Korea’s ancient history has primarily focused on the Three Kingdoms period, involving the three kingdoms of Goguryeo (37 B.C.-668 A.D.), Baekje (18 B.C.-660 A.D.) and Silla (57 B.C.-935 A.D.). However, the Gaya confederacy, which also existed during this period (42-562), has long been known as Korea’s “lost kingdom.” But in fact, Gaya survived for some 600 years, while the advanced state of its cultural refinement seems to only recently have come to be properly understood and appreciated. Thanks to the ongoing research efforts of history and archeology scholars, Gaya is now poised to assume its rightful place in Korea’s ancient history.

The Three Kingdoms period of Korea’s ancient history includes scant mention of the Gaya state. Nevertheless, Gaya built large-size burial mounds for its rulers that provide tangible evidence of the kingdom’s 600-year existence.
GAYA Kingdom’s Rightful Place in Korean History

In Korean history, Gaya has long been known as the “lost kingdom.” But exactly what was it about the Gaya state that caused it to earn such a dubious distinction?

Kim Tae-sik Professor of History Education, Hongik University
In Korean history, Gaya is often referred to as the "lost kingdom." Most often, stories about a lost kingdom are rooted in myth and legend since few traces of its existence can be found. In contrast, there is no question that Gaya actually did exist. It was known for developing an advanced iron industry and earthenware culture, while its name lives on in the gayageum, the representative traditional string instrument of Korea. But exactly what is it about the Gaya state that caused it to become known as the lost kingdom?

Lost but Not Forgotten

Korea's ancient history is centered around the Three Kingdoms period, which included the kingdoms of Goguryeo (37 B.C.-668 A.D.), Baekje (18 B.C.-660 A.D.), and Silla (57 B.C.-935 A.D.). Eventually, Silla managed to defeat Goguryeo and Baekje and unify the Korean peninsula under its rule. The notable history book Samguk sagi (History of the Three Kingdoms), written during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), which succeeded Unified Silla, does not include the history of Daegaya burial mounds on the southern slope of Mt. Susan in Gyeongju, Gyeongsangbuk-do province, estimated to have been built during the mid-5th century, attest to Gaya's advanced development just prior to its demise.
Gaya. This is because the book was written from a Goryeo perspective that perpetuated various historical distortions attributed to Silla. Although Silla was able to defeat Gaya in 562, Baekje in 660, and Goguryeo in 668, its historical accounts did not include any references to Gaya because Silla regarded the Gaya state as having been part of its territory.

In the 17th century, Joseon Dynasty scholars, such as Han Baek-gyeom, sought to clarify ancient Korean history by recognizing Gaya as a fourth kingdom, The confederated state of Gaya was not an inconsequential kingdom subordinate to the rule or influence of ancient Japan. In fact, Gaya deserves to be recognized as the fourth kingdom of ancient Korea that existed for some 600 years.

along with Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla of the Three Kingdoms period. However, in conjunction with its maneuvering to wrest control of Korea in the late 19th century, Japan began to assert that Gaya had been an ancient Japanese territory under the administrative control of Japan's Mimana Nihonfu. Moreover, during Japan's colonial rule of Korea (1910-45), this claim about Gaya was disseminated not only in the Asian region but also throughout the world, thereby causing Gaya to become known as Korea's "lost kingdom."

When Korean archaeologists began to excavate the Nakdonggang River basin area in Gyeongsang-do in the 1970s, they uncovered considerable artifacts from the ancient kingdom of Gaya. And thanks to ongoing excavation work and related research over the past 30 years, the characteristics of Gaya culture are now coming into clearer view.

**Gaya Culture**

Above all, Gaya culture was characterized by a combination of the agricultural culture of the southern region of the peninsula and the metal culture of the northwestern areas. When Wiman Joseon in the northwestern region of the Korean peninsula collapsed in 108 B.C., due to an offensive launched by Emperor Wudi of Han China, its people fled to the coastal areas of Gyeongsangnam-do province, where they settled. The major remains of this settlement have been found in a group of tombs located in Daho-ri, Changwon. The relics recovered from Daho-ri Tomb No. 1, estimated to date to the late first century B.C., feature characteristics of Wiman Joseon traditions, as seen in the shape of wooden coffins and the similar styles of bronze and iron artifacts.

With the Gaya region being at the center of maritime trade with Lelang, over time, these exchanges came to exert considerable influence on the nature of Gaya culture. Situated in the northwest of the peninsula in the second and third centuries, the Lelang state engaged in active trade with Gaya along sea routes in the western and southern seas. In this way, the advanced culture and items of Lelang were introduced to Gimhae, the center of the Gaya state. A Chinese-style bronze mirror, elegant necklace of glass beads, iron kettle, and other relics found in Yangdong-ri Tomb No. 162, are evidence of the extensive interaction between Lelang and Gaya.

Of note, Gaya culture was basically conservative and modest in
nature, and is thus quite distinctive from the cultures of Silla, Baekje, and Wa (ancient Japan). The reserved character of Gaya culture was formed under the continued cultural influences of Lelang, which differed from the more fundamental and practical nature of Silla culture and the more elaborate refinement associated with Baekje culture. On the other hand, Wa culture was significantly shaped by Gaya influences, due to the geographical proximity, although ritual aspects, along with the external form being replicated on a larger scale, replaced practical elements.

Gaya formed a confederated state, based around the western areas of the Nakdonggang River basin, that existed for some 600 years. The areas that came under the influence of Gaya culture included Goryeong in Gyeongsangbuk-do province, as well as Gimhae and Haman in Gyeongsangnam-do. The number of smaller states that comprised the Gaya confederation varied from a low of 7 or 8 to a high of 22, with 12 to 13 during a majority of the time.

**Fourth Ancient State**

By the 2nd century A.D., a small kingdom had been established in Gimhae, while signs of early Gaya culture began to appear in the Gimhae and Changwon areas around the first century B.C. Thereafter, Gaya, or the Geumgangaya Kingdom, based in Gimhae, acquired control of the smaller neighboring states, which became known as the Former Gaya Confederation. In the latter half of the 4th century, Gaya flourished, functioning as a vital bridge between Baekje and Wa. But by the early 5th century it had succumbed to an alliance of Goguryeo and Silla forces.

However, in the latter half of the 5th century, one of the former Gaya states in the Goryeong area revived the confederacy, which led to the emergence of the Latter Gaya Confederation. It adopted the name Daegaya Kingdom (Great Gaya Kingdom), during which time Gaya kings were buried in the Jisan-ri tombs at Goryeong. In the early 6th century, Gaya managed to rebuild its state under a one-rule system, but soon thereafter, it was divided into north and south Gaya by the diplomatic policy of Baekje and Silla. Finally, Silla annexed this area in 562.

The culture of Gaya played a key role in the formation and development of ancient Japanese culture from the early first century through the 6th century. Geographically, Gaya was ideally located for contact with Japan by sea and thus developed close relations with Wa. Since Wa did not acquire the ability to produce iron until the late 5th century, it imported iron materials from Gaya, such as iron broad axes and iron ingots, for making domestic ironware. Gaya also introduced to Wa the technology to produce its refined earthenware ceramics, known as Sueki, as well as the horse harness and iron helmets and armor, thereby contributing much to the development of ancient Japanese civilization.

In light of the foregoing, it is clear that the confederated state of Gaya was not an inconsequential kingdom subordinated to the rule or influence of ancient Japan. Though it may not have attained the stature of Korea's better-known kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla, it does deserve to be recognized as the fourth kingdom of ancient Korea that existed for some 600 years.