

## Ancestral monumentalization

### Considerations on the keyhole-shaped tumuli in Korea

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This study examines the key-hole tumuli discovered in the Yöngsan River basin, focusing on their significance within the historical context. Notably, this region garnered attention for its jar coffins and haniwa-like artifacts, previously undocumented in the Korean peninsula. Although key-hole tumuli, a burial tradition typical of Japan, are infrequently found in this area, so far fourteen have been unearthed. Typically located on plains or hills near coastal or river areas, their placement suggests a connection between the burying community and maritime trade routes.

While some scholars propose that these monuments were constructed for Wa immigrants unable to return to Kyūshū due to local unrest, I contend that they represent an effort by the Wa people or a closely associated community to establish a symbolic and ideological connection with the Chōlla territory, thereby gaining control over its resources. After discussing various aspects of the burial customs in Korea and examining the theories proposed by Korean and Japanese researchers, this article aims to interpret the trend as a brief, but intentional, effort by a new group to establish their importance in the Yöngsan River basin by constructing elaborate burial structures.

**Keywords:** keyhole-shaped tumuli; Korean archaeology; colonialism; tombs; Yöngsan River.

#### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article seeks to illuminate some aspects of the key-hole tumuli excavated in the Yöngsan River basin, a territory in the southwest of the Korean Peninsula encompassing the city of Kwangju and the South and North Chōlla provinces. Historically, this region attracted considerable attention during the colonization period due to its jar burial and haniwa-like artifacts, previously undocumented in the Korean peninsula (Kim Nakjung 2009: 15).<sup>2</sup> The key-hole tumuli, a funerary tradition distinctive to the

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<sup>2</sup> Outside of the Yöngsan River basin, cylindrical haniwa have only been excavated in Kunsan, Kyehwado, Kosōng, and Kōje. On the other hand, earthenware products with almost the same production technology as haniwa have been excavated in the

Japanese archipelago, during the so-called 'kofun period' (from about 300 to 600 CE), are unexpectedly present in the Yöngsan River basin, with fourteen identified so far (Kim Nakjung 2009: 221). Other continental funerary architectures, such as brick chamber tombs, were extensively imported and adopted during the period referred to by past historians as the Three Kingdoms Period (which spanned from approximately 57 BCE to 668 CE)<sup>3</sup> and Korean megalithism traces back to the bronze age. What makes this archaeological phenomenon uniquely significant is that the tradition, which does not come from the continent but rather from the Japanese archipelago, lasts in the area for less than a century and does not form a single locally concentrated cluster, rather the tombs are scattered in territories isolated from each other. Such dispersion suggests a certain degree of mobility of the 'burying group,' implying that the tombs may have been built by a powerful and wealthy immigrant community.<sup>4</sup> This community likely controlled lucrative trade between certain regions of Japan and Korea and aimed to assert political power within the territory, taking advantage of the political and military vacuum in the peninsula notably after Koguryö relocated its capital to P'yöngyang in 427 CE and the fall of Hansöng (modern Seoul and Paekche's first capital) to Koguryö invaders in 475 CE (Kim Nakjung 2009: 226). While scholars like Im Yöngjin claim that these monuments were constructed for Wa immigrants who could not go back to Kyūshū due to local instability (Im Yöngjin 2012: 120), I argue that they reflect the deliberate strategy of a Wa community, or a group closely linked to the. This community deliberately avoided adopting local customs, constructing these tombs to symbolically assert their presence in the Chölla region. The introduction of a new type of funerary architecture might, therefore, signify not only respect for the original traditions of the community but also a desire to eradicate local customs and reconnect their heritage to a specific territory. The Yöngsan River basin, boasting significant agricultural productivity and an exceptional labor and military force, held strategic importance for maritime routes that facilitated trade between Japan, Korea, and the continent.

After introducing some aspects of this funerary practice in Korea and examining some of the theories proposed by Korean and Japanese studies, this article aims to explore the phenomenon of a short-lived funerary trend introduced by an immigrant 'burying group' from northern Kyūshū. Taking

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Kyöngdang area of the earthen fortification in P'ungnap, so it is clear that haniwalike earthenware products were available in Paekche territory during Hansöng period, but it is still difficult to identify the roots and background of that importation.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, a genuine "three kingdom period" in Korea probably lasted from the mid-6th century until 668. Before this period, entities without textual documentation would only become visible through material evidence.

<sup>4</sup> Community is understood here to mean simply a group of people that have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups (Cohen 1985: 12).

into consideration various theories proposed by Korean and Japanese studies, I interpret this trend as an unsuccessful attempt by the immigrant community to establish their presence in the Yöngsan River. The community built lavish funerary buildings to create a fictitious local lineage, which would grant them greater political sway in the territory.

According to Arthur Saxe's Hypothesis #8 'formal disposal areas for the dead are used to affirm corporate group rights over crucial but restricted resources' (quoted in Pearson 1999: 136). Social groups may employ formal disposal areas for the dead to symbolize corporate membership rights and inheritance (Douglas 1995: 79). Lynne Goldstein supports this, stating that corporate group rights to use and control crucial but restricted resources are attained and legitimated by lineal descent from the dead.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the construction of megalithic tombs, a completely unprecedented feature in the local archaeological landscape,<sup>6</sup> was intended to contribute to the consolidation of control over the crucial resources in question, especially maritime and fluvial routes, in addition to agricultural ones. Thus, the overarching objective was to achieve a systemic seizure of the area's economic resources.

