

A Study on the Cultural and Historical significance of the ancient tombs in Silla and Gaya

SoYoon Choi^{1*}

Abstract

During the Three Kingdoms Period in South Korea, the construction of ancient tombs emerged as a significant material phenomenon. While the ancient tombs of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla have received considerable attention, the tombs of Gaya have also become a subject of exploration due to their historical importance. Although archaeological data related to these tombs has been partially acquired, ongoing discoveries continue to reveal remains from the Unified Silla and Gaya. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to concentrate on the recent accumulation of materials pertaining to the Unified Silla and Gaya ancient tombs. Through an examination of their historical background, distinctive characteristics and construction methods, this paper seeks to elucidate the cultural and historical significance of Silla and Gaya tombs.

Keyword : Ancient Tombs, Silla, Gaya, and Construction Methods

1. Introduction

The construction of ancient tombs by various kingdoms including Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla and Gaya, represents a noteworthy physical phenomenon that demands meticulous examination. In this regard, recent archaeological excavations have continued to unearth remnants from the Unified Silla Period to yield a wealth of invaluable data essential for scholarly research [1][2]. The Baekje Research Institute at Hansung Baekje Museum opened the excavation site at Bukmunji in Mongchon Mountain Castle to the public and announced an archaeological discovery that confirmed the existence of a Hanseong Baekje period cultural layer beneath the Unified Silla cultural layer. This indicated that there was no cultural layer between the Baekje and Unified Silla cultural layers in 2014. In addition, the findings extends to the village's lifestyle and characteristics. These advancements have opened the door to comprehensive analysis and facilitated thorough investigations into this subject matter. In line with the reserach, the purpose of this paper is to focus on a detailed exploration of the ancient tombs of Unified Silla and Gaya. The paper will delve into the historical context surrounding these tombs to elucidate their distinctive characteristics and the methods employed in their construction. Moreover, it will critically

1 Department of Arts & Museum, Kookmin University, Seoul, Korea [Graduate Student]
e-mail: namu95720@naver.com

Received(March 21, 2022), Review Result(1st: April 15, 2022, 2nd: May 7, 2022), Accepted(June 3, 2022), Published(June 30, 2022)



© 2022 The Authors. Published by NCISS.
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

examine the historical and cultural significance embodied by these tombs to identify their broader societal implications. By conducting an analysis of the contemporary utilization of the ancient tombs of Silla and Gaya as educational resources, tourist attractions and cultural spaces within the local community, this paper seeks to contribute to future scholarly studies on these tombs as a continued exploration of their enduring cultural and historical value.

2. Analysis of ancient tombs of Silla

2.1 History of ancient tombs in Silla

In the latter half of the 3rd century, Silla began using wood coffin tombs [3]. With Buddhism's adoption, Gyeongju saw many temples built and graves transition to soil-covered stone chamber tombs. During the 4th-5th century Malipgan period, the Gochong culture declined as the Gobun culture rose. Silla's growing power enabled its expansion into the Gaya region and beyond to culminate in the annexation of Daegaya in 562. This period saw the erection of many fortresses and the introduction of later Gobun culture artifacts like Dangakgobae(短脚高杯) and Bugaguyeonjanggyeongho(附加口緣長頸壺). Access to the Han River basin allowed direct trade with China. By the late 7th century, Silla unified the three kingdoms, leading to the emergence of Korean culture. The construction of pebble mound-covered wood coffin tombs dates between the late 4th to mid-6th century, coinciding with the Malipgan era to symbolize a form of memorial service.

During the era of wood coffin tombs covered with pebble mounds, structures such as suhyulsik sukgwakmyo and ongkwanmyo were constructed in Gyeongju. However, these structures held lower ranks compared to the wood coffin tombs covered with pebble mounds. In addition, the Gochong culture rapidly proliferated throughout the rural areas during this period and resulted in the formation of extensive clusters of ancient tombs in various parts of the Yeongnam region. The main burial practices in ancient mounds across the Yeongnam region underwent a transition from mokgwak to suhyulsik sukgwak [4]. Notably, with the exception of the Gaya region located west of the Nakdong River and south of Gaya Mountain, hoenggusik (横口式) sukgwak structures were also constructed throughout the Yeongnam region and the eastern coast. Variations can be observed in the choice of stone materials, construction techniques and the arrangement of subsidiary receptacles of coffins according to the specific region. Distinctions are apparent between Gyeongju and the surrounding countryside as well as within different segments of the memorial service held before the grave and the structure of ancient tombs.

