

EXCERPT FROM THE SAMGUK SAGI: SŎL KYEDU

Introduction

In the first millennium of the Common Era, the Korean peninsula (and beyond into present-day Manchuria) was governed by three kingdoms — Silla, Paekche, and Koguryŏ. By the seventh century, Silla had defeated its neighbors and unified most of the peninsula. Silla society was dominated by hereditary status in the form of the “bone rank” system, and in general, the historical importance of hereditary status is one of the pronounced features of Korea relative to its East Asian neighbors. The bone rank system grouped people, based on birth, into royal/aristocratic “hallowed bone” and “true bone” categories or into six “head ranks” with everything, from the government office one was able to hold to the clothes one could wear, being governed by this rank. Sŏl Kyedu, who lived in the seventh century, was one person who was dissatisfied with this system.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions

From *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, edited by Peter H. Lee, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 49. © 1993 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from the Samguk sagi: Sŏl Kyedu

Sŏl Kyedu was a descendant of a Silla official. Once he went drinking with his four friends, each of whom revealed his wishes. He said, “In Silla the bone rank is the key to employment. If one is not of the nobility, no matter what his talents, he cannot achieve a high rank. I wish to travel west to China, display rare resources and perfect meritorious deeds, and thereby open a path to glory and splendor that I might wear the robes and sword of an official and serve closely the Son of Heaven.”

In the fourth year, *sinsa*, of Wu-te [621], Sŏl stealthily boarded an oceangoing ship and went to T’ang China.

[Translated by Peter H. Lee]

Questions:

1. How did Sŏl feel about the bone rank system, and what was his solution? What other avenues might have been open to him? What sort of society might he have preferred?
2. For whom would the bone rank system have been beneficial? What advantages and disadvantages did it have?
3. Sŏl was of head rank six—in other words, he was just below noble status. For whom might the bone rank system have been most frustrating, and why?