

The Place of *Hwarang* Among the Special Military Corps of Antiquity

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Despite having represented a “noble flag” of Korean nationalism in the course of the twentieth century, *Hwarang* may actually have been a para-religious order composed of bands of commoners or even low-born subjects acting under the command of aristocratic leaders. Since their origin, *Hwarang* were related to the ethnic, religious, and socio-political nature of Silla. There is no reason for doubting that they also were engaged in military operations, even if, almost surely, this was not their only and unique task. Some religious/military aspects of *Hwarang* make them similar to other “special corps” of antiquity. This structuralism-oriented paper tries to individuate both common and different elements shared by *Hwarang* with other special organizations that flourished in ancient times, with particular reference to sacredness and sexual ambiguity. In this regard, the author emphasizes the character of the sacredness/alienation relationship traceable in western “special corps” and, possibly, within *Hwarang*, too.

Keywords: *Hwarang*, special corps of antiquity, sexual ambiguity, sacredness, Silla society

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Prologue: The Naked Ape

According to today's most widely followed biological classification, man is a mammal of the order of the primates. A "naked ape," paraphrasing the famous book of Desmond Morris (Morris, 1967), in which he explains, apart from the differences that have intervened in the external aspect, human beings still carry the heritage of their origins. After all, in the past decades French Structuralism, beginning from Claude Levi-Strauss and Henri Laborit, has insisted on the importance of the most primitive part of the human brain (the so-called "reptile brain"; Laborit, 1971) and its reactions in front of the superstructures imposed by the cultural experiences.

Therefore, if man is a primate, beginning from the way of reporting him with the counterpart inside the same group, there will inevitably be behavioral resemblances with the biological relatives more similar to him. Among such behaviors is also the one that most interests us in this study: the creation, from a supreme authority, of "special military corps" trusted with the defense of the sovereign and the whole group (in the specific case of humans, the people, and the nation) and, in a more

general way, the existence inside the same ethnic and/or social entity, of individuals, united by a same cultural condition, gathered to form “special corps” separated from the rest of community. If we observe well, this deals with phenomena that already blink in the behavioral patterns of the so-called “social animals,” including, obviously, the primates.

The social structure of the primates (and not solely the primates) shows the presence of a dominant male, that checks a *harem* of females and a number of males which are not allowed to mate, so that they live more or less on the borders of the community waiting to constitute an autonomous group or replacing themselves with the leader in the moment when this is about to accuse the effects of the inexorable law of the time. Therefore, the condition of the unmated samples is particular: they belong to the group and yet theirs is a status of social precariousness. They are male but they cannot practice their masculinity. Transported in the human sphere, theirs is almost a “caste” of “untouchables,” a condition of “sacredness” intended as social alienation. At the same time, theirs is a condition of sexual ambiguity, unable as they are to mate. Moreover, they are forced to live an existence in which the only social counterpart is represented by similar samples, within the limits of the same “caste” or group. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is what in the humans’ world is called “comradeship” or “camaraderie.”

In other words, we are in front of sacredness and sexual ambiguity. These are elements that we can find in many ancient and less ancient military organizations. The creation of special military corps, in fact, often represented in every part of the world at an attempt from the central power to organize, to frame (and then to control), and to give a social meaning to all young people that, as the “unmarried” Primates, were excluded from the power. These élite corps were at once blessed and accursed. Members of such organizations were considered “sacred”, and they often referred themselves and made sacrifices to precise divinities. At the same time their inevitable comradeship made them sexually ambiguous and, rightly or wrongly, targets of insinuations of sexual

character. Not by chance, among the accusations to the Knights Templar (a sacred order for excellence), during the trial that brought their annihilation, sodomy had a great importance.

For the sake of convenience, I have divided the ancient military corps into structures of “type I” and “type II,” intending in the first case organizations that are tightly related, from the ethnic-cultural point of view, to the people and the nation for which they worked. This concerns the most archaic organizations that, at least conceptually, were different from those of type II, where the organizations themselves set aside the ethnicity of their components that instead were united only and exclusively from a political idea or from superior religious beliefs. To offer a practical example, the corps of the so-called “Immortals” of the Achaemenid Empire was of type I (the members were to be Medians or Persians), whereas the Praetorians of the Roman Empire represented an organization of type II, hailing as they did from various regions and provinces.

This study, mainly conducted through a structuralism-related perspective, represents an attempt to add the *Hwarang* (花郎) of the Silla (新羅) period in Korean history among the special military corps of antiquity (of type I?) with particular reference to the sexual sphere and sacredness. On the basis of what I have affirmed above, I believe there are constant and characteristic elements verifiable in various military organizations of ancient times. I will first treat the cultural motives that could have produced the sacredness and the ambiguity, at least in those military corps that may be placed in well-defined (and, as far as possible, also documented) historical contexts and periods. I will then describe examples of such military corps, not refraining from also treating Amazonism, which, here considered a special military corps, will also represent an important element in the economy of the discourse on *Hwarang*. Finally, I will try to analyze the nature of the same corps of the *Hwarang* with the purpose to insert it into a broader cultural context within a so far neglected comparative approach. In this regard, I will

offer evidence, together with the *Hwarang*'s peculiarities, and also the elements in common with military organizations in other cultures and in other epochs. I must state here that in my analysis of the sources on *Hwarang* I will not take into consideration the text *Hwarang segi* (花郎世紀, *Chronicles of Hwarang*), the presumed work of Kim Dae-mun (金大問) which miraculously reappeared in 1989 after centuries during which it had been considered lost. There is a fierce academic debate regarding this text's authenticity¹ in a cultural context such as the East Asian one where the creation of historical forgeries would not represent an absolute novelty.

Homo Sacer

The creation of a special military corps implies the separation between it and the rest of the community, especially in periods and historical contexts where military activity concerned, as a rule, all free citizens. The idea of separation from the human community implies the approach of the excluded people to the divinity. In other words, it implies to make them "sacred." The concept of "sacred," therefore, takes an ambiguous nature: to separate one from the community of the living people, in fact, means to make him belong to the world of the dead. As a matter of fact, the ambivalence of the "sacredness" actually springs from the experience of the spiritualization of the dead persons connected with the very funerary cults. "Sacred" means "separated": who is sacred does not belong to the community of the men, but to another dimension, much more ineffable and mysterious. The opposite of "sacred" is "profane," from the Latin "*pro*" (before) and "*fanum*" (temple; hence the word

¹ Against the authenticity of *Hwarang segi* are, among others, McBride (2005, pp. 236-48), No Tae-don (1997), and Bak Jae-min (p. 216ff.). On the contrary, the authenticity of the manuscript is not excluded by among others Yi Hui-jin (2010, p. 263ff.) and Yi Jong-uk (2010, pp. 9-14). On the two extant manuscripts of *Hwarang segi* in particular see McBride (2008).

“fanatical”). Therefore, “profane” is one who is out of the temple, or rather out of the sacred dimension, as “sacred” and “profane” are dimensions typical to humans. In the ancient Greek world the *naos* (ναός) was the cell of the temple where the statue of the divinity was placed, the most sacred space where only the priest could enter. This space was preceded by the *pronaos* (πρόναος), an area free from sacredness more or less corresponding to the Latin *profanus*. Still today, in the Greek-orthodox churches, the sacred zone of the altar, also called “presbytery,” is separated from the zone reserved for the believers from an architectural element called “iconostasis” (εικονοστάσι).

To be declared “*sacer*” in ancient Rome meant to be condemned to the civil death (Cantarella, 2007, pp. 242-6). Whoever was found guilty of a particularly serious crime (such as violation of the confinements, violence towards one’s parents, or deception perpetrated inside the relationship between “*patrons*” and “*clientes*”) was consecrated to the gods by the formula “*sacer esto!*” (“Be him sacred!”). After all, the term “*sacrificium*” means “to make sacred.” A man that had been declared “sacred” was excluded by the community and could be killed by anyone: this killing, offered to the gods infernal, was not in fact considered a homicide. The negativity of the term “*sacer*,” compared to a formula of accurse, also emerges unequivocally in Latin literature: *Quid non mortalia pectora cogis, auri sacra fames!* (“To what crimes you drive the hearts of men, accursed hunger for gold!”) (Virgil, *Aeneid*, III, pp. 56-7).

In a more general context, Durkheim’s definition is acceptable (Durkheim, 1968, p. 454), for which the sphere of the sacred is essentially a peculiar world, where the sacred actually is separated from the rest of the community. Sacredness often characterized special military corps as well as other legal organizations, such as that of the gladiators², that

² Even if occasionally used as military trainers for legionaries of regular army, gladiators cannot be considered a true special corps. However, their “sacredness” springs from their status of “outcast” (Kyle, 1998, p. 128ff.) and from their devotion to particular gods, to whom they sacrificed in

were similar to them. Their “special status,” in fact, represented a peculiarity that, while making them “different,” actually enacted, at once, their isolation and separation from the common people. In the West, the sacredness of some special corps was evident, in the medieval period, in organizations such as those of the Templars or the Knights of the Teutonic order, whose members not rarely were the younger sons of the nobility excluded from marriage and from succession, as the “bachelors” of primates are. In more ancient cases the sacredness of special corps, even if less evident, immediately jumped to the eyes of the contemporaries and of those people who treated subsequently of them. The “Sacred Battalion” (ἱερὸς λόχος) of ancient Thebans is not remembered by that name for mere chance.

And what about the East? The *Hwarang* of Silla, which constitutes the main topic here, were certainly a special military corps with unique characteristics, but perhaps referable under the commune, great denominator of that sacredness and sexual ambiguity that I have already mentioned. But of this I will treat further below.

Sharing Weapons, Sharing Souls

Let us look at the following inscription, found in Sicily and reported in *CIL*, X.2: 758 nr. 7297:

FLAMMA SEC VIX AN XXX
PVG NAT XXXIII VICIT XXI
STANS VIII MIS III NAT SYRVS
HVI DELICATVS COARMIO MERENTI FECIT

order to get protection. Indeed, it seems that venerated gods changed according to the various types of gladiators: *retarii* made sacrifices to Neptune, *secutores* to Vulcan, as but two examples. In this regard see Isidore of Seville (XVIII, pp.54-5). Also see Guidi (2009, p. 92).

After filling the abbreviations we can read: *Flamma, secutor, vixit annos XXX. Pugnavit XXXIII, vicit XXI, stans VIII, missus III. Natione syrus. Huic Delicatus coarmio merenti fecit.*

The translation is: Flamma, secutor³, lived thirty years. He fought thirty-four times, won twenty-one times, fought to a draw nine times, was defeated and pardoned four times, and was a Syrian by nationality. Delicatus made [this inscription] for this comrade-in-arms who deserved it.

