

Excavations of Large-scale Megalithic Burials at Yulha-ri, Gimhae-si, Gyeongsang Nam-do

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Introduction

A number of high profile excavations of Mumun Period cemetery sites have taken place since the mid-1990s. For example, wide-scope horizontal archaeological excavations at Yulha-ri (栗下里), led by Lee Yeong-ju of the History and Cultural Centre of the Gyeongnam Development Institute, took place from May 2005 and December 2006 (Lee 2006, 2007). Excavations were conducted in an area of 126,634 sq m in order to facilitate a large residential development that is planned for the area. Many archaeological features dating from the Mumun (c. 1500 - 300 B.C.), Three Kingdoms (c. A.D. 300/400 - 668), Goryeo (935-1392), and Joseon (1392-1910) Periods were recovered.

Yulha-ri has caused a stir in the Korean and Japanese archaeological communities because of the large scale of some of the high-status Mumun megalithic burials excavated there. Some of the 106 burials at Yulha-ri likely required substantially greater labour to construct than the average megalithic burials in Korea. A settlement with 51 Middle Mumun-style pit-houses was also found nearby. This report is primarily a description of the mortuary features of Yulha-ri. Most of the burials are megalithic and so their construction involved a substantial amount of labour. In this brief summary I focus on the largest megalithic burials that must have involved the greatest amount of labour.

Location



The site is located in Jangyu-myeon, spread out along low hills in the middle of a small valley formed by a small tributary stream some 7 km west of the lower Nakdong-gang River, close to where it flows into the sea. In terms of modern geography the flat area below the site is classed as a backswamp and is situated in a marginal deltaic zone. In the Mumun Period, however, the Nakdong Delta had not yet formed and so the environment of the area to the east of the site probably resembled a bay rather than an alluvial delta. Archaeological features are distributed along the gentle slopes and tops of low flat hills that are flanked on the north, southwest and south by steep hills with peaks greater than 300 m asl.

Mortuary Features

Burials were found either on the slopes and tops of hills or on low flat terraces. The capstones of most of the megalithic burials dating to the Mumun were destroyed due to modern farming, but several large-scale burials with cobblestone platforms came to light. Lee divides the large-scale megaliths into two types according to their shapes in plan-view: (1) those with low, rectangular-shaped cobblestone platforms and (2) those with low, circular-shaped



cobblestone platforms. In most cases, only the outer cobbles that form the plan-shape of the platforms remain, but it is thought that the inside of the platforms were constructed using tamped earth and cobbles. The average thickness of cobble platforms is about 30 – 40 cm. Burials are further subdivided into burials with large platforms and those with large burial pits (Lee 2007:27-29, 2006:247-249).

Burials B-4, B-5, and B-6 are contained within the largest rectangular platform, which is 46 m in length. Excavators were able to recover only 3 m of the original width of the platform because modern ploughing activity and/or erosion along its long axis damaged approximately half of the platform. Lee estimates that the original width of the stone platform was approximately 10 m (Lee 2007:28). The next largest is A-II-17. It has a rectangular stone platform measuring 12.7 m in length and a little over 3 m in width.

A-I-11, A-II-2, and A-II-19 are among the burials with large interment pits (Lee 2007:28-29). The actual interment area for the deceased is lined with long stone slabs surrounded by cobbles. The burial pit of A-I-11 was constructed by digging a pit inside a larger pit approximately 2.5 m in depth. A-II-2 is also a double-pit burial and the deepest part of the pit is almost 8 m in length, 6 m in width, and is over 2 m in depth. A-II-19 has a circular cobble platform. Excavators were able to ascertain that, in contrast to the double-pit construction of A-I-11 and A-II-2, Burial A-II-19 has a pit that was constructed using a total of 6 pits within pits to a depth of 2.5 m. The deepest part of the burial pit was lined with cobbles and measures 6.6 m X 4.1 m in area. The shaft space between the interment area of these burials and the surface is piled with up to 4 layers of thin stone slabs.