## 2. Preliminary remarks

The keyhole-shaped tumuli, commonly defined by both Korean and Japanese archaeologists "square front round back-shaped mounded tomb," (Korean *chönbang huwönbun*, Japanese *zenpö köenfun* 前方後円墳) represent a distinctive monumental funerary structure constructed between the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. These tumuli are found extensively across the Japanese archipelago. It is generally assumed that this type of burial system acquired its distinctive shape when the passage portion of the round tomb, covered with a heap of earth, was merged into the burial mound. Deceased individuals interred in these tumuli were accompanied by a generally homogenous set of grave goods, including bronze mirrors, bronze and iron tools, and weapons. Subsequently, characteristic jasper/green tuff products were included in this inventory (Mizoguchi 2009: 15). In Korean archeology, the character 'pun' (墳) generally denotes tombs with a distinctly visible tumulus (Kim Nakjung 2009: 31). This is not the only mounded-type tomb built in Korea at that time; at least from the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE onward several wooden chamber tombs with stone mound (積石木槨墳) were simultaneously constructed in the Silla territory.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Mike Parker Pearson (1999: 136).

<sup>6</sup> This area also contains evidence of five or six distinct burial customs; jars, capsule-type jars, high mound tombs, horizontal-type stone chambers, keyhole-shaped tumuli, and Paekche style stone chambers.

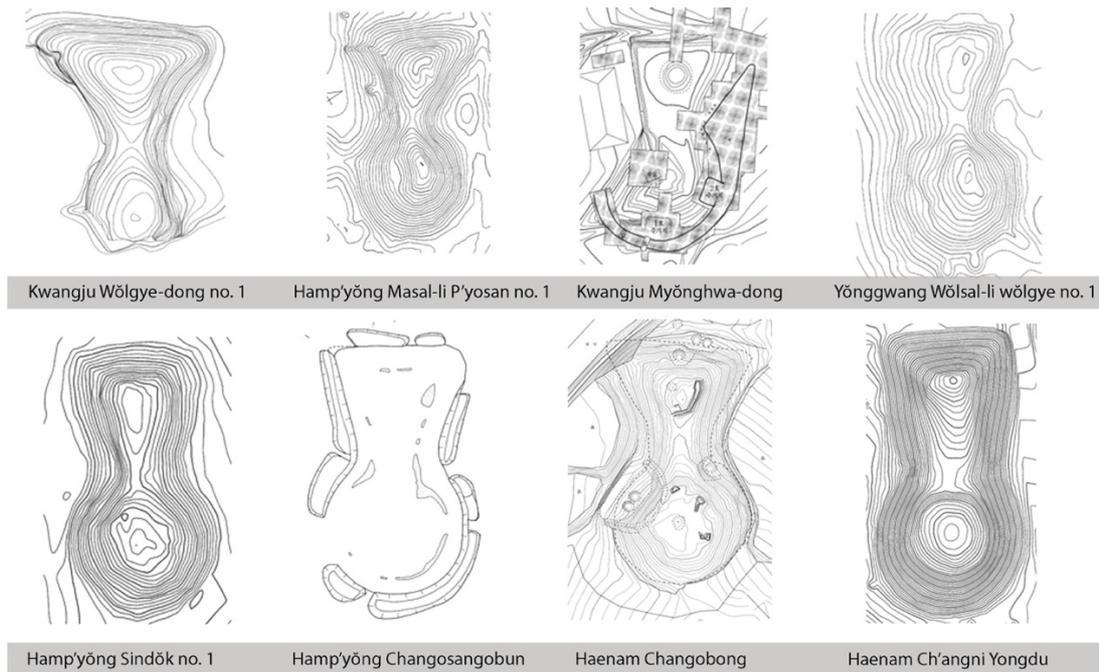


Figure 1. Key-hole tumuli aerial view (adapted from Sö (2007: 84).

The Japanese-style keyhole-shaped tumuli are located mainly in the Yöngsang River basin area and the coastal areas of Koch'ang, Yönggwang, and Haenam. Koch'ang Ch'iram-ni is the northernmost example while the southernmost exemplar is that of Haenam Pangsals-li Changobong. In terms of size, the smallest is Kwangju Myöngghwa-dong (33m), while the biggest one is Haenam Pangsals-li Changobong (76m). However, they are relatively small in comparison to those built in Japan, where some of the early keyhole-shaped tumuli are enormous. For example, the Hashitaka tumulus, believed by certain scholars to be Queen Himiko's tomb, measures about 280 meters in length. The largest tomb, Daisenryō kofun (大仙陵古墳), is approximately 468m long. It is believed to be the final resting place of Emperor Nintoku, and it is thought to have been constructed over a period of 20 years in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to note that the construction of tumuli in Korea occurred during the late phase of Japan's Kofun period (500-600 CE), during which there was a significant decrease in the size of tumuli overall (Mizoguchi 2013: 297).

A notable disparity arises when comparing the fourteen keyhole-shaped tumuli identified in the Korean territory to the vast count of approximately 5,200 tumuli in Japan. Moreover, the largest examples of these tumuli were constructed in the present-day Nara basin, the region that would later become the seat of the successive capitals of the ancient Japanese state (Mizoguchi 2009: 15). It seems

<sup>7</sup> See Mizoguchi (2013: 214) for the dimensions of the main tumuli in Japan.

that many of the burial artifacts discovered in the keyhole tombs were sent by the ruling authority situated in the Nara basin and the Osaka plain, within the Kinki region, to the outlying regions. Such findings suggest that the start of the Kofun period aligns with the emergence of a centralized and organized coalition among different ruling entities (Barnes 2007: 173-177).

Apart from the two tumuli discovered in Kwangju Wŏlgye-dong, which are in proximity, the remaining tombs are scattered and isolated from each other. This contrasts sharply with the situation in Japan, where tumuli were constructed over an extended period and exhibited a notable topographical concentration. These mounds were usually located on plains or hills near the coast or riverfront, indicating a link between the economy of the group that built them and maritime routes. The location of the tombs may be related to what Mizoguchi calls 'port of trade settlements,' which occupied the nodal coastal regions of Kyushu and western Japan (Mizoguchi 2013: 219). Given that maritime trade primarily involved rowboats rather than sailboats, it is reasonable to infer that Wa sailor men necessitated regular stops to allow oarsmen to recover from fatigue (Woo Jae-Pyoung 2018: 193). The southwest coast of Korea emerged as a crucial region requiring strategic locations for these necessary rest and replenishment stops. Small communities of traders presumably took advantage of these opportunities, despite the risks involved, due to the lucrative nature of the business.

