

Unreliable Narratives: Historical and Archaeological Approaches to Early Silla

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This paper surfaces the major contradictions between the “Account of the Han” in the third-century *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Records of the Three Kingdoms) and the twelfth-century records of early Silla in the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (History of the Three Kingdoms) with regards to the formation of the Silla kingdom in southeastern Korea during the third and fourth centuries. Archaeological material, specifically grave goods and cemeteries, is then employed to assess the conflicting historical accounts. Analysis of burial customs and tomb styles does suggest that there was a high degree of cultural cohesion evident in the region, which broadly agrees with both the above textual accounts. Nevertheless, the inconsistent adoption of grave construction techniques, differing levels of commitment to a uniform ritual practice between sites, and variable grave good displays attest to a high degree of diversity and the lack of an overarching governmental authority in southeastern Korea. The picture that emerges from the ritual evidence is one of many independent groups with a fundamentally similar cultural grammar. While the archaeology does concur with historians that favor the “Account of the Han” and the *Sanguozhi*, there are still problems with both texts’ assertions of regional political structures and centralization. And while the two texts may be fundamentally incompatible, there is still potential value in the *Samguk sagi*’s accounts of Silla’s incipient warfare with neighboring groups.

Keywords: Silla, Samhan, *Samguk sagi*, “Account of the Han,” Iron Age archaeology

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