

THE KAESŎNG ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

DAVID LAKIN

Introduction

The author visited Kaesŏng as a representative of the Museum of London. His paper sketches out the proposals made at the time of his visit for an archaeological survey of Kaesŏng and its hinterland. In presenting his observations, he will repeat a couple of caveats: he is in no way a specialist in Korean archaeology; and the proposed archaeological project described here has yet to take place.

So how did the Museum of London become involved in an archaeological project in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?

In the summer of 2002, Dr Tony Michell of Euro-Asian Business Consultancy came to the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) with details of a potential project at Kaesŏng. Proposals were in the air for the construction of an 'industrial park' on the outskirts of the city, which had been the capital of the peninsula during the Koryŏ period (AD 918–1392) and which since the end of the Korean War had fallen within the boundaries of the DPRK. Although the 'industrial park' was to be located outside of the historic limits of the city, Dr Michell was concerned that within the 3,200 hectares to be developed, it was very likely that archaeological sites would be at risk from the construction of the park and that provision should be made for rescue archaeology ahead of the development.

At the same time it was felt that as a result of the necessary relaxation of border controls attendant on the construction and operation of the park, an opportunity might present itself for the development of heritage tourism within the historic limits of the city.

The role of the Museum of London lay in the provision of specialist advice in regard to archaeological investigation (in the industrial park or the city as necessary) within a commercial environment and under 'rescue' conditions—a situation in which MoLAS has thirty years of experience. As time progressed, the potential contribution of the Museum expanded to include advice on the preparation of World Heritage Status documentation, the presentation of historic sites, and the recording of vernacular architecture, amongst other things.

Potential

At its height Kaesŏng had over a million inhabitants; it was the national capital for 400 years; known monuments include two dozen royal tombs, a royal palace and an academy devoted to the training of Koryŏ state officials; it had a thriving trade with China and may have played a major part in the development of ceramic and printing technology. The shrinking population of the city has meant that many archaeological sites lie undisturbed by modern development, opening up numerous possibilities for the investigation through archaeology, coupled with a re-reading of many written sources, of the social, economic and political development of the city and its hinterland.

Two reconnaissance trips were made to Kaesŏng with a view to gaining some insight into the current state of knowledge about the archaeology of the city and its hinterland, whilst at the same time assessing the practical aspects of undertaking an archaeological project many thousands of miles from the Museum of London's normal base of operations.

First reconnaissance, January–February 2003

At the invitation of the DPRK tourist authorities and with the assistance of the National Bureau for Cultural Property Conservation and of the Kaesŏng People's Committee, a trip was arranged to Kaesŏng in late January 2003. The party was led by Dr Michell and included the author, Dr Elisabeth Chabanol of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Tineke D'Haeseleer, a research student working on Chinese texts pertinent to Kaesŏng, and two journalists from *Time* magazine.

Following arrival in Pyŏngyang, a couple of days were spent acclimatising to the sub-zero temperatures (minus 12 degrees C on arrival) and visiting the Korean History Museum, the Folk Museum and the fortress hill of Moranbong in historic Pyŏngyang before moving southwards to Kaesŏng.

The emphasis on arrival in Kaesŏng lay in visiting the sites for potential archaeological intervention and in meeting local archaeologists in order to gain an overview of current knowledge and capabilities. Despite some useful time spent at local monuments, these intentions were less than wholly successful, largely owing, it seemed, to an unwillingness to engage in unscheduled interviews on the part of DPRK officials. Although a number of substantial monuments could be visited—the Manwŏldaе palace, Kongmin's tomb and Namdaemun gate—there seemed to be little or no attempt to present information about or interpret these sites or a coherent understanding of the historic city as an entity in its own right, still less of its place within a wider landscape.

It was perhaps not surprising that the monuments were treated as individual



Fig.1. Kongmin's tomb and environs (© David Lakin/MoLAS)

entities and the presentation of information was relatively sketchy. However, it was clear that considerable time and effort had been expended at some sites, most notably at King Wang Kŏn's tomb, to renovate the structures—although the effort was clearly largely directed at producing an ‘as new’ effect, which might not meet the most exacting of standards of historical authenticity.