This inscription is the epitaph of a famous gladiator who lived around the second and third centuries CE. “Flamma” (Flame) clearly is a nickname, as well as “Delicatus” (Delicate), the comrade-in-arms who took care of his burial.

The key word in this inscription is “*coarmio*,” dative of “*coarmius*,” a word composed by “*co*” (with) and “*arma*” (weapon). Therefore, the primitive meaning is “he who shares weapons,” and then “comrade-in-arms.” Sharing weapons meant sharing the same destiny in the military life, in the camp, in training, and on the battlefield. Sharing weapons meant sharing fear, rage, pain, and death. In other words, it meant sharing souls. The correspondence between the concept of “weapon” and “soul” may be easily traceable from very ancient times. As souls, weapons are a part of humans. In English, the term “arm” means either a part of the human body or “weapon” (also see the Greek word ἄρμος meaning “join” or “articulation”). Swords or spears were considered a mere extension of the arm. In Japan, the soul of a *samurai* was believed to live in his sword. In the West, proper names were given to famous swords: “Durendal” is the sword of Roland, “Colada” is the sword of the Cid, “Excalibur” is the sword of King Arthur, and “Joyeuse” is the sword of Charlemagne. In the East, we cannot but recall “Ama no

³ The *secutor* was a gladiator heavily armed with a helmet, a sword, and a large shield. As his opponent usually was the *retarius* (a gladiator lightly armed with a fishnet and a trident), he often was also called *contrarete* (anti-fishnet).

Murakumo (天叢雲劍)” (also called “Kusanagi no tsurugi [草薙の劍]”) of Japanese mythology (Naumann, 1992, pp. 158-60). Weapons, in fact, originally belong to Gods. In various cultures of antiquity, blacksmiths were sacred people, respected and feared, since they forged weapons. In many Romance languages, the words “soul” and “weapon” (“*anima*” and “*arma*” in Latin), even if they have different etymologies, still have a nearly identical sound in identifying “inner strength,” “courage,” and “bravery.”⁴ Indeed, a weapon is anything able to increase human strength. A Sicilian proverb says: “*L’armi dunanu arma*” (Weapons give soul [and then bravery]). In modern Italian, “*anima*” (soul) is called the internal part of a gun. No wonder, then, that weapons often become sacred objects, connected with the sacredness of the soul. Frequently we find weapons in ancient tombs, but weapons also are tools able to unite and join the thoughts and the feelings (and then the “souls”) of a whole human group. The so-called *Männerbünde*, a confraternity of sacred, initiated warriors typical to Indo-European people since very ancient times, probably is to be considered among the forerunners of special military corps. One of the most widely used words (from Asia to the Pre-Columbian cultures of America) is “*toki*,” (stone) axe which is, at the same time, a tool of daily life, a weapon, and a ritual object.⁵ In this regard, we must not forget that in modern Korean the axe is exactly called “*dokki*” (도끼).

Therefore, sharing weapons means sharing souls. But sharing souls also means “loving” or “sharing the same sleeping spot.” In Latin, the word “*contubernium*” means, at once, the smallest unit (eight men) of a legion and the tent where these men slept. Generally, the soldiers of a *contubernium* were rewarded or punished together. We begin to glimpse a relationship between the concept of “comrade-in-arms” and “intimacy,”

⁴ See, for example, the terms “*alma*” (Ancient Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Catalan) and “*arme*” (ancient French), equally meaning “soul.”

⁵ On the “*toki*” and its symbolism see Tucci (1974, p. 10).

an intimacy that can easily evolve toward love. In the case of men sharing military life, this means homosexual love. The semantic passage from “comrade-in-arms” to “lover” is clearly perceivable in ancient Greek. In Homer, the term “*hetairos*” mainly has the meaning of “companion,” “comrade-in-arms” (Homer, *Il.*, IV, 294), but in later epochs it also means “lover” (Semonides, 7, 49; Aristophanes, *Ec.*, 912). The term *ἑταίρα* “*hetera*”, indicating a female entertainer (or courtesan) in some aspects similar to India’s *ganika*, Korea’s *gisaeng* (妓生), and Japan’s *geisha* (芸者), comes exactly from “*hetairos*.” Indeed, the relationship soldier-lover is explicitly stated by Plato (*Sym.* 5): εἰ οὖν μηχανή τις γένοιτο ὥστε πόλιν γενέσθαι ἢ στρατόπεδον ἐραστῶν τε καὶ παιδικῶν, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ἂν ἄμεινον οἰκήσειαν τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἢ ἀπεχόμενοι πάντων τῶν αἰσχυρῶν καὶ φιλοτιμούμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους· καὶ μαχόμενοί γ’ ἂν μετ’ ἀλλήλων οἱ τοιοῦ τοι νικῶεν ἂν ὀλίγοι ὄντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν πάντας ἀνθρώπους. ἐρῶν γὰρ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ παιδικῶν ὀφθῆναι ἢ λιπὰν τάξιν ἢ ὄπλα ἀποβαλὼν ἦττον ἂν δὴ που δέξαιτο ἢ ὑπὸ πάντων τῶν ἄλλων, καὶ πρὸ τούτου τεθνάναι ἂν πολλακίς ἔλοιτο. (So, if we could conceive the possibility of a city or an army composed of lovers and their loves, they surely could find the best way of living, refraining from any evil act and competing with each other for honor. In this way, when fighting side by side, even a handful of such men would be able to crush and be victorious over any enemy. A man in love, in fact, would surely choose rather to be seen by everyone than by his beloved either when abandoning his post or while flinging away his arms. Rather than this, he would prefer to die several times.)

To conclude this paragraph, let us return to the gladiator’s epitaph. We will never know the truth, but the nickname of his comrade-in-arms, the author of the inscription, was “*Delicatus*,” a word meaning “delicate,” but also meaning “effeminate.” To hypothesize an intimate relation between the two gladiators is not absurd. As an individual sharing weapons and feelings, a comrade-in-arms often can also be a lover, and this becomes more evident when we deal with comrades of special military

corps, from the most ancient ones to the medieval Templars up to the Schutzstaffel (**SS**), the ill-famed Nazi paramilitary organization which paradoxically also had the task to fight homosexuality (Burleigh and Wippermann, 1992, pp. 171-2; Chiappano, 2001). In some cases the inter-comrade relationship can start after entering military life, where the “older-to-younger” sexual initiation may also become an authentic “rite of passage” from the ordinary life to the sacral, secluded reality of “special corps,” in a kind of “master-pupil” relationship. (Templars were strongly suspected of that.) In other cases, an inter-comrade relationship can develop within the limits of an already existing relationship. (This was the case of the *Sacred Battalion* of Thebans.) I will call this kind of relationships “tutorage.” In sum, we find again sexual ambiguity connected with sacredness, and both being related with camaraderie.

Of course, somebody may say that, in order to be “sexually ambiguous” one does not need to enter a special corps. Others may say that not all members of an élite organization are necessarily “sexually ambiguous.” Someone also may ask what I mean when I write “sexual ambiguity.” First, I must answer such a question. For “sexual ambiguity,” here I mean a sexual attitude representing not only a minority in the social context of a certain period, but also one strictly linked to the rules (written or not) of a certain organization. In this regard, the practice of celibacy as provided in the rules of a religious or military organization here is considered “sexual ambiguity,” as well as the homosexuality practiced by the Thebans of the *Sacred Battalion*, that, even if maintaining the traditional aspect of the *erastes-eromenos* relationship, was something different from the *paidierastia* at that time common in Greek culture. In other words, the “sexual ambiguity” I am discussing is an attitude that, rather than being an authentically free and individual cultural choice, is strictly connected to a precise context and organization, controlled by political power, and mutually dependent with it while representing a rule. This is, in my opinion, the anthropological legacy of the “naked ape.” That is, in other words, a further element of

separation (sacredness) from the rest of human community.

Before dealing with *Hwarang*, I will examine briefly some famous warriors' organizations of antiquity in order to establish a comparison with the Asian world, looking for common patterns able to lead back to military corps, even in their historical specificity, to a pre-cultural anthropological state.

Samnites' *Legio linteata*

The *Legio linteata* (Linen-covered legion) was an élite corps of ancient Samnites, an italic people who were a formidable opponent of Rome at the time of Roman expansion in Italy. From the most complete (and extant) record (Livy, X, p. 38)⁶ regarding it, we know that the *Legio linteata* was composed of 16,000 men who were chosen and enrolled after a dramatic ceremony in which: ...*Iurare cogebant diro quodam carmine, in exsecrationem capitis familiaeque et stirpis composito, nisi isset in proelium quo imperatores duxissent et si aut ipse ex acie fugisset aut si quem fugientem uidisset non extemplo occidisset.* (They were forced to swear, in a dreadful kind of form, containing curses on their own person, on their family, and on their descendants, if they did not go to battle, whithersoever the commanders should lead, and if either he himself fled from the battlefield, or, in case he should see any other fleeing, did not immediately kill him).

The *Legio linteata* probably took its name from the linen textiles covering the oath field (...*locus est consaeptus cratibus pluteisque et linteis contactus...* [There is a place enclosed with hurdles and boards, and covered overhead with linen cloth]), but the possibility that its soldiers used to wear linen clothes cannot be ruled out (Salmon, 1995, p. 111).⁷ This organization actually was a kind of *kamikaze* (神風) corps, as

⁶ On the *Legio linteata* also see Pliny (XXXIV, p. 43) and Festus, in Lindsay (1913, p. 102).

its members were sacred to Jupiter by means of *devotio*, a special oath, made in the name of a god, according to which warriors promised to win or die in battle.⁸

The creation of the *Legio linteata* could have been a political purpose connected with the *Ver sacrum* (Sacred Spring), a ritual that seems to have been common among the ancient people of Italy. According to the ritual of *Ver sacrum*, in case of an emergency putting at risk the very existence of a tribal group, almost all the goods of the clan or the tribe were sacrificed to gods by Spring. Young people representing a burden, rather than being killed, were expelled from the community and forced to challenge death every day by wandering and living on their own strength. In this way, soldiers of *Legio linteata* could have been the survivors of a *Ver sacrum*, ready to fight until death in exchange for retaking their original place inside the community. If so, the political-military use of once-excluded members of the tribe would confirm on the one hand the close relationship between power and special corps, and on the other hand the typical primates' social structure still present in forms of aggregation of humans.

