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THE SEVEN-BRANCHED SWORD

Many Japanese historians have attempted to fill the gap of “the missing two sexagenary cycles” between the death of Jingū in A.D. 269 [i.e., the death of Queen Himiko recorded in Wei-zhi] and the enthronement of Homuda-wake in A.D. 390 by examining the inscription on the Seven-branched Sword 七支刀 preserved at the Isonokami Shrine 石上神宮.¹ The Seven-branched Sword is believed to be the sword that is spoken of in Nihongi (NI: 251) as having been sent by the Paekche court to Homuda-wake in A.D. 372.

The full translation of the inscription on the Seven-branched Sword may be read as follow: “On May 16th, the 4th year of Tae-hwa 泰和 [or on April 16th, the 4th year of T'ai-ho], the day of Byeong-O at noon 丙午正陽, this seven-branched sword was manufactured with hundred-times-wrought iron 造百練鐵 七支刀. As this sword has a magical power to rout the enemy 世(生)叫百兵, it is sent [bestowed] to the king of a vassal state 宜供侯王. Manufactured 作 by x x x x. Never has there been such a sword 先世以來未有此刀. Thinking of longevity, the king of Paekche 百濟王 [or the Crown Prince of Paekche who owes his life to the august King 世子寄生聖音(晋)] had this sword made for the king of Wa [or the king of vassal state] 故爲倭王. Hope that it be transmitted and shown to posterity 旨造傳示後世.”^{<1>} See also Kim Jeong-Hak (1986). The year the sword was manufactured is speculated to be A.D. 369.

According to the inscription, Wa seems to have been addressed as a “vassal state” 侯王 to Paekche. Naturally, most Japanese scholars have tried to turn the inscription around and cast Paekche as the “vassal state” by reading the inscription “respectfully presenting the sword to the Emperor by the Paekche

¹A shrine in the city of Tenri, Nara Prefecture, supposedly dedicated to a sacred sword presented to Jimmu by the deity Takemikazuchi. The Mononobe clan regarded the deity of this shrine as their own clan deity.

king.” Ueda Masaaki (quoted by Saeki, 1977) is rather an exception among Japanese historians because he “has maintained that the Seven-branched Sword was ‘bestowed’ on the Wa ruler by the king of Paekche.” Ueda “based his interpretation on the argument that the term ‘koo’ 供 [howang 侯王] appearing in the inscription denotes a ruler in vassalage to the Paekche king and that the inscription is written in the commanding tone of a superior addressing an inferior, exemplified by the sentence reading ‘Hand down [this sword] to [your] posterity 傳示後世.’” However, Saeki (1977) argues that one can not interpret the inscription to mean either “to bestow” the sword on the king in vassalage or “to respectfully present” to the emperor, as many Japanese scholars have maintained since the Meiji period. Saeki seems to be inclined to take Hirano’s argument that the inscription simply indicates the fact there was a respectful and sincere relationship between the rulers of Paekche and Wa.²

In any case, according to Yoon (1990: 21), this seven branched sword reveals the highly progressed metal industrial art in Paekche: “In fact, it seemed very difficult to manufacture a big iron sword with a delicate appearance by the metal fabrication technology which was developed during the early 4th century, simply because various engineering processes, including smelting of iron ore, casting of molten iron, heat-treatment or joining of iron and steel, carving skills in iron materials, etc. were necessary so as to secure such a metal product of high standard.” Yoon (1990: 21) concludes that “[c]onsidering every aspect of engineered artifacts above mentioned, the manufacturing technology of Ch’ilchi-do [the seven branched sword] by Paekche experts was excellent and superior to that of Le-lang, contributing to the improvement of metal craftsmanship in Japan.”

Hirano (1977) notes that although *Nihongi*, “in its main text, treats Yamato

²Kiley (1973) notes that: “The founding of the conquest polity in Yamato is, predictably, almost without documentation The written source materials on fourth century Japan are poor, and those records that do exist are of Korean origin. One of the earliest of these is a ‘seven branched sword’ of Korean manufacture still preserved in Japan. Dated A.D. 369, the inscription expresses the desire of the King and crown prince of Paekche for continued good relations with the king of ‘Wa’. . . . Throughout the fifth century, Paekche was more or less constantly allied with the [Wa] king against the other two major Korean states, Koguryeo and Silla. Yet it remains uncertain that the ‘Wa’ king mentioned in the inscription of 369 was based in the Yamato area, and the origin of the Wa armies that fought on the peninsula for decades thereafter is equally vague. There is no good reason to suppose that these hordes represented a state organization located in Yamato.”

