

# Exchanges between ‘Wa’ (Japan) and ‘Baekje’ (Korea) as seen from the ritual sites of Okinoshima and Jungmak-dong

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the value of the ritual sites of Okinoshima, inscribed as a World Heritage site under the title, “The Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region.” With a focus on the fifth and sixth centuries, which the period when rituals on Okinoshima reached their peak, the background to the rituals is discussed.

## I. Merchants of Wa trying to embark on long-distance sea journeys to Baekje

Let us first take a look at the ship-shaped earthenware pottery excavated at the Nigore burial mound in Kyoto. These are burial goods that were placed in the burial mound, made out of earthenware pottery in the shape of ships. (Fig 1-1).

Although these items were excavated in Kyoto, they actually depict ships from the Kingdom of Wa dating to be fifth to sixth centuries and are somewhat different to modern-day vessels. These were not sail-powered vessels, but rather were manned by a crew of 16, rowing with oars by hand.

Let us now compare these earthenware likenesses of ships to ones that were excavated at the Dalseong-Pyeongchon-ri site in Korea (Fig 1-2). These ships of the Gaya region on the Korean Peninsula are exactly the same type as those used by Wa. In other words, the ships of that age, whether from Wa, Gaya, Baekje or Silla, were all of the same type, that is to say not sailing ships.

Until now, as noted in various major works, research implemented by historical and archaeological societies into ancient international exchanges, including the ancient rituals of Okinoshima, has focused on the

interaction between royal houses, or between tribal chiefs in the era prior to the formation of kingdoms, looking at interactions between the heads of various regional groupings.

Although such interactions at the leader level are not in dispute, what this paper suggests is that ancient international exchanges were not limited to those at the elite level.

I believe that back in antiquity, as far back as the Yayoi period, groups of merchants whose main purpose was to engage in trade existed in the Japanese archipelago.

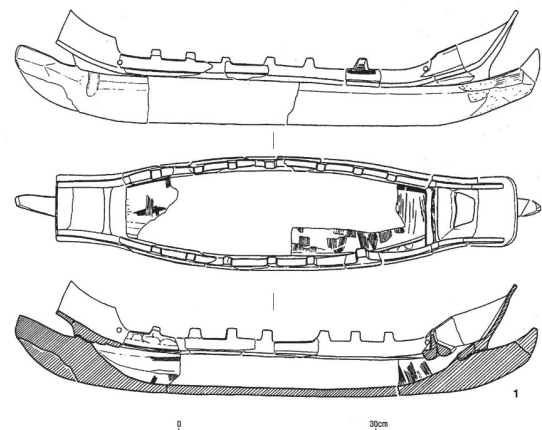


Fig. 1-1 : Ship-shaped earthenware vessel excavated from the Kyoto Nigore burial mound (Yasaka-cho Board of Education, ed., 1988).

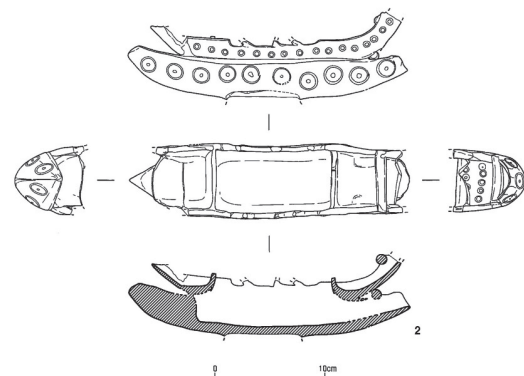


Fig. 1-2 : Dalseong-Pyeongchon-ri site (Gyeongsangbukdo Institute of Cultural Properties, 2010).

