

The Allegory of King Kyōngmun in the *Samguk yusa**

Maurizio Riotto

This article investigates a story regarding King Kyōngmun of Silla found in the *Samguk yusa*. In particular, the research is focused on the donkey ears the king is said to have acquired after his ascent to the throne in 861, an episode that resembles the well-known tale of King Midas of Phrygia. Given the allegoric nature of the tale, I divide the article into three parts, dealing first of all with the donkey's symbolism in ancient Eurasia. The second section shows other literary examples of kings having horse or donkey ears, including that of Midas, in an attempt at interpreting these stories. Finally, I give my personal explanation of the passage regarding King Kyōngmun, assessing the similarities and differences with the story of Midas. In conclusion, the tale of King Kyōngmun, an actual historical figure, appears much more tragic, since it is deeply anchored in a precise historical context, namely, the process leading to the inevitable ruin and fall of the state after a dramatic series of uprisings and revolts.

Keywords: King Kyōngmun, King Midas, Donkey ears, Silla Kingdom, *Samguk yusa*

Prologue

King Kyōngmun 景文 (r. 861–875) of Silla 新羅, as he is portrayed in the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事, appears to have been a bizarre character. Not only because he used to sleep with snakes, but also because he had donkey ears, just like King Midas in the Western narrative tradition. One cannot help but wonder

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