

KOREAN FORTEANA

The *Samguk Yusa* or ‘History of the Three Kingdoms’, penned by the Buddhist monk Ilyon in the late 13th century, chronicles Korean history and traditions from the earliest times to roughly the 10th century CE. Judging by this little-known book, ancient Korea had its fair share of fortean events. The following is a smattering of examples that may be of interest to readers of this journal.¹ Leaving out the more palpably mythological material such as heroes born from eggs or virgins, the *Samguk Yusa* bristles with curiosities that breathe an air of historicity.



a copy of the *Samguk Yusa*, Beomeosa Temple, Namsan-dong, Busan, Gyeongsangnam-do, South Korea

On the cryptozoological front, it says, “the body of a huge woman came floating on the sea south of Sabi-su” either in 661 or in 667 CE. “Her body was seventy-three feet long, her feet six feet long, and her mount of Venus three feet long. Another story says her body was eighteen feet long ...” (36, p. 97). The witnesses were happy to interpret the arrival as the goddess of the sea, but could it have been the heavily decomposed corpse of a giant squid or some other mollusc that had really washed ashore?

Other freaks of nature are reported. “Tradition says that when King Muryōl ascended the throne (654) a countryman presented to him as a congratulatory gift a pig with one head, two bodies and eight legs”, which a “wise man in the court” creatively interpreted as “an omen that the King would annex all the territory in the eight directions under heaven.” (34, p. 92). Talhae († 79 CE), an early king of Silla in the southern part of the peninsula, was blessed with a most unusual appearance: “His head was found to be three feet two inches in circumference and his body nine feet seven inches tall; his teeth were close-set and even in his mouth like two rows of pearl-white seeds in a half-open pomegranate: and his bones were all joined closely like one mass of jade – all bespeaking a peerless Hercules. They buried his body on the hill of Soch’ōn.” (20, p. 56).

Moving from giants to longevity, the highest ages on record were attained by king Suro († 199 CE), the first ruler of Gaya, and his wife Hwang-ok, who hailed from “Ayuta” in India: “On the first of March in the sixth year of Chung-p’ing in the reign of Ling-ti, the year of the snake, Kisa (189) the Queen died at the age of one hundred and fifty-seven. ... The King spent many lonely hours in deep grief after the death of the Queen, and at last he also died ten years later at the age of one hundred and fifty-eight, on the 23rd of March in the fourth year of Kien-an during the reign of Hsien-ti in the year of the hare, Ki-myō (199).” (58, p. 164, cf. 167, 203).

Besides movable printing types of metal, the first Asian sundial, and the oldest water-powered clock in the world, the Koreans may – perhaps? – also lay claim to the world’s first ‘saint weeping blood’. Chungji-Japkan, a 10th century government official of Silla, “had a portrait of King Suro painted on a three-foot length of silk embroidered with a twisting dragon, hung it on the wall with an oil lamp

¹ The translation used is Ha Tae-Hung & G. K. Mintz (trs.), *Samguk Yusa; Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2004⁷)

burning before it and worshipped it daily, morning and evening. After three days tears of blood fell like rain from both eyes of the portrait and made a deep pool on the ground. He then took the portrait to King Suro's shrine and burned it there." (58, p. 165). Unlike the weeping Maries of today, the solution to the mystery seems readily available here: the burning oil clearly caused some of the paint to melt, releasing a red pigment. The understanding that the substance was blood forms an instructive parallel to the Christian counterparts, particularly because of the antiquity of this case.

In olden days, the Koreans were no strangers to atmospheric anomalies either. In 767 CE, "a fierce dog fell from the sky to the south of the East Pavilion, with thunder that shook heaven and earth. Its head was as large as a water-jar, its tail was three feet long, and it looked like a burning fire." (43, p. 114) Comparative mythology offers the key to the explanation, as lightning has been mythologised as a canine or feline monster worldwide, including in China.² The contemporary interpretation that these were all "portents of war" aside, an unusual meteor shower or auroral event may have transpired, as in the same year "two stars fell into the courtyard of the North Palace, followed by another, and the three stars sank into the ground. ... A big tiger was seen entering the palace and suddenly disappeared as it entered the royal living quarters." (43, p. 114f.) The "two suns" that appeared in the sky on April 1, 760 CE and "remained for ten days, an omen of catastrophe on earth" (119, p. 351f.) were almost certainly parhelia, colloquially known as 'sun dogs'. A total eclipse is hinted at when, somewhere between 839-857 CE, "the heavens and the earth became dark." (45, p. 121). And ball lightning could have been behind the following event: during a military campaign, general Kim Yu-sin of Silla was praying on top of Söngbu-san, 'Star-floating Mountain', when suddenly "a huge fireball appeared above the altar and flew toward the north shooting flames. Just as the enemy were about to attack the exhausted troops in the lonely fortress, it changed into lightning and struck their stone-shooting cannons. ... the Silla troops were saved. This is the reason the place is named Star-floating Mountain, for the fireball floated above it like a fiery star." (34, p. 90) 'Supernatural' aid in decisive battles is, of course, a common fixture of ancient histories – like Sanherib's defeat at Jerusalem (*Isaiah* 37. 36-37) – but that does not exclude the possibility of some real, physical explanation. That said, other events are even more challenging to the fortean historian. What to make of the following: "In Februari of 920 the shadow of the pagoda at Hwangnyong Temple appeared upside down on the grounds of the house of Küm-mo-saji and in October of the same year the strings of the bows held in the hands of the gods of the five directions at the Temple of the Four Deva Kings were mysteriously cut away and the dogs in the mural painting rushed out into the temple courtyard and back into the picture again." (52, p. 132). Plagues of Biblical proportions, interpreted as prodigies foreboding the fall of the kingdom of Baekje, also transpired in 660 CE, when "the water in all the wells of Puyö and in Sabi-su ... turned blood-red, and small fish leaped out of the water on the western seashore and fell dead. There were so many that the people could not collect and eat them all. In the fourth moon tens of thousands of frogs appeared in the treetops." (34, p. 83). Though the above may be just digestible for the committed fortean, who knows what other treasures lie buried in the pages of similar works that have never been translated into an European language?

Marinus van der Sluijs
Seoul, South Korea

² The archetype of the 'lightning dog' also casts light on the black dog seen in 1577, see **FT 195: 30-35**.