

## The Early Period: Geumgwan Gaya

According to a legend recorded in the *Samguk yusa*, a thirteenth-century collection of tales from the Three Kingdoms period, the rulers of the Gaya Confederacy had divine origins, “hatching” from six celestial eggs to form the six kingdoms of Geumgwan Gaya, Dae Gaya, Ara Gaya, Seongsan Gaya, Goryeong Gaya, and So Gaya. Setting aside the more fantastic elements of this legend, both history and archeology confirm that, unlike the rest of the Korean peninsula—where the kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla began to consolidate territory and form complex states during the first centuries of the Common Era—the Gaya region consisted of independent, although culturally affiliated, city-states throughout most of the Three Kingdoms period.

The most prominent of these city-states during the early Gaya period was Geumgwan Gaya, with its center in the modern city of Gimhae. Geumgwan Gaya’s early success no doubt resulted from its geographical location where the Nakdong River entered into a natural harbor on the southern coast. This allowed Geumgwan Gaya considerable influence over the trade routes between the eastern and western parts of the peninsula, between the coast and inland areas, and between Korea and the Japanese archipelago. In addition, the Geumgwan Gaya region was rich in iron, which was needed by all of Gaya’s neighbors, including Chinese commanderies in the northwest part of the peninsula and the different polities of Japan. In fact, Chinese historical records from the third century suggest that the iron ingots from Geumgwan Gaya found in archeological digs across southern Korea and Japan were the most common form of currency in this area at the time.

## **Social Distinctions**

Recent archeological excavations around Gimhae reveal the appearance of significant social distinctions indicating the rise of a ruling class for Geumgwan Gaya in the middle of the third century. At this time, important tombs started to be located in a separate cemetery removed from the general burial grounds. Numerous luxury goods, including ingots, weapons, and agricultural implements made of iron, have been found in these high-ranking tombs, as well as stone weapons and bronze ornaments from Japan, suggesting diplomatic alliances between Geumgwan Gaya and the Japanese elite. Most telling is the appearance of human sacrifices as part of funerary rites for the first time. In addition, excavations of the Geumgwan Gaya capital have uncovered the foundations of a large palace-like structure removed from the other residential areas, providing further evidence for increased separation of different social classes beginning in the mid-third century.

## **Transitional Ceramics: The Gimhae Style**

Closely related to the formation of a ruling class was the appearance of transitional ceramics moving from earlier earthenware to more technologically sophisticated stoneware. Earthenware could be made by villagers in simple open pit (or slightly more advanced closed vertical shaft) kilns, as it is still made seasonally in many agricultural villages throughout Asia today. On the other hand, construction and maintenance of above-ground chamber kilns and harvesting of finer clay involved a considerable mobilization of labor, and advanced techniques (like use of the potter's wheel and paddling) demanded a more skilled work force. Consequently, at least in its initial stages the development of a stoneware tradition depended upon the elevation of a social elite, for whom it would have been reserved. Archeological excavations have unearthed a distinctive ceramic tradition for the Geumgwan Gaya region, often called the "Gimhae" style. The Academy's collection includes numerous examples characteristic of this important transitional stoneware, all of which are included in this exhibition.

## **The Decline of Geumgwan Gaya**

Geumgwan Gaya began a slow decline in the early fifth century, possibly due to military incursions by Goguryeo that seem to have driven many refugees from Gaya to Japan. It is probably not a coincidence that stoneware was first introduced to Japan at this time, and that Japanese stoneware shows a clear indebtedness to the Gaya ceramic tradition. Likewise, Gaya ceramics also greatly influenced the development of Silla's stoneware tradition. Baekje and Silla slowly encroached on Gaya lands from the late fifth century to the early sixth century and encouraged the immigration of skilled artisans. Shortly thereafter, the king of Geumgwan Gaya peacefully submitted to Silla in 532, and Silla's ruling elite assimilated the Gaya royalty and nobility into the ruling structure of their expanding state.

## Cross-Cultural Influences

China established commanderies in the northwestern Korean peninsula as early as 108 BC. This included the famous Lelang Commandery with its center near Pyongyang, the modern capital of North Korea. Over the next several hundred years, until Lelang finally succumbed to Goguryeo in the early fourth century, these commanderies with their settlements of Chinese immigrants played a key role in introducing new technologies that profoundly changed material culture throughout the peninsula, and on the archipelago of Japan.

Low-fired earthenware was made in Korea as early as 10,000 years ago. Until the first century AD, various regional traditions developed, ranging from vessels made by coiling coarse clay and fired at temperatures as low as 700 degrees centigrade to carefully crafted wares made from fine clay tempered with quartz sand and fired as high as 870 degrees centigrade. The earliest Korean kilns were primitive open-air pits, which gradually transitioned to closed vertical shafts that allowed for higher firing temperatures.