Countryside burials began mirroring Gyeongju's gochong culture that signifies a hierarchical distinction

between Gyeongju and rural areas [5]. The construction of pebble mound-covered wood coffins in Gyeongju ceased in the early 6th century while transitioning to soil-covered stone chamber tombs to signify a significant shift in Silla's burial practices. This change including the adoption of hoenghyulsik (横口式) suksilbun appears to align with Silla's centralizing system in the early 6th century, involving law promulgation and Buddhism recognition. Consequently, ancient tombs primarily moved to mountains and simplified funeral practices and reducing tomb sizes.

2.2 Characteristics of ancient tombs in Silla

Silla's capital Gyeongju housed most major ancient tombs built by the ruling class to show a transition from Silla-style mokgwakmyo to pebble mound-covered wood coffins and finally to soil-covered stone chamber tombs [7]. This study explores these tombs in Gyeongju and rural areas considering the chronological aspect of burial services. Silla-style mokgwakmyo, first discovered in Gyeongju's Gujeong-dong, were later found in Pohang, Ulsan, Gyeongsan and Daegu that reflect Silla's political expansion. Despite the prohibition against burying the living with the dead in 502 AD, evidence of this practice was found in Gyeongju's early wood coffins and rural tombs.

The growth of Silla's Gochong culture was marked by the introduction of pebble mound-covered wood coffins in Gyeongju, most notably Hwangnamdaechong [7]. These tombs, rich in metal artifacts, were primarily used by Silla's ruling class [8]. The tomb culture spread throughout the countryside in Silla's later stages with many tombs in territories controlled by Silla including Gaya and regions east of the Nakdong River. The type of tombs discovered varied by region. Some areas deviated from Gyeongju's burial practices by using nails, rings, and wooden coffins for burial within chamber tombs. However, the number and size of tombs in rural Silla declined significantly after the dangakgobae period that indicates a decline in tomb culture.

2.3 The Construction method employed for ancient tombs in Silla

The Silla-style wood coffin tomb traceable to the rectangular wood coffins from the late Three Kingdoms period [9] differed from the tom contrast style, which housed main and subsidiary coffin receptacles in an earthen shed [10]. These tombs, rich in artifacts and not leaving surface traces, evolved into Silla-style coffins covered with pebble mounds as revealed by findings in Gyeongju and Ulsan. In Gueo-ri, Gyeongju, a notable discovery was made in the form of a large tomb where the main and subsidiary receptacles of the coffin were installed separately. It suggests the existence of

distinct tombs for the ruling class of Silla. The wood coffin covered with pebble mounds is characterized by two key components: the juksukbu which refers to the stones placed on and around the main body of the coffin receptacle and the hosuk, a stone structure surrounding the earthen mound. In prominent ancient tombs like Hwangnamdaechong (皇南大塚), Geumgwanchong (金冠塚), and Cheonmachong (天馬塚), all the structures including the coffin receptacle and the accumulated stone parts were built above ground. In smaller and medium-sized tombs, the accumulated stone parts were constructed in the space between the earthen shed wall and the wood coffin wall with the earthen shed itself situated underground.

The main shape of Silla's wood coffins covered with pebble mounds is round with some twin graves resembling gourd dippers to accommodate married couples [11]. Tomb size, shape and burial accessories reflect the social status of the deceased. Turning to the stone chamber tombs of Silla in Gyeongju, they are situated along ridges in mountainous areas and constructed using roughly trimmed stones. It distinguishes them from the tombs in Baekje. These stone chambers can have rectangular or square shapes with rectangular chambers typically featuring flat ceilings and square chambers often having vaulted ceilings. The locations of the tombs along the roadside exhibit different types including central types, left-sided maldistribution types and right-sided maldistribution types with the left-sided maldistribution type being more prevalent than the others. Inside the stone chambers, deceased individuals are buried on stone pillows and footholds without the use of wood coffins. In earlier periods, Silla's earthenware were interred in the stone chambers. Subsequently, yugaehap (有蓋盒) and segyeongbyeong (細頸瓶) featuring engraved inhwa motifs replaced them. With the official endorsement of Buddhism, cremation tombs containing remains stored in earthenware such as yugaehap became prevalent in the latter part of Silla. Among the local ancient tombs of Silla in Naengsu-ri in Youngil, stone chambers with small chambers arranged in the shape of 卜 for the burial of accessories along a pathway in front of the main rectangular chamber were discovered. In Eupnae-ri and Taejang-ri in Sunheung in Youngju, a mural and a stone chamber were found, respectively. These findings exhibit strong influences from Goguryeo's ancient murals and the ancient mural in Taejang-ri contains a beautiful passage written by Eosuk (於宿), a sulgan-ranked individual in Silla. These discoveries draw attention to the presence of stone chambers in Silla.