Thebe's Sacred Battalion

In the book *On the Art of Besiegement* (*Πολιορκητικά*) attributed to Aeneas Tacticus (fourth century BCE) is written (X, p. 20): Καὶ πρῶτον ἐπισκεπτέον εἰ ὁμονοῦσιν οἱ πολῖται, ὡς ἂν ὄντος μεγίστου τούτου ἀγαθοῦ ἐν πολιορκίᾳ. (In case of besiegement, first of all it is necessary to be sure of the concord the citizens, which is the most precious thing.). The concord between citizens, in Greek called *Homònoia*, refers to political

⁷ The passage by Livy here reported refers to 293 BCE. However, Livy, himself, in a passage of his work dated to 309 BCE says that the *Legio linteata*'s soldiers wore linen clothes (Livy, IX, p. 40).

⁸ *Devotio* seems to have been a kind of oath common to all of ancient Italy's people, including Rome. See *DAGR* (II, 1, pp. 113-9).

harmony, but also to social equity. The concord implies a situation in which the gap between “rich” (privileged) and “poor” (discriminated) must be filled. However, Aeneas is aware that, because of their private interest (as well as for their poor military skill), the defense of a state trusted to ordinary citizens is problematic (III, 6. XV, 2. XVI, 2.). At the same time, he does not ignore the danger represented by mercenary soldiers who, even if more skilled than common citizens, can overthrow the government for which they work (X, 7, XII, 4). This was a great dilemma in the war policies of ancient states. *Homònoia* was of course necessary, but how to choose between citizens and mercenary soldiers when the state was at risk? These were crucial points also affecting Eastern societies, and, as we will see, Silla was not an exception. (I suspect that the creation or the promotion of *Hwarang* actually represented, first of all, an attempt by King Jinheung to establish “concord” inside his kingdom and, at the same time, to strengthen the national army by giving emarginated citizens the possibility of making better their position through their [political and military] devotion to the state.)⁹

To conciliate the patriotic love of citizens with the military skill of mercenary soldiers, the Greek *polis* of Thebe was one of the ancient

⁹ Some Korean scholars, such as Yi Gi-dong (1984) and Kim Sang-hyeon (1999, p. 502ff.) claim that the institution of *Hwarang* included the assimilation of the conquered Gaya élite into Silla society. I do not agree with such a hypothesis. I think that in a historical period plentiful of conflicts the institutionalization of *Hwarang* aimed to increase the number of common soldiers and, in order to do that, the Silla king had to emancipate, first of all, the “outcast” people of Silla, probably the offspring of former Jinhan (辰韓) people. As a matter of fact, King Jinheung did not need a few aristocratic men from a conquered kingdom, but rather many warriors from the lowest stratum of Silla society. I think something similar happened in all of the Three Kingdoms. (The tale of Ondal [溫達], reported in *Samguk sagi* [三國史記, *Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*], 45, indicates that even the King of Koguryo [高句麗], in the sixth century, actually transformed an outcast into a brilliant commander.) An example that may support my theory is given by the Spartan government, which on the occasion of the dramatic battle against Persians at Plataea (August 20, 479 BCE) enrolled up to 35,000 slaves *helots* in the army (Herodotus, IX, p. 10). *Helots* were the offspring of Messene people subjugated by the Spartans in the course of the eighth century BCE.

societies able to put this concept into practice. The Thebans created a special battalion formed of 300 selected citizens, completely devoted to war, called the “Sacred Battalion” (ἱερὸς λόχος) or the “Sacred Band” (DeVoto, 1992). The origin of the name is not clear. Perhaps it is linked to the Platonic concept according to which a lovely friend is a gift from Heaven. We do not know whether they were sacred to a god; in any case, they were “sacred,” as they represented an entity that was separate from the rest of the citizens. The sexual ambiguity of this corps is evident. The battalion was in fact formed by 150 homosexual couples united in a relationship that should have been different from the “ephebic love” (pederasty) typical in the ancient Greek world (Ogden, 1996). To fight to death in the ranks of a hoplites’ phalanx, while managing military equipment weighing as much 40 kilograms, in fact, should have been a task reserved to adult males only. The couples, however, had a predominant individual (tutelage).

According to Plutarch (*Pel.*, p. 18), these élite soldiers were created by Gorgidas. They operated from at least 378 BCE. Plutarch, himself, by quoting a passage of Plato (see above), explains the reason why an army formed by lovers and beloved was to be preferred to one composed of “normal” soldiers.

The warriors of the *Sacred Battalion* were able to crush Sparta’s army (which was considered invincible) in 371 BCE (the Battle of Leuctra) and in 362 BCE (the Battle of Mantinea) and give Thebe the supremacy over all the cities of Greece. Eventually, they were annihilated in the battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE) by the Macedonians of Philip II. On that occasion, while the rest of Thebe’s disrupted army abandoned the battlefield, the warriors of the Sacred Battalion fought to the very last, and at least 254 of them were killed there. King Philip II, himself, after the tremendous fight, was moved in seeing the dead bodies of the lovers fallen one next to the other, as they never could endure the shame of retreat. If victory was impossible, they must die. As they were “sacred,” they were blessed, and they were cursed.

In spite of being deadly warriors, the members of the Sacred Battalion were aware of the traditional aesthetics. They did not ignore the motto “καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός” (Beautiful and Good [especially at war]), a principle that also should have inspired King Jinheung in choosing *hwarang* or, at least, their leaders. Epaminondas, the famous commander in chief of Thebe’s army at Leuctra and Mantinea, also was a professional dancer and musician (Cornelius Nepos, XV). The search for aesthetics by *Hwarang* should not be seen as a contradiction. Military skill and, at the same time, love for beauty were normal in many ancient cultures and we must not make the mistake of judging according to modern cultural parameters.

Achaemenid Persia’s *Immortals*

Very little is known about this special corps. Little information is given by Herodotus (VII, p. 83), according to whom that of the “Immortals” was an élite infantry corps formed by 10,000 men, united in a strong camaraderie, all of Median or Persian origin. Perhaps created by Cyrus the Great (Xenophon, *Cyr.*, VII), they actually represented the Royal Guard and, once in battle, their main task was to defend the king at any cost (Arrianus, III, p. 13). They were given special food and wore splendid cloths and jewels (Curtius Rufus, III, p. 3). Perhaps they also concealed their face (at least on some occasions) behind masks. When going to war, they were followed by chariots bringing their wives, concubines, and servants (Cook, 1983, p. 105ff.).

Herodotus says that the term “immortals” derives from the fact that anyone killed, seriously wounded, or sick was immediately replaced by a new member so that the number of 10,000 could never decrease. However, what Herodotus translated by the Greek word ἄθανατοι (immortals) probably is not the Persian term “Anauša” (immortals), but “Anûšiya,” which simply means “comrades.” In any case, in the ancient world, they also were called Μηλοφόροι (“apple [or pomegranate]

bearers”) since their spears were counterbalanced by a pomegranate/apple-shaped weight (Athenaeus, XII). Some 1,000 members of the “immortals” had this weight made of gold, the others of silver.

Macedonian *Hetairoi*

The Macedonian *Hetairoi* are a good example of how the character of a special corps can change according to the historical context. *Hetairoi* (lit. “comrades,” “companions”; see above) should have been originally a kind of private guard of the Macedonian King, formed by his barons, friends, and relatives (Lane Fox, 2004, p. 22). Therefore, it was a “type I” corps. However, following the Macedonian expansion under Philip II and, above all, under Alexander the Great, it turned into a “type II” corps as even foreigners were admitted to it. We do not know much about their “sacredness,” but, as for sexual ambiguity, a fragmentary record by Theopompus of Chios (*FGrH*, 115 F 225, Jacoby) is worth quoting: “... ὅθεν καὶ δικαίως ἂν τις αὐτοὺς οὐχ ἑταίρους <ἀλλ’ ἑταίρας> ὑπολάμβανεν εἶναι... ἀνδροφόνου γὰρ τὴν φύσιν ὄντες ἀνδρόπορνοι τὸν τρόπον ἦσαν...” (...Therefore one rightly could maintain that they were not “heteri” but “heterae”... They were killers by nature and prostitutes by disposition...).

Even if some modern scholarship thinks of Theopompus as a hyper-moralistic writer (Shrimpton, 1991), this record cannot be taken lightly. Theopompus, in fact, was born around 380 BCE. In the record quoted above he is referring to a period preceding the Macedonian expansion, that is, a period in which *Hetairoi* still are a “type I” corps. In this phase, they must have had a stronger spirit of camaraderie. And the reference to them as “male prostitutes” only means that they practiced adult-adult homosexuality, in other words, something similar to what we can suspect was apropos of the Sacred Battalion warriors.

The Knights Templar

Studies on the Knights Templar are legion, and this is not the place to discuss the Knights Templar in detail. I only will recall certain aspects of this organization that I believe could have been similar, in some way, to that of Silla's *Hwarang*.

Their original name was "Pauperes commilitones Christi templeque Salomonis" (Poor Comrades-in-arms of Christ and Solomon's Temple). They actually were members of a Catholic monastic order officially established in 1128-29. In this regard, their institutionalization has been seen as an attempt by the Church to "recycle" those younger sons of nobility whose abuses and misdeeds against ordinary people were motives for embarrassment in the relationships between the Pope and other European kings (Partner, 1987, p. 8). Even if their main purpose was to defend Christian peregrines visiting the Holy Land, they soon acquired a strong political and economic weight. In particular, while excelling in financial activities, they succeeded in amassing a huge wealth by means of which they founded authentic credit institutions able to provide various monarchs of Europe with economic support. Because of their growing power they eventually met the hostility of King Philip IV of France who, in accord with Pope Clement V, put under arrest the most eminent members of the Order in 1307. After a dramatic trial, in the course of which they were accused, among other charges, of blasphemy, idolatry, pederasty, and sorcery, many of them were sentenced to death. Pope Clement eventually dismantled the Order in 1312 (Martin, 2005, p. 121ff.), and Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, was executed in 1314.

The precepts of the Knights Templar were not very different from those of other monastic orders. An exception was represented by the authorization to use weapons in order to protect Christianity. Nevertheless, they had to refrain from all other acts of violence, including hunting. The three duties common to other monastic orders

(poverty, obedience, and chastity) had to be practiced even if not explicitly declared. Married men, however, could be accepted in some cases. Collective prayers were widely practiced, too.

Despite the fact that they are known by the name of “Knights Templars,” only a few of them (perhaps less than 10 percent) actually were knights. The heavily armed knights formed the core of the corps. Many of them were the younger sons of noble families, unable to marry and come into possession of an inheritance, this due to the feudal rules of that time. This is not different, as we can see, from the young males of primates. But most of the Templars were common or humble people charged with various tasks. There were the so-called “sergeants” forming troops of light chivalry, stablemen, farmers, blacksmiths, servants, administrators of the property of the Order, and even priests whose duty was that of celebrating Mass for other members.