Among the technologies adapted from China were several improvements to the production of ceramics that began to appear during the first to the third centuries AD. Although vessels continued to be made by coiling, the use of the potter's wheel was introduced, allowing Korean artisans to refine shapes before firing. Also introduced was the paddling technique (*tanal*), in which the sides of a vessel were pounded to improve strength. Both of these techniques are commonly seen in Chinese storage vessels as early as the Warring States period (479-221 BC). Even more revolutionary was the introduction of chamber kilns, eventually built above ground, with divisions between the firing and pottery chambers to make possible

higher firing temperatures. This allowed for temperatures as high as 1000 to 1200 degrees centigrade. The third and fourth centuries saw a transition from soft-fired earthenware (*yeonjil*) and “tile” ware (*wajil*), so-called because its hardness resembles that of roof tiles, to technologically advanced stoneware (*kyeongjil*). The latter was fired in a tightly closed reductive atmosphere at high temperatures, resulting in a lower absorption coefficient and a much greater hardness. The reductive atmosphere also produced the gray color characteristic of Korean ceramics of the Three Kingdoms period, as it was of Chinese Warring States utilitarian ceramics a few centuries earlier. Together with these technological improvements, the increasing social organization that resulted from the establishment of the Three Kingdoms by the fourth century promoted increased specialization for ceramic production, and there are government offices specifically in charge of ceramics recorded for both the Goguryeo and Baekje kingdoms.

After the fall of Lelang, cultural exchange continued with China, particularly through sea routes. Located on the southern and southwestern parts of the peninsula from which China was most accessible, both Gaya and Baekje reveal considerable influence from south China during this time. Chinese luxury goods from the fourth and fifth centuries have been found in tombs throughout the southern Korean peninsula, including early celadon-glazed ceramics characteristic of modern Zhejiang Province. However, glazed wares were rarely produced in Korea before the Goryeo period (918-1392). Most interesting are Chinese mirrors found in Gaya tombs, some of which may date to as early as the Western Han dynasty (202 BC-9 AD), suggesting that they would have been made in distant geographical regions centuries before they ultimately were interred as burial goods in Korea.

# Gaya and Japan

Understanding of the Gaya Confederacy was greatly complicated during the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945) by its identification with Mimana (Imna in Korean). According to the eighth century Japanese court history *Nihon shoki*, the legendary Japanese Empress Jingu (traditional reign dates 201-269 AD) led a successful invasion of the Korean peninsula, eventually resulting in the establishment a Japanese colony called Mimana that wielded control over the peninsula through the sixth century. Interest in Mimana was revived by a Japanese soldier's discovery in 1883 of a stone monument with an inscription in modern Jilin province, China (part of Goguryeo territory during the Three Kingdoms) that could be interpreted as independent confirmation of early Japanese presence in Korea. This stone monument, called the Gwanggaeto Stele, was erected by (the Goguryeo) King Jangsu in 414 AD, and the inscription mentions military conflicts between Goguryeo and the Japanese Wa people.

However, research on Mimana during the Japanese colonial period was heavily politicized. Evidence supporting Empress Jingu's invasion of Korea and the establishment of a Japanese colony during the early Common Era was interpreted as a historical precedent for the colonization of Korea by the Meiji (1868-1912) government, and as a justification for the inclusion of the peninsula in the modern Japanese empire. Mimana became one of the key platforms for Japanese expansion into the East Asian continent, as part of a convoluted theory that Korean civilization was stagnant and could only be modernized under Japanese control. Consequently, the role, and even the existence, of Mimana has been hotly contested, and it remains one of the most controversial aspects of early Korean history.

Archeological excavations since Korean independence, together with advances in scholarship on early East Asian history by both Korean and Japanese scholars, have revealed a much more nuanced image of diplomatic and military interactions between the various powers controlling parts of Korea and Japan through the sixth century. Most researchers now propose that it is unlikely a Japanese power ever controlled the Gaya region, which existed as an independent, culturally affiliated confederacy of city-states throughout its history. However, archeological discoveries show that Gaya was closely connected to polities in the Japanese archipelago through trade, political exchange, and military alliances (particularly against Silla and Goguryeo).

By controlling the trade networks along the southern peninsula, first Geumgwan Gaya and then Dae Gaya seem to have dominated the exchange of goods between Korea and Japan for much of the Three Kingdoms period. Rich in iron, the Gaya region was the primary source for this essential metal (and its accompanying technological advances) in Japan. Gaya also served as the intermediary through which technological innovations were transmitted from China into Japan, particularly improvements to ceramic production. The Japanese hard-bodied grey stoneware known as *sueki* that characterizes the Kofun period (ca. 250-552) is deeply indebted to Gaya ceramics, and many *sueki* are virtually indistinguishable from their Gaya precedents.