Fig. 1 Ship-shaped earthenware excavated in Japan and Korea

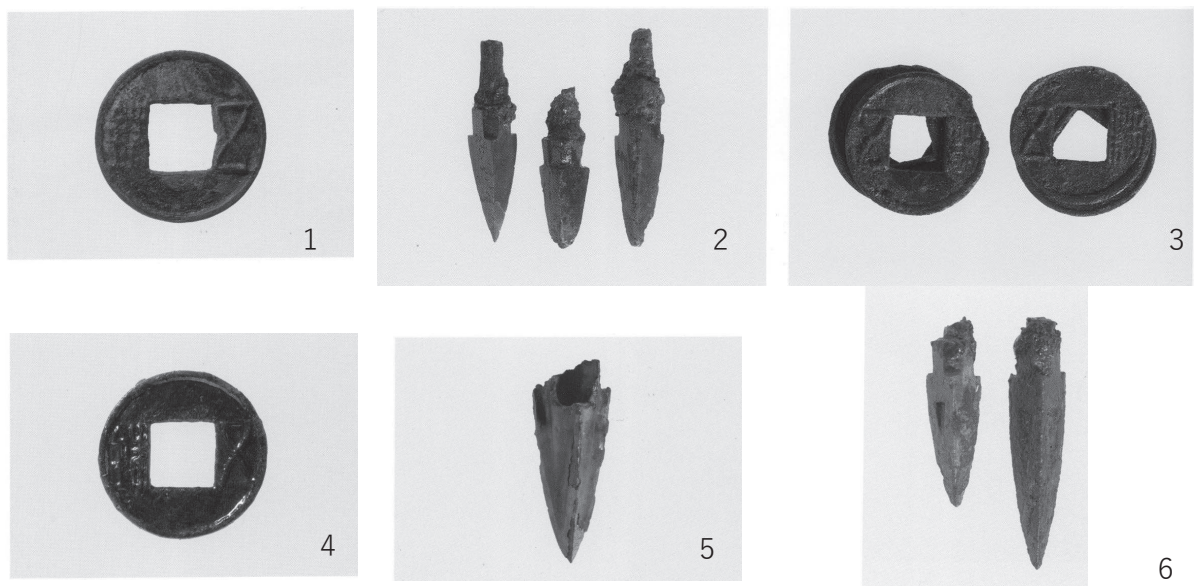


Fig. 2 : Coins and bronze arrowheads from Han Dynasty China that attest to the existence of ancient Japanese and Korean merchant groups. Han Dynasty Wu Zhu coins and bronze arrowheads excavated from Unbuk-dong site, Yeongjong-do, Incheon City, Korea (2, 3); Neukdo site, Sacheon City, Korea (4, 6), Harunotsuji site, Iki, Nagasaki Prefecture (1, 5), (Jinju National Museum, 2016).

It is also likely, therefore, that these merchants crossed the Genkai Sea, bringing back new cultural practices and goods with them from their travels to the Asian continent. So, what would have been the differences between the merchants, whose main purpose was to engage in trade, and the rulers of the day, who could be likened to today's powerful politicians?

Of course, there would also have been times when politicians acted as merchants. However, the job of a merchant is a specialized profession, requiring business acumen and some degree of proficiency in foreign languages. Without at least rudimentary Korean or Chinese language skills the merchants who travelled to the continent would not have been able to engage in commercial activities.

Of course the use of interpreters would have been one way to overcome this challenge. However, another requisite for international trade would have been the skills to build and repair ocean-going ships. These various factors demonstrate how it was no easy matter to become a trader or merchant. As a group, merchants would have passed down the abovementioned prerequisite knowledge and skills from generation to generation, and there is

evidence for the existence of merchant groups at the time in both Japan and Korea.

Wu Zhu, which were ancient Chinese coins, have been excavated from sites close to present-day Incheon International Airport and Neukdo close to Busan in Korea. They have also been found at sites in Fukuoka and on Iki (Fig. 2). These coins would suggest that they were used in trade back in ancient times.

There has previously been some debate about how Wu Zhu were used, and whether they were used for monetary or ceremonial purposes. The recent consensus is that they were actually used as money and as a means of exchange at the time.

One of the main reasons that the merchants of Wa made the effort to cross the ocean to the Korean Peninsula was to acquire a commodity they prized more highly than any other, namely iron.

Iron was produced in all regions of Korea at the time, but the largest production region and the destination for the Wa merchants on their trading missions was Geumgwan-Gaya, in the vicinity of modern-day Busan and Gimhae. Iron was imported by Wa from the Yayoi period onwards, much of it from the region then known as Byeonhan.

The reason for these large-scale imports of iron is that on the Japanese archipelago at the time there were no technologies capable of smelting and producing good-quality iron that could be used in the production of weapons and armor. This was why the people of Wa had no choice but to seek to import high-quality iron from the Korean Peninsula.

In this type of trade, if the vessel on which iron was loaded were to go adrift or sink, it would entail catastrophic financial and material losses. On the outward journey vessels would be loaded with the special products and goods of Wa to be sold on the Korean Peninsula, the proceeds from which would be used to purchase iron. However, if on the return journey the vessel were to founder in the stormy waters of the Genkai Sea, the loss would be immense to the merchant. Rituals were therefore one means by which groups of merchants sought to avoid disaster and protect their trade missions from danger. The practice of offering prayers to the *kami* is one of the reasons why the rituals on Okinoshima became so popular, which will be explained later.

The merchants of Wa voyaged across the sea in search of iron materials, using Chinese coins as a means of exchange, but also bringing with them products of Wa for the purpose of purchasing the valuable and strategic commodity that was iron. Like trade today, the transactions were not simply one way. The merchants brought goods with them to sell for money that they could then use to purchase iron materials.

Among the products that the Wa merchants brought with them were bronze whorl plaques (Fig. 3). The uppermost plaque in the Fig. 3 is one excavated from the Gimhae Daeseong-dong mounded tomb group. The bronze whorl plaques were not products themselves, but were decorative objects to be attached to shields or quivers, which would catch the light and make the objects they were attached to more alluring. The king of Gaya was said to like these objects and bronze whorl plaques have been found at royal burial sites associated with the kings of the Gaya Confederacy.

