

On “Usan Island” in old Korean documents

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1 Summary

An old Korean book, *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (Geography Section of the Annals of King Sejong's Reign, 1454), states, “Usan, Mureung, two islands, are in the sea due east of the [Uljin] prefecture. The two islands are not far apart and are visible on a clear day. They were called Usan State in the Silla period.”¹ The Government of the Republic of Korea (“ROK”) connects this with Takeshima (Korean name: “Dokdo”) and claims that “in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, it is recorded that Ulleungdo (Mureung) and Dokdo (Usan) are two islands that are part of Joseon's Uljin prefecture; it is also recorded that the two islands had been territories of Usan State, which was subjugated to Silla in the early 6th century, indicating that Korea's effective control over Dokdo dates back to the Silla period.” However, the entire article of *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is pertaining to Ulleungdo. It is most probable that there was an Usan State on Ulleungdo in the 6th century, and as time passed, it came to be believed that there is an Usan Island separate from Ulleungdo. Usan in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is either an imaginary island or Ulleungdo. It is not Takeshima.

2 The ROK's view that “Usan” in old Korean documents is Takeshima

The ROK's claim is as follows: <Quotation from MOFA-ROK's pamphlet²>

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2 Geographical Recognition of Dokdo and Relevant Historical Evidence

A. Dokdo has been recognized geographically as a part of Ulleungdo.

On a clear day, Dokdo is visible to the naked eye from Ulleungdo (Ulleung Island), the island which lies in closest proximity (87.4 km) to Dokdo. Given its geographical location, Dokdo has historically been considered to be a part of Ulleungdo.

This is well evidenced in early Korean documents. For instance, the Joseon (Korean) government publication ⁽¹⁾ *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (Geography Section of the Annals of King Sejong's Reign) (1454), which provides a geographical record of

Korean territory, states, “Usan [Dokdo], Mureung [Ulleungdo] ... The two islands are not far apart from each other and thus visible on a clear day.”

While there are numerous adjacent islands surrounding Ulleungdo, Dokdo is the only one visible to the naked eye from Ulleungdo on a clear day.

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B. Korean government publications record that Korea has long recognized Dokdo as Korean territory and exercised effective control over the island.

In the Joseon (Korean) government publication ⁽²⁾ *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* (Geography Section of the Annals of King Sejong's Reign), 1454, it is recorded that Ulleungdo (Mureung) and Dokdo (Usan) are two islands that are part of Joseon's Uljin-hyeon (Uljin prefecture). It is also recorded that the two islands had been territories of Usan-guk (Usan State), which was subjugated to Silla (former kingdom of Korea) in the early 6th century (AD 512), indicating that Korea's effective control over Dokdo dates back to the Silla period.

Consistent records pertaining to Dokdo are also found in other governmental publications, including ⁽³⁾ *Sinjeong Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam* (Revised and Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea), 1531; *Dongguk Munheon Bigo* (Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea), 1770; *Man'gi Yoram* (Manual of State Affairs for the Monarch), 1808; and *Jeungbo Munheon Bigo* (Revised and Enlarged Edition of the Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea), 1908.

Particularly noteworthy is the record in the volume “Yeojigo” in ⁽⁴⁾ *Dongguk Munheon Bigo* (Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea), 1770, which states, “Ulleung [Ulleungdo] and Usan [Dokdo] are both territories of Usan-guk [Usan State], and Usan [Dokdo] is what Japan refers to as Matsushima [the old Japanese name for Dokdo].” This passage makes it evident that Usando is the present-day Dokdo and that it is Korean territory. <Quotation ends.>

3 *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* and its article on Ulleungdo

Sejong Sillok Jiriji is a geography book of eight provinces of

1 *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*『世宗實錄』地理志 江原道蔚珍縣條, 國史編纂委員會『朝鮮王朝實錄 五』Seoul: 東國文化社, 1956, p. 680.

2 MOFA (ROK), *Dokdo, Beautiful Island of Korea - Pamphlet*, pp. 5-6. <<https://dokdo.mofa.go.kr/eng/pds/pdf.jsp>> (access: May 17, 2023.)