#	Tomb name	Length	Haniwa	Internal structure
1	Yŏngam T'aekal-li Charabong	35.6	-	Vertical type, stone chamber
2	Hamp'yŏng Yedŏng-ni Sindŏk no. 1	51	-	Horizontal type, stone chamber
3	Kwangju Wŏlgye-dong no. 1	44	Yes	Horizontal type, stone chamber
4	Kwangju Wŏlgye-dong no. 2	33	Yes	Horizontal type, stone chamber
5	Kwangju Myŏnghwa-dong	33	-	Horizontal type, stone chamber
6	Haenam Ch'angni Yongdu	41.3	Yes	Horizontal type, stone chamber
7	Kwangju Yogi-dong	50		
8	Tamyang Kosŏng-ni	24		
9	Tamyang Sŏngwŏl-li	38		
10	Haenam Pangsalsal-li Changobong	76	Yes	Horizontal type, stone chamber
11	Hamp'yŏng Changnyŏl-li Changosangobun	68	Yes	
12	Hamp'yŏng Masal-li P'yosan no. 1	46		
13	Yŏnggwang Wŏlsal-li wŏlgye no. 1	39		
14	Koch'ang Ch'iram-ni	55	Yes	Horizontal type, stone chamber

Table 1. Tombs recognized as keyhole-shaped tumuli in Korea (adapted from Kim Nakjung 2009: 208).

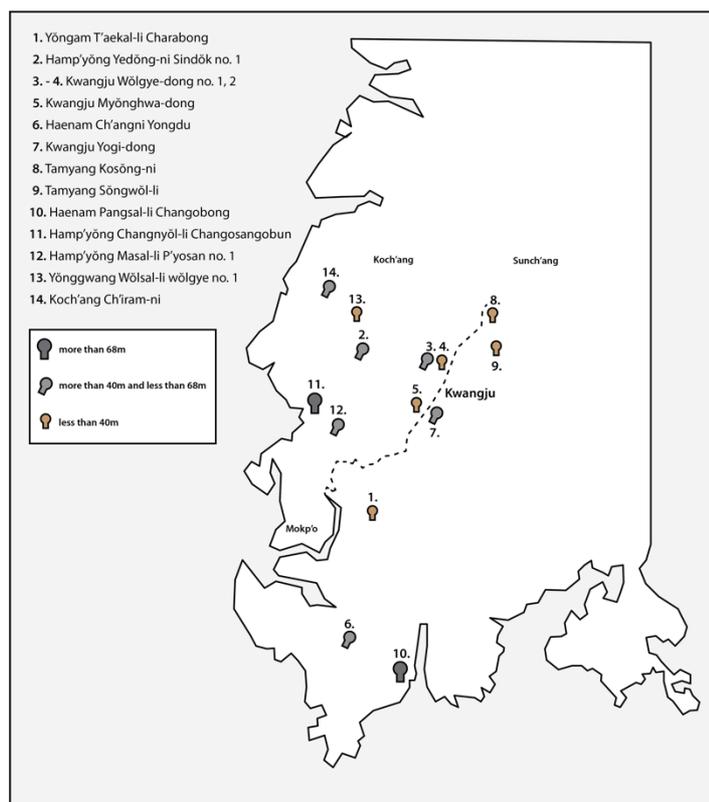


Figure 2. Map of the fourteen key-hole tumuli discovered in Korea (adapted from Kim Nakjung 2009).

Since the 1960s, some scholars have proposed that the Mounded Tomb Culture of the Early Kofun period resulted from the imposition of Yamato power over western Japan. However, it is challenging to support the notion that all of western Japan encompassed by the Early Kofun Mounded Tomb Culture was directly under Yamato control, especially given the limited extent of the Yamato State even in the fifth century, which was confined to the Kinai Region (Barnes 2014: 3-29).

Remarkably, constructions believed to be typical only of Japanese archaeology, specifically the keyhole-shaped tumuli, began to be discovered in Korea in the 1980s. At present, at least fourteen tombs of this type have been unearthed in the Peninsula. In addition, other tombs such as Kwangju Yogidong, Changsöng Chinwön Sandong-ni, and Tamyang Künsöng Woech'udong, may also belong to the category of keyhole-shaped tumuli, so that the total amount may increase in future (Yi Yöngch'öl and Kim Yönghui 2011: 150).

The stone room structures within the Korean keyhole tumuli closely resemble those in Kyūshū. Im Yöngjin has identified two types of stone chambers (primary burial facilities) in Korean keyhole tumuli: the Northern Kyūshū type and the Higo type (肥後) type (Im Yöngjin 2012: 120). The North Kyūshū-style stone chambers, such as Kwangju Wölgye-dong and Haenam Pangsals-li Changobong, date primarily from the latter quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. On the

other hand, the Higo-style stone chambers, such as those found at Kwangju Myŏnghwa-dong and Haenam Ch'angni Yongdu, were built mainly at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Lee (2014: 82) emphasizes a tangible material culture link between the Yŏngsan River basin and northern Kyūshū, extending back to at least the Bronze Age, possibly even earlier. Shared practices, such as jar burials and the exchange of material culture as reflected in the tomb inventories demonstrate the historical connection between the regions. Historically, the northern Kyūshū region held a more advantageous position for obtaining prestigious items from China and Korea, along with access to raw materials crucial for iron production believed to be located in the southern Korean peninsula (Mizoguchi 2013: 214).