Eventually the Templars faced a tragic destiny, as they were accused of horrible practices especially performed in the course of the rites of admission to the Order. In particular, according to accusations, ambiguous and obscene acts were performed within the limits of the “tutorage,” or master-pupil (or elder-younger) relationship. Possibly some accusations against them were false. In any case, they were strongly suspected of sexual ambiguity (homosexuality) and blasphemy. Indeed, their very nature as monk-warriors was an ambiguous one. Sacred and feared, blessed and cursed, they were not different from Asia’s shamans (who even today are “sacred and feared”), and eventually they disappeared from history, as *Hwarang* did. However, several centuries later, the Templars have known an authentic revival and a great amount of (more or less scientific) research has been written about them. Beyond the history there is legend. The Templars as guardians of the Holy Grail and masters of esotericism continue enticing both scientists and common readers. If we consider that, the case of *Hwarang* appears as a true instance of *déjà-vu*.

Amazons

By the term “Amazonism” I mean a cultural pattern according to which a significant part of the women of a certain society not only receive regular military training but also participate actively in military events. This is the reason why, in spite of many records concerning real (Teuta, Boudicca) or imaginary/literary (Brunhild, Camilla, Bradamante, etc.) figures of queens and/or female warriors, to find a culture where Amazonism was actually practiced is anything but easy. In recent times, Amazonism was surely practiced by some tribal groups in today’s Benin (formerly Dahomey, in Africa)¹⁰ and, perhaps, in South America. In these cases, Amazonism was practiced in a religious context characterized by animism. However, whenever considering Amazons, we immediately think of the fabulous people often quoted in western classical texts. The term “Amazon” (Ἀμαζών) itself seems to have a Greek origin and is composed by the negative prefix “a” (without) and the substantive “*mazos*” (breast). The term then would mean “breastless” because, according to a legend reported by several classical authors,¹¹ such formidable female warriors used to cut off (or burn out one) of their breasts in order to make easier the use of bow. However, the etymology of the term is uncertain and all Amazons portrayed in ancient art show both breasts.

Despite the legendary halo surrounding Amazons and their land, we have various reasons to believe that some nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes of the southern part of what today is called the “Sarmatia Low-

¹⁰ Capone & Ceccherini (2010). In today’s Benin, a special corps composed by women, created in the early eighteenth century, lasted until 1933. It seems that women were recruited among members of the Royal House, but also from among war female/prisoners and divorced women. They were equipped with a rifle and a *machete* and also had sharpened teeth, to be used as weapons in case of emergency.

¹¹ See, for example, Diodorus Siculus (II, p. 3); Pseudo-Hippocrates (p. 17).

land,” actually practiced Amazonism. Some historical accounts are so precise and detailed that they cannot be pure invention and, in some cases, they have been confirmed through archaeological finds. For this reason we are almost sure that at least a people known as *Sauromatae* (and perhaps Massagetae and Issedonians, too), probably of Iranian origin and not necessarily to be identified with *Sarmatians*, practiced Amazonism. According to Herodotus (IV, pp. 110-7), *Sauromatae* was a race that derived from the fusion of Scythians with Amazons. Pseudo-Hippocrates’ record apropos of *Sauromatae* women (Pseudo-Hippocrates, 17) leaves no room for doubt: ἐν δὲ τῇ Εὐρώπῃ ἐστὶν ἔθνος Σκυθικὸν, ὃ περὶ τὴν λίμνην οἰκεῖ τὴν Μαιώτιν, διαφέρον τῶν ἐθνέων τῶν ἄλλων, Σαυρομάται καλεῖνται. τουτέων αἱ γυναῖκες ἰπάζονται τε καὶ τοξεύουσι, καὶ ἀκοντίζουσι ἀπὸ τῶν ἵπων, καὶ μάχονται τοῖσι πολεμίοισιν, ἕως ἂν παρθένοι ἔωσι. οὐκ ἀποπαρθενεύονται δὲ μέχρις ἂν τῶν πολεμίων τρεῖς ἀποκτείνωσι, καὶ οὐ πρότερον ζυνοικέουσιν ἢ περὶ τὰ ἱερὰ θύουσαι τὰ ἐν νόμῳ. ἢ δ’ ἂν ἄνδρα ἐωστῆ ἄρηται, παύεται ἰππαζομένη, ἕως ἂν μὴ ἀνάγκη καταλάβῃ παγκοίνου στρατείας. (In Europe there is a Scythian people called *Sauromatae* that inhabits the confines of the Palus Maeotis [today the Sea of Azov]. They are different from all other races. Their women ride on horseback, use the bow, throw the javelin from their horses, and fight with their enemies as long as they are virgins. They do not lay aside their virginity until they kill at least three enemies, nor do they take husband until they perform the sacrifices according to law. Once they marry, they refrain from riding horses unless they are forced by the necessity of a general expedition.)

The aspect regarding the connection between the sexual life and bravery in war is particularly interesting. Killing enemies for the first time is an authentic rite of passage, as it is necessary to assert and confirm both the femaleness and the belonging to the tribe by means of marriage. As Herodotus explains (IV, p. 117), “No maiden may marry before killing a foe. For this reason some of them grow old and even die unmarried, since they have not been able to comply with that precept.” In

other words, Sauromatae women must act like men in order to prove their feminine nature and become full members of the community. I think there is no doubt that this is to be considered sexual ambiguity. But that is not all. Sauromatae women seem to have had a true leadership in their people. Nicolaus of Damascus, while confirming the relationship between bravery and marriage existing among Sauromatae women, goes as far as stating that “Sauromatae obey their women as slaves obey their owners” (*FGrH*, 90 F 103 Jacoby). And in *Periplus ponti Euxini*: 161, we also can read: ...ὡς δὲ Ἐφορος λέγει, Σαυροματῶν λέγεται ἔθνος. Τούτοις δὲ ἐπιμενίχθαι τὰς Ἀμάζονας τοῖς Σαυρομάταις λέγουσιν, ἐλθούσας ποτὲ ἀπὸ τῆς περὶ τὸν Θερμῶδοντα γενομένης μάχης: ἐφ’ οἷς ἐπεκλήθησαν οἱ Σαυρομάται Γυναικρατούμενοι (...According to Ephorus, this is the people of Sauromatae. The tradition says they are mixed with Amazons since the battle fought near the river Thermodon. This is the reason why they are called “Gynaikratoumenoi,” or “ruled by women.”).

What has been stated by ancient historiographers has been confirmed, in some way, by archaeological finds. The tumuli (*kurgan*) attributable to Sauromatae in fact show many cases of individual burials (rather than men and women buried together), where at least 20% of the tombs of women contain weapons among the grave goods. Weapons are found in women tombs together with typically feminine objects, such as mirrors (David, 1976, p. 214ff.). Moreover, grave goods found in Sauromatae women tombs suggest that warrior women should have had a high social status. In particular, some goods, such as stone slabs with feet (probably altars), make one think that warrior women also could have performed sacerdotal functions.

In sum, Amazons (intended as that part of Sauromatae women who dedicated themselves to war for a part of their lives) may be considered a true “special corps.” They should have played an important role in the warfare of their people, either as warriors or priestesses. In this regard, their sacredness and sexual ambiguity emerge very clearly. Such ambiguity probably ceased after marriage, when they finished representing a

“special corps” separated from the rest of the community and returned to their functions of mothers inside the tribal group.

Hwarang: Their Nature and Social Role

The *Hwarang* of ancient Silla is commonly believed to have been an élite corps trained in order to cultivate ethics and military skills. More exactly, we should say that, as they were educated and trained in the respect of moral values, they also were expected to fight in battle more fiercely than ordinary soldiers. As a matter of fact, *Samguk sagi*, the oldest record about the *Hwarang*, never states explicitly that they received any special military training nor does it state that war was their main task.¹² According to *Samguk sagi*, 4, King Jinheung (眞興王), “In 576 CE, for the first time supported the *Wonhwa* (三十七年春始奉源花).” We will deal soon with this organization, which, at first glance, seems to have been nothing but a group of female entertainers. After the initial success of *Wonhwa* (源花, also written as 原花) in entertaining people, two beautiful girls, Junjeong (俊貞, called Gyojeong [姣貞] in *Samguk yusa* [三國遺事, *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*]) and Nammo (南毛), quarreled over jealousy matters, and eventually Junjeong killed her rival. After such a tragic episode, the *Wonhwa* were dissolved and, instead of them, “Men of beautiful mien, with their faces made-up and beautifully dressed, were again supported, and they were called *Hwarang* (更取美貌男子粧飾之名花郎以奉之).” Around these *Hwarang* “people gathered as clouds and,

¹² Doubts regarding military activity as the main task of the *Hwarang* have been expressed in recent scholarship. See, for example, Tikhonov (1998, pp. 324-31). However, the military importance of the *Hwarang* within the process of unification by Silla is suggested in Hong Sun-chang (1996, p. 156ff.). On the trends of research on the *Hwarang*, see Kim Gwon-taek & Yi Yeong-cheol (2010, p. 4ff.). The *Hwarang*'s participation to battles (as well as their participation in the political life of the country) as part of the project for strengthening the centralization of the state (especially after the crisis of the *Yukbu* [六部] system) is rightly hypothesized by Bak Nam-su (2008, p. 105ff.).

following the path of moral principles, they enjoyed each other, amusing themselves with songs and visits to famous mountains and great rivers.” This reference to the mutual (相) relationship, emphasized by Kim Bu-sik in *Samguk sagi*, is important, as it could imply a form of that “tutorage” which I discussed apropos of other special corps in the West. Indeed, the “tutelage” also emerges from *hyangga* (鄉歌) poems such as *Mo Jukjirangga* (慕竹旨郎歌) and in other episodes such as those of Burye (夫禮) and Ansang (安常) (*Samguk yusa*, 3) that seem to echo a “hierarchical” (and erotic?) friendship similar to that of Achilles and Patroclus in *Iliad*.

