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Crowning glory: headdresses of the Three Kingdoms period

Lisa Kay Bailey

Archaeologically, the Three Kingdoms period in Korea subsumes a span of approximately three and a half centuries, from around AD 300 to the mid-7th century. During this period the peninsula was divided into three distinct cultural and political entities: Koguryö in the north, Paekche in the southwest and Silla in the southeast. In addition, a federation of small states known collectively as Kaya occupied territory in the Naktong river basin (Figure 1). Kaya was eventually absorbed by Silla in AD 582; and with the help of Tang Chinese allied forces, Silla succeeded in unifying the peninsula in AD 668.

Study into the material culture of early civilizations such as the Three Kingdoms tends to rely heavily on tomb data. Evidence of mortuary practices constitutes the material residue of intentional behaviour on the part of the living members of society to produce a specific environment for the deceased. In this context, the choice of tomb construction, the inclusion or exclusion of certain types of burial goods, the adornment of the body and so on can be treated as social messages. When decoded, these may provide some of the lost information about any given society concerning outside cultural influence, belief systems, social hierarchy as well as funerary customs.

In this paper, I analyse such external stimuli through discussion of one type of burial object, the crown or headdress, which affected the arts and traditions of each of the Three Kingdoms. In doing so, I particularly hope to highlight the distinctive aspects of Silla tomb culture which set it apart from the rest of the peninsula.

Koguryö

Bordering on China, the kingdom of Koguryö was strongly influenced by the influx of northern Chinese culture. This was facilitated through the so-called Four Chinese Commanderies to the north of the Han River, which existed between 108 BC and AD 313. Koguryö was also the first of the Three Kingdoms to receive Buddhism

from China in AD 372. As a result, Buddhist motifs were readily adopted by Koguryō craftsmen and artisans.

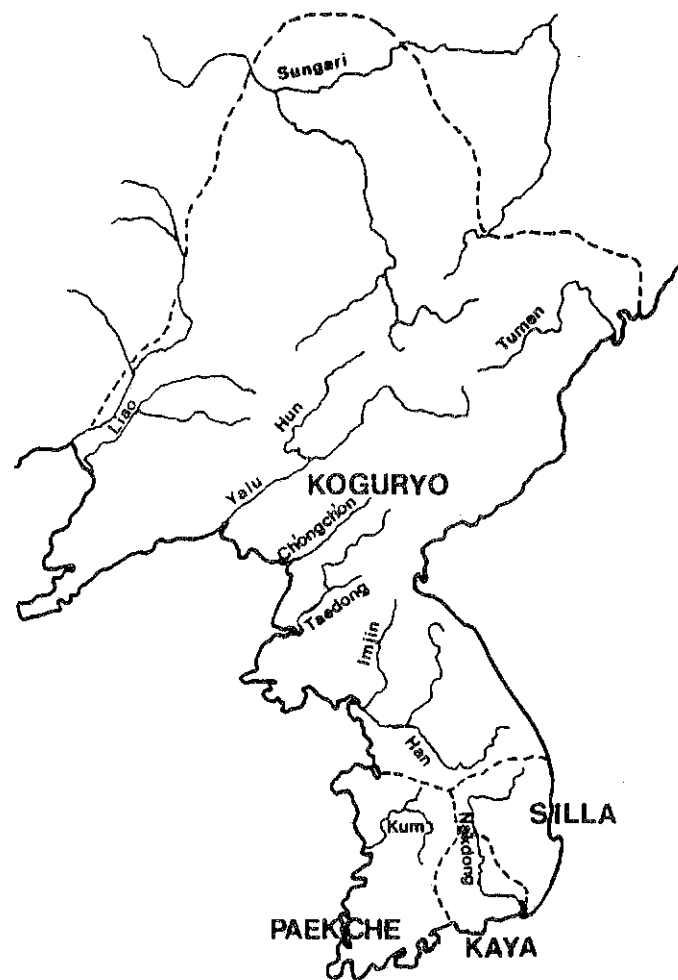


Figure 1 The geographical divisions of the