

# Can the *Samguk sagi* Be Corroborated through Epigraphy? An Analysis of the Capital-Rank System and Councils of Nobles

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Kim Pusik's 金富弼 (1075–1151) *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (History of the Three Kingdoms) is arguably the single most important document for understanding the history of the early Korean state of Silla 新羅 (traditional dates, 57 BCE–935 CE). Despite the existence of other literary and archeological materials, as a royally sanctioned “standard history” the *Samguk sagi* continues to enjoy a position of power in determining the “history of Silla.” One of the most distinctive features of Silla society is its highly stratified social system as articulated through the establishment of its bureaucratic rank system (*kyōngwi* 京位) and councils of nobles (*hwabaek hoeŭi* 和白會議). The *Samguk sagi* presents a narrative that functions as an “officially authorized” account of the institution of the seventeen-level system of capital ranks and other institutions of government administration in the first three centuries of the Common Era. To what extent can the historical narrative of the *Samguk sagi* be verified by epigraphy and other early literary materials? The uncomfortable truth is that inscriptions from the early Silla period provide no evidence that the capital rank system was established prior to the sixth century. More important, epigraphy shows that unlike the story found in the *Samguk sagi*, the formation of the capital rank system was probably more of a process that evolved vigorously during the crucial sixth century and probably achieved something close to its final form during the reign of King Chinhŭng 眞興 (540–576). Furthermore, despite the sequence of events reported in the *Samguk sagi*, administrative and managerial offices associated with the council of nobles in Silla—the Administration Chamber (*chōngsadang* 政事堂) and Southern Chamber or South Hall (*namdang* 南堂)—probably did not take concrete form until at least the late seventh century. More than merely the ideological or rhetorical necessity of demonstrating that Silla and its institutions were “older” than those of Koguryŏ and Paekche, Kim Pusik and his associates—or perhaps even earlier historiographers—sought to create new historical memories of Silla, and by reshaping the past they strove to fashion the future.

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