Horse Trappings of Gaya and Wa

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Gaya can be divided broadly into its early period and late period with the middle of the 5th century demarcating these two periods. During the period from the early 4th century through to the first half of the 5th century Early Gaya prospered mainly in Gimhae and Pusan in the Nakdong-gang River valley. During this period, Gaya adopted the horse culture of the Xianbei and the northern tribes of northeast China, which saw the development of a horse culture where each person rode a horse, which was markedly at variance with the former period of the Three Han kingdoms. Late Gaya lasted from the second half of the 5th century through to 562, and during this period it held various kinds of power mainly on the western side of the Nakdong-gang. One representative example of this power is Dae-Gaya, which was centered around Goryeong. Unique forms of horse gear such as incurved oval shaped bridle bits, f-shaped bridle bits and ornamental harness pads shaped like the tip of a sword, were developed in the Hapcheon region where Goryeong and Tara state were situated. This contrasted regionally with Silla which was situated on the eastern side of the Nakdong-gang.

By the 5th century, Japan was adopting metal horse gear from the continent, especially through Gaya, which speaks of the closeness of the relationship between Gaya and Japan at that time. The volume of horse gear that Japan received during Early Gaya was not that great, and it is highly likely that it was received separately in various locations around the Japanese Archipelago. By contrast, the acceptance of horse gear during Late Gaya occurred selectively as a result of the establishment of a military system by Japan’s central government, and it is also very possible that such items soon came to be produced domestically.

Thus, this close relationship of interaction between Early and Late Gaya and Japan conversely opens up the possibility of adjusting the chronologies of both regions through horse gear. By adopting this perspective for determining the age of stone coffins found in the Inariyama tombs in Saitama Prefecture that have become an important standard for establishing calendar dates for Japan’s Kofun Period, it is fair to suggest that they date back to the first quarter of the 6th century.