Notably, during the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Iwai power in the Ariake Sea region of Kyūshū expanded its influence into the northern part of the island. In the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Kyūshū region was integrated into the Yamato regime. Im Yŏngjin takes these circumstances to mean that the deceased of the North Kyūshū-type stone chamber tombs in the Yŏngsan River basin are likely to have been Northern Kyūshū rulers who fled in exile due to Iwai's control of Northern Kyūshū during the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile the deceased of the Higo-type stone chamber tombs are presumed to be Ariake sea region rulers fleeing the Yamato regime's control of Northern Kyūshū in the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Im Yŏngjin 2012: 120). Adding a layer of complexity, archaeological sites associated with Kūmgwan Kaya from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Taesŏng-dong, contain artifacts from Japan, particularly originating from the central Kinai region of Japan, mainly Nara and Ōsaka (Woo 2018: 186).

The majority of the keyhole-shaped tombs in Korea share striking similarities with those found in the Japanese archipelago. These common features include the presence of moats, the use of red pigment to decorate the interiors of stone chamber tombs, and the use of cylindrical pottery for ritual purposes (Lee 2014: 76). However, some subtle differences distinguish Korean keyhole-shaped tumuli from those in Japan. Korean tumuli tend to include local pottery and lack the roofing stone (Korean *chūpsŏk*, Japanese *fukiishi*, 葺石) which typically covered Japanese burial chambers and burial mounds (Kwŏn Oyŏng 2017: 142). Notably, hybridization phenomena were quite frequent in the peninsula, such as in Nangnang or Koguryŏ tombs (De Benedittis 2022: 67), suggesting that some structural or stylistic characteristics of the tombs were selectively adopted due to the preferences of the adopting group, while some other choices were determined by local stone and material conditions. Kim Nakjung (2009) prefers to think that the group in the Yŏngsan River basin, inexplicably adopted only some specific aspects of that funerary tradition as a symbol to emphasize their association with the Wa (Kim Nakjung 2009: 221).

Given the typology of objects found in these tombs, it is generally agreed that they were constructed in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This construction period spans approximately two generations and corresponds to the reigns of kings Munju (455-475 CE), Samgŭn (477-479 CE), Tongsŏng (479-501 CE), and Muryŏng (501-523 CE). A more generous estimate would include the last period of King Kaero (455-475 CE) and the beginning of the mandate of King Sŏng (523-554 CE). However, the majority of keyhole-shaped tumuli in Korea seem to have been constructed in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of King Muryŏng.<sup>8</sup> This funerary tradition stands out as one of the shortest in duration in Korea.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Hypotheses on the origins of the buried remains in Korean keyhole-shaped tumuli

In 1983, Kang Ingu first entertained the hypothesis that the Kosŏnggun Songhak-dong tomb no. 1 belonged to the category of keyhole-shaped tumuli. Subsequent surveys confirmed the identification, including the Haenam Pangsŏl-li Changobong and Hamp'yŏng Changnyŏl-li Changosangobun tombs. The excavation of the tomb of Hamp'yŏng Yedŏng-ni Sindŏk no. 1 provided conclusive evidence that the internal burial structure corresponded to that of a 'chamber tomb' typical of Kyūshū island. Furthermore, the presence of haniwa and sueki pottery at the Myŏnghwa-dong and Wŏlgye-dong tumuli in the city of Kwangju further supports the hypothesis of the Japanese origin of these tombs (Pak Ch'ŏnsu 2011: 176).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this, Sŏ (2007).

<sup>9</sup> While a trend of monumentalization of tombs was already established in the territory of Silla from at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, it became particularly noticeable in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of wooden chamber tombs with stone mounds, exemplified by structures like Hwangnam Taech'ong, (120m long and 22m high) and Nosŏ-dong Ponghwangdae tomb (78.5m long and 21.2m high).

<sup>10</sup> Sŏ emphasizes, however, that the wooden haniwa and the wooden furnace discovered in Wŏlgyedong no. 1 are more closely associated with the Kinki region (Sŏ 2007: 102).

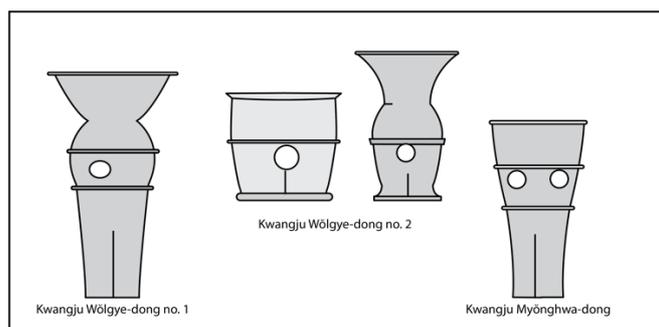


Figure 3. Hanjwa unearthed from keyhole-shaped tumuli in Korea dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century (adapted from Sŏ 2007: 102).

As this area has already been previously considered by some Japanese historians as one of the areas under the control of Mimana,<sup>11</sup> the discovery of these tombs has aroused strong interest and fear in Japanese and Korean researchers, respectively. Originally, one of the main proponents of the colonial theory was Suematsu Yasukazu, who in his book (*Mimana kōbōshi*, “A history of the rise and fall of Mimana,” 任那興亡史, 1949) proposed that Mimana was a Japanese colony on the Korean Peninsula that was active from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, but first focused his attention on the Kaya area. However, this idea has lost popularity since the 1970s, mainly because of the lack of archaeological evidence. In the 1960s the North Korean archaeologist Kim Sŏkhyŏng was one of the pioneering scholars who first attempted to refute the theory (Cho Insŏng 2022: 255-256). Thanks to the results of the survey of the tombs of Kaya in the area of Yŏngnam in the 1970s and those of the royal tombs of Kaya from the 1980s, the Mimana hypothesis progressively lost its credibility (Kwŏn Oyŏng 2017: 133-151).