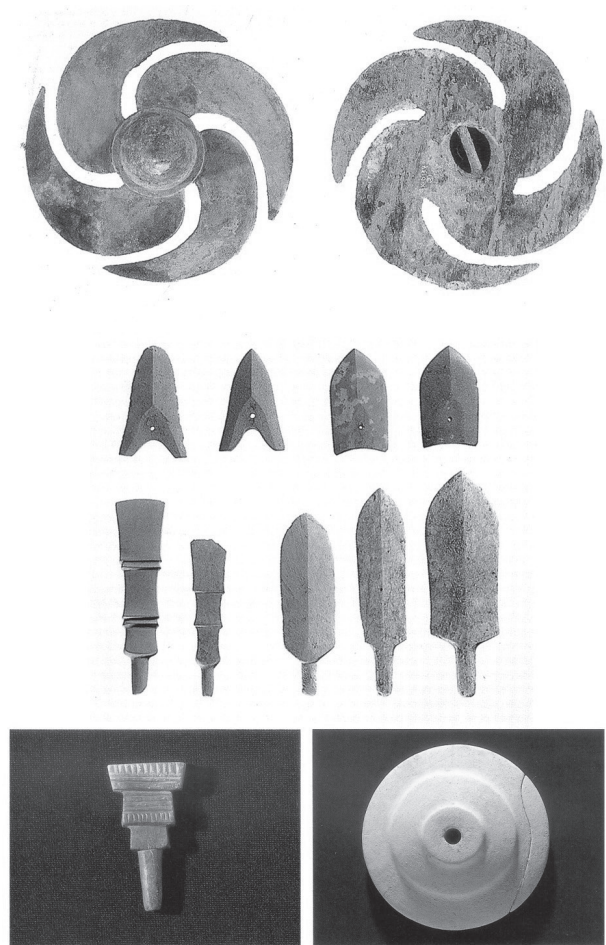


Fig.3 : Items imported to Korea from Wa, excavated from the Daeseong-dong ancient tomb group, Gimhae (Tokyo National Museum, 1992).

The stone arrowheads shown at the bottom of Fig. 3 is made of jasper. The arrowheads were also made of jasper, rather than bronze, indicating that they were not made for practical purposes, but rather were intended for ceremonial purposes, or to burnish the owner's prestige. It is these kinds of items that made their way from Wa to Geumgwan-Gaya.

In 1989 a model based on the ship-shaped earthenware vessels referred to above, was recreated of the ships that the Wa merchants would have used at the time. The recreated vessel was then put to sea in a test sailing that would take it from Osaka to Fukuoka and then on to Busan (Fig. 4). Looking at the photograph of the vessel that was used to recreate this sea voyage, it can be seen



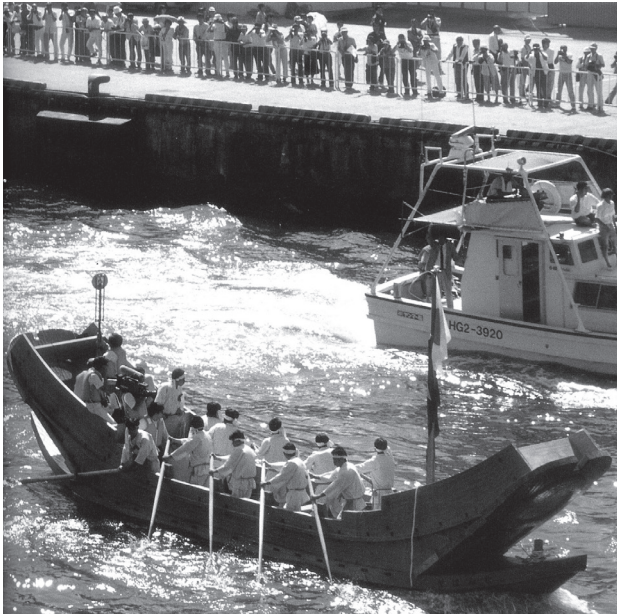


Fig. 4 : Reconstruction of a Wa trading vessel from around the 5<sup>th</sup> century and an experimental voyage from Osaka to Busan (Osaka City Board of Education, Osaka City Cultural Properties Association, ed., 1989).

that it was somewhat larger than the actual vessels that sailed in the fifth and sixth centuries. The recreated vessel made a successful voyage all the way to Busan.

The recreated ships had no masts or sails. It was based on

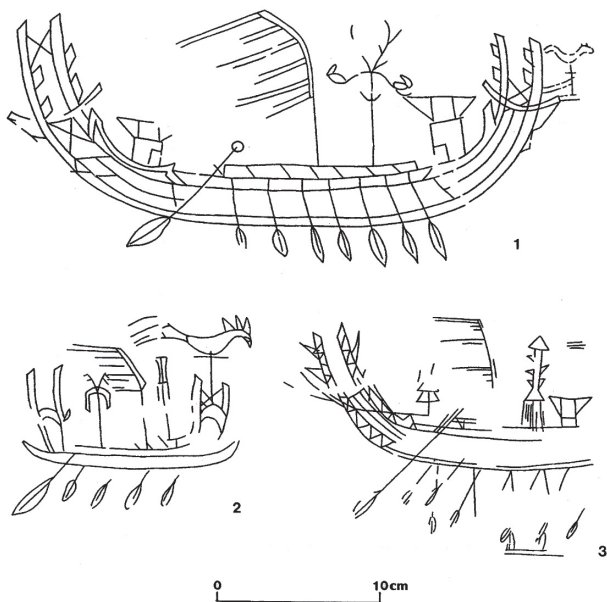


Fig. 5 : Three depictions of vessels excavated from Higashi-Tonozuka burial mound, Tenri City (Tenri City Board of Education, ed., 2000).