Korea contained in *Sejong Sillok* (Annals of King Sejong's Reign) (1454). King Sejong is the fourth king (1418-1450) of the Rhee family (Joseon Dynasty). Soon after his accession to the throne, the King ordered each Province to compile and submit a record of its geography.³ *Gyeongsang-do Jiriji* (Geography of Gyeongsang Province, 1425) (the only surviving Provincial geography) is an example. Then *Sinchan Paldo Jiriji* (Newly Edited Geography of Eight Provinces) was compiled in 1432, which became the basis of *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*.⁴ The article on "Usan, Mureung" in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is as follows: <For the original text, see Document 1.>

Usan, Mureung, two islands, are located in the sea due east of the [Uljin] prefecture. The two islands are not far apart, and they can be seen if the weather is clear. [They were called Usan State in the Silla period. Another name is Ulleungdo. The land is a hundred *ri* [unit] square. Usan State had not submitted itself to Silla, relying on the steepness of the land. In the twelfth year of King Jijeung, Isabu became military commander of Haseulla province, and said, "The Usan people are intrepid. It is difficult to make them obey by force. We should rather make them give in by trickery." He made many wooden beasts of prey, placed them on battle ships, sailed to the country, and deceptively said that he would let the beasts go. The people of Usan State surrendered in fear. In the thirteenth year of Goryeo Taejo [the first King of Goryeo Kingdom], islanders Baekgil and Todu presented products [to the King]. In the thirteenth year of King Uijong, inspector Kim Yu-Rib and others returned and reported: "There is a big mountain on the island. From the top of the mountain to the sea it is 10,000 odd *bo* [unit of distance] eastwards, 13,000 odd *bo* westwards, 15,000 odd *bo* southwards, and 8,000 odd *bo* northwards. There are vestiges of village in seven places and are such relics as stone Buddhist images, iron bells and stone towers. Many *Jaeho*, *hobon* and *seoknam-cho* [medicinal plants] grow there. During the reign of Taejo of the present dynasty, the King, having heard that many people took refuge on the island, appointed Kim Rin-U of Samcheok as "Appeasing Officer" again, evacuated the inhabitants and made the island uninhabited. Rin-U said, "The land is fertile, a bamboo is big as a column, a rat is big as a cat, a peach is bigger than a measuring cup; this is how things are there."

4 Interpretation that Takeshima is visible from Ulleungdo

The validity of the ROK's claims based on *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is hereinafter examined.

First, the assertion that *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* states, "Usan [Dokdo], Mureung [Ulleungdo] ... The two islands are not far apart from each other and thus visible on a clear day" (section 2, underlined part (1) above) is a quotation from an article of *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* which states "Usan, Mureung, two islands, are

located in the sea due east of the [Uljin] prefecture. The two islands are not far apart, and they can be seen if the weather is clear." However, the "Dokdo" in square brackets ("Usan [Dokdo]") is an interpretation made and inserted by the ROK, and was not in the original. A report from 1906 by Ulleungdo county magistrate Sim Heung-Taek is the first Korean document in which the name Dokdo appears. Why, then, does the ROK interpret Usan to be Takeshima? The MOFA pamphlet explains that "while there are numerous adjacent islands surrounding Ulleungdo, Dokdo is the only one visible to the naked eye from Ulleungdo on a clear day." That is, assuming one has the modern knowledge that Ulleungdo and Takeshima are in the sea to the east of the Korean Peninsula, since *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* states that there are two islands of Usan and Mureung and since Mureung is Ulleungdo, accordingly Usan must be Takeshima; although there are many islets around Ulleungdo, Takeshima is the only one which is visible from Ulleungdo on a clear day. (Other islets are located so near that they are visible from Ulleungdo on a daily basis.)