The discovery of Japanese-style tombs in the Yŏngsan River basin has sparked both intense interest and concern among Japanese and Korean researchers alike, given the historical considerations associated with the region. Initially, some Korean scholars were reluctant to acknowledge the existence of these tombs for fear that their discovery might provide new evidence for the Mimana theory. These dynamics have also given rise to the tendency to call these graves ‘Korean drum mounded tumuli’ (*changgobun*, 長鼓墳), to avoid an obvious and direct association with the Japanese tombs. Similarly,

<sup>11</sup> During the Japanese Occupation Period in Korea (1910–1945), some Japanese historians proposed a theory that Yamato had colonized the southern part of the Korean peninsula from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE through a government office in Mimana, as mentioned in the *Nihon Shoki*. However, this theory lacks corroboration from Chinese or Korean sources and is unsupported by archaeological evidence. Despite its lack of validity, the idea persisted in Japanese historiography and textbooks, remaining a contentious issue today (Lee 2014: 71).

instead of the Japanese term *haniwa*, the expression ‘Cylindrical pottery around the perimeter of the mound’ (*T’onghyŏng punju t’ogi*, 通形墳周土器) has been employed (Sö: 2007). In any case, no keyhole-shaped tumuli were built during the 4<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Mimana was presumably established, but their construction in the Korean territory began just as Mimana started to lose its power in the region. Moreover, the scattered nature of these tombs challenges the notion of a centralized Wa government office in the peninsula, rather, the tombs are widely dispersed (Pak Ch’önsu (2011: 248). In addition, the period of construction of these tombs is significantly circumscribed, so even if the burying community tried to take control of this area, the attempt must not have lasted for more than a century. Since the first discoveries of the keyhole-shaped tumuli, much research has been conducted on the topic, acknowledging its sensitivity, particularly from a political perspective. The ‘scatteredness’ of these tombs makes it more difficult to understand which community these tombs could belong to. These tumuli do not form a concentrated necropolis, rather they are dispersed in the basin of the River Yöngsan, a region where, from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the most typical burial system was instead the ‘jar coffin.’

One of the most widely debated issues between Korean and Japanese scholars is whether to attribute these tombs to ‘local chiefs’ or to ‘Japanese immigrants’ to the area. While there are some discrepancies in opinions, proponents of the “local chiefs” hypothesis—Habuta Yoshiyuki (土生田純之, 2000), Pak Sunbal (朴淳發, 2000), Tanaka Toshiaki (田中俊明, 2000), Kazuo Yanagisawa (柳澤一男, 2001), Akihiko Oguri (小栗明彦, 2000)—generally agree that at this stage the territory of the Yöngsan River basin was not yet, or not completely, under Paekche’s direct control. Instead, local chiefs attempted to halt Paekche’s southward expansion by strengthening their alliance with the Wa. According to Kim Nakjung, some local forces in the Yöngsan River basin, maintaining a close relationship with Paekche but desiring political independence, also engaged with northern Kyūshū forces in order to gain international prestige and counterbalance their diplomatic relations within the Korean Peninsula (Kim Nakjung 2009: 225, Söng Chöngyong 2012: 116). Therefore, these tombs represented a political symbol of the international networking established in the area and served as a warning against the enemies of the community who built them.

Contrary to the references in the *Nihon Shoki* regarding Paekche’s growing influence in the Chölla region,<sup>12</sup> this idea is no longer considered as historically reliable. It is more plausible that Paekche

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<sup>12</sup> “Seven provinces were accordingly subdued [...]. Then they moved their forces, and turning westward, arrived at Kohyejin, where they slaughtered the southern savages [...] and granted their country to Paekche” (Aston 1896: ix, 29, yr 249).

started progressively gaining control over this territory only from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Some believe it is challenging to imagine that the recipients of these tombs are men of Wa origin, especially considering the vastness of the territory in which they are located (Sō 2007: 107).

The second hypothesis is that they might instead be migrants from Japan. Azuma Ushio (1995) proposes that the individuals buried in these graves were a group of influential migrants from Kyūshū who settled in the area. However, Lee argues that the status of these Wa-origin immigrants must have been relatively low, considering that the sizes of Korean tombs ranged from 33 to 76 meters, while Japanese tombs averaged hundreds of meters in length (Lee 2014: 77). Yōn Minsu (2011: 141) contends that there are no discernable political or military trends in the Japanese archipelago, such as Northern Kyūshū, that would justify a mass migration to the southern part of the Korean peninsula during this period, making such hypotheses less convincing. Even the Iwai rebellion against the Yamato court in 527 CE<sup>13</sup> may not have been a significant catalyst for determining migratory patterns. Instead, there was migration from the southern part of the Korean peninsula to the Japanese archipelago, such as the Kaya region, especially during the military campaigns of King Kwanggaet'o of Koguryō in the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, but reverse migration from the Japanese archipelago is difficult to imagine (Yōn Minsu 2011: 141-3).

While mass migration from Japan to Korea during this period seems unlikely, considering the importance and vitality of commerce with Korea, it is plausible that some influential people from the archipelago moved to better control maritime routes and affairs. Moreover, with the increasing influence of Yamato on the Kyūshū and concurrently with the Iwai rebellion, there may have been a stronger need to secure additional resources to compete with Yamato, justifying an intensification of relations with the Yōngsan River area. After renouncing their trade with Kaya which was definitively conquered in 562 CE by Silla, the Wa also sought alternative partnerships in the peninsula, which represented a precious route to reach South China (Woo Jae-Pyoung 2018: 196). The importation of iron and technology from Korea played a crucial role in Japanese state formation and economy, making it vital for them to ensure the continuity of trade relations with Korea. According to the Silla Annals, in the year 500, the final coastal raids from the archipelago took place, which had been a recurring issue for Silla almost since the kingdom's establishment, suggesting a decline in Japan's influence over the eastern regions of the peninsula (Best 2007: 111).

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<sup>13</sup> The Iwai Rebellion refers to a significant uprising that took place in Japan in 527 CE. It was led by Iwai, a provincial governor, against the central government's authority, reflecting regional discontent and political turmoil during that time. For more on this rebellion see *Nihon Shoki* (Aston 1896 xvii: 18).

