The Reference to “Riben” in the Epitaph of Ni Jun

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This article presents the results of an empirical study of the word “Riben” 日本 (Jpn: Nippon; hi-no-moto) appearing in the epitaph of Ni Jun 知軍 (613-678), a native of the Korean kingdom of Baekje, discovered in 2011 in Xi’an, the site of the Tang Dynasty capital of Chang’an. In this epitaph, which extols Ni’s most prominent achievements, there is an item concerning his success in persuading a foreign “would-be emperor” to subject himself as a tributary of the Tang Dynasty, and the word “Riben” appears at the beginning of the item. Researchers to date have been of the opinion that the name of the Japanese archipelago kingdom of “Nippon” was formulated by the Asuka-Kiyomihara Ryō 飛鳥浄御原令 code enacted between 681-687, and firmly established in the Taiho Ryō 大宝令 code of 701; however, due to the fact that Ni Jun died in the year 678, it is now necessary to reconsider this assumption.

The historian Tono Haruyuki has argued that the “Riben” in the epitaph of Ni Jun is not the name of a specific kingdom, but rather a term indicating the Far East, in general, and the territory of Baekje, in particular. The author of this paper attempts to refute such an idea by a detailed study of the text of the epitaph, leading him to the conclusion that “Riben” does in fact refer to the Japanese reading of “hi-no-moto ひのもと” for the Chinese characters 日本, and surely indicates the archipelago kingdom.