as superior to Silla and Paekche . . . , in the quotations from Korean sources, terms expressing equal footing are used without modification. For example, a passage from the Kudaraki [Paekche Chronicle] in the *Ūjin* section reads, ‘The king dispatched Prince Toki and cemented the friendship established by his predecessor 遣王子直支于天朝 以脩先王之好也’ Particularly the section on *Ūjin*, while stating in the main text that the king of Koguryeo ‘paid tribute to Yamato by sending an envoy,’ also discloses unwittingly that there was a line reading, ‘the king of Koguryeo gives instructions to Japan 高麗王教日本國也’ in the letter brought by the envoy. Judging from this, we may presume that the expression ‘paid tribute’ was an embellishment by the Nihon shoki compilers. . . . All this enhances the credibility of the Paekche sources cited in the Nihon shoki and at the same time shows that the phraseology of the Nihon shoki is surprisingly artless. The latter point is proved by the fact that the supercilious term ‘paid tribute’ is used heedlessly also in the case of Chinese envoys arriving from Kure.”³

Nihongi (NI: 251) further records that a “seven-little-one-mirror 七子鏡” was sent by the Paekche court to *Ūjin* together with the Seven-branched Sword 七枝刀. Covell and Covell (1984: 22-23) note: “The intriguing fact is that the two objects [sword and mirror] still exist in Japan A bronze mirror [with human figures] 人物畫像鏡 20 cm in diameter [was discovered in 1834, and] is now. . . preserved at Suda Hachiman Shrine 隅田 八幡神社, Wakayama 和歌山⁴. . . . The inscription upon it can be translated as ‘in the sheep year 癸未年’ which makes it 383, 443 or 503 A.D. . . . The Chinese lettering around the edge is somewhat ambiguous. It reads: ‘In the year of the sheep, period of Great King 大壬年, to a [younger] brother king 男弟王 . . . , when he was staying at Ishisaga Palace 意紫沙加宮, thinking of longevity. He [Sama 斯麻] ordered two men to make this mirror, taking 200 cho of white

³This refers to Nihongi’s records for the 58th year of Nintoku (NI: 296): “The Land of Wu 吳 and the Land of Koguryeo together attended the Court with tribute 朝貢.” Also for the sixth year of *Yū ryaku* (NI: 347): “The Land of Wu sent envoys with tribute 吳國遣使貢獻也.” Aston (NI: 296n) notes that: “It is not to be supposed that China or even Koguryeo ever sent ‘tribute’ to Japan. Presents were no doubt exchanged, which both sides very likely represented to their subjects as ‘tribute.’ ” Apparently, however, Nihongi adopted the Chinese way of speaking arrogantly of foreign nations.

⁴Hachiman has been identified as the deified spirit of Homuda-wake, and has been worshiped as the central deity at Hachiman Shrine. There are about 25,000 Hachiman Shrines throughout Japan today.

nickel bronze.’ Can this be the present from Paekche to *Ūjin*, referred to in the *Kojiki*? Is the king . . . the ruler in Japan?”⁵

Since the inscription includes the two letters, Sa-ma 斯麻, Sakamoto Yoshitane 坂元義種 (1991: 108-112) suggests the possibility that the sheep year is A.D. 503 and the Great King is King Munyeong of Paekche whose name was Sama according to his funerary inscription. Then the younger brother king of Wa can be, say, Keitai 繼體 (Wohodo no Sumera Mikoto 男大迹). Indeed, the expression “younger brother 男弟” can be found in the *Wajin-den* of Wei-zhi: Himiko 卑彌呼 “had a *younger brother* who assisted her in ruling the country 有男弟佐治國” (Tsunoda & Goodrich, 1951: 13). Further-more, the *Nihongi* (NI: 346) quotes the Paekche *Shinsen* 百濟新撰 which states that the Paekche King Kaero 蓋鹵 sent Lord Konji 昆支 (in A.D. 461) to Wa (to Yūryaku 雄略) in order to confirm the friendship of *big brother King* 以脩兄王之好.^{3, 2, 8} King Munyeong 武寧王 (A.D. 501-523) was the son of King Kaero (A.D. 455-475). The younger brother king seems to indicate either Keitai 繼體 (A. D. 450-531?) or, more likely, Buretsu 武烈 (A. D. 489-506?).

The inscription, in conveying the fact that Sama [King Munyeong] let two men make this mirror, uses the Chinese character 竟 (implying “ultimately”) in place of 鏡 (mirror) apparently because of their identical phonetic sounds, *kyeong* (*Ch. jing*). Indeed the bronze mirror ornamented with a human figure aiming a spear and four galloping animals found in the tomb of King Munyeong also carries the inscription, including an expression “made mirror” 尚方作竟真大好 in which the Chinese character 竟 (ultimately) is used in place of 鏡 (mirror). See also Kim Jeong-hak 金廷鶴 (1981: 291) and Sakamoto Yoshitane 坂元義種 (1991: 61)

⁵The inscription on it says, 癸未年 八月日十 大王年 男弟王 在意紫沙加宮時 斯麻 念長壽 (奉)遣 開中費直 穢人 今州利 二人等 取(所)白上同二百早作(取)此竟(鏡). See Sakamoto Yoshitane 坂元義種 (1991: 117). Yi Chinhui (1982) reads the inscription as follows: 大王年 . . . 所此竟矣 未年八月日.