5 Interpretation according to a rule for compiling records of geography

The sentence in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* "The two islands are not far apart, and they can be seen if the weather is clear" may literally mean that the two islands of Usan and Mureung are not far apart from each other and thus visible on a clear day, as the ROK interprets it. In a historical context, however, the sentence may be interpreted differently. Provinces were requested to compile records of geography in line with a certain rule so that the central government could put together the provincial geography and establish the geography for the entirety of Korea. According to *Gyeongsang-do Jiriji* (Geography of Gyeongsang Province, 1425) (see section 3 above), the description of the islands should include "how far they are distant from the land and whether there are inhabitants cultivating the land." The book goes on to describe Chuksan Island as "By water two hundred *bo* from the land. No field to be cultivated."⁵ This rule is not directly for *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, but if one reads in conformity with this rule, there is a possibility that the sentence "The two islands are not far apart, and they can be seen if the weather is clear" describes the distance from land. That is, although the exact value is unknown, the two islands Usan and Mureung are located at a distance visible on a clear day from the Korean Peninsula. Actually, Ulleungdo is visible but Takeshima is not, which means Usan is not Takeshima.

6 Confirmation by *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam*

That the island visible on a clear day is Ulleungdo, not Takeshima, becomes still more apparent when one consults *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam* (Revised and Augmented Survey of

3 TAGAWA Kozo 田川孝三「竹島領有に関する歴史的考察」『東洋文庫書報』20 (1988) p. 43.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

5 『慶尚道地理志・慶尚道統撰地理誌』朝鮮總督府中樞院, 1938, p. 19. See SHIMOJO Masao 下條正男『竹島は日韓どちらのものか』文春新書, 2004, pp. 162-166.

6 『新增東國輿地勝覽』卷四十五, Seoul: 東國文化社, 1958, p. 814.

the Geography of Korea, 1531), which the MOFA-ROK pamphlet refers to (section 2, underlined part (3) above).⁶ The article on “Usando Ulleungdo” reads as follows: <For the original text, see Document 2.>

Usando Ulleungdo – Also called Mureung or Ureung. The two islands are located in the sea due east of the prefecture. Three peaks, high and steep, hold up the sky. The southern peak is somewhat lower. The trees on the tops of the mountains and the shore at the foot of mountains can be vividly seen if the weather is clear. Can be reached by sailing two days with the wind. It is also said that originally Usan and Ulleung were one island. The land is a hundred *ri* square.

As cited above, *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam* modified *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*’s article “The two islands are not far apart, and they can be seen if the weather is clear” to read “Three peaks, high and steep, hold up the sky. ... The trees on the tops of the mountains ... can be vividly seen if the weather is clear.” That is, while maintaining the sentence “The two islands are located in the sea due east of the prefecture,” the sentences that follow are undoubtedly about Ulleungdo alone, and state that the trees on the tops of the mountains are visible on a clear day. (Takeshima is a rock formation on which no trees grow.)

7 Does Korea’s effective control over Takeshima date back to the Silla period?

Here, the second assertion will be examined. The ROK claims, “In *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, 1454, it is recorded that Ulleungdo (Mureung) and Dokdo (Usan) had been territories of Usan-guk (Usan State), which was subjugated to Silla (former kingdom of Korea) in the early 6th century (AD 512), indicating that Korea’s effective control over Dokdo dates back to the Silla period” (section 2, underlined part (2) above).

It is not true that *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* says “Ulleungdo (Mureung) and Dokdo (Usan) had been territories of Usan-guk (Usan State).” The *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* article speaks only about Ulleungdo. The sentences “Called Usan State in the Silla period. Another name is Ulleungdo. The land is a hundred *ri* square.” are citations from *Samguk Sagi*⁷ (The History of Three Kingdoms) (1145). An article in “the History of Silla part 4, the 6th month of the 13th year of King Jijeung’s reign” states: Usan-guk (Usan State) is in *hae-do* (island in the sea) due east of Myeong Ju [present Uljin prefecture]. Another name is Ulleungdo. The land is one hundred *ri* square. <For the original text, see Document 3.>

