

A History of Korea - Part 2

Michael Downey

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Across Korea, both North and South, dolmens seem to crop up everywhere. They appear as great standing stones with what appears to be tabletops. Upon observation, one has to marvel at the technology necessary to move and place these gigantic stones. Like the stone monuments that testify to the lifestyle of the neolithic inhabitants of Europe, the dolmens scattered throughout Korea tell us something about the stone age and bronze age people who built them. The existence of these, essentially tombs, tells us that there was a rigidly stratified society. At the very top were the elite, that is the chief or headman or wang /king. This class may also have included wives, children, and other family members. They were the ones that had free access to all the things that sustained life. They also would have the leisure time to consider and pursue eternal life by aspiring to rest for eternity in such elaborate tombs.

There also had to be a middle class who could produce the standard of living that the elite had become accustomed to. Somebody would also have the technical knowledge to find, maneuver, and set the stones.

There were also the poor souls who were required to do the heavy lifting, the slaves. Records show that 30% of the population of Old chson were slaves. They were property, bought and sold and inherited. There would also be clerics to explain eternity and give it the desirability to pursue immortality. Of course these would have been the shamans. Known as moodongs, they were the mediators between the people and the spirit world. They would have been the experts on the afterlife and how to get there most efficiently.

Dolmen in Korean is 고인돌 which means propped up stone. In many were found bronze grave goods such as daggers, swords, bells, and mirrors, but also polished stone daggers and burnished pottery. Several tombs also contained jade or amazonite beads, some in the crescent shape known as a ogok which possibly originated in Siberia and represents new life. Gogok (aka kogok) would reappear in later ornamentation, notably on the golden crowns of the Silla kingdom (57 BCE - 935 CE). One of the richest tombs is at Namsong-ri, containing more than 100 bronze artefacts which besides mirrors and daggers include an axe, chisel, a lacquered birch-bark scabbard, and tubular-shaped jade beads. It may be that some objects were those of a shaman, and there is evidence that shamans were also tribal chiefs in early Korea. The role of the shaman or moodongs was equal to or even greater than the importance of the king.

Korea has a history of slavery more than 1400 years old. From the early village life of hunter gatherers through the three kingdoms, United Silla, Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, Korean society was built around slaves. Nobi is the Korean word for slave. They occupied the lowest rung of Korean society. They could

be bought, sold, raped, beaten to death, starved to death, and inherited. These nobi made up 30-40% of the population of Joseon. Most slaves became slaves as a result of being made prisoners of war. The wars between Shilla and Koryeo produced a large number of slaves. Old Chosun and the walled cities also fought each other and the winners made the losers slaves.

The document called History of the Three Kingdoms, Sam guk sagi 삼국사기 gave a detailed account of the slaves of that period. The English translation of nobi is slave but it could be argued that they were serfs or indentured servants. They were the same race as their owners but owned, they were. They could be bought, sold, and passed down to inheritors like any property. They could be deprived of life, liberty, and all happiness on the whim of a master. They were surely slaves. When their offspring were born they were slaves also. They remained part of the slave class from the old Choson period through to the descendants of the slaves of the Three Kingdoms who became the slaves of the United Shilla, and then Koryeo and the Joseon dynasty. Throughout that time they did all the heavy labor freeing up the Nobel or Yang bang class to pursue intellectual, artistic, religious, and philosophical endeavors. The life of a slave varied according to circumstances and the chance of a master's temperament. They might be a tenant farmer, a concubine, a house servant, etc. But they were always slaves. The class existed for more than 1400 years almost unchanged. When the dynasties changed the slaves remained as slaves. The aristocrats that ruled the various dynasties remained the same and they kept their slaves. Koreans have a small number of surnames, Pak, Yi, and Kim being the most prominent. They are the descendants of the early rulers. The dynastic wars were basically struggles between brothers and other family members for power and position. The royal families became the Yang ban. The Yang ban became the aristocrats, administrators and rulers of Korea into the modern times. They were civil officials 문방 and military officers 무방. The slave class was integral to this society. The history of Korea spans the period of the first migrants drifting into the peninsula bearing the name we call it today.

Although the founding city of Old Chosun was conquered by the Han Chinese in 108 BCE.

After many years of contact, battles, cultural, and technology exchanges, Emperor Wu prevailed through backstabbing, betrayal, and actual fighting to conquer Old Chosun in 108 BCE. As a result China entered into a long standing occupation of Korean territory under a system called commandaries. When Gojoseon was defeated in 108 BC, three commanderies were established in its place: Lelang, Lintun, and Zhenfan. In 107 BC, Xuantu Commandery was also established in the place of Gojoseon's ally, Yemaek. In 82 BC, Lintun was absorbed into Xuantu and Zhenfan absorbed into Lelang. In 75 BC, Xuantu moved its capital to Liaodong due to resistance from the native people. Lintun was transferred to Lelang. These so-called commandaries were administrative units charged with controlling the subject people. Three of the five were dissolved after a few years but Lelang remained in place around modern day Pyongyang for about 400 years. It's all part of the Chinese worldview that they are the center of the world. The Koreans didn't agree. Out of the political, cultural, and military mishmash rose the nations who formed the Three Kingdoms period.