a ship-shaped drawings on *haniwa* cylindrical clay figures excavated from the Higashi-Tonozuka burial mound in Tenri City, Nara Prefecture (Fig. 5). These drawings feature no mast or sails, but only a banner or flag.

In their vessel the merchants of Wa travelled via Tsushima, and the first port they would have entered on the Korean Peninsula would have been at the mouth of the Nakdong River, close to the present-day port of West Busan.

It is assumed that the Wa seafarers would have charted a course aiming for a spot more or less equidistant between present-day Busan and Gimhae, which is actually visible on a clear day from Tsushima. Upon entering the port of West Busan the merchants would they have set about selling their wares brought over from Wa and purchasing Gaya iron, before returning to Wa.

## II. Deepening relations Wa and Baekje nurtured in the process of countering the threat of Goguryeo

Although this cross-sea commercial activity ran smoothly until the fourth century, a problem arose in the fifth century. It was in the early fifth century that the kingdom of Goguryeo started its southward expansion, invading Geumgwan-Gaya, in large-scale attacks.

Under threat of attack by Goguryeo or Silla, which followed the same policies as Goguryeo, the merchants of Wa found it extremely difficult to enter the ports of Geumgwan-Gaya. It could be assumed that the situation also had other effects, such as restrictions on exports of iron materials, or price surges.

The merchants of Wa had found trade with Geumgwan-Gaya to be very profitable until the fourth century, but once Goguryeo and Silla started to place pressure on their smaller southern neighbor, it is thought that income from trade would have been severely curtailed, although not entirely extinguished. It is likely that the commerce environment changed, resulting in export restrictions.

It was in response to this situation that the merchants of Wa headed to Baekje on the west of the Korean

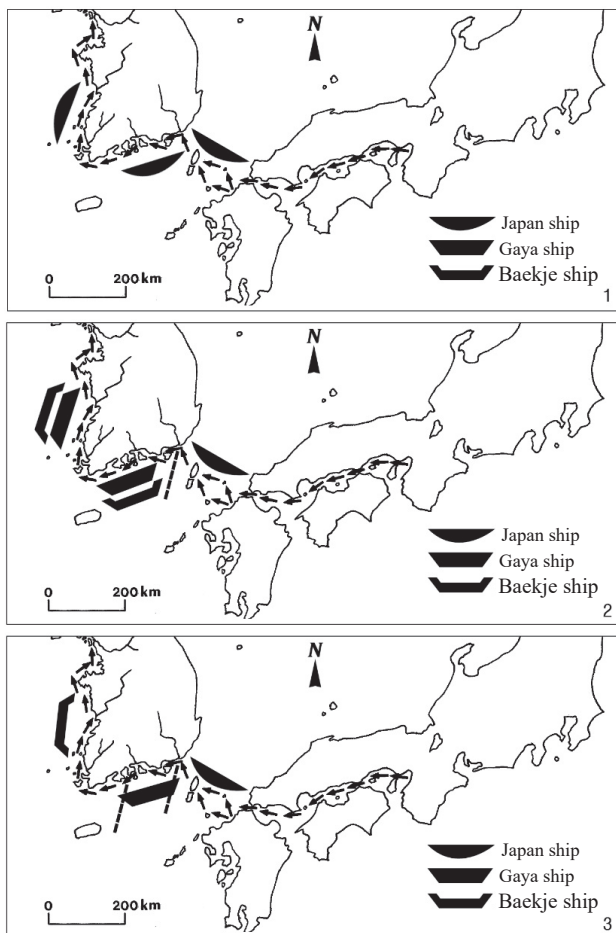


Fig. 6 : Three possible navigational routes from Wa to Baekje around the fifth to sixth centuries (Woo, 2018).

Peninsula. The first capital of Baekje was Seoul, followed by Gongju. The geopolitical situation on the Korean Peninsula therefore made it necessary for the Wa merchants to move the focus of their commercial operations from Geumgwan-Gaya, which was relatively close to the Japanese archipelago, to the western coast of the Korean Peninsula (Fig 6).