The story about Isabu making the people of Usan State surrender using wooden beasts of prey is also derived from *Samguk Sagi*, which states that Usan State’s other name is Ulleungdo. The story of the islanders who presented products in the 13th year of

Goryeo Taejo is about Ulleungdo. Again, the island on which Kim Yu-Rib reported to have seen a big mountain and vestiges of village in the 13th year of King Uijong, and lastly, the island where Kim Rin-U reported that the land was fertile and big bamboos grow is Ulleungdo, not Takeshima, which is a rock formation. *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* cannot be a ground for the Korean assertion that its effective control over Takeshima dates back to the Silla period.⁸

8 Conclusion: Usan[do] in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is Ulleungdo

In addition, the island Kim Rin-U visited as “Appeasing Officer” (last part of the article of *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, see section 3 above) is described as “Usando” (Usan island) in *Taejong Sillok* (Annals of King Taejong’s Reign).⁹ In the second month of the 17th year of King Taejong (1417) it is recorded: <For the original text, see Document 4.>

Appeasing officer Kim Rin-U returned from Usando. He presented products such as big bamboo, sea lion skin, unprocessed paper mulberry, cotton, and *Geom-bak* tree, and brought back three inhabitants. The number of households on the island is about 15, the population is 86, men and women altogether. ...

To sum up, the following appears to be the case. That is, in the Silla period, there was an Usan State on Ulleungdo (Ulleung Island). As time passed, people began to consider “Usan” to be the island’s name, and it was written in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, “Usan, Mureung (Ulleung), two islands, are located in the sea due east of the prefecture. The content of the article, however, is entirely about Ulleungdo, as a matter of course. The article on Kim Rin-U in *Taejong Sillok* is an example of Usando (Usan island) meaning Ulleungdo. The Usan in *Sejong Sillok Jiriji* is not Takeshima but an imaginary island or Ulleungdo.

<Postscript>

There are Korean maps made in and after 18th century in which Usan (Usando) is drawn to the east of Ulleungdo. The Usan island of this group is an islet adjacent to Ulleungdo that is called Jukdo in Korea now. As Korean officials began to visit Ulleungdo periodically, knowledge about Ulleungdo increased. They found an islet (located 2 km from it) and assumed it to be Usando. Whereas the “Usando” drawn between the Korean Peninsula and Ulleungdo is an imaginary island (Doc. 2, “Map of Eight Provinces,” *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam*), this Usan island depicted to the east of Ulleungdo (Doc. 5) does exist, but it is not Takeshima either.

7 *Samguk Sagi*『三國史記』is the first history book in Korea, compiled by Kim Bu-Sik金富弼and others in the 23rd year of Goryeo Injong高麗仁宗 (1145). It records the history of Silla新羅, Goguryeo高句麗 and Baekje百濟 (TAGAWA田川, *op. cit.* note 3 above). 『三國史記』學習院東洋文化研究所 (學東叢書1), 1964, p. 33-34.