The Koryŏ Museum, accommodated in the former Confucian academy of Sŏnggyungwan, had a representative selection of material relevant to the period of Kaesŏng's heyday, but little attempt had been made to put the material in context. It was not possible to visit the reserve collections for the museum and it was by no means clear how extensive these were or where they were held.

Second reconnaissance, August 2003

Dr Chabanol and the author made a return trip in August 2003 in somewhat more clement weather for a further reconnaissance, at the end of which a memorandum of understanding was signed between Euro-Asian Heritage Development (EAHD—Dr Michell's company) and the National Bureau for Cultural Property Conservation



Fig.2. Re-erected pagoda in the grounds of the Koryŏ Museum (© David Lakin/MoLAS)

(hereafter Cultural Bureau). The memorandum was the result of a further series of visits to monuments in Kaesŏng and its environs. The principal proposals were:

- Kongmin's tomb: non-invasive survey of the queen's tomb to establish whether its contents had been 'looted' in the colonial period; topographic survey of the associated monastic enclosure; development of a visitor centre/site museum
- Manwŏldae palace: trial excavation, topographic and other non-invasive survey concentrating in the western part of the complex
- Kyŏngdŏk palace in Kaesŏng: a hitherto unexcavated aristocratic residence thought suitable for trial excavations

The site visits were made in the company of Professor Jeon from Kaesŏng University. He was a very useful source of anecdotal information about previous field work at these sites. Regrettably, however, no original records were made available for study and, despite an agreement to provide access to these, none have yet turned up.

Activity since August 2003

Euro-Asian Heritage Development Corporation in association with the EFEO have recently developed a further proposal for trial excavations at the Namdaemun gate. Severed from the line of the defences as a matter of policy in the colonial period, it now sits in the middle of a traffic island.

Kaesŏng has a major heritage resource in the 1,800 or so vernacular buildings surviving in the centre of the modern city. These represent a fraction of the number which would have existed in the heyday of the city. They are nonetheless likely to come under threat of demolition as an economic upsurge propelled by the development of the industrial park brings both cash and people to Kaesŏng. EAHD seeks to preserve



Fig.3. Outer door to house in central Kaesŏng (© Euro-Asian Heritage Development)



Fig.4. Traditional houses in central Kaesŏng (© David Lakin/MoLAS)

these buildings as part of a heritage zone which would serve in part as a tourist resource—hotels, restaurants, etc.—and in part as a living history museum. The aim is to refurbish these buildings and encourage the current residents to take up the employment opportunities created in the heritage zone. The Folk Hotel, Minsok Yŏgwan, in the historic area has recently been acquired by a Korean Australian and is being refurbished.

EABD has signed an agreement with the Cultural Bureau to develop the museum shop of the Koryŏ Museum, which includes training craftsmen making souvenirs and developing the area to provide income to support the museum.

Hyundai commenced construction work in the industrial park in the summer of 2005, and a team of South Korean archaeologists have made discoveries. Only anecdotal evidence for this has filtered through to the author, but it seems as though the discoveries include both pre-historic and Koryŏ-period sites.

Conclusion

With the realisation of plans for the industrial park coming on apace, the risks to the historic remains of Kaesŏng resulting from the consequent economic upsurge are increased. Unplanned development is likely to result in the destruction of archaeological sites, both inside and outside the historic city, as well as of many of the surviving vernacular buildings in the historic core. Increased visitor numbers are likely to degrade even protected monuments if not carefully controlled.

It is particularly important that a management plan for the heritage of Kaesŏng be implemented while there is still time. Happily the DPRK authorities are currently in the process of preparing a World Heritage Site application for Kaesŏng. It is to be hoped that this will provide a suitable framework for protection and development of the quite remarkable heritage potential of Kaesŏng.