

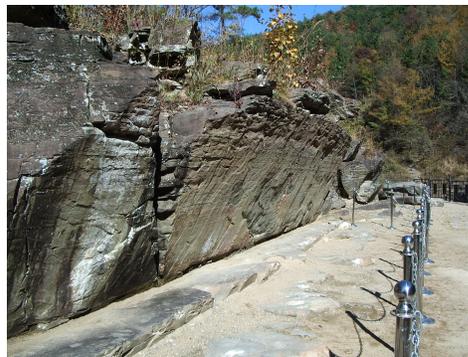
KOREA'S PREHISTORIC PAST

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As a rule, visitors to England or Ireland are well aware of the impressive prehistoric treasures these countries have to offer and an excursion to Stonehenge or Newgrange is frequently on tourists' agendas. It is clear that Korea does not have any Stone Age monuments to match these famous places, yet there are plenty of traces of Korea's distant past that receive perhaps less attention than they deserve.

Pictograms and petroglyphs are two types of *rock art* decorating millions of stones in almost all countries on earth, often in remote places such as deserts and mountains. Carved images known as 'petroglyphs' (암각화) were carved since the Neolithic or Late Stone Age and are firmly on the tourist radar in places such as the southwestern United States of America, Hawai'i, and Australia. Few people are aware that the Korean peninsula, too, has its share of petroglyphs, all dating to the Neolithic period. At Bangudae, close to Eonyang (Gyeongsangbuk-do), a single rock panel features some 290 drawings, including hunters, fishermen, deer, tigers, pigs and what archaeologists believe are hunting tools. Nowadays, the rock can only be seen at times of drought, as the construction of the Sayon Dam has caused it to be submerged most of the time. A popular place for Korean primary school trips, not too far from Bangudae, is Cheonjeon-ri, where another panel is filled with a mix of pictures of antlered animals and abstract, geometric images such as concentric circles, spirals and joined lozenges. A few more pictures, specifically a set of two concentric rings and what looks like a face mask, are found at Yangjeondong, in the area of Goryeong. Apart from these places, only a handful of other locations are known to have carved rocks.



petroglyphs, Cheonjeon-ri, Dudong-myeon, Ulju-gun, Ulsan, Gyeongsangbuk-do



petroglyphs, Yangjeondong, 532 Janggi-ri, Goryeong-eup, Goryeong-gun, Gyeongsangbuk-do

Compared to other countries, very few rock art sites are known from Korea and the ones we do know contain not quite as many items as the millions of carvings known from Mongolia or China, for example. Why is this? Another question is why the few sites currently known are all found in the eastern half of the country only? Perhaps there are many more petroglyphs waiting to be discovered in Korea, which simply have escaped detection because of the many mountain slopes and valleys where scarcely any human being ever sets foot. The Bangudae pictures were only discovered in 1971 and just about a decade ago, dr. Yim Se Gweon, of Andong National University, discovered a batch of unknown carvings at a new site in Sugok-ri, not far from Andong. The rocks were only situated a few miles away from a road, but there was no trail and they were well hidden in the mountain vegetation. When the present author visited this place in 2005, less than ten people had ever seen these petroglyphs, none of whom were westerners.



petroglyphs, Sugok-ri, Imdong-Myeon, Andong-si, Gyeongsangbuk-do

Parts of Ireland as well as the entire coastline of Portugal, Spain, France and the Netherlands are well known for their megalithic burial constructions known as *dolmens* (고인돌, 지석묘). Intriguingly, dolmens following the same design proliferated in Bronze Age Korea (1st millennium BCE), so much so that almost half of the world's dolmens are currently thought to be in Korea, with estimates ranging from 5,000 to 30,000! Many are found on Ganghwa-do (Gyeonggi-do), including the largest example from Korea – the impressive tomb at Bugeun-ri, which was listed as a World Cultural Heritage site in 2000 – along with the dolmen cemeteries at Gochang and Hwasun, both in Jeolla-do. Some other fine specimens were excavated in Cheonjeon-ri, Chuncheon (Gangwon-do), in 1966 and 1967.



dolmen, Historic Site 137, location 317 Bugeun-ri, Hajeom-myeon, Ganghwa-gun, Ganghwa-do, Incheon Metropolitan city, Gyeonggi-do



dolmen, Gangwon-do Monument no. 4, Cheonjeon-ri, Soyanggang (River), Chuncheon, Gangwon-do