The image of the *Wonhwa* and the *Hwarang* given by Kim Bu-sik (a Confucian scholar) is not idealized yet as it will be later in an intellectual context represented by Buddhist writers like Gakhun (覺訓) and Iryeon (一然, 1206-89). Nevertheless, the biography of Kim Yusin (金庾信 595-673) (starting from his noble status) reported in *Samguk sagi*, 41, has represented a kind of Bible able to influence generations of specialists in Korean studies. If we look at *Samguk sagi*, it is not an exaggeration to state that whereas the “nobility” of the *Wonhwa* and the *Hwarang* never is clearly claimed, the nature of such groups seems to be (since their first apparition) that of entertainers, hunters, shamans, or street artists (in other words, something like the *mujari* [무자리] of Goryeo) rather than that of an élite corps. Their nobility, in fact, would have been explicitly noticed by Kim Bu-sik who, on the contrary, emphasizes the quarrel and murder between the two leaders, due to a typically feminine (and negative) quality like jealousy. Moreover, when Kim Bu-sik writes that the king, in order to create *Hwarang* for the benefit of the country, “looked for talented people,” can only refer, mainly, to commoners or low-born people: in fact, what was the necessity to seek “talented people” if the people of noble birth already were inside the court and well-known by the king himself?

The only reference to the general “nobility” of the *Hwarang* found in *Samguk sagi* is a passage quoted from a problematic work, the

Xinluoguoji (新羅國, *Records of the Silla Kingdom*), written by a certain Linghu Cheng (令狐澄) of Tang (唐) China, perhaps to be considered a literary invention of Kim Bu-sik.¹³ The “marvelous and mysterious way,” called *pungnyu* (風流), Choe Chi-won (崔致遠) (b. 857) would have mentioned in his preface to the *Nangnangbi* (鸞郎碑) stele. And as recorded in *Samguk sagi*, *pungnyu* seems to refer (if that stele actually deals with the *Hwarang*) to the traditional religious spirit of the country, a spirit animated, first of all, by Shamanism and divinized nature that, according to some nationalistic views, has been considered a “true archetype” of Korean-style physical training (Kim Bu-chan, 2005, pp. 1802-4). This religious attitude (which later would have represented the philosophical basis of *Samgyo* (三教), in a unique syncretism already remarked upon by Yi Gyu-bo [*Dongguk yi sanggukjip*, 9]), should have been the basic beliefs not only of Silla people, but also of the people that preceded the foundation of the Silla state. In any case, Shamanism represented the religious world of ordinary people in spite of the “Buddhist Revolution” that occurred in Silla in the sixth century. To teach Confucian and Buddhist principles to *Hwarang* was nothing but a political project aimed to establish a religious (and then political) harmony (*homonoia*) inside the kingdom for the sake of the country itself. The moral principles of *Sesok ogye* (世俗五戒) and the very conceptual synthesis contained in *Samgyo* were more than a mere “음식물” imported from China and elaborated *more coreano* in Silla, as suggested by Kim Chung-nyeol (1989, p. 128ff.). In particular, the Confucian elements were necessary in order to strengthen the cognition of monarchy (and then of the centralized state) *per se*, regardless of the religious orientation of the Royal House. On the other hand, such a process of social transformation implied the necessity to turn as many

¹³ According to McBride (2005, p. 234), the *Xinluoguoji*, now lost, was not written by Linghu Cheng but represented only one of his sources.

people as possible into followers of Buddhism, and this policy involved *Hwarang* too.

The “legend” of the *Hwarang* actually starts from Gakhun and his *Haedong goseung jeon* (海東高僧傳, *Lives of Eminent Korean Monks*), a controversial work about which some recent scholarship has raised the specter of forgery. This book is suspected to be a fake created by Yi Hwang (李晦光, 1862-1933; a Buddhist monk also known by the religious name of Saseon [師璿]) in the late nineteenth century (Sørensen, 2008, p. 205). Whether a forgery or not, however, this book put *Hwarang* at the service of Korean nationalism. In the late Goryeo period, when the homeland was harassed by Mongols and Confucianism was gaining ground, a Buddhist Master (Iryeon) created the image of the *Hwarang* as the pure, fearless knight sacred to Maitreya, the ancient protector of the country. After a long silence, during which *Hwarang* are substantially portrayed in a negative way, in the late nineteenth century, when the Confucian state was agonizing and Korea was about to become the prey of foreign powers, another Buddhist monk could have renewed the legend of the perfect, sacred warriors inspired by the highest moral principles in the defense of the homeland. If so, this would be another proof of that “defensive fundamentalism” which is not rare to find in the course of Korean history (Riotto, 2011).

Therefore, all information given in *Haedong goseung jeon* is to be judged with prudence. There is no doubt that *Samguk yusa* emphasizes the “sacredness” of *Hwarang*. The term “*gukseon* (國仙),” for example, does not appear in *Samguk sagi*. “*Gukseon*” is a synonym of “*Hwarang*” and is formed by two characters recalling, respectively, the “nation” and sacredness. Despite attempts to faithfully translate this term, the basic idea remains that of “sacred people put at the service of the country.” *Samguk yusa* has many episodes regarding *Hwarang* and their relationship with Buddhism and the cult of Maitreya in particular. The impression is that Iryeon’s reconstruction of facts and episodes concerning *Hwarang* is aimed to restore credibility to an institution, that

of the *Hwarang*, which at that time had little or nothing to be proud of. In this regard, there is a curious episode, preceding the realization of *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa* (that is to say, what now are the basic sources on the *Hwarang*), which is worth being recalled. This episode, already recorded by Yi Gok (李穀, 1298-1351) in his *Dongyugi* (東遊記, *Diary of a Travel to East*), also is reported in *Dongmunseon* (東文選, *Anthology of Eastern Literature*), 71. After describing the zone of Samilpo (三日浦) and its lake, the text adds: “People say that in this lake the “Four Sages”¹⁴ used to play and hence go to the 36 peaks. On the peaks there were steles.

Ho Jong-dan took all the steles and threw them into the water (人言此湖爲四仙所遊三十六峯。峯有碑。胡宗旦皆取而沉之。” Ho Jong-dan (C. Hu Zongdan [胡宗旦]) was an enigmatic character who must have had strong influence at the Goryeo court during the reigns of King Yejong (睿宗, r. 1105-22) and King Injong (仁宗, r. 1122-46) in a period when the presence of influential foreigners in Goryeo was not rare (Yun, 2002). Korean sources on Goryeo portray him in a positive way (*Goryeosa* [高麗史, *History of Goryeo*], 74; *Dongguk tonggam* [東國通鑑, *Comprehensive Mirror of the Eastern Kingdom*], 20-21; *Goryeosa jeolyo* [高麗史節要, *Essentials of Goryeo History*], 7-9. *Yeosa jegang* [麗史提綱, *Abridgement of History of Goryeo*], 7, etc.). A native of Fuzhou (福州), in Song (宋) China, he arrived in Goryeo aboard a merchant ship. For the good character and his talent in literature and sorcery (厭勝) he was respected (and perhaps also feared) by the king and ended up holding several positions in the Goryeo administration. His role in the episode of the steles is anything but clear. However, we can assume that those steles were connected with the “Four Sages” and then with the *Hwarang*. I do

¹⁴ The “Four Sages” are, of course, Namseokhaeng (南石行, also called Namnang [南郎]), Sullang (述郎), Yeongnang (永郎), and Ansang (安詳). (On the “Four Sages” related to Samil-po see Lee (1968, 68 n., p. 320). On the “Four Sages,” their stele, and their relationship with the *Hwarang*, also see Cha Ju-hwan (1989, pp. 46-8).

find it difficult to think of someone who, while wandering the country, spends his time by throwing steles into the water for fun. If Ho really did that, he acted under a precise order received from the king. The question then becomes: what terrible words were engraved on those steles to make them disappear? And why did the king entrust the task to a foreigner and not to a Korean? The case seems to imply an authentic *damnatio memoriae* of the *Hwarang*, the will to erase even their memory. In such a case, may this episode have had something to do with the portrait of the *Hwarang* in *Samguk sagi*, the history commissioned by King Injong and completed in 1145? To erase the memory of the *Hwarang* in order to create a new and more positive image of that very institution, this is a hypothesis we must consider seriously.

Ho Jong-dan also had an important part in the folktales of Jeju (濟州) Island. However, contrary to official documents, Ho is seen in Cheju in a very negative way. This is due, perhaps, to his role as representative of the official power in Gaeseong (開城), which was the Goryeo capital, and to the complex situation existing at that time between Goryeo and Tamna (耽羅; Jeju).

The historical works that followed *Samguk yusa* add little or nothing about the *Hwarang*. Nevertheless, many of them concord in depicting *Hwarang* as outcasts separated from the rest of the community. This is an image very different from that shown by the Goryeo sources, but one which still confirms the “sacredness” (intended as isolation and separation) of the *Hwarang* themselves. In this regard, in Seong Hae-eung (成海應, 1760-1839)’s *Yeongyeongjae jeonjip – oejip* (研經齋全集外集, *Collected Writings by Yeongyeongjae*), 53, we read: “According to today customs, (the term “*hwarang*”) indicates the male shamans (今俗男巫之稱).” Indeed, the correspondence between “*baksu*” (male shaman) and “*hwarang*” also is unequivocally already attested in *Hunmong jahoe* (訓蒙字會, *Collection of Characters for Training the Unenlightened*), a sixteenth century Chinese-Korean lexicon that clearly reports: “覘: 화랑이 격.” The identification of *Hwarang* with male shamans (at least in

the period in which the writer lived) is reiterated in *Jibong yuseol* (芝峰類說, *Classified scripts by Jibong*), 18: 今俗乃謂男巫爲花郎失基旨矣. (“Today it is custom to use ‘hwarang’ also to indicate male shamans. The old meaning is lost.”). The term, however, seems to have degenerated to the meaning of “male prostitute” (Rutt, 1961, p. 8). Other minor references on *Hwarang* are provided by *Dongguk tonggam*, 5-7; *Samguksa jeolyo* (三國史節要, *Epitome of the History of the Three Kingdoms*), 7; *Sinjeung Dongguk yeoji seungnam* (新增東國輿地勝覽, *New Enlarged Geographical Treatise on Korea*), 21; *Daedong unbugunok* (大東韻府群玉, *Gems collected from rhymes of Korea*), *passim*; *Haedong yeoksa* (海東繹史, *Historical treatise on Korea*), 10; *Dongsa gangmok* (東史綱目, *A Profile of Eastern “Korean”*), 3 and *passim*, and other texts.