It is likely that there were cases in which the merchants of Wa would depart from Fukuoka and head to Seoul (Fig. 6-1), but that was a route that was fraught with danger. A safer way of making the crossing would have been to change to a Gaya or Baekje vessel in the present-day port of West Busan (Fig. 6-2). Another option could have been to change to a Gaya vessel in the lands under Gaya administration and then changed again upon reaching the lands of Baekje (Fig. 6-3). Although there were probably



Fig. 7 : Burial goods in royal tombs undergoing rapid change during the transition from the late 4th to early 5th century: Comparison of Tombs 93 and 94 at the Daeseong-dong ancient tomb group, Gimha. (Photo by author)

vessels from Wa that made the entire journey directly, the most likely route taken would have involved changing vessels as described above.

There is also evidence for the decline of Geumgwan-Gaya from the early fifth century onwards due to the expansionist invasion of Goguryeo. As shown in this photograph of the Daeseong-dong mounded tomb group, tomb no. 94 is to the right and tomb no. 93 is to the left (Fig. 7). The tomb on the right is that of the father, with the son's tomb on the left. Both of these tombs are of rulers of Geumgwan-Gaya, in other words the kings of Gaya.

If you examine the area around the stone base to the coffin of the father's tomb, you will notice flat iron ingots, or flat iron ingots. These flat iron ingots were used as money during the Geumgwan-Gaya era, as well as for weapons and armor. Around the father's tomb are 110 to 120 ingots. Some have likely been stolen over the course of the years, so it could be assumed that originally there were 180 to 200 ingots in place. This would indicate that the father was incredibly wealthy.

In stark contrast to the father's tomb, the tomb of the son, shown here after excavations had been carried out is almost devoid of any signs of flat iron ingots having been in place. This demonstrates the tremendous upheaval





Fig. 8 : Small Gaya-style earthenware excavated from Tomb No. 93 at the Daeseong-dong ancient tomb group, Gimhae. (Photo by author)



Fig. 9 : Small Gaya-style earthenware excavated from the Nonaka burial mound, Osaka (Takahashi, Nakakubo, eds., 2014).

caused by the large-scale invasion of Goguryeo, which brought about a change in burial practices. Where formerly a king's body was buried with many burial goods, subsequently these burial goods almost entirely disappeared.

Facing this new era of conflict and austerity, it would have been difficult for Geumgwan-Gaya to export iron to Wa. Thereafter the national strength of Geumgwan-Gaya gradually continued to decline, with the result that merchants from Wa had to travel further to Baekje.

However, the travelers from Wa did not immediately abandon the ties that had been built up over the course of centuries. There is proof to suggest that there was

hope for the resurgence of Geumgwan-Gaya. This proof was found in the tomb of the son described above. Fig. 8 depicts an earthenware item from the son's tomb, dating back to the early fifth century. Fig. 9 shows earthenware excavated from a site in Japan. As you can see, the two are identical. The earthenware from Japan was discovered at the Nonaka burial mound, located in a secondary position to the Hakayama burial mound, a royal tomb in Osaka Prefecture. This suggests that up until the early fifth century the kings of Wa and Geumgwan-Gaya were both secretly hoping for a revival of trade.

The Katsuura-minenohata mounded tomb in Fukutsu City, Fukuoka Prefecture is the tomb of a Fukuoka merchant who travelled between Wa and Baekje (Fig. 10). He was also a politician and what is interesting about the Baekje-style corridor-style stone chamber is that it uses Goguryeo-style pillars. This would imply that

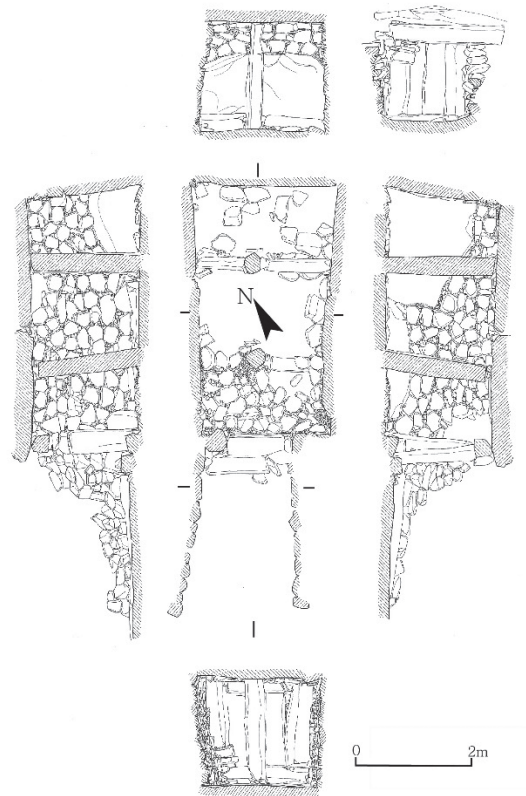


Fig. 10 : Baekje-style corridor-style stone chamber and Goguryeo-style stone pillars seen at the Katsuura-minenohata mounded tomb in Fukutsu City, Fukuoka Prefecture (Fukutsu City Board of Education, ed., 2011).

