

Teaching Korea - The Gold Crowns of Silla

About the Object

The gold crowns were made in the Korean kingdom of Silla (57 BCE-935 CE) between the 5th and 7th centuries.

They were discovered in a series of mounds which housed the tombs of the Silla royal family in Gyeongju.

The tombs also contained other precious artefacts, many of which were made of gold.

Most of the treasure found in the tombs, including the crowns, are now to be seen in the Gyeongju National Museum or in the National Museum of Korea in Seoul.

A reconstruction of a tomb with replica artefacts can be seen in the Gyeongju National Park.

The Gold Crowns, and some of the other objects found within the tombs, have been identified as National Treasures of Korea, and the Gyeongju Historic Area, which contains the Tumuli Park Belt and the Royal Tombs, has been designated as a World Heritage Site.

The Story of the Object

THE GOLD CROWNS OF SILLA

The crowns were made in the Korean kingdom of Silla.

In all six gold crowns have been discovered.

All were made over a short period of about 100 years.

The crowns have many similarities but there are some differences which are explained by the fact that they were made at slightly different times.

The crowns were made between the 5th and 7th centuries.

They were excavated in Gyeongju, the former capital of Silla.

It seems that Gyeongju is the only place in the world where so many gold crowns have been excavated.

This helps to explain why the Silla kingdom is often called the kingdom of gold crowns.

Gold was seen as a symbol of wealth and prosperity, status and power.

As a result, a gold crown was a visible sign of the authority and importance of the rulers of Silla.

Whereas the crowns made of pure gold were probably for kings, those crowns which were made from gilt-bronze or gold-plated bronze were probably for less important members of the royal family.

The gold crown from the Hwangnamdaechong tomb may well have been made for a queen because the body found within the tomb was female.

THE ROYAL TOMBS

It seems that the burial mounds in Gyeongju were built for members of the royal family and for other very important people in the kingdom of Silla.

Besides the body of the person who had died, the tombs also contained various precious artefacts.

The tombs were built in a special way.

Large pits were dug and lined with wood.

The coffin of the dead person was placed on the floor of the pit which was covered with large boulders and a mound of earth.

There were no corridors.

This meant that grave robbers found it very difficult to access the graves for the treasure contained within them.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE FIRST CROWN – THE GEUMGWANCHONG (OR GOLD CROWN) TOMB

The tomb was excavated in 1921.

The story goes that one day when a house was being built in the area now known as Noseo-dong in Gyeongju, a group of children found some beads in a mound of soil.

At this time Korea was ruled by Japan and a Japanese police officer who was passing saw the beads and asked the children where they had found them.

The children showed him the place.

Digging in the soil revealed more artefacts. Once excavated, it was clear that the hill had been a burial site dating back to the early Silla period.

It seems that the tomb was built between 475 and 500 CE.

Many artefacts from the Silla period were dug out of the ground including the gold crown, which gave its name to the tomb, Geumgwanchong.

Archaeologists now believe that the grave did not belong to a king but to an important member of the royal family.

THE CONTENTS OF THE TOMBS

The tombs not only contained gold crowns.

There was a vast array of precious objects.

In all, over 40,000 artefacts have been recovered by archaeologists.

They included gold, silver, and bronze vessels, gold and silver weapons, gilt-bronze plate armour, stoneware vessels, 20,000 mainly blue Indo-Pacific beads, and various horse fittings.

THE SILK ROADS

Although the kingdom of Silla was at the southeastern tip of the Korean peninsula, it is clear that the kingdom had forged links with other countries beyond the peninsula.

The archaeological remains discovered in the tombs ranged from objects made by skilled crafts people from across Central Asia, even as far away as the Mediterranean, as well as from Silla itself.

The principal explanation for the items making their way to Korea is trade.

Merchants would have travelled to and from Korea by sea.

However, they would have principally travelled by land using the Silk Roads which crossed Asia linking the countries of the Middle East to those of the Far East.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GOLD CROWNS

The Gold Crowns of Silla are significant in several ways and, when considering the significance of an object, it is appropriate to think about it on numerous levels.

On a global scale and in relation to world history, they are immensely significant because it appears that Gyeongju is the only place in the world where so many gold crowns have been excavated.

On a national level, the crowns tell us so much about the times in which they were created.

The crowns were made of gold and gold objects have for centuries been seen as symbols of wealth and prosperity, status and power. As a result, a gold crown was a visible sign of the authority and importance of the rulers of Silla.

The fact that several gold crowns were found reveals that the kingdom of Silla was indeed wealthy.

It also tells us that any grave robbers who had tried to find and remove any treasure from the tombs had failed spectacularly.

On the other hand, the intact nature of the burial tombs may also reveal the respect and reverence the people of Silla, and later times, had for their rulers.

The richness of the decoration and the exquisite nature of the workmanship in creating such wonderful objects demonstrates the extremely high standard of skill of the craftsmen who made these objects.

They also indicate the advanced expertise of the crown makers and suggest brilliant designers, careful planning and an unhurried process.

There was time to create the objects and the intricate parts, and this suggests a confidence amongst the rulers about the period in which they were made.

Besides the crafts people who made them, the gold crowns are also significant in relation to everyone else alive at the time.

For the kings themselves, they symbolised wealth and power.

For the general population, they inspired awe and wonder, created a pride in the wonderful craftsmanship of the Korean goldsmiths, and displayed the supremacy of the monarchs and their families.

For those from foreign lands who met the kings and queens of Silla, they showed the dominance of the monarchs, their authority and wealth and, as a result, the need for the foreign dignitaries and diplomats to show respect and due deference.

For those today studying the history of Korea, the gold crowns provide a fascinating insight into:

- a world time period which is not as well-known as it should be for its skilled craft work
- a country, people and society which deserve much greater attention and admiration than they have traditionally received.



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