Therefore, Im Yǒngjin proposes that those entombed in the keyhole-style tumuli were individuals of Wa origins, and who, with approval from the core powers in the Yǒngsan River basin, obtained land on the fringes, lived there, died, and, being unable to return home, were buried in the area (Im Yǒngjin 2012: 120). On the other hand, Pak Ch'ǒnsu suggests that these tombs may have belonged to powerful families coming from the Ariake Sea coastal region of northern Kyūshū (Pak Ch'ǒnsu 2011: 188). Pak bases this conclusion on the analysis of stone chambers and shell objects discovered in northern Kyūshū, the importation patterns of ceramics and Paekche artifacts from the Yǒngsan River basin in the Japanese archipelago, and those in the Eta Funayama Kofun in Kumamoto Prefecture, as well as the tumuli of the Yǒngsan River basin (Pak Ch'ǒnsu 2011: 188). Pak claims that these individuals were more than mere traders; rather the keyhole-shaped tumuli in the Yǒngsan River basin belonged to Wa individuals who were dispatched by Paekche as a temporary measure to govern the area since local chiefs could not rule over the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula directly, especially after the transferal of the Paekche capital to Kongju in 475 (Pak Ch'ǒnsu, 2002: 42-59). Notably, the *Nihon shoki* contains references to several Paekche officials of Wa-descent during the mandate of the ruler Kinmei (r. 539–571) corresponding to King Sǒng's reign (r. 523–554). Also, according to the *Nihon Shoki*, King Tongsǒng (r. 479-501) purportedly returned to Paekche escorted by five hundred Yamato soldiers. While the reliability of this information is uncertain, it suggests that various categories of people may have been cyclically sent from Yamato to the peninsula for economic or political purposes. Chu Podon (2000) and Yukihiisa Yamao (2001) also support the hypothesis that these people were Paekche officials with Japanese origins. This theory is supported by the presence of some artifacts from Paekche in the tombs. However, it is important to note that in Japan grave goods of the early keyhole tumuli included Chinese and Korean imports as well as indigenous products (Mizoguchi 2013: 214).

Despite the prevalence of tumulus culture in the Kinki region, there is no clear evidence to suggest that the Paekche people of Wa-descent or Japanese immigrants adopted expensive Japanese burial practices without specific motivation. The widespread distribution of tumulus culture doesn't appear to be forcibly imposed by specific groups from the Kinki Central Region. Instead, it was adopted and shared by the emerging elite of individual regions. This elite group sought to achieve dominance over others in their respective regions by participating in the “elite communication sphere” (Mizoguchi 2013: 241).

King Muryǒng, as per the *Nihon Shoki*, was born and raised in Japan and was buried in Korea in a brick-chamber tomb, a burial architecture largely utilized by the Liang Dynasty. This adoption could be viewed as a diplomatic strategy intended to highlight the amicable relations with the Southern Dynasties (Woo 2018: 203). The adoption of a foreign type of tomb may correspond to specific fashions

or personal tastes, but it was also a symbol of powerful international alliances to be used as a deterrent against new military threats from Koguryŏ (Woo 2018: 204). In the specific case of the Yŏngsan River basin, the adoption of a foreign tomb style may have represented the community's attempt to establish its political and cultural autonomy in contrast to the Paekche kingdom, which, in turn, sought control over these areas. I concur with Azuma Ushio's notion that a group of Wa immigrants endeavored to assert their dominance over the Yŏngsan River territories between the 5th and 6th centuries, following a power vacuum created by the fall of the first capital of Paekche. The tombs of this community were comparably smaller, but still among the largest in Korea's archaeological panorama. It is probable that this Wa community functioned as a 'corporation,' specializing in the trade of agricultural products or technology. The scatteredness of these tombs resulted from the community's nature and the ever-increasing influence of Paekche. In the following section, we will scrutinize the events that marked the end of the Wa community's attempt to control this territory. The following section will explore the events marking the end of the Wa community's attempt to control this territory.

#### 4. Progressive loss of autonomy of the Yŏngsan River basin

The relocation of the Koguryŏ capital in 427 CE triggered significant shifts in the geopolitical dynamics of the Korean peninsula. Even before this event, as per the Koguryŏ stele inscription, in 400 CE, Kwanggaet'o dispatched a force of fifty thousand soldiers southward, successfully displacing the Yamato forces from Silla (Best 2007: 87). In response to the changing landscape, Paekche sought to secure its survival by strengthening its influence in the territories of the southern peninsula and consolidating diplomatic relations with potential allies. According to the *Samguk Sagi*, Paekche invested in its alliance with the Silla royal family in 493 CE, aiming to jointly respond to Koguryŏ's advance. Additionally, in 498 CE, Paekche dispatched an army to the Noryŏng Mountains to enhance its control over the Mahan remnants who lived in the area of present-day South Chŏlla province. As part of its military efforts, Paekche made the country of T'amna its tributary (No T'aedon 2014: 125). King Tongsŏng's reign (479-501 CE), marked a significant period for Paekche's diplomatic endeavors and consolidation of power. In 490 CE he sent envoys to Qi seeking recognition of his control over vassals, including territories in the Chŏlla region (*pyŏkjung*, 辟中; Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe 1987: 416). Paekche employed a strategic approach, acknowledging the power of local chiefs in these regions by sending them prestigious goods such as crowns, golden shoes, swords, and pottery. The distribution of mirrors, a crucial strategy for political alliance in the Early Kofun period, was also part of this diplomatic effort (Barnes 2014: 18). Administratively, Paekche implemented the *tamno* system,' a

tributary relationship with local chiefs who were still able to maintain their local identity to some extent (No T'aedon 2014: 133).<sup>14</sup> The nature of Paekche's relationship with the Yǒngsan River basin is a subject of debate. Some argue that the area was already indirectly under the control or influence of Paekche, while others argue that the area was a distinct political entity until the early 6<sup>th</sup> century (Taehan munhwa yusan yǒn'gu sent'o 2011: 315). Culturally, the Yǒngsan River basin maintained a strong cultural tradition distinct from that of Paekche and Japan. The preservation of this identity was, in part, facilitated by the considerable local wealth driven by substantial agricultural productivity. The affluence of the region ensured a more prosperous labor force compared to other areas, contributing to the preservation of its unique cultural heritage.