Mortuary artifacts, mostly in the form of red burnished pottery, came to light in just under half of the total number of burials. The chief function of red burnished pottery is thought to have been ceremonial in nature, but the circumstances of its production and distribution leads some archaeologists to think it is also related to the prestige of the deceased (Bale and Ko 2006; Nelson 1999). Less than 10% of all burials contained groundstone daggers, and even less than that contain a combination of groundstone daggers and red burnished pottery. Groundstone daggers functioned as prestige artifacts in some parts of the Korean Peninsula in the Middle Mumun (Bale and Ko 2006). Among the few burials with red-burnished pottery and groundstone daggers is A-II-17, one of the largest burials with a rectangular stone platform. Only one burial, B-9, contained a bronze dagger with a stone pommel (Lee 2007:36).

Lee estimates that the settlement and most of the burials date to the Middle Mumun (c. 850-550 B.C.) and that the chronological order of the burials can be divided in three phases. The earliest burial, A-I-20, contains red burnished pottery that corresponds to Lee's Phase I (i.e. the final part of the Late Early Mumun, c. 900 B.C.). Most of the burials with rectangular and circular cobble platforms were constructed during Phases II, the Middle Mumun. Lee estimates that B-9 was likely among the latest mortuary features to be constructed at the site because of the slender form of the bronze dagger excavated from there. He associates this burial with Phase III, corresponding to the earliest part of the Late Mumun (c. 550 – 300 B.C.) (Lee 2007:33-34, 2006:252-253). Most of the above dates are preliminary and have been estimated through the results of detailed pottery seriations. The trend in Korean prehistoric archaeology is to use AMS radiocarbon dating, and such data may be available when final site report is released in 2009.

Yulha-ri in a Regional Context

The final site report for Yulha-ri has not been published as of this summary, but it is possible to briefly interpret the potential significance and meaning of the site in a regional Northeast Asian context. Yulha-ri is among a small number of high status Middle Mumun cemeteries found along the southern coast of Korea. Other sites with similar features include Deokcheon-ri, Jeokyang-ri, Igeum-dong, and Jindong-ri (Yun 2000). In fact, Phase II of Yulha-ri was likely contemporaneous with most of the burials at Igeum-dong, and Deokcheon-ri and Jindong-ri may have been slightly later in the Late Middle Mumun. Igeum-dong and Yulha-ri are similar in that they are complex sites with differentiated residential and mortuary zones.

The presence of multiple high status mortuary features in the form of megalithic stone platform burials at various intervals along the southern coast shows that individual personages had enough power to marshal the labour required to build large-scale megalithic burials. Furthermore, the presence of such burials supports the hypothesis that small-scale chiefdoms with large settlements centres formed along the southern coast in the Late Middle Mumun just as large interior settlements such as Daepyeong, Oksan-ri, and others were in decline (Lee and Bale 2004).

This period is also the time when Mumunoid settlements and burials appeared in northern Kyushu in Japan along with intensive wet-rice cultivation. Several controversial hypotheses in Japan explain the origins of the Yayoi Culture as being associated with migration by Mumun farmers from southeast Korea to northern Kyushu. Yulha-ri is yet another example that tends to strengthen the hypotheses that claim that Mumunesque culture was instrumental in the formation of Yayoi.

It is interesting to note that archaeologists have documented economic exchange between the south coast of Korea and northern Kyushu that dates to the Early Jeulmun Period (c. 6000 – 3500 B.C.). In this sense, the location and growth of Yulha-ri and the other south-coastal high-status cemeteries can be seen as having resulted from being at a midway point along bronze exchange routes between the interior of the Korean Peninsula and the island of Kyushu (Lee and Bale nd:8). The same areas were instrumental in iron trading, relations with Lelang of the Western Han, complex chiefdom formation, and the origins of state-level societies in Korea. Thus it is reasonable to suggest that there was some economic association between the leaders who were interred in the large-scale megaliths of Mumun sites such as Yulha-ri and groups in northern Kyushu and Northwest Korea.

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