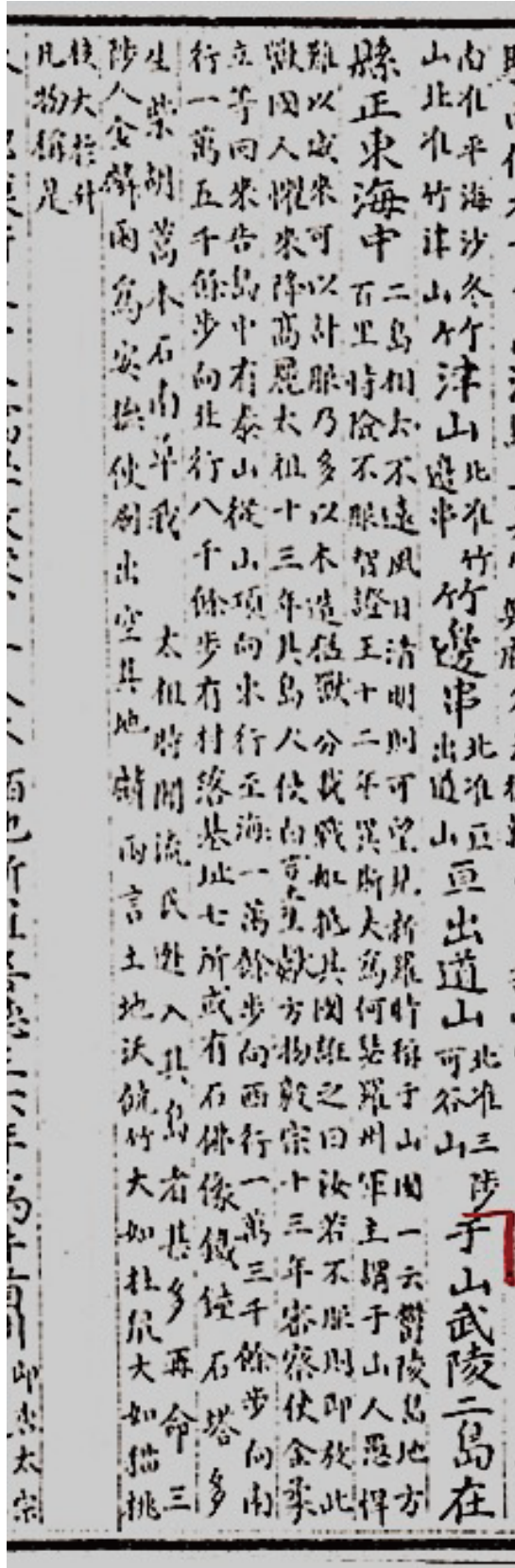
8 The ROK claims that *Dongguk Munheon Bigo* (Reference Compilation of Documents on Korea)『東國文獻備考』(1770) states, “Ulleung [Ulleungdo] and Usan [Dokdo] are both territories of Usan-guk [Usan State], and Usan [Dokdo] is what Japan refers to as Matsushima [the old Japanese name for Dokdo]” (section 2, underlined part (4) above). While the Korean claim might link *Dongguk Munheon Bigo* with *Sejong Sillok Jiriji*, it is not appropriate to interpret a document from the 15th century by simply applying a writer’s opinion from the 18th century. On *Dongguk Munheon Bigo*, see SHIMOJO下條, *op. cit.* note 5 above, pp. 100-103.

9 *Taejong Sillok*『太宗實錄』太宗十七年二月壬戌条, 國史編纂委員會『朝鮮王朝實錄 二』Seoul: 東國文化社, 1955, p. 146.