2.4 Cultural Implication of ancient tombs in Silla

Unified Silla tombs often reflect the Buddhist ideologies that were influential during this period. The adoption of Buddhism as the state religion had a profound impact on the layout, structure and content

of the tombs. Many tombs such as the Heavenly Horse Tomb in Gyeongju contain mural paintings and artefacts that depict Buddhist themes or symbols to highlight the ideological transition of the society. The artefacts found in the tombs provide a wealth of information about the material culture of the Unified Silla period including its art, craft, attire and daily life. Gold crowns, jewellery, pottery and weaponry found in these tombs demonstrate the high level of craftsmanship during the Unified Silla period. The murals and sculptures also provide valuable insights into the artistic styles and aesthetic sensibilities of the era.

3. Analysis of ancient tombs in Gaya

3.1 Historical overview of ancient tombs in Gaya

Gaya, a confederation of ten entities, lacked political unity leading to its annexation by Silla in the mid-6th century. Evidence of this disunity is found in the uniformity of its ancient tombs and earthenware [12]. A transition from the Three Kingdoms period to Gaya is marked by the construction of large mokgwakmyo tombs in Daeseong-dong, Gimhae in the late 3rd century. These tombs differ from Silla's by having separate main and subsidiary receptacles. After the 5th century, Gaya's earthenware is classified into three styles, each representing different regional influences. Aragaya's influence evidenced by ancient tombs in Dohang-ri and Malsan-ri provides insights into the political landscape of the time.

Centered around the Goseong, Sogaya Peninsula influenced regions along the midstream of the Namgang River by the 6th century. The distribution of Jinju-Goseong style earthenware that are limited to Goseong and Sacheon suggests a decline in power [13]. Important archaeological remains include ancient tombs in Songhak-dong, Goseong, and similar tombs in Naesan-ri, Goseong and Jungchon-ri, Sancheong that reflects Sogaya's power structures.

Daegaya that were originated in Goryeong expanded its influence. The central remains of Daegaya include the ancient tomb in Jisan-dong, Goryeong where hundreds of ancient tombs including large mounds were constructed [14]. Notably, a ridge near the mountain's peak serves as a location for ancient tombs to constitute royal tomb areas spanning several generations. These large ancient tombs distinguish themselves from those found in other regions of Gaya. In the ancient tombs of the Daegaya region, prestigious items of the Daegaya style including earrings, along with Goryeong style earthenware are occasionally discovered. Furthermore, earthenware with beautiful inscriptions such as 大王 and 下部 has been found. In the vicinity of the midstream of the Nakdong River, including Uiryeong, Hapcheon,

and the Goryeong basin, Daegaya-style fortresses were constructed. It appears that Daegaya experienced a golden age in the latter part of the 5th century. However, it seems that Daegaya was unable to establish dominion over the entire area where Goryeong style earthenware was buried as it was eventually destroyed.

3.2 Characteristics of ancient tombs of Gaya

Ancient tombs in Gaya are categorized as mokgwakmyo, suhyulsiksukgwakbun, and hoenghyulsiksukgwakbun based on the burial method. In the late 3rd century, distinct large mokgwakmyo appeared in Daeseong-dong, Gimhae, marked by unique location, size, and burial artifacts. The tradition of burying the living with the deceased was first noted in the 29th ancient tomb in Daeseong-dong. Investigations of these tombs were conducted in sites like Kwaebin-dong, Goryong, Okjeon, Hapcheon and Dohang-ri, Haman [15]. The conversion from mokgwakmyo to suhyulsiksukgwak started in the late 4th century and developed into larger tombs by the 5th century with the transition period varying by region [16]. Gaya's suhyulsiksukgwak tombs commonly had a long, thin, rectangular shape that contrast with the rectangular tombs in the east of the Nakdong River near Silla's center. By the 6th century, hoenghyulsiksukgwak tombs which are classified into two types were also built in Gaya [17]. The two types include those resembling the stone chambers in Songsan-ri, Baekje with vaulted ceilings and those that introduce elements of hoenghyulsiksukgwak to the thin and long rectangular suhyulsiksukgwak exemplified by tombs in locations like Songhak-dong, Goseong, Naesan-ri, Dohang-ri, Haman, and Jungdong-ri, Uiryeong.