Understanding the Yǒngsan River basin's history during the late 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries is challenging due to the lack of specific documentation. The absence of records or accounts of this region during keyhole tumuli construction in the late Kofun period hampers reconstruction efforts. The historical records on Paekche found in the *Samguk Sagi* are often problematic. Official record-keeping in Paekche did not commence until the late-fourth-century reign of King Kūnch'ogo (trad. r. 346–375). Consequently, prior accounts are laden with legends, portents, and historically unverifiable material (Best 2007: 3–4). The paucity of references to the political situation in the Yǒngsan River basin in surviving documents, such as the stele of King Kwanggaet'o, further complicates historical reconstruction. Additionally, the fate of the small Mahan countries remains uncertain, with Chinese sources eclipsing Mahan-related records after the ascendancy of Paekche in the 4th century. The Paekche Annals of the *Samguk Sagi* mention King Onjo's annexation of Mahan in 8 CE, 26 years after the founding of Paekche. However, the Records of the Three Kingdoms claims that Mahan had 54 countries in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and Paekche was only one of them (Kuksa p'yǒnch'an wiwǒnhoe 1987: 191).

The “Paekche Annals” of the *Samguk sagi*, while a crucial historical source, does not provide detailed information on Paekche's relations with the Japanese archipelago during this period. It may exhibit a partial portrayal influenced by stereotypes about Japanese pirates from the later Koryō period (Best 2007: 64).

The *Nihon Shoki* stands out as a rich source for understanding interactions between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. Consequently, its storyline has significantly influenced the

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<sup>14</sup> It is reasonable to assume that this system had been abandoned by the middle of the sixth century when, according to the evidence of both the Book of Liang and the Paekche Annals, the dynasty had regained its political and military stability. The tamno system's particularistic ordering of authority in the kingdom was abandoned in favor of the more centralized, and Sinitic, structure of the five circuits. This change was accompanied by a reorganization of Paekche's government along more Chinese lines (Best 2006: 131).

comprehension of early relations between Korea and Japan from the 4th to the 7th centuries (Lee 2014: 73).

The *Book of Song*, authored by Shen Yue from the Southern Qi dynasty in 492–493 CE, is another relevant source. It offers limited details on Koguryō, Paekche, and Wa (Japan) but is reticent on other regions which provides few details on Koguryō, Paekche, and Wa, but, again, is reticent on other regions. Within the *Book of Song*, there is a reference to the toponym ‘Mohan’ (慕韓), interpreted by scholars such as Sakamoto Yoshitane as the remaining forces of Mahan. This interpretation suggests that Mahan retained an independent political identity and was not yet under the control of Paekche (Sakamoto Yoshitane 1978: 474-5). While the information in the *Book of Song* may not be exhaustive, it suggests that Japan cast a strong influence on the region to the point that the Wa demanded that their king should have been called “Wa, Paekche, Silla, Imna, Kaya, Chinhan, Mohan.”<sup>15</sup>

The loss of Paekche’s first capital led to a prolonged crisis that persisted until approximately 538 CE when King Sōng (r. 523–554 CE) moved the capital to Sabi (present-day Puyō) and renamed the state Nam Puyō. This relocation marked the end of the crisis and a significant turning point for Paekche's military strength and international standing. King Muryōng’s reign, during which the majority of the keyhole-shaped tumuli were constructed, saw Paekche gradually recovering from the trauma of its earlier defeat by Koguryō. In the Portraits of Periodical Offering of Liang (梁職貢圖) tributary documentative paintings painted by the future Emperor Yuan of Liang, Xiao Yi (r. 552–555 CE) in 521 some kingdoms like Sara (Silla) and Panp’a (Tae Kaya) are referred to as ‘small neighbor countries of Paekche,’ indicating Paekche's restored pride.

The early 6<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a strengthening connection between Paekche and the Wa.<sup>16</sup> Archaeological evidence reveals a decline in artifacts from the Kaya region in the Japanese archipelago and an increase in Paekche-made artifacts, some of which were found in the Eta Funayama Kofun (located in the Kumamoto prefecture, on the island of Kyūshū).<sup>17</sup> According to Woo Jae-Pyoung, an

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<sup>15</sup> 弟武立，自稱使持節、都督倭百濟新羅任那加羅秦韓慕韓七國諸軍事、安東大將軍、倭國王。

<sup>16</sup> While living in Japan for sixteen years, Lord Konji could promote a pro-Paekche policy in the Yamato court. His son King Tongsōng was born during his stay in Japan and had access to the Yamato Court. During this period, bilateral exchanges peaked as Paekche artifacts flowed into the Yamato kingdom. This relationship is the foundation for proposing that the keyhole-shaped tumuli in the Yōngsan River basin could have been dedicated to Wa families who had connections with Paekche, or to individuals of Paekche origin raised in Japan and culturally influenced by Wa traditions.

<sup>17</sup> Considering the characteristics of the relationship between Paekche and Yamato from the end of Hansōng to the beginning of the mandate of King Sōng, the royal family in Paekche was directly in charge of diplomacy with Yamato and some of its members spent a lot of time in the archipelago. In particular, King Tongsōng and King Muryōng were enthroned as kings of Paekche, but both of them were probably born in the Yamato territory. In 451 CE King Kaero sent his brother Konji to the