Document 1

Sejong Sillok Jiriji 『世宗實錄』地理志

“Gang-weon province, Uljin prefecture” 江原道蔚珍縣条



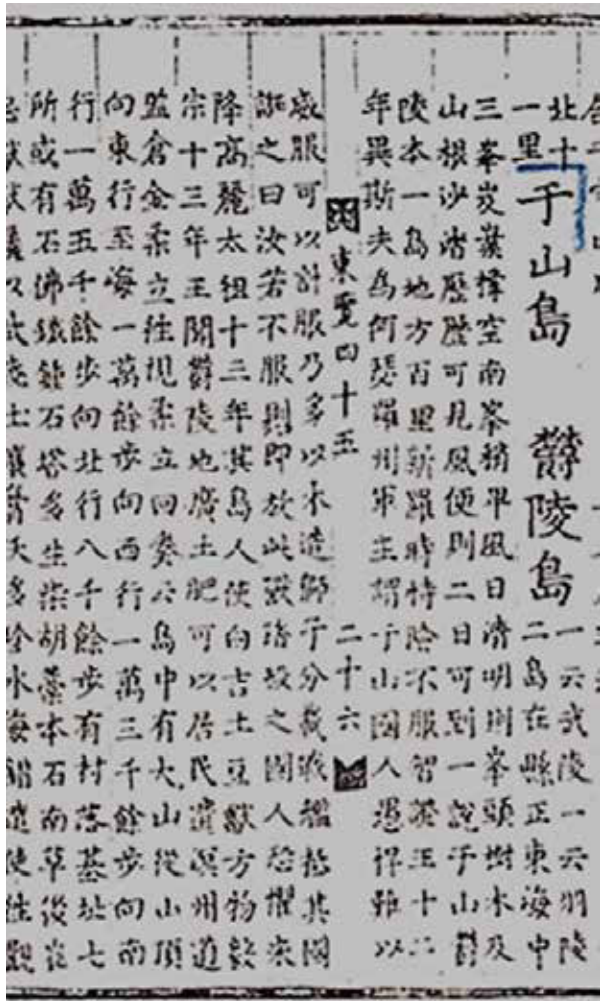
<Transcription>

于山武陵二島在縣正東海中 [分注]二島相去不遠 風日清明則可望見 新羅時稱于山國 一云鬱陵島 地方百里 特險不服 智證王十二年 異斯夫爲何瑟羅州軍主 謂于山人愚悍 難以威來 可以計服 乃多以木造猛獸 分載戰船 抵其國 誑之曰 汝若不服則即放此獸 國人懼來降 高麗太祖十三年 其島人使白吉土豆 獻方物 毅宗十三年 審察使金柔立等 回來告 島中有泰山 從山頂向東行至海一萬餘步 向西行一萬三千餘步 向南行一萬五千餘步 向北行八千餘步 有村落基址七所 或有石佛像鐵鐘石塔 多生柴胡蒿本石南草 我 太祖[宗]時 聞流民逃入其島者甚多 再命三陟人金麟雨 爲安撫使 刷出空其地 麟雨言 土地沃饒 竹大如柱 鼠大如貓 桃核大於升 凡物稱是

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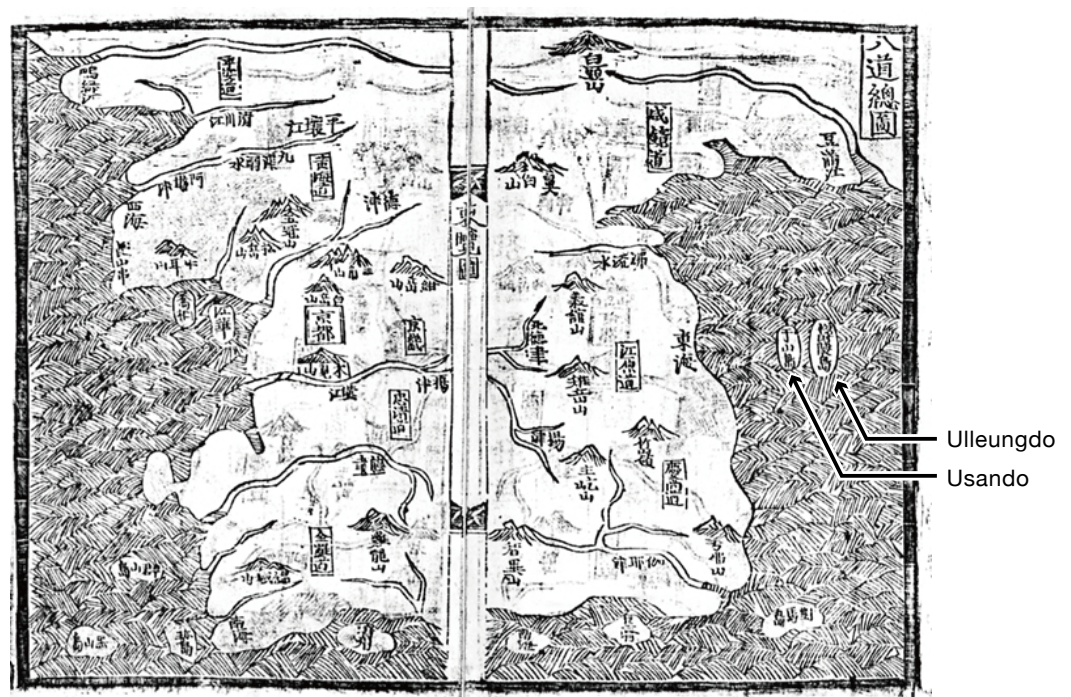
Document 2