Contrary to the common-place created by ancient and modern historiography, we must think that a remarkable part of the *Hwarang* consisted of common or humble people organized in brigades or groups under the command of leaders who could be of noble birth. Many elements strengthen this hypothesis. We know that 1,000 people (perhaps the so-called *Nangdo* (郎徒) who, of course, could not all be nobles) served under the *Hwarang* Sadaham and Burye.¹⁵ The number “1,000” probably is to be considered a symbolic one. However, a certain Dongnyang Paljin (棟梁八珍), believed to be an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, is said to have formed a brigade of 1,000 followers divided in two groups, one destined for manual work and one for more intellectual activities (*Samguk yusa*, 5). We do not know whether the followers of Paljin were *Hwarang*: in any case, given their considerable number, we can hypothesize that also in the *Hwarang* were members charged with different tasks, probably according to their original social status. When Master Weolmyeong (月明) was ordered by King

¹⁵ Apart from the fact that *Nangdo* should not be considered *in toto* as *jingol* (眞骨), their relationship with the *Hwarang* seems in any case to have been one of submission or even one of servant-master. In this regard see Jo Beom-hwan (2008, p. 421ff.).

Gyeongdeok (景德) to compose a prayer in 760, he replied: “As one belonging to the group of Gukseon, I am not good at Indian hymns. I only know vernacular songs.” (臣僧但屬於國仙之徒, 只解鄉歌. 不閑聲梵; *Samguk yusa*, 5). He thus revealed his poor literary level. When Gwisan (貫山) and Chuhang (筓項) ask Master Wongwang (圓光) to teach them the rules of the path toward Virtue, they confess their ignorance (*Samguk sagi*, 45) in a way (俗士顛蒙, 無所知識) that cannot be simply intended as youthful immaturity. After their heroic deaths, Gwisan and Chuhang were promoted *post mortem* to the ranks of *naema* (柰麻) and *daesa* (大舍), respectively the eleventh rank and the twelfth rank in the Silla government. Therefore, if we consider that another *Hwarang*, Burye, was appointed *Dae gakkan* (大角干), one of the highest grades, Gwisan and Chuhang were rewarded with quite low ranks, which demonstrates, on the one hand, their formerly humble status, and on the other hand, the fact that even if ordinary people *Hwarang* could be rewarded in cases of meritorious acts and deeds. The Gukseon Gudam certainly cannot be considered a “gentleman,” as his rude manners arouse the monk Hyesuk (惠宿)’s indignation (*Samguk yusa*, 4). He is very far from being a “perfect Knight.” In this regard, Kim Bu-sik is more reliable than Iryeon when he says, quoting Kim Dae-mun, that “from the *Hwarang* came capable officers, loyal subjects, good generals, and brave warriors.”

An interesting record, apropos of the *Hwarang*’s social status, can be found in book 3 of *Muye dobo tongji* (武藝圖譜通志, *General, Systematic and Illustrated Treatise of Military Arts*). This record concerns Hwang Chang (黃倡 or also 黃昌), a Silla *Hwarang* who, according to the popular tradition, went to Baekje (百濟) at the age of 7 (...黃倡郎新羅人也. 諺傳季七歲入百濟...). In Baekje, he started to perform his unique dance of swords, enticing and fascinating a large number of spectators. His fame reached the King of Baekje who summoned him. However, when requested to show his skills in front of the enemy king, Hwang killed the monarch and was then put to death. In this tale, a *Hwarang* is portrayed as an authentic wanderer, a street artist. Moreover,

he spent almost his entire life abroad, and it is difficult to think that he was made a *Hwarang* while in Baekje. This only means that he was already a *Hwarang* at the tender age of 7, when he crossed the border between Silla and Baekje. “*Hwarang*” possibly was not only a juridical status that included people of different origin, but also a true social status that could be transmitted from parents to sons. But if so, what kind of people were *Hwarang* by birth?

I suspect that the original core of *Hwarang* could have been formed by socially marginal people or even by ethnic groups different from that of Silla. Perhaps they were the aboriginal people, settled in Jinhan since the late Bronze Age who of course did not disappear at once after the rise of Silla. That different ethnic groups lived (more or less peacefully) together in the Korean Peninsula in the crucial period ranging from the end of the first millennium BCE to the Proto-Three Kingdoms period is a realistic possibility, made even stronger by the differences traceable in burial systems (Riotto, 1995). In this case, the condition of the *Hwarang* could have been similar to that of *mujari* in Goryeo. The lists of *Hwarang* recorded in the “yellow book” (黄卷)¹⁶ Iryeon writes about in *Samguk yusa* appears to be a census register of a particular category of people, divided in bands and “recycled” by King Jinheung as true and fully Silla citizens. Indeed, the necessity of further investigation on the relationship between *Hwarang* and the Silla nation has already been stated by Korean scholars, too (Ju Bo-don, 1997, p. 126).

In sum, there is enough to state that all questions regarding the *Hwarang* have to be reconsidered, possibly from a perspective free from any prejudice or nationalistic influence. Unfortunately, modern scholarship has to deal with forgery-like sources that, after appearing more or less miraculously, only add confusion to confusion. The solution to the problem is so far away.

¹⁶ On the “yellow book” see Mohan (2001, p. 163).

Hwarang: Their Sacredness and Sexual Ambiguity

In *Samguk sagi*, the verb used to indicate the establishment of the *Hwarang* by the king is 奉. This character, however, means either “to do something for someone” or “to support, to sponsor, to promote, to take care of.” If we accept the last meaning, we have to think that King Jinheung actually did not create the *Wonhwa* and the *Hwarang*, but simply recognized and gave an official character to already existing organizations. If we accept such a hypothesis, we do not need to anticipate the date of the king’s official act as, for example, Yi Byeongdo does on the basis of some events, like that regarding Sadaham (斯多含), reported as preceding the year 576 (*Samguk sagi*, 4: the case of Sadaham dates to 562).¹⁷ But there is another, enticing possibility. *Samguk yusa* states that some years passed from the dismantling of the *Wonhwa* to the creation of the *Hwarang*. What if the Sadaham is to be referred to as the *Wonhwa*? What if the *Wonhwa* themselves were tasked with military actions, making Korea the only culture in the Far East to have practiced Amazonism (see above)?

Sadaham died of grief for the death of his comrade Mugwan (武官), a grief that possibly implies a relationship stronger than simple friendship. What kind of love existed between the two? The episodes related to *Wonhwa/Hwarang* often show couples’ affairs (Junjeong/Nammo, Sadaham/Mugwan, Burye/Ansang, Gwisan/Chuhang, and others). These are stories of love and jealousy also common to other famous couples of ancient literature, such as Achilles/Patroclus in *Iliad*, Euryalus/Nisus in *Aeneid*, Cloridano/Medoro in *Orlando furioso*, and others. All are relationships where the homoerotic context is more or less evident. But tales about *Wonhwa/Hwarang* are presented as historical

¹⁷ However, McBride (2005, p. 243) notices that, when identifying the concepts of “*Hwarang*” and “*pungwolju* (風月主),” the origin of *Hwarang* themselves could be dated back to 514.

facts illustrating, together with strong passions, a formidable sense of camaraderie. If we consider, at once, the sexual ambiguity of the term “*hwarang*,” the association, in later times, of the *Hwarang* with male shamans or even male prostitutes, and their feminine look, we can suspect inside the *Hwarang* corps the existence of homosexual relationships similar to those present in Thebe’s Sacred Battalion. The sexual ambiguity of *Hwarang* is so evident that the author of *Haedong goseung jeon* felt the necessity to drive away any suspicion by means of a comment that seems to be an authentic *excusatio non petita*. After dealing with the *Hwarang* corps, the author praises King Jinheung, so different from the corrupted Emperor Ai (哀帝, r. 7-1 BCE) of the Former Han (前漢) dynasty. In particular, a passage by the Chinese historiographer Ban Gu (班固, 32-92) is analyzed¹⁸: “Emperor Ai only loved futile lewdness, so Ban Gu said: ‘To incline towards those delicate and beautiful things that entice humans’ mind not only is natural to women but also to men.’ However, if we look, this is not right when we speak about those days [of Silla]” (哀帝徒以色是愛故班固曰柔曼之傾人意非特女徒蓋亦有男色焉評之不可同日而語矣). Even if the passage is obscure in its final part, there is no doubt that the author of *Haedong goseung jeon* tried to separate the Chinese customs from Silla history. Emperor Ai is well known for his homosexuality (Hinsch, 1990, p. 44ff.), and it is not mere chance that his name is countered with that of Jinheung. This was an attempt to clarify the name of a king whose zeal in choosing “beautiful boys” could have given rise, in later periods, to some suspects.

The *Hwarang*’s sexual ambiguity is perceived, after Ayukai Fusanoshin¹⁹, also by Richard Rutt (1961, pp. 57-61), who, however,

¹⁸ The original passage is in *Qian Han shu*, 93.

¹⁹ Ayukai’s ideas are quite original in a context that, however, sees Japanese scholars such as Mishina Shōei and Suematsu Yasukazu to give perhaps excessive (and uncritical) importance to Shamanism in Silla. See Ayukai (1931- [especially the fourth part]), Mishina (1974) and

only uses as main terms of comparison the groups of wandering performers, like the *Namsadang* (男寺黨), typical to the Joseon period. Eventually Rutt suspends any judgment on *Hwarang*'s homosexuality, perhaps because he refuses to accept the idea that what represented an exception in Joseon society could have been quite normal at the time of Silla. Actually, the *Namsadang* only are relics, the extant "tip of the iceberg" of a past that Goryeo and Joseon intellectualism has tried to bury at any cost.²⁰

Whatever is the truth, there is no doubt that the establishment (or the "officialization") of *Wonhwa* and *Hwarang* are two faces of an identical project in the course of which *Hwarang* eventually replaced *Wonhwa*. The continuity between the two organizations is clearly expressed in *Haedong goseungjeon* (Life of Beobun = King Jinheung), where a passage taken from *Hwarang segi* says that "...according to the content of (*Hwarang*) *segi*, from the *Wonhwa* to the end of Silla there were around two hundred *Hwarang*, of whom the *Four Sages* were the wisest (自原郎至羅末凡二百餘人其中四仙最賢且如世記中)." *En passant*, it should be noticed that, as it is hard to imagine that only 200 people belong to *Hwarang* in about 350 years, this record (if authentic) must be only referred to those *Hwarang* who achieved special merits: probably they must have been commanders of *Hwarang* brigades.

However, the impression is that the analyses of *Hwarang* (starting from their very name) made by ancient (and less ancient) authors have been biased not only by the scarcity of elements at the disposal of historiographers, but also by a kind of self-imposed censorship aimed to not investigate, in an in-depth way, some evident contradictions. This is

Suematsu (1954). The views of Japanese scholars are sharply criticized by Bak Yun-seop (Bak Yun-seop, 2006: especially pp. 47-50), whose attack seems heavily influenced by a Confucian-oriented mind.

