathed knife of the queen could be interpreted as a small version of a sword and it may be speculated that it signalled high status for the consort of the king.

Another object group associated with both the king and the queen is the large metal shoes, which are known to be artefacts belonging to the ruling elite (table 1). Their huge size and the small ornamental attachments on the



[Figure 3] The dress elements of Muryŏng and his queen.

[Table 1] Dress elements of highest ranking graves from Kyŏngju and other locations (grey) (after Lee 2002, with additions).

	grave	crown	earrings	necklace, collar	armrings	belt	sword	shoes	finger rings
1	Cheonmachong	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
2	Geumgwanchong	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
3	Geumryeongchong	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
4	Hwangnamdaechong south	●	●	●		●	●	●	●
5	Hwangnamdaechong north	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
6	Signichong	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
7	Hwango 16-1	●	●	●		●	●	●	
8	Hwango 16-8	●	●	●		●			
9	Hwango 16-2	●	●	●		●	●		
10	Eunryeongchong	●	●	●	●	●		●	●
11	Houchong	●	●	●	●		●	●	●
12	Bomundong (Jeogseok)	●	●	●			●		
13	Kangbyeon-ro 3-A-34	●	●	●		●		●	
14	Muryeong king	●	●	●		●	●	●	
15	Muryeong queen	●	●	●	●			●	
16	Yangsan man	●	●	●		●	●	●	●
17	Daegu Dalseong 37-1	●	●	●			●		
18	Daegu Dalseong 37-2	●	●		●		●		
19	Imdang 7A	●	●	●	●				
20	Imdang 7B	●	●	●		●	●		●
21	Imdang 7C	●	●		●				●
22	Hwango 4		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
23	Noseori 138		●	●	●	●	●		●
24	Nodongri 4		●	●		●	●		
25	Hwangnam 110		●	●		●		●	
26	Yangsan woman		●	●		●			
27	Hwangnam 82west		●		●	●			
28	Hwango 14-1		●			●	●		
29	Hwango 33east		●			●	●		
30	Hwangnam 82east		●			●			
31	Angye 2		●			●	●		
32	Inwang 149		●			●	●		
33	Hwango 5		●			●			●
34	Inwang 20		●			●			
35	Hwango 16-11		●			●			
36	Hwango 16-4		●			●			

soles indicate that these shoes were not intended for walking. Therefore, they are often regarded as objects used exclusively in the funerary context (Lee 2002, 72). However, if worn during a person's lifetime, they would imply the use of a means of transportation—such as a horse, wagon, or sedan

chair—which would further underline the high status of their wearers.

Generally, and this has to be strongly emphasized, most of the artefacts in the tomb do not belong to object categories unknown from other burials. The significant difference is the high quality of craftsmanship necessary to produce the artefacts and a higher degree of ornamentation, often including precious metals. This is not coincidental, as Mary W. Helms has shown in her cross-cultural research on the kingly ideal (Helms 1993). Based on historical and anthropological data from various regions of the world, Helms demonstrated that another essential aspect of royal self-representation and the construction of legitimacy is connected to the ownership and display of objects of outstanding craftsmanship. This can be seen as a universal indicator of the ruling elite, including the Korean peninsula, and may prove useful for identifying royal burials.

Once the set of artefacts related to the dress or adornment worn by the king and his wife has been defined, a comparison with burials from Kyŏngju and other locations becomes possible. It is remarkable—and confirms the above-stated hypothesis regarding the over-regional expression of elite culture—that the elements of personal adornment are indeed very similar, even though differences in style for the headdress or earrings are clearly apparent. Another difference is the absence of finger rings in Muryŏng's tomb which are a common element of the highest ranking Silla graves in Kyŏngju (table 1). A striking contrast is also the absence of a metal belt in the coffin of Muryŏng's queen, in contrast to female members of the ruling elite, as, for instance, in Hwangnam Taech'ong North. The singularity of Muryŏng's tomb, however, does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about gender-specific or power-related differences between female members of Paekche's and Silla's ruling elite.

It is certainly no surprise that for the cemetery north of Wolsŏng all those graves that are commonly mentioned as possible candidates for a royal burial can be found with the dress elements as represented in Muryŏng's tomb (table 1). Therefore, it is clear that the number of already excavated tombs containing the full set of adornment is higher than the number of historically confirmed rulers of Silla for the maripkan period. As mentioned above, this has already been noted by different authors, often accompanied by attempts to exclude certain graves based on their location, size, or the perceived lower quality of their grave goods. From the perspective of Muryŏng's royal adornment, however, these exclusions are not easily justifiable. Assuming that perhaps not all rulers were properly recorded in the historical sources, it remains evident from the number of burials with the full set of adornment that other individuals of the ruling elite also possessed dress elements similar to those of the ruler. This could be members of the extended family or other individuals of high status. The example of the lavishly equipped but rather small sized mound 127 also known as Kŭmryŏngch'ong, which was the last resting place of a young occupant, who in all likelihood never exerted any power, shows that status was ascribed through lineage rather than achieved.