『新增東國輿地勝覽』 卷四十五蔚珍縣山川条 Uljin prefecture, *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam*



<Transcription>

于山島 蔚珍島 [分注]一云武陵 一云羽陵 二島在縣正東海中 三峯岌嶸撐空 南峯稍卑 風日清明 則峯頭樹木及山根沙渚 歷歷可見 風便則二日可到 一說于山蔚珍本一島 地方百里 新羅時恃險不服 智證王十二年 異斯夫爲何瑟羅州軍主 謂于山國人愚悍 難以威服 可以計服 乃多以木造獅子 分載戰艦 抵其國 誑之曰 汝若不服則即放此獸 踏殺之 國人懼來降 高麗太祖十三年 其島人使白吉土豆 獻方物 毅宗十三年 王聞蔚珍島地廣土肥 可以居民 遣溟州道監倉金柔立往視 柔立回奏云 島中有大山 從山頂向東行至海一萬餘步 向西行一萬三千餘步 向南行一萬五千餘步 向北行八千餘步 有村落基址七所 或有石佛 鐵鐘 石塔 多生柴胡 蒿本 石南草 後崔忠獻獻議 以武陵土壤膏沃 多珍水海錯 遣使往觀之 有屋基破礎宛然 不知何代人居也 於是移東郡民以實之 及使還 多以珍木海錯進之 後屢爲風濤所蕩覆 舟人多物故 因還其居民 本朝 太宗時 聞流民逃其島甚多 再命三陟人金麟雨 爲按撫使刷出空其地 麟雨言 土地沃饒 竹大如杠 鼠大如貓 桃核大於升 凡物稱是 世宗二十年 遣縣人萬戶南顯 率數百人 往搜捕民 盡俘金丸等七十餘人 而還 其地遂空 成宗二年 有告別有三峯島者 乃遣朴宗元 往覓之 因風濤 不得泊而還 同行一船 泊蔚珍島 只取大竹大鰻魚 回啓云 島中無居民矣



『新增東國輿地勝覽』 八道總圖

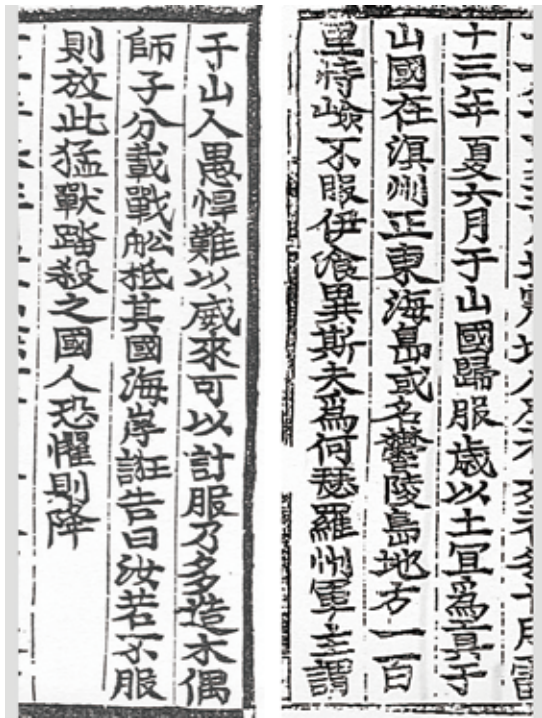
"Map of Eight Provinces," *Sinjeung Dongguk Yeoji Seungnam*