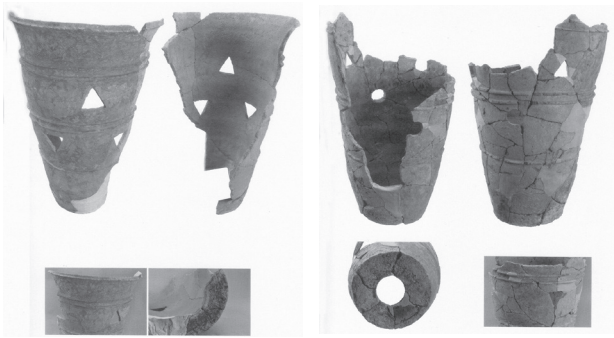


Fig. 11 : Wa-style cylindrical *haniwa* excavated from a square burial mound in southwestern Baekje, dating to the late fifth century: earthenware artifacts excavated from Yeongnam Okyari square burial mound (Naju National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, ed. 2012).

while adopting the Goguryeo-style in some respects, the merchants of the day maintained their friendly relations with Baekje and kept relations with Goguryeo to minimal diplomatic interactions.

This person was very astute, and it is this astuteness that enabled him to engage successfully in trade with Baekje as a merchant and also as a statesman.

### III. Maritime technologies of Wa, Gaya and Baekje in the fifth and sixth centuries

Some items that would suggest that enhanced trade between Baekje and Wa proved to be a success are the cylindrical earthenware artifacts excavated from Yeongnam Okyari square burial mound in what would have been southwestern Baekje (Fig. 11). These cylindrical items resemble *haniwa* from Wa, and are found in Baekje burial mounds from the end of the fifth century onwards.

Similar earthenware items are found in Baekje tombs from the late fifth century, which attests to how close relations had become by that time, as the adoption and utilization of funerary and tomb architectural styles suggests a friendly relationship between the two kingdoms. Although the earthenware items resemble *haniwa* found in Kyushu, the hole is a Baekje addition not found in Japan. The presence of *haniwa*-like figures



Fig. 12 : Tomb of a chief in the southwestern area of Baekje in the central Baekje-style, decorated with cylindrical earthenware imitating Wa-style cylindrical *haniwa*, dating to the late 5th century, (Naju National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, ed. 2012).

demonstrates the affinity between Baekje and Wa that had developed by the fifth century. Fig. 12 shows *haniwa* incorporated into traditional Baekje tombs.

Changes become apparent from the sixth century, during the reign of King Muryeong of Baekje, who is purported to have been born on Kakaranoshima, and island in Tsukushi Province.

It is my belief that the *haniwa* found at burial sites in Korea were influenced by Wa, but some scholars believe them to have been the result of local influences in the Baekje region (Fig. 13). However, since its shape is similar to that of Japanese *haniwa*, I believe that the hypothesis for the existence of a Japanese influence to be correct.

There are stories and records that claim King Muryeong





Fig. 13: Local cylindrical earthenware from the Baekje area  
 1. Punggi-dong Apgol site, Asan  
 2. Chungdong site, Gunsan  
 3. Joongrang site, Hampyeong (Baekche Historical Museum, Chungcheongnam-do Institute of History and Culture, eds. 2011: Jeonju National Museum, ed. 2009: Gwangju National Museum, ed. 2000).



Fig. 14 : Photo of the interior of the tomb of King Muryeong, dating to the early sixth century: The finest Chinese Southern Dynasty style tomb, constructed by specialist craftsmen invited from Southern Dynasty China (National Museum of Korea, ed., 1999).

of Baekje was born in Tsukushi Province in Japan. King Muryeong commissioned himself a brickwork tomb in the style of the Southern Dynasty of China (Fig. 14 ). Recent excavations have proven that the tomb of King Muryeong was designed and built by Chinese artisans. However, it was during the era of King Muryeong that the tombs of chiefs and other leaders in the southwestern



Fig. 15 : A Wa-style keyhole shaped burial mound located in southwestern Baekje, with a small number of cylindrical earthenware vessels (cylindrical *haniwa*) embedded at the narrow point of the mound: Myeonghwa-dong burial mound in Gwangju (Gwangju National Museum, ed. 1996).

region of Baekje closest to Japan start to employ the distinctive “keyhole” shape. This is another element in addition to the *haniwa* mentioned above that attests to the closeness of relations between Baekje and Wa at the time. The Myeonghwa-dong burial mound in Gwangju (Fig. 15) is the tomb of a local chief for which the keyhole shaped tumulus was adopted, in addition to the use of *haniwa* figurines. Although not precisely the same as the tombs of Japan at the time, it is very similar. These *haniwa* were made during the era of King Muryeong, or the era of Emperor Keitai in Japan.

The Wa administration of Emperor Keitai also adopted elements from Baekje-style tombs. The stone chambers of the Gamil-dong Baekje tomb group in the Seoul region (Fig. 16) were created in the Baekje style that would become the blueprint for the Kinai-type corridor-style stone chamber with horizontal entrance of the Wa era (Fig. 16). The items depicted in the photograph were discovered close to Seoul.