# Dae Gaya

After the decline of Geumgwan Gaya as the principal city-state of the Gaya confederacy in the early fifth century, the next city-state to take prominence was Dae Gaya, or “Great Gaya.” Dae Gaya was an inland polity with its center in modern Goryeong County, North Gyeongsang Province. However, in the mid to the late fifth century Dae Gaya seems to have secured the important Seomjin River, providing it with access to sea routes and a strategic harbor along the southern coast.

The appearance of goods from Dae Gaya in Japanese archeological sites from the late fifth century, and of goods from Japan in the Dae Gaya region, indicates that Dae Gaya had re-established the supremacy of Gaya as a trade and diplomatic partner for the Japanese archipelago by that time. In addition, the official history of the Chinese Southern Qi dynasty (479-502) records a mission from Dae Gaya in 479, proving that Dae Gaya cultivated an extensive international diplomatic network. Moreover, recent scholarship has proposed that Dae Gaya had a highly organized military, and was able to conscript considerable militia and labor forces beyond its immediate sphere of influence in the Goryeong area. This has challenged the traditional view of a group of independent city-states in Gaya during the late fifth to the early sixth centuries, suggesting that Dae Gaya may have begun to emerge as a complex state rivaling the Three Kingdoms towards the end of the Gaya Confederacy.

Ceramics from the fifth and sixth centuries (when Dae Gaya rose to power) reveal a fully developed stoneware tradition with a mastery of chamber kiln technology that allowed for high firing temperatures. The vessels from the fifth and sixth centuries in the Academy's collection generally have noticeably thinner, harder bodies than those from the earlier Geumgwan Gaya period. In addition, shapes tend to be more complex, and often suggest ritual functions, particularly in the tall, perforated feet and pedestals that are one of the most characteristic features of this period. This supports the idea that stoneware, which was a more labor-intensive technology requiring a specialized workforce, was a high-level product reserved for the most elevated social classes.

Although Dae Gaya may have begun to show features of a complex state, in the early sixth century it lost control of the southern coast and the Seomjin River to Baekje, which likely started a rapid decline that culminated with the absorption of the entire Gaya Confederacy into Silla in 562. This brought to a close one of the most remarkable periods of cultural fermentation in East Asian history, which has only come to light in the past few decades, and is still taking shape through the efforts of archeologists and other researchers today.

# The Three Kingdoms Period

The Gaya Confederacy occurred at a crucial time in the development of complex societies in the Korean peninsula, as states controlling large territories with multiple centers emerged for the first time. This began with Goguryeo (traditional dates 37 BC-668 AD) in the north, which probably took shape in the first century AD. Goguryeo had considerable direct interaction with China, due to the presence of Chinese commanderies such as Lelang in northwestern Korea. This interaction was often violent, and Goguryeo eventually brought an end to Chinese presence on the peninsula when it absorbed the last Chinese outposts in the early fourth century. With the aid of an advanced cavalry, Goguryeo pressured the rest of the Korean peninsula, twice forcing Baekje to move its capital south and regularly encroaching upon Silla and Gaya. The military threat from Goguryeo was a primary reason why other states on the peninsula cultivated allies in both Japan and China. Many of the technologies introduced from Korea to Japan during this time were probably first brought by Gaya and Baekje refugees from Goguryeo incursions.

Baekje (traditional dates 18 BC-660 AD) occupied the southwestern part of the peninsula, with its first capital at Hanseong along the southern banks of the Han River in modern Seoul. Due to its geographical location, Baekje was well situated to absorb cultural influences from southern China through sea routes, particularly during the fourth through the sixth centuries, when the northern part of China was subjected to a series of foreign rulers, effectively preventing overland communication. Like Gaya, Baekje was an important partner for Japan, and was especially influential in transmitting culture to the early Japanese Yamato court. Writing, legal codes, and Buddhism are all thought to have been introduced into Japan through

diplomatic exchange with Baekje. In turn, Yamato provided military support to Baekje in its struggles with Goguryeo and Silla.

Silla (traditional dates 57 BC-935 AD) developed in the southeastern part of the peninsula. Since Silla and Gaya were located on either side of the Nakdong River, they were closely related. The ceramic traditions of Silla and Gaya developed in close conjunction with each other, and it is often difficult to distinguish between them. Many of the early Korean ceramics in the Academy's collection may come from either the Silla or the Gaya region, as numerous examples in this exhibition show. After assimilating Geumgwan Gaya in 532, Silla eventually absorbed Dae Gaya in 562, and with the aid of the Chinese Tang dynasty (618-907) defeated Baekje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668, unifying the peninsula. However, remnants of Goguryeo established the Balhae kingdom (698-926 AD) in Manchuria and parts of modern Russia, and ultimate unification would wait until the tenth century under the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392).

In addition to Gaya ceramics, the Academy is rich in early Korean ceramics from the Silla region. However, HAA has only a single fragment from Goguryeo, and a meager two examples of Baekje ceramics, both of which are on display in this exhibition.