Nevertheless, the seeming similarities of the dress elements of the ruling elite, suggest that the rulers and their consorts did not stand out much among the members of the upper social stratum. In this sense it is also highly remarkable that individuals with the actual adornment of a king were buried in other parts of the wider Silla region. Since a full listing of those tombs and their discussion is beyond the scope of the present article, only a few examples may be mentioned to illustrate the situation. One example is the mounded double grave at Yangsan, whose

[Figure 4] Plan of the grave chamber of the mounded tomb in Yangsan (Shim 1991, plate 5).

primary interments were most likely those of a husband and wife (fig. 4). The man was equipped with the full regalia of a king, while the woman was adorned with earrings, a necklace, armrings, and a belt. Based on the basic elements of his adornment, the man was on par with King Muryŏng. The most significant difference in the dress is the less elaborate style of the interred objects. The same applies to other examples of burials with exceptional furnishings from the wider region around Kyŏngju, such as Daegu Dalsŏng 37 or burials from Goryŏng-Imdang, also in the Daegu area. Even though these graves do not preserve the complete set of dress elements represented in Muryŏng's tomb, their general appearance—from the perspective of the preserved metal objects—was not very different from that of Muryŏng and the rulers in Kyŏngju, although the quality and elaborateness of their objects were not at the same elevated level.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Tracing royal tombs for the time of the late 4th to the early 6th centuries in Silla and the other polities on the Korean peninsula is a challenge on many different levels. No matter which criteria are finally chosen for identifying the tombs of rulers and their consorts, it seems that the results are not fully explaining the available data. Obviously, there are some pieces of important information still missing or certain facts are not fully understood. It may be that this is due to the general expectations of a hierarchical power structure (e.g. Choi 2013). For instance, if the archaeological evidence suggests the existence of individuals bearing the titles of ruler or even king, adorned with the regalia of a ruler and buried like members of the ruling elite, the most likely explanation is that the historical tradition enumerating six rulers is not correct, or that the maripkans represented a position that cannot be simply equated with later kings. Instead of searching for an absolute ruler with uncontested authority and wide-reaching influence, we need to take into account that the ongoing process of Silla's state formation at the time of the tombs' construction, or the general constitution of its power structure, may have produced a different kind of rulership.

As mentioned above, the identification of royal tombs is difficult not only because of the absence of inscriptions, but also due to the large number of burials that must be considered if artefacts are used to determine the social status of the deceased. The method employed in this study, which follows, as explained, the analysis of Hee-joon Lee (2002), reconfirms this insight in one variation: namely, that it seems impossible to define a royal burial based solely on its artefacts or size. Thus, instead

of applying the term "royal" to burials that appear to be outstanding, it may be more useful to address them—as has been done occasionally in the present study—more neutrally as belonging to the ruling elite. According to Mary W. Helms, the ruling elite or aristocracy of early state formations are individuals and groups that are connected to political authority and government (Helms 1998, 185). Using this term in the case of the Three Kingdoms period to describe those individuals who were buried in a more elaborate and affluent way has the advantage to rely less on titles and ranks from the historical sources, which may have been used inconsistently or entail a social and legal status that is most of the time impossible to infer from the archaeological record. Referring to the ostentatious and monumental burials as "royal" is also implying family ties between the buried individuals as well as a fixed and largely uncontested lineage etc., which need to be confirmed through research instead of being accepted as a given. Otherwise there is the risk of limiting the outcome of possible interpretations prematurely, which is in all likelihood one of the reasons for the current state of research.

What can be clearly stated is that the polities of the Three Kingdoms period had a ruling elite which expressed its high status, amongst others, through lavish funerals and partly monumental tombs. The high number of mounded tombs in the cemetery north of Wolsŏng with individuals adorned with all regalia of the ruling elite suggests that the maripkan was not an uncontested ruler from a well-established succession line. We may assume that competition for legitimacy and authority was fierce. The ruler might have been able to restrict the access to some resources and goods, but the insignia of high status were owned and displayed by many other elite members as well. The presence of individuals with status objects

similar to those of the king points to a phenomenon observable in other contexts as well: namely, that the ruler was a *primus inter pares* within the social stratum of the ruling elite.

The existence of individuals with a "royal" set of adornment outside Silla's central place may hint to a less centralized power structure, as has been already suggested by other authors such as Daehwan Kim (2007), Young-sung Kim (2017) or Dae-Jae Park (2013). It can be assumed that individuals with comparatively similar status and authority have controlled smaller areas and the ruler in the capital needed to negotiate with these people in order to gain their followership. Similarities in the design of certain objects were in this setting the result of a commonly shared style and not—directly—of an uneven power relationship.

In order to progress and to open new fields of enquiry in which the archaeological sources can take a main role for reconstructing the early history of the Korean peninsula, it is probably necessary to get away from the perception that the Three Kingdoms period was a time of three bigger political entities with clear borders and an established power structure struggling for domination on the Korean peninsula. Rather, we may expect fuzzy borders, fluid hierarchies, shifting alliances and centers of power.

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초록

왕은 사망했는데, 어디에 있는가?

마립간기 신라 '왕릉'에 대하여

세바스티안 뮐러*

신라 마립간기의 왕릉은 겉으로 드러난 수수께끼와 같다. 이들 무덤은 발굴되고 분석되어 왔으나, 피장자를 식별하거나 왕릉을 다른 상위 엘리트 묘장과 구별하는 일은 여전히 과제로 남아 있다. 왕릉을 규정하는 데 전통 사학과 주관적 기준에 강하게 의존하는 것은 고대의 상황을 이해하는 데 장애물이 되는 것으로 보인다.

본 연구는 한반도 삼국시대의 유일하게 명확히 식별 가능한 왕릉, 즉 백제 왕 무령왕과 왕비의 능을 기준점으로 삼아, 왕권의 자기 표상과 재현을 검토한다. 무령왕릉은 초지역적 엘리트 문화와 왕권 표상의 기본 요소를 표현하고 있음을 논증한다. 경주의 고분들과의 비교는 통치자의 지위가 *primus inter pares*(동등자 가운데 첫째)에 가까웠으며, 마립간기에는 권력이 덜 중앙집권적이었음을 시사한다.

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