interesting archaeological find supporting the Paekche-Wa alliance comes from the maritime ritual site of Puan Chungmak-tong in the North Chŏlla region. Dating from the 4th to the 7th century, this site, associated with Paekche, houses an altar likely used for performing rituals to sea deities. Alongside artifacts originating from Kaya and the Southern Dynasties of China dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, a series of stone implements imitative of those widely used in ancestor-worship rituals in Wa were discovered (Woo 2018: 188). Additionally, a passage in the Book of Song quotes a letter from King Bu of Wa to the Emperor Song in 478, condemning Koguryŏ's threats and expressing gratitude for Paekche's assistance in sailing back to the archipelago. These historical and archaeological pieces contribute to understanding the dynamics of political and maritime relationships in the region during this period. The relocation of Paekche's political center southward, coupled with a stronger alliance with Yamato, provided a natural opportunity for Paekche to expand its influence in the Yŏngsan River basin. Paradoxically, the construction of keyhole-shaped tumuli in this region began in the Yŏngsan River region during a period when Paekche was regaining prominence and overcoming a prolonged crisis. This would rather suggest that despite Paekche's growth, this area still enjoyed a degree of economic and political autonomy during this time. The ongoing cultural contact between the Yŏngsan River region and Kyūshū, which was ongoing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, became notably more pronounced in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. This interaction involved military, political, and technological aspects which, however, lack explicit references in official sources. Lee characterizes the relationship between the Yŏngsan River basin and the Ariake Sea areas in Kyūshū as an active "third space," facilitating connections across the Korea Strait through interactions with the polities of Paekche and Yamato (Lee D. 2014: 71-2).

The Paekche kingdom's definitive control of these territories appears to be associated with the introduction of a new administrative system known as the 'five regions system' (*obangje*), as referenced in the *Book of Zhou*, completed in 636 CE. This system likely represented a more sophisticated

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Yamato and this passage is reported in the *Nihon Shoki* "Summer, 4<sup>th</sup> month. Lord Kaero of Paekche, having learned by rumor that Iketsu hime had been put to death by burning, held counsel, saying: 'The ancient custom of sending tribute of women to be made Uneme is contrary to decorum, and is injurious to our country's reputation. Henceforward it is unmeet that women be sent as tribute.' Accordingly, he intimated to his younger brother, Lord Konji, saying: 'Do thou go to Japan, and serve the Emperor.' Lord Konji answered and said: 'My Lord's commands must not be disobeyed. I pray thee give me one of thy consorts, and then I will undertake this mission.' Lord Kaero accordingly took one of his consorts who was pregnant and having given her in marriage to Lord Konji, said: 'The month for the delivery of this pregnant consort of mine has already arrived. If she should be delivered on the journey, I pray thee place (the child) on board a ship, and whatever place thou mayest have arrived at, cause it to be at once sent back to this country.' So, at last, he took his leave, and went on his mission to the Yamato Court" (Aston 1896: xiv, 17).

reformulation of the previous *tamno* system, allowing for increased centralization of power and stricter control of other areas in the southwest of the peninsula (No T'aedon 2014: 132). This effective control of the Yǒngsan River area began in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the characteristic brick-chamber tombs in the central region and keyhole-shaped tumuli in the southwestern borderland disappeared. They were replaced by the Nūngsal-li type tombs featuring stone chambers containing Paekche pottery and prestigious objects like crown flower decoration (Han'guk Kokohak'oe 2007: 326). This archeological evidence suggests that, by this time, the territory was completely under the influence and control of the Paekche kingdom.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the examination of key-hole tumuli in South Korea offers significant insights into the socio-political dynamics and cultural interactions prevailing during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. These megalithic tombs, akin to dolmens, suggest the emergence of an elite group that intentionally distanced themselves from commoners socially, economically, and politically (Yi Yǒngch'ōl – Kim Yǒnghŭi 2011: 150). They showcased their elevated social status through monumental structures and prestigious artifacts. Until recently, scholarly perspectives on early Korea-Japan relations from the 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries largely adhered to the notion that the interactions between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago were confined to the historical kingdoms of Koguryō, Paekje, Silla, and the Kaya polities on the Korean side, with Wa (i.e. Yamato) representing Japan (Best 2007: 71-2). However, the discovery of these tombs challenges this perspective, illustrating a more intricate web of relationships that extended beyond the traditionally recognized entities. The existence of these tombs suggests diversified connections involving various communities on the Korean peninsula. Thus, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, cultural contact persisted between Kyūshū and the Yǒngsan River region, potentially indicating a region that retained either complete or a certain degree of autonomy from Paekche.

The debate regarding the origins and the identity of those interred in the keyhole tumuli continues, primarily due to the absence of epigraphs or region-specific sources that could provide a definitive resolution. The enigmatic 'burying group' likely lacked a capital that could naturally evolve into a necropolis, akin to Ji'an for Koguryō or Kyōngju for Silla. The scattered distribution of these tombs may be attributed to the community's presence being confined to a brief chronological period, particularly around the second half of the 6th century. An alternative explanation could be that this community was not entirely sedentary and derived its prosperity from maritime routes, thereby accumulating economic wealth. However, if we entertain this hypothesis, the question arises as to how such a community could assert political dominance in an area renowned for agricultural richness.

Paradoxically, the construction of tombs in the Yöngsan River region began during Paekche's resurgence, suggesting that despite Paekche's growth, the area maintained economic and political autonomy.

The absence of documentary sources on this region and the scarcity of archeological evidence pose challenges to the formulation of definitive hypotheses regarding the origins and evolution of the keyhole tumuli. While a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon may remain elusive, I argue against the notion that the deceased were Wa individuals who accidentally perished in this region and were unable to return to their own territory. Instead, I propose that the construction of these tombs was a deliberate act preceding Paekche's increased influence, capitalizing on a political vacuum. Originating from northern Kyūshū, this community sought to legitimize its presence and assert control over local economic resources through these monumental structures. In contrast to Koguryō's mural-painted tombs with concealed magnificence, the keyhole tumuli aimed to display the power and grandeur of the burying community. In a short-lived and unsuccessful attempt this emergent 'burying group' of Wa origins, or linked to the Wa, endeavored to monumentalize their presence in the territory with dispendious funerary buildings. These lavish megalithic tombs, serving as artificial landmarks, held a deliberate ideological, political, and economic significance, acting as symbols intended to legitimize the burying group's claim to authority over the Yöngsan River Basin area.

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