The corridor-style stone chamber with horizontal entrance of the Inouchi-inarizuka burial mound in Kyoto Prefecture is depicted in Fig. 17. This is a stone burial chamber in the Baekje-style that was adopted by the kings of Wa. Accordingly it can be seen that Baekje adopted the keyhole shaped burial mound style of Wa, which in turn Wa adopted the corridor-style stone chamber with





Fig. 16 : Wa Kinai-type corridor-style stone chamber with horizontal entrance (Central Baekje-style) in its original form: Dating to around 4-5<sup>th</sup> century, state of excavation at Gamildong Baekje tomb group in the Seoul region. (Photo: the author)

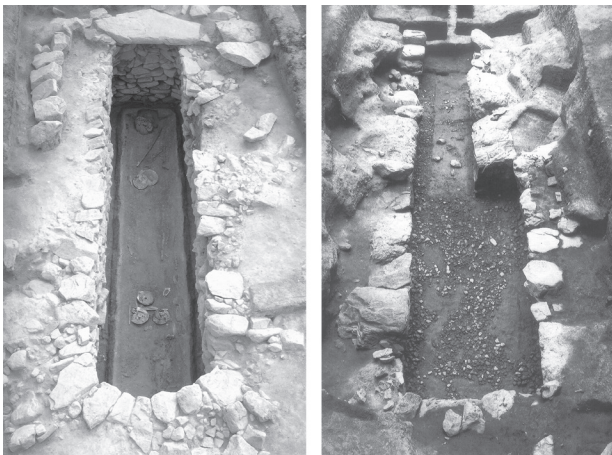


Fig. 17 : Transition from a corridor-style stone chamber to a Central Baekje-style stone chamber with horizontal entrance: Kinai-type corridor-style stone chamber with horizontal entrance, which spread from central Wa from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

(Left) Pit-style stone chamber at the Yukinoyama burial mound in Shiga Prefecture (Research Team for the Yukinoyama Excavations, ed., 1996).

(Right) Horizontal entrance stone chamber at Inouchi-inarizuka burial mound in Kyoto Prefecture (Osaka University Research Group for Inarizuka Tumulus Excavation, ed., 2005).

horizontal entrance style of Baekje.

In addition, one of the materials most often traded by the merchants of Wa was Japanese umbrella pine (*Sciadopitysverticillata*). The coffin of King Muryeong



Fig. 18 : Coffin made of Japanese umbrella pine (*Sciadopitysverticillata*), dating to early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Wooden coffins of King Muryeong and his queen, made of Japanese umbrella pine brought by Wa emissaries and merchants via maritime routes. It is highly probable that Wa emissaries and merchants also participated in the Jungmak-dong rituals in which Wa-style rituals were performed. After selling umbrella pine and other special Wa produce and goods, the merchants of the time would likely have purchased valuable strategic materials and luxury prestige goods in Baekje. (Photo: the author)

(Fig. 18) was made using Japanese umbrella pine imported from Wa. Japanese umbrella pine was used for the coffins not only of the kings of Baekje, but also regional leaders and chiefs in Baekje. The merchant vessels of Wa would therefore load up with Japanese umbrella pine for the outward journey to Baekje, where they would sell their precious cargo of lumber.

#### IV. Peak in coastal-based rituals in line with the expansion of maritime exchanges between Wa and Baekje

Among the items that were often purchased by Wa merchants from Baekje were multi-colored glass beads. These beads have been found in burial mounds in various regions of Japan, and also at the ancient ritual sites of Okinoshima, which have been a focus for my research (Fig. 19).

Among the various beads, the yellow and green ones

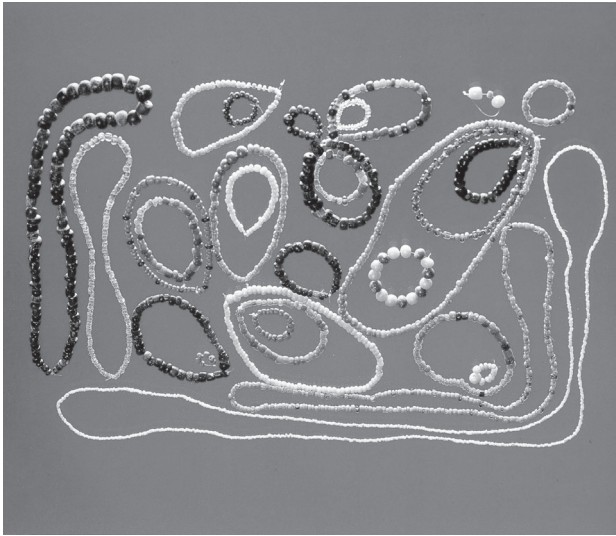


Fig. 19 : Baekje-style glass beads in yellows and greens, dating to the 5-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, excavated at the Okinoshima ritual site No. 8 (Munakata Taisha Cultural Properties Management Office, ed., 2003).