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Document 3

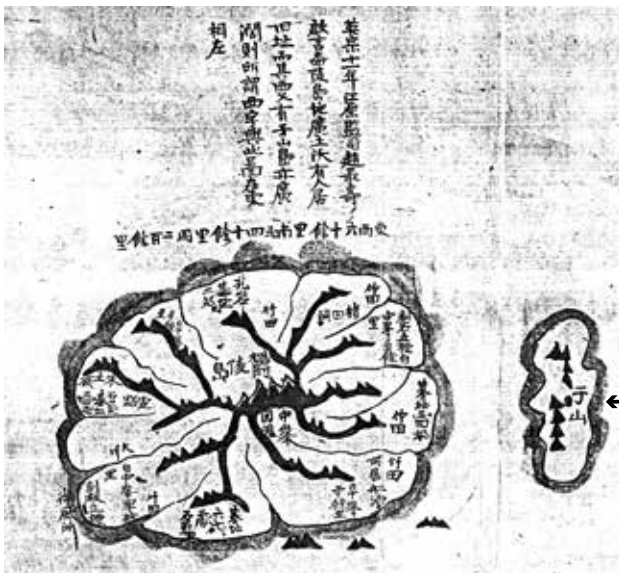
『三國史記』新羅本記第四 智證王十三年条

Samguk Sagi, Silla pt.4, the 13th year of King Jijeung



<Transcription>

十三年夏六月 于山國歸服 歲以土宜爲貢 于山國 在溟州正東海島 或名鬱陵島 地方一百里 恃嶮不服 伊飡異斯夫 爲何瑟羅州軍主 謂于山人愚悍 難以威來 可以計服 乃多造木偶 師子 分載戰船 抵其國海岸 誑告曰 汝若不服 則放此猛獸踏殺之 國人恐懼 則降

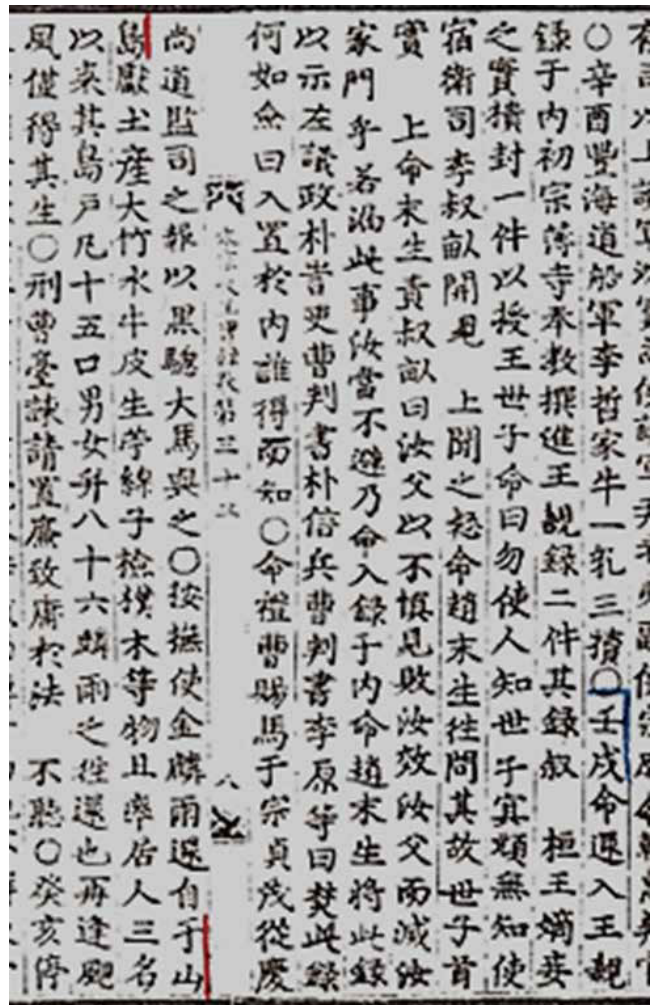


Ulleungdo

Document 4

『太宗實錄』太宗十七年二月壬戌条

Taejong Sillok, the 17th year of King Taejong



<Transcription>

○按撫使金麟雨 還自于山島 獻土產 大竹 水牛皮 生芋 綿子 檢樸等物 且率居人三名 以來 其島戶凡十五 口男女并八十六 麟雨之往還也 再逢颶風 僅得其生

Document 5

Daedong Yeoji-do 14 (Map of Korea, 19th C.?)