3.3 Construction methods and placement of ancient tomb in Gaya

The No. 29 tomb at Daeseong-dong is notable for the extensive earthenware buried with the deceased. This led to the evolution of the ihyuljubugwaksikmokgwakmyo tomb style, starting with the 13th tomb [18]. Similar tombs were found in Bokcheon-dong, Dongnae and it suggested a commonality of burial practices. Another type of tomb, suhyulsiksukgwakbun, was used for memorial services and featured stone walls with wooden coffins inside. The mural tomb in Goa-ri, Goryeong with lotus decorations on its ceiling bears a resemblance to the Jeonchukbunsik tomb in Songsan-ri, Gongju.

Gaya tombs have unique regional characteristics regarding construction methods and placements [18]. For example, tombs in Jisan-dong, Goryeong, Dohangri and Malsanri, Haman comprise earthen mounds over coffin receptacles [19]. Some tombs have a central arrangement for burying the deceased and the

living together [20].

In the Goseong region, tombs like those in Songhak-dong and Naesan-ri feature mounded burials, different from soil mound tombs in Goryeong and Haman. The stone coffin chamber was typically installed after the mound was laid and similar to tombs in the Youngsan River basin. Moreover, certain tombs such as those in Songhak-dong, Gyeongsan-ri, Ungok-ri, Seonjin-ri, and Jangmok feature a munjusuk (stone slab) at the chamber entrance. And yosuk, a long rectangular stone, at the chamber wall bottom hints at a possible connection to Japanese burial structures.

3.4 Cultural Implication of ancient tombs in Gaya

The Gaya tombs are known for their rich grave goods including pottery, iron weapons and armor, horse trappings and ornamental beads. These artifacts suggest a society where status and military prowess were highly valued. The Gaya tombs also offer a glimpse into the cultural practices of the Gaya people. The variety and quality of grave goods suggest a rich material culture. The presence of musical instruments in some tombs points to the importance of music in Gaya society. The burial mounds themselves and the rituals associated with them can provide insights into Gaya beliefs about death and the afterlife.

4. Discussion

Silla-style wood coffin tombs emerged in the 3rd century and transitioned to stone chambers with soil. Silla expanded its dominion to create new burial practices and artifacts. In the 6th century, wood coffins with pebble mounds ceased in Gyeongju and royal tombs moved to mountainous regions. Varied tomb designs reflect burial customs. In contrast, the ancient tombs in Gaya lacked unity and fell to Silla in the mid-6th century. The construction and placement of tombs and earthenware across Gaya varied and indicated the absence of a unified political and cultural entity. Different tomb structures in Gaya such as mokgwakmyo, suhyulsiksukgwakbun and Hoenghyulsuksilbun tombs reveal insights into the region's cultural and political dynamics.

The study of ancient tombs has undergone a transformative shift and encompassed not only their archaeological significance but also their broader cultural and societal roles. As local governments have taken steps to improve the preservation and presentation of these tombs, they have emerged as cultural spaces that contribute to the well-being of local communities. In addition, these tombs have become valuable educational and tourist resources and fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of our

cultural heritage. For instance, it is possible to develop online resources related to the tombs such as virtual tours, educational videos and interactive activities. This can make the tombs accessible to people who are unable to visit in person and can provide supplementary material for teachers and students.

5. Conclusion

The recognition of ancient tombs as cultural and historical symbols extends beyond academic interpretation and highlights their profound impact on contemporary culture. Their preservation and interpretation as cultural heritage hold immense value that provides insights into the ancient civilizations of Silla and Gaya and informs the development of theories within the field of archaeology. The findings presented in this paper contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding ancient tombs and identify their characteristics, regional variations and developmental changes over time. By expanding the understanding of these tombs, this paper expects that visitors can gain a deeper appreciation for their cultural significance and their potential to shape future cultural endeavors.