²⁰ In this regard, I will only recall the fact that *Namsadang* actually replaced groups formed by women. The resemblance with the passage from the *Wonhwa* to the *Hwarang* is impressive.

probably due to cultural changes that have occurred in Korea since the Silla period. Still today, much of the scientific production regarding *Hwarang* deals with their “education” and, especially, their military training associated with their road to virtue. This is an attitude clearly deriving from Confucian thought still influencing Korean scholars. It is also a fact that the oldest records about *Hwarang* date from the middle and late Goryeo period, that is to say no less than 600 years after the establishment of *Hwarang* corps. How embarrassing would it have been for a Greek of the fourth century CE (then in a Christian context) to deal with the *Sacred Battalion* of Thebe that flourished 600 years earlier? We must think that something similar has happened with the authors of the sources about *Hwarang* that we can read today.

Before attempting any hypothesis regarding the terms “*wonhwa*” and “*hwarang*,” we should consider that these Sino-Korean words are probably translations of pure Silla terms. We know nothing about such hypothetical terms, but what is sure is that the terms “*wonhwa*” and “*hwarang*,” as they are, are full of sexual ambiguity. In English, these terms are often translated as “Original Flowers” and “Flowers’ Youth.” However, we do not need a doctoral degree in linguistics to understand that such translations are nearly meaningless. As a matter of fact, the character 花 also indicates “woman.” Indeed, the identity of the concepts of “flower” and “woman” is easily traceable in many cultures, and Korea does not represent an exception from ancient times. In this regard, it is enough to think of *Nakhwaam* (落花巖), the “Rock of fallen flowers,” from which the court ladies of Baekje voluntarily fell into the river in order to avoid any abuse from Silla-Tang soldiers, acts celebrated since the Goryeo period in epic poems such as *Jewang ungi* (帝王韻紀, *Register of Verses of Emperors and Kings*), 2: “The Silla King called the Tang army, that came quickly under Su Dingfang, and attacked Baekje’s capital. Arrows and projectiles fell like rain for land and water. And then many ladies, for a long time acquainted with the Court, chose to put an end to their lives, by throwing themselves into the river. And the rugged

cliff dominating the once called “King’s River shore,” now is the “Rock of fallen flowers”....

羅王申奏邀天討
命蘇定方下態貌
水陸矢石紛如雨
幾多紅紛墮清流
落花巖聳大王浦

The term “*wonhwa*” means then “original women,” perhaps in the sense of “true, authentic women.” We must keep in mind this meaning when we will consider the concept of “*hwarang*.”

In the case of *Hwarang*, we must start from the second character, 郎. Despite the numerous translations with “youth,” the semantic sphere of this word refers, first of all, to masculinity and “maleness” in general, regardless of the age. We are not able to know whether *Hwarang* had a “retirement age” after which they were not considered and called “*Hwarang*” any longer.²¹ However, it is a fact that in *Samguk yusa* the term “-rang” is used not only for youths, but also for aged people, as in the already quoted *Mo Jukjirangga*, a poem seemingly written by a pupil in memory of the lost beauty of his Master. We also should exclude the use of “-rang” in Korean texts as a reference to a precise, bureaucratic position, even though we cannot be certain whether the term “-rang” following proper nouns always implies belonging to the *Hwarang* corps or, in certain cases, is a mere appellation. Moreover, the character 郎 is countered with another, similar homophone ideogram with which it can be easily confused. (In fact, the two characters occasionally appear confused also in ancient texts such as *Samguk yusa*, 3: 王又念欲興邦國.

²¹ According to Yi Jong-uk (2002, pp. 100-3), after their “retirement” *Hwarang* devoted themselves to agriculture or military roles, or even became leaders of their villages. Yi’s views, however, are based on a record reported by the controversial *Hwarang segi*.

順先風月道. 更下令選良家男子有德行者. 改爲花娘.) This character is “rang (娘)” and concerns the feminine world. It appears frequently in the literary world and still is used, for example, in the Sino-Korean word “*nanjja* (娘子)” (girl, virgin, maid. However, the *Dohwarang* (桃花娘) reported in *Samguk yusa*, 1, is a married woman.), that is nothing but an aulic, polite synonym of the pure Korean “계집 아이.” It must also be added that, at least in Middle Korean, this character was also pronounced “nyang” (maid, virgin; a title still used for young, unmarried women but today usually written “嬢”) as is unequivocally reported in *Dongguk jeongun* (東國正韻, *Correct sounds of Korea*), *Hunmong jahoe*, and *Jaryu juseok* (字類註釋, *Explanations of the Various Characters*).²²

The word “*hwarang*” is therefore composed by two characters indicating opposite semantic spheres: “*hwa*” (feminine sphere) and “*rang*” (masculine sphere). But if “*hwa*” also means “woman” (and we have no reason for denying this), the term “*hwarang*” becomes a mere synonym of “*yeorang*” (女郎), a word that, according to Yi Hui-seung (1971: 2008), means: 1) a strong tempered woman acting like a man, and 2) prostitute. Therefore, to give “*hwarang*” a meaning such as “women-like men,” “men-like women,” or “women and men” is anything but impossible. In any case, the term “*hwarang*” mirrors *per se* a strong sexual ambiguity, and it is not for a mere chance that, starting from the Joseon period, *Hwarang* will be associated with male shamans²³, a “category” of people where sexual ambiguity is easy to find. I will not go as far as say that all *Hwarang* actually were women. In this regard, I

²² To be precise, *Dongguk jeongun* reports “娘: 냥”; *Hunmong jahoe* reports “娘: 거집냥”; and *Jaryu juseok* reports “娘: 쇼녀냥.”

²³ The use of the word “*hwarang*” to indicate the male shaman (and not simply shamaness’ husband) still survives in some areas of Gyeongsang Province and Gangwon Province (Seo Jeong-beom, 1974, p. 78). Moreover, Seo Jeong-beom himself individuates in the character “*hwa* (花)” the basic concept of the words “*hwarang*” and “*wonhwa*.” In this regard, he associates the term “flower” with the artificial flowers, symbolizing both the masculine and the feminine sex, created by shamans for their ceremonies (Seo Jeong-beom, 1974, pp. 79-80).

cannot accept the hypothesis of Sin Bong-nyong (2001). Nevertheless, the objection raised by Sin is reasonable: what is the sense of choosing “beautiful men” if they are destined to serve the nation (either as warriors or officers) and then they should be selected on the basis of their talent rather than beauty?

I think that this can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, it is possible that, according to the esthetic parameters of ancient Silla, beauty was associated with virtue. Indeed, this relationship is common to various cultures. To give only two examples, the association of “beauty” with “good,” summarized in the motto *καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός* (Beautiful and Good), represented the basis of esthetics in Classical Greece, but such an association is traceable in ancient Rome, too. It is condensed in the Latin proverb *Mens sana in corpore sano* (Healthy mind in healthy body), which is still widely used. On the other hand, we do not have to forget the sacred character of *Hwarang* or, at least, of their leaders. Their connection with Buddhism is so clear that it leaves no room for doubt, but we have good reasons for believing that *Hwarang*’s sacredness preceded Buddhism itself. The sacred *Hwarang* portrayed by Gakhun (or pseudo-Gakhun) and Iryeon are only an attempt by the authors to make *Hwarang*’s primordial sacredness converge in the new faith, Buddhism, once this became the state religion. We do not know whether the two people whose oath is engraved in the so-called *Imsin seogiseok* (壬申誓記石, Stone of the oath made in the *Imsin* year²⁴) were *Hwarang* or not. What is sure is that once again we come across a “couple,” and this couple dedicated and consecrated itself by making a pledge in the name of Heaven, in accord with the oldest tradition.

Make-up and beautiful dresses imply a ritual of sacrifice. In many cultures the victims of a sacrifice (either humans or animals) were richly

²⁴ In the case of *Imsin seogiseok*, the year may be either 676 or 732. See Yi Byeong-do, 1957. Bak Yeon-su, 1982, identifies the two authors of the stele as *Hwarang*, but he thinks the year to have been earlier, during the reign of King Jinpyeong, or 579-632.

adorned before being sacrificed. In this regard, I only will recall the case of the *capacocha* child sacrifice in Inca culture (Bray and others, 2005). Moreover, since they are offered to gods, victims must be physically perfect. The Samnites of *Legio linteata* and the “immortals” of Persia are said to have worn splendid armor as proof of their special status, obtained (at least in the case of Samnites) after a sacred ritual. Thanks to make-up and beautiful dresses, *Hwarang* entered a new dimension, and this dimension is a feminine one, after the failure of *Wonhwa*. Were they made eunuchs after a particular ceremony? We do not have any evidence about the existence of official eunuchs in Silla, even if in Balhae (渤海) the *Hangbaekguk* (巷伯局) office seems to have been concerned with the management of court eunuchs, too. In any case, still in Goryeo, *Seollang* (仙郎, a term that is to be considered a synonym of *Hwarang*, at least the *Hwarang* of noble birth²⁵) were beautifully dressed before dancing (*Pahan-jip*, 3) and received attention for their pleasant look, as in the case of a certain boy Bak (朴) reported in *Dongguk yi sanggukjip*, 9 (次韻空空上人贈朴少年五十韻...).

More probably, once made up and beautifully dressed, *Hwarang* were ideally transported to pre-Silla times or to the very roots of Silla culture, a historical past, preceding Buddhism, where women had a leading role and homoeroticism was more widely accepted. Perhaps, the creation/officialization of *Wonhwa* and *Hwarang* represented for King Jinheung a kind of arrangement, a “price to pay” to his people in exchange for the acceptance of Buddhism. However, if this hypothesis is correct, we should also consider the possibility that in the pre-Silla period (or in the most remote phase of Silla history), women joined men

²⁵ The *Seollang*, seen as descendants of the *Hwarang*, are sometimes quoted in early Goryeo documents, including epigraphs (as in the case of Gwang Hyeop [光叶] and Kim Hyeop [金叶]): 仙郎光叶金叶阿志 (Hwang Su-yeong, 1976, p. 182). They are generally said to have been of noble origin and they seem to be connected with (and to have had a role as performers in) the *Palgwanhoe* festival (八關會). *Seollang* also are quoted in the Chinese text *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* (宣和奉使高麗圖經, *Illustrated Record of an Embassy to Goryeo in the Xuanhe Era*), 21.

in military activity. In other words, we have to consider the possibility of the existence of Amazonism in Korea, and this would be an exceptional fact. As we have seen above, in ancient times the only known cases of Amazonism referred to the nomadic people (presumably of Iranian origin) that settled in the plains ranging from the Black Sea to the Ural Mountains.

