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Beacon-Fires of Old Korea.

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“On the 19th of July, 1588, the sails of the Armada were seen from the Lizard, and the English beacons flared out their alarm along the coast The news found England ready.”

These words from Green’s History might have been used more than once, to describe events in the peninsula now known as Chosen. Long before Elizabeth’s sailors battled with Philip’s, galleons, the Koreans had learned that safety from sea rovers, coming from East or West, lay in a system of warning fires.

Since the dawn of history, man has used signal fires. The North American Indians had “Smoke talks,” when a blanket dropped over the fire, and then lifted, made interruptions, long or short, in the column of gray smoke that ascended into the clear desert air. Sometimes the call to the entire tribe to rally, and attack the whites, was seen and read by keen-eyed scouts, who had mastered the Indian’s own code. Then the danger might be avoided, but all too often the early travellers went on without dreaming of their coming doom, to find themselves at last surrounded by over-whelming forces, called from every direction by these messages that travelled with the speed of light.

Aeschylus in the Agamemnon speaks of signal—literally “courier”—fires. In England, apart from the emergencies of invasion, beacons were regularly used to flash news and warnings from point to point. A thrilling chapter in Lorna Doone tells how the Doones burned Dunkery Beacon because it hindered their raids on their neighbors.

The fire signal that has perhaps been most widely celebrated was hung in the belfry of the Old North Church in Boston, April 18, 1775.

“He said to his friend, ‘If the British march

By land or sea from the town to-night,

Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch

Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—

One if by land, and two, if by sea ;

And I on the opposite shore will be, [page 47]

Ready to ride and spread the alarm

Through every Middlesex village and farm,

For the country folk to be up and arm.’”

Korea’s Fire-Signals were more elaborate, and better systematized, than the more or less makeshift devices already mentioned. The map shows the 5 lines, 4 of them following the coast-lines, and 1 entirely inland, with 696 beacons, each of which was lighted every night, and was (at least in theory) ready for a smoke signal all day long.

I am told that the signal from the most distant point—in Hamkyung Province—which was relayed by 86 stations, reached Seoul in less than 4 hours. That is under 3 minutes for each station. The distance covered was more than 300 miles, and would have been a journey of 15 days over ragged mountains.

A typical beacon is the one at Kumipo, in Whang Hai Province, (This location may be more familiar to many readers under the name of “Sorai Beach.”)

This beacon is farther west than any other south of An- ju, and as it commanded the entrance to the rich farming lands of Whang Hai Province— it was here that the Alceste and Lyra came, for the first visit to Korean waters made by British forces—it was important in national defence. As it does not show on the map, I have inserted a star to locate it The promontory averages 50 feet above high water, and juts boldly out into the ocean. The neck that joins the “Point” to the mainland is so low that if this coast should sink 30 feet, the “Pong Dai” would be on a small island. Before the summer colony built its cottages along the cliffs, there was only one dwelling, the little tiled house of the beacon keeper, nestling below the beacon, half a mile from the fishing village at the port of Kumipo.

A low rampart encircles a space possibly 20 yards across. The grassy wall is just high enough to hide from anyone on the ocean the keeper, as bent double, he crept in to fire the waiting signal. The Pong Dai, literally “watch tower,” occupies most of the space inside the rampart. It is a truncated pyramid, built of rough stones, the top of it mak-[page 48] ing a platform 20 feet higher than the level of the ground, so from this post the whole ocean can be waiched, as far as the eye can reach. Inside the pyramid is a chimney, 4 feet square, at the bottom of which is a horizontal flue, that leads to the space inside the rampart. So in time of need the keeper could, himself unseen, reach the opening of the flue, and light the beacon, while the strong draft up the chimney would produce a signal that was described to me by a Korean friend who watched them often, as “in no way inferior to the tail of a comet.”

In this particular case, the signal of distress served not only to notify the local military commander, and after him the Provincial General, and in due course, the Commander-in-Chief at Seoul, it could also be seen at once at Ong Jin, just across the 12-mile-wide bay. Ong Jin was a naval station, with men-of-war, and a garrison. This signal would bring a force from there at top speed to repel invaders, and there were similar garrisons up and down the coast.

So much for one typical beacon. I fancy the others were much like this, at least along the coasts. While in the mountains the rampart for protection was not needed, the Pong Dai (峰台) (observation platform) and Pong Su (峰燧) (flue for the fire) were found, perhaps more or less elaborated, everywhere.

The histories tell us that China had a system of beacons in the days of the Three Kingdom (三國)—the 3rd century A. D.—and that even then the part of what is now Korea, adjacent to China, used beacons. In time of war, or for other special needs, temporary installations were also made along the hills—possibly the earliest system of field telegraphs known to military science.

There has always been a certain flexibility about the entire fire signal system. For example; when two kings of old Korea were exiled to the island some miles off the coast of Whang Hai, known as Big Blue (大靑), not only was a palace built there, but a beacon was also established, so messages might be sent (and possibly received) even when navigation[page 49] was interrupted. When the period of exile was done, palace and beacon were alike let fall into ruin, and today only the outlines of either can be traced.

The books contain other scattered references to our subject, but in this case, as in most others the mine of information is the Moon-hun Pi-go. As I can well believe that others, like myself, know little more than the name of this compendium of data concerning Korea as she once was, I take pleasure in quoting here a memorandum concerning this amazing work, kindly furnished by Dr. Gale.