References

- [1] H. K. Lee, "The Historical Significance of the Remains of Unified Silla and Baekje Excavated from Mongchon Mountain Fortress," *SILLASAHAKPO*, no. 34, 2015, pp. 335-373.
- [2] J. P. Woo, "The Political Solidarity between the Central and Local Politicians in Paekche between 5-6th Centuries when Common Tombs were shared", *The Journal for the Studies of Korean History*, no. 77, 2019, pp. 105-131, doi: 10.21490/jskh.2019.11.77.105.
- [3] The Korean Archaeological Society, *Korean Archaeological Lecture*, Sahoipyounghon Academy, 2015.
- [4] K. N. Kim, "The Structure and Changing Nature of the Earthen Mounds of Silla Tombs of the Fifth and Sixth Century According to the Location of the Main Burial Chamber - Focusing on the Tombs of the Middle and Lower Reaches of the Nakdong River and Geumho River -", *Journal of Korean Field Archaeology*, no. 15, November 2012, pp. 139-174, doi: 10.35347/jkfa.2012..15.139.
- [5] B. S. Hong, "A study on ancient tombs of Silla in the 6th and 7th century", Doctoral thesis, History, Pusan University, Republic of Korea, 2001. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T8033310>.
- [6] D. W. Lee, "The Hierarchy and Changing Patterns of Ancient Tombs in the Gyeongju Area in the Fifth and Sixth Century", *Journal of Korean Field Archaeology*, vol. 2, no. 32, July 2018, pp. 31-64, doi: 10.35347/jkfa.2018..32.31.
- [7] I. S. Jeong, "A study of 4~6th century silla gourd-shaped tomb : centered around ancient tomb structure and analysis of buried persons", Master's thesis, History, Inha University, Republic of Korea, 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T13711893>.

- [8] B. H. Choi, "Chronological Data Concerning Early Silla Tombs and the Date and Deceased of Hwangnamdaechong Tomb", *Journal of Soong Sil Sahak(The Historical Review of Soong Sil University)*, vol. 0, no. 43, December 2019, pp. 33-76, doi: 10.16942/ssh.2019.43.12.02.
- [9] B. H. Choi, "Saroguk and the Development of the Wooden Coffin and Wooden Chamber Burials of the Gyeongju Region in the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period", *Journal of Central Institute of Cultural Heritage*, no. 27, October 2018, pp. 29-104, doi: 10.20292/jcich.2018.27.29.
- [10] S. H. Choi, "A changing process and review on character of the wooden chamber tombs in Kyoungju region", *Journal of Korean Field Archaeology*, vol. 0, no. 21, November 2014, pp. 29-63, doi: 10.35347/jkfa.2014..21.29.
- [11] S. H. Jo, "A Study of Ara Gaya Based on Mortuary Analysis", Doctoral thesis, Cultural Resources Studies, Gyeongju University, Republic of Korea, 2018. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T14733574>.
- [12] K. K. Choi, "A Study on the Gaya stone-lined pit burial tomb", Doctoral thesis, Archaeology and Art History, Dong-A University, Republic of Korea, 2014. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T13448176>.
- [13] S. C. Ha, "Archaeological Study of Sogaya", Doctoral thesis, History, Gyeongsang National University, Republic of Korea, 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T13853378>.
- [14] D. H. Kim, "The Transition and Background of Stone chamber Tomb with Side Door in Gaya(加耶) Area.", Master's thesis, History and Archeology, Inje University, Republic of Korea, 2015. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T13834056>.
- [15] S. Y. Lee, "A Study on tumulus culture of Hapcheon·Goryoung region between 5 and 6C", Master's thesis, Archaeology and Art History, Dong-A University, Republic of Korea, 2007. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T11192697>.
- [16] J. Y. Sim, "A Study on Tombs of Geumgwan-Gaya", Doctoral thesis, Archaeological, Pusan National University, Republic of Korea, 2019. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T15367848>.
- [17] J. S. Kim, "A study on Stone chamber tombs with horizontal entrance in Gaya", Doctoral thesis, Archaeology and Anthropology, Kyungpook National University, Republic of Korea, 2019. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T15363787>.
- [18] Y. J. Choi, "A study on multi-chambered tombs in Gaya", Master's thesis, History, Gyeongsang National University, Republic of Korea, 2017. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T14387783>.
- [19] J. Y. Cho, "A study on the regionality viewed from the structures of 5~6th century kaya tomb", Master's thesis, Historical Archaeology, Korea University, Republic of Korea, 2012. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T12705418>.
- [20] S. W. Kim, "A Study on the Sacrificed Burials of Gumguan Gaya", Master's thesis, Archaeology, Pusan National University, Republic of Korea, 2005. [Online]. Available: <http://www.riss.kr/link?id=T10097690>.