But the situation in the Far East is very different. The existence of Amazonism is not proven, despite the high number of “warrior-women” portrayed in literature. The Amazons in Far Eastern literature, however, seem to live with embarrassment regarding their condition, probably under the influence of patriarchy affecting the collective conscience. With reference to Chinese literature, when Mulan (木蘭) returns home after twelve years spent as a soldier *in disguise*, she acts as follows (*Mulan-shi* [木蘭詩], in *Gushi yuan* [古詩源], 13): “After opening the door of East Pavilion, I sit in the bed of the western room. After getting rid of the war-time cloak, I again dress in my old skirt. Near the window I put in order the cloud of my hair, in front of the mirror I adorn myself with a yellow flower.”

開我東閣門
坐我西間牀
脫我戰時袍
著我舊時裳
當窗理雲鬢
對鏡帖花黃

In sum, suddenly after her return, the first thought of Mulan is that of retaking her femaleness. As a matter of fact, the main virtue of Mulan is not her military skill, but the Confucian duty of filial piety.

Korean literature presents various examples of Amazonism, generally traceable in the classical novels. However, even in this case Amazonism seems to be something occasional and embarrassing. We can say

that Amazonism was already considered a case of “sexual ambiguity.” Shortly before her death, the main character of the classical novel *Bujang yangmun rok* (傅張兩門錄) states: “My only regret is to have been born with a Commander’s spirit in a woman’s body” (장부의 마음으로 몸이 여자 되니 천만 한이 유유하도다). As we can see, Far Eastern literature finds it difficult to reconcile femaleness and military skill. The only possible case of true Amazonism I was able to find in Far Eastern texts concerns the Central Asian Xiongnu (匈奴) people. The source is *Qian Han shu* (前漢書, *History of the Former Han*), 70. The passage refers to 35 BCE and regards the episode of the siege by the Chinese of a fortress controlled by Zhizhi (郅支), the rebel emperor of the Xiongnu. In the dramatic phases of the fight, when the Chinese are about to overwhelm the resistance of the defenders: “The Shanyu (emperor) himself, after wearing an armor, went up a tower, while the empress and several tens of other wives, all equipped with bow, shot the besiegers” (單于乃被甲在樓上, 諸闕氏夫人數十皆以弓射外人). Of course, one can say that necessity could have forced Zhizhi’s wives and concubines to become warriors, but, as rightly pointed out by Daffinà (1982, p. 82), archery skill cannot be learned in a single day, and thus we must assume that the women who fought the Han should have received some kind of training.

Apart from this episode, to find evidence of Amazonism in Far East is difficult. As for Korea, the presence of ruling queens at Silla cannot authorize maintaining the existence of Amazonism, not even supported by convincing archaeological finds. Regarding Silla, we only may forge a theory leading to hypothesize the presence of warrior-women: *Hwarang* also carried out military actions. *Hwarang* represent the logical continuation of *Wonhwa*. Therefore, *Wonhwa* also performed military actions.²⁶

²⁶ On *Wonhwa*, also with reference to their possible involvement in military actions, see Kim Yeol-gyu (1996, p. 72ff.) and Hong Sun-chang (1996, especially p. 157).

This is an enticing theorem which also is very hard to demonstrate. Nevertheless, we have to think that Korean women in the Three Kingdoms period were at least expert in managing typically masculine activities. The well-known saga of Ondal (溫達), reported in *Samguk sagi*, 45, shows a Koguryo princess able to give her husband advice about the quality of horses. The princess also had supernatural powers (as Queen Seondeok [善德女王] also had) and followed her husband to the battlefield, as we can understand from the episode of Ondal's bier, that could be transported to Koguryo only thanks to the magic words pronounced by the princess herself. Some oral variants of the same saga report that the princess taught Ondal even the use of the sword. In any case, oral literature admits more easily the existence of warrior women in Korea. In this regard, an interesting record comes from Carlo Rossetti, an Italian diplomat who directed Italy's Legation for about eight months starting from November 1902. In his *Corea e coreani* (Korea and Koreans), the first encyclopedia of Korea in the western world, Rossetti wrote, apropos of the origin of kite games in Korea: "According to a legend... A King of Goryeo decided to declare war on the island of Quelpart, at that time called Tamna, ruled by dreadful Amazons..." (Rossetti, 1905, p. 166).

Rossetti was not a Korean reader/speaker and we do not know what word he translated as "Amazons." However, legends often have a basis in truth. If their content is added to the massive literary production regarding the military deeds of heroines, to the hints traceable in historical sources and to the undisputable importance women had in ancient Korea, the hypothesis of the existence of some kind of Amazonism in the Korean peninsula (especially from the late Bronze Age to the Proto-Three Kingdoms period) appears less absurd than it could seem at a first glance.

Conclusions

The sixth century represents for Silla an epoch of dramatic changes during which the various kings tried to find a “new way” to approach the geo-political asset of Northeast Asia. This required shedding some traditional cultural patterns (that is, human sacrifices, attested until the first part of the sixth century [Yi Seung-jun & Kim Su-hwan, 2011, pp. 121-6]), or transforming them into social elements more suitable to the new political projects. The aim of such reforms was to secure internal harmony and strengthen national conscience by founding a strongly centralized state ruled by monarchs in the name of Buddhism, the new religion of which Silla must be both representative and defender. This great political process also implied an increase of military activity (the conquest of Gaya, between 532 and 562, was perhaps the most significant military event of the sixth century for Silla) and then the necessity to have as many troops as possible at the nation’s disposal. This need for new military forces probably concerned Baekje and Koguryo in the same period, too. Ondal (who also lived in the sixth century) may be seen as an “outcast” transformed by King Pyeongwon (平原王, r. 559-90) into an excellent commander (see note 9 above).

It is almost certain that *Hwarang* were part of this project. Perhaps, originally they were marginalized people (belonging to an ethnic minority?), strongly connected with shamanistic rituals they used to practice in the course of their nomadic or semi-nomadic life. In this regard, they could have been similar to the Samnites of *Legio linteata*. Inside these groups, women should have had a primary, leading role, and even Amazonism cannot be ruled out. Perhaps, hence comes the term “*wonhwa*”: “original women,” with a meaning similar to the expression “the first people,” which refers to native Americans.

King Jinheung gave these groups an official character by dividing them into brigades controlled by a representative of official power. As *Hwarang* used to wander the country, their noble commanders were

forced to stay with them, particularly when far from the capital. The noble commanders then ceased to represent a danger for the central power. In this regard, the hypothesis of a growth of *Hwarang*'s military power after the crisis of monarchy and its relationship with Silla's fall (Jeon Gi-ung, 1994, p. 123ff.). Was exactly that the terrible secret of *Hwarang*?) is surely fascinating.

In order to eliminate a possible source of internal conflict and make them good Silla citizens, they were taught Confucian and Buddhist principles to be harmonized with their original customs and beliefs. King Jinheung tried to preserve some original cultural patterns, such as women's superiority, but, as this experiment ended in failure, he opened the groups' leadership to men, too. However, before being admitted, men were beautifully dressed and made up: a rite of passage able to make them "sacred" and transform them into women. This may explain the sexual ambiguity of the term "*hwarang*."

There is no reason for doubting that a part of the *Hwarang* served as Silla soldiers. In this regard I imagine the organization of *Hwarang* quite similar to that of the Knights Templar. There were warriors, of course, but most of them should have been stablemen, servants, secretaries, equerries, and others. These humbler individuals probably represented the variegated world of *Nangdo* (郎徒), whose importance is rightly remarked by Jo Beom-hwan (2008, p. 404ff.). Some of them could have received prizes or rewards for their value or honesty and promoted to court officers. Some others could have become entertainers or male/female concubines. However, at least those *Hwarang* destined to perform military action seem to have been organized in bands where couple-relationships were privileged. In this case, their resemblance with the Theban Sacred Battalion or the Sacred Band appears very close.

My personal theory is that they always remained something apart from the ordinary people, and when the historical scenario changed, making them unnecessary or simply embarrassing, they were discharged from history as the Knights Templar were. Since they had remained

followers of ancient beliefs and customs, they practiced sexual promiscuity and probably homosexuality and perhaps, in the early days, Amazonism, too. Their effeminacy, their shamanistic rituals, and the role of women inside their organization became something intolerable and shameful. In the collective conscience of Koreans, they simply turned into shamans and prostitutes in spite of the attempts, especially by Iryeon, to recycle them as unblemished and blessed heroes. Indeed, in Goryeo, even if sexual promiscuity and freedom continued, until to shock, in 1123 a foreign envoy such as Xu Jing (徐兢) (*Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing*, 23 and *passim*), the sexual ambiguity had already been institutionalized and “regularized” thanks to the creation of precise figures, as eunuchs and *gisaeng*, that do not seem attested in Silla, at least in an official way. To think of someone who was, at once, shaman, warrior and (possibly) homosexual should have been almost impossible: a destiny similar to that of Thebe’s “Sacred Battalion.” What is sure is that in Goryeo the perception of *Hwarang* drastically changed (Kim Sang-hyeon, 1989, p. 231ff.) and the attempt to transform them into Buddhist heroes seems an act of political-nationalistic propaganda aimed to oppose the rise of Confucianism and, at the same time, to recover the national identity violated by the foreign invasions.

In the twentieth century, the *Hwarang* have resurfaced from their obscure past. Once again, they were called to help the country by representing the best part of Korean people in ethnic and ideological nationalism. No wonder that this has happened. Simply, for their particular nature, *Hwarang* “deserved” that and still they are passing through what happens to those declared “sacred:” to be, at once, blessed and cursed.

**A TENTATIVE TABLE ILLUSTRATING SOME FEATURES OF HWARANG
IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER “SPECIAL CORPS” OF ANTIQUITY**

Organization	Type	Sacredness	Sexual Ambiguity	“Tutorage”
Samites’ <i>Legio lintea</i>	I(?)	Yes (Sacred to Jupiter <Zeus>)	?	?
Thebe’s Sacred Battalion	I	? (Despite the name, its sacredness is not certain)	Yes (Adult-Adult Homosexuality)	Yes
Achaemenid Persia’s “Immortals”	I	Probable	? (For certain, they had wives and children)	?
Macedonian “Hetairoi”	I (first phase) II (second phase)	? (first phase) No (second phase)	Possible (first phase) No (second phase)	? (first phase) No (second phase)
Knights Templar	II	Yes (They were monks)	Yes (Celibate and chastity)	Yes
Amazons (actually Sauromatae women)	I(?)	Probable (Female warriors with religious power?)	Probable (Relationship marriage/bravery in war)	?
Silla’s <i>Hwarang</i>	I(?)	Yes (Strong relations with shamanistic practices and Buddhism)	Probable (Androgyny; Perhaps Amazonism, too)	Yes

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