The Moon-hun Pi-go (文献備考)

National Encyclopaedia.

The first edition of the Moon-hun Pi-go was undertaken in the 40th year of King Yung-jo, 1770 A.D., Hong Pong-han (洪鳳纖) a noted scholar of that reign being appointed to the task. He made the Chinese Moon-hun T’ong-go (文獻通考) his model and included in the scope of his work : Astronomy, Geography, Ceremony, Music, Literature, Taxes, Finances, Population, Commerce, Office, Education, Rank, giving the historical facts attending each.

There were 40 volumes as bound, 100 as marked inwardly.

The original book of the Moon-hun Pi-go as done in Yung-jo’s day was made up of 13 sections. These now required revision and King Chung-jong (1777- 1800 A. D.) appointed Yi Man-oon(李萬運)to under take it with the result that he added 7 new sections making 20 in all.

Later the Emperor Yi T’ai-wang (李太王) commissioned Pak Yong-tai (朴容大) who still lives, 80 years of age, to undertake a new revision. His work finally included 16 divisions as printed in 1908. These divisions are : Astronomy, Geography, the Royal House, Ceremony, Music, Punishments, Taxes, Finance, Population, Commerce, Foreign Relations, Government Examinations, Education, Office, Literature. [page 50]

As bound, there are 51 volumes—the extra one being given to errata—and an index. The volumes as inwardly marked now number 250.

In this book we read that the beacons were systematically established in 1151 A. D. in the 3d year of King Wi Jong (毅宗) of the Koryu Dynasty. The capital was then at Song-do, and the Capital Province reached from what is now Whang Ju to the Han Riven The dangers of those days were evidently from the Northwest, for the plan was proposed by Cho Chin Yak (曹晋若) “General of the West and North”, and provided only for notice of danger. The signal was a fire by night, a smoke by day. A single fire meant approaching danger, 2 fires, or 3, meant increasing urgency, and 4, the maximum, called for “help at once”.

The plan allowed 4,000 soldiers at each signal station. Let us remember that round numbers are always subject to question, and that the civil authorities do not always grant the requests of the military men. Part of the local taxes were allotted for their support.

When the Yi Dynasty was established in Seoul—1392—the old system was greatly improved. The five lines were laid out, and the excellent idea of a nightly signal, that told the Capital all was well, and at the same time tested the watchers, was put into force.

One fire meant peace, 2 meant “even a shadow of the approach of foreign thieves,” 3 their actual approach. If they entered the country, that was told by 4, fighting by 5. A continuous fire meant continued fighting, I suppose this was a call for re-enforcements. Evidently the fire was smothered for a time, then allowed to blaze out again, to get the number required. The number did not mean different fires blazing at once, but referred to a succession of blazes.

The system was strictly military. In the country districts, the reports as received were sent by the keeper to the local Commandant, not to the Magistrate of the County. In Seoul, they went to the Minister of War, who reported to the King. I have not found any record of using the beacons to transmit orders from the Capital, or to convey any messages[page 51] other than those shown in the code just given. It is quite possible that such uses were made, and the codes may still be lying, with a wealth of other material on old Korea, in the Library. Doubtless some of our members here this afternoon can tell from their own observation of seeing the fires blaze on peak after peak, till finally on the summit of South Mountain shone the light that told the Palace, center of the nation’s life, that for one more night the “Land of the Morning Calm” was at peace throughout its borders.

As in the case of many another plan that was perfect on paper, human nature hindered the working of the beacons. In the first century of the Yi Dynasty, Inspector of the Provinces Yi Hun Sik (李玄錫) reported that the first, meaning the most important “road”, the one leading from Hamkyung Province, was continually interrupted.

He gave as the reason the sparseness of population—”for 50 or 100 li there is no one living, so there is of course no one to tend the fire, or to rebuke the guardian for neglect of his duty”. He suggested that Buddhist priests were fond of mountain life, and not afraid of loneliness. He advised that a little temple be built at each beacon, the temple furnished with a priest, and he be given a low official rank, with freedom from taxation. The local authorities were to have no responsibility beyond supervision. This was not adopted in to to, but living conditions at the beacons seem to have been improved as a result of his investigations.

In 1685 Nam Ku Man (南九萬) proposed that each beacon have 5 sets of 7 men each, taking daily turns, to ensure faithful care. In many cases only exiles were available, and as they were (political) criminals, the local people looked down on beacon-keepers as a class. One of them complains of this “They will not marry our sons or our daughters, they will not treat us as human beings”.

When the soldiers went among the people to call those whose turn had come, to serve at the Pong Dai, they fell on their knees, offering presents, and beerging “Let us only escape being sent to that place”. On account of this Pak Mun Su (朴文秀) General Inspector, in 1741, advised that this[page 52]  plan of selecting keepers from among the people be given up, and that the military forces provide them. As a rule, this seems to have been done, and retired soldiers were often glad to get the post, which carried with it fields enough to support a family, rights to wood, or sometimes to fisheries. Pak was shrewd enough to suggest that a title also go with the appointment saying that if this were done, the position would be eagerly sought. “The thing pleased the King, and it was done” say the records.

The system was in operation till Kap Oh Nyun—1894— when the telegraph made it unnecessary, and with many other survivals of the old days, it was abolished by official decree. This brings to mind the words of our great English poet, written in widely different circumstances, but applicable here:

“On dune and headland sinks the fire,

Yea, all our pomp of yesterday,

Is one with Nineveh and Tyre”.