So-called *totem poles*, serving as ‘village guardians’ or boundary stones, form a different aspect of Korean culture that every visitor to Korea venturing outside Seoul will encounter sooner or later. The custom to build such poles and place on roads or at the entrance to towns continues fairly much to the present day, but boasts a respectable antiquity. Essentially two different types of poles can be distinguished. *Sotdae* (솟대) or ‘bird poles’ are columns of stone or wood surmounted by one, two or three birds shaped like ducks. In the original, pre-Buddhist religion associated with shamanism, these birds will have represented a sky god or goddess, perched on a mythical ‘tree of life’. *Jangseung* (장승) is a generic term for the second type of poles, that usually comes in pairs, carved in the shape of a grotesque man or woman identified as *Cheonhadaejanggum*, ‘Great General Under Heaven’ and *Jihayeojanggum*, ‘Female General Under the Ground’; the people of Jeolla-do endearingly identify them as *Harabeoji*, ‘grandfather’, and *Halmeoni*, ‘grandmother’. While wooden *jangseung* are concentrated in the central part of Korea, stone pillars are more common in the southern regions; the ancestral figures for which Jeju Island is famous, the so-called *dol hareubang*, are almost certainly the local Jeju representation of the elusive ‘grandfather’ figure.



sotdae, Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul



dol hareubang, Hyeonam Folk Museum, Chuncheon, Gangwon-do



jangseung Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul



sotdae, Kim Youjeong Literature Village, Chuncheon, Gangwon-do

Korean people have erected *sotdae* since the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE to 668 CE), but it is clear that the custom originally arrived with them from the shamanic cultures of northern Asia, where examples can still be found today. The Dolgan, the Samoyed, the Yenisey Ostyak and the Yakut, for example, are Siberian societies that place a bird on top of a sacred pillar, specifically a two-headed eagle in the case of the Dolgan and the Ostyak. *Jangseung* have been constructed from about the 8th century and may very well have similar origins in northeast Asia.

Apart from Korea's Altaic roots, its prehistoric past was undoubtedly a complicated patchwork of migratory influences. Long before the official arrival of Buddhism, for instance, Indian influences already made an appearance in Korea. Hwanin (환인), the legendary grandfather of Dangun (단군) and founder of Go-Joseon, bears a name that was originally used for the Hindū sky god, Indra. This indicates that the very foundation legend was coloured by traditions from India. In addition, royal lineages in Korea established connections with Indian nobility long before the heyday of Silla, as legendary evidence bears out. In the *Samguk Yusa* (3 (68)), Ilyon wrote that Kim Suro, the first king of Gaya, married a princess Hwang-ok from "Ayuta" in the year 48 CE. 'Ayuta' clearly represents the Sanskrit name *Ayodhya*, although it remains unclear whether this referred to Ayutthaya in Thailand or to Ayodhya in the homeland of Buddhism. Interestingly enough, analysis of DNA samples taken from some of the royal Gaya tombs in 2004 confirms that there is a genetic link with some ethnic groups from India, Malaysia and Thailand – even though, as a whole, the Korean population is far more closely related to Mongols and Tungus than to any of these peoples.

Another passage in the *Samguk Yusa* (1 (22)) suggests early migrations to Japan. Ilyon offers the story of Yeonorang, a fisherman who was carried off to Japan by "a monstrous rock" and worshipped there as a sun king; his wife, Syeongeu, represented a moon queen and the story claims that, at that time, "the sun and moon ceased to shine in Silla. ... the spirits of the sun and moon had formerly resided in Silla, but ... had bid farewell to this land and departed for Japan in the east." Although it is hard to see what to make of this tradition, other than perhaps a garbled memory of a solar eclipse, linguists have just recently been able to prove that the Japanese language goes back to a form of Korean that died out in Korea itself; while the modern Korean language is mostly based on the Silla dialect, aspects of the Gaya, Baekje, Buyeo and Goguryeo languages apparently formed the basis of Japanese. Such evidence serves to inspire considerable confidence in the folkloric material recorded by Ilyon and

elsewhere.

For foreign visitors, Korea clearly has more to offer than Buddhist temples, food and traditional dances. For anyone willing to look a bit further, there is a fascinating 'lost world' to discover both in the many vestiges of Korea's shamanic and megalithic past and in ancient writings, many of which still await translation into English. From petroglyphs to myths and legends, much of this rich past remains still unknown to the western world. Clearly, there is fertile ground for future research and publicity in this field.

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