Fig. 20 : Coastal cliff of Jungmak-dong ritual site of Baekje, where open-air Wa-style rituals were also held from the late 5th to early 6th centuries.(Photo by author)

were imported from Baekje. There is a similar site located in Baekje that is important when evaluating the Okinoshima ancient ritual sites. It is the Jungmak-dong ritual site, located on the west coast of Korea. As in the case of Okinoshima, the Jungmak-dong ritual site was developed on a precipitous cliff (Fig. 20), at a high place where the maritime routes of the time would have been visible. This is something that is shared in common with

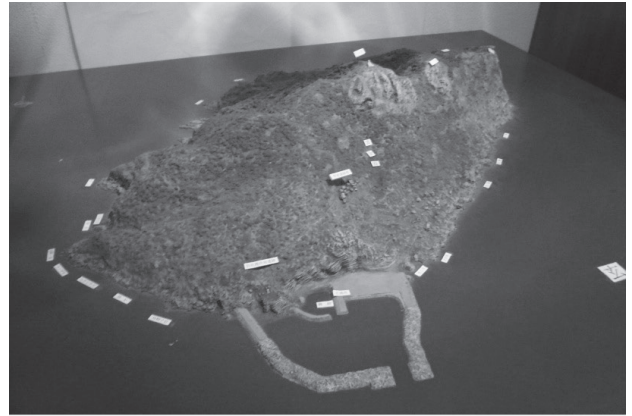


Fig. 21 : Stone-made copies in the Wa-style excavated from the Okinoshima ritual sites and a model of Okinoshima. (Photo by author)

the ancient ritual sites of Okinoshima.

Interestingly, artifacts common to those used in the ancient rituals of Okinoshima (Fig. 21) were also found at the Jungmak-dong ritual site (Fig. 22). These similarities would suggest that the merchants of Wa, who conducted rituals on Okinoshima, also participated in the rituals of Jungmak-dong in Baekje. They could in actual fact be termed as a joint ritual, shared between the two sites.





Fig. 22 : Traces of participation of Wa emissaries and merchants in the Jungmak-dong rituals of Baekje: Stone-made copies in the Wa-style excavated from the Jungmak-dong ritual site and reconstruction of a scene from the rituals.

This clearly demonstrates the closeness and depth of the ties that were shared by Baekje and Wa at the time.

In summary, although it may appear that the Okinoshima ancient ritual sites took place on a lone island located in the midst of the Genkai Sea (Fig. 23), in actual fact Okinoshima was a highly internationalized ritual site with close links to the Jungmak-dong ritual site, which itself held national importance for Baekje.

The main purpose of the rituals held on Okinoshima was to pray for the safety of the passage of trading ships operated by merchants who also participated in the rituals at Jungmak-dong. If a ship, loaded with valuable goods, foundered in the stormy waters of the Genkai Sea on its return journey to Wa, the losses to the merchants would have been immense. Even with these rituals, however, it

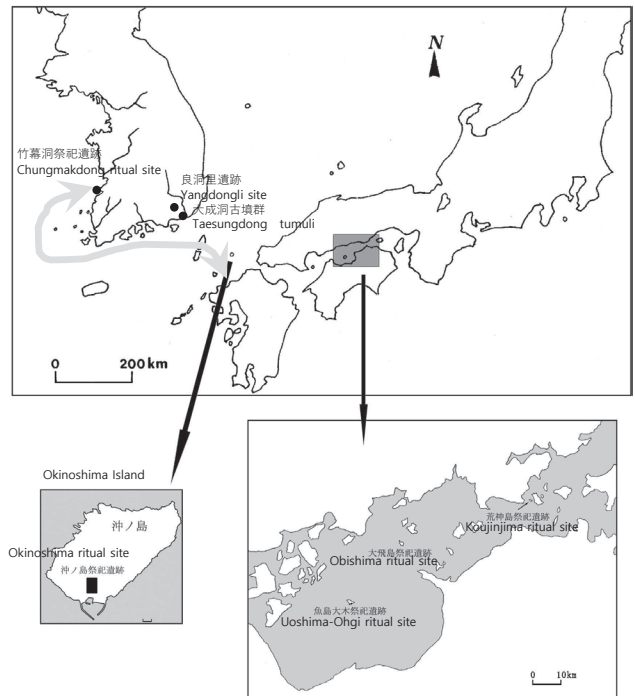


Fig. 23 : Location of the Jungmak-dong and Okinoshima ritual sites, where Wa-style rituals were conducted by emissaries and merchants of Wa (Sata, 1988, Kamei, 1988, Woo, 2010).

was evitable that some ships would sink or go adrift.

Another function of Okinoshima, therefore, would have been as a location where ships that had gone adrift may be saved by floating on the current, become being washed ashore on Okinoshima. This is something that has since been confirmed by aerial research. If a vessel went adrift between Iki and Tsushima islands, unless it was washed ashore on Okinoshima it would have been lost for good, with all people and cargo on board. It is my contention that due to the people who had been saved by the fortuitous location of Okinoshima, it gradually came to be known as a “Sacred Island.”

As noted above, at their peak the ancient rituals of Okinoshima were conducted in an international environment, and Okinoshima was considered to be the most important ritual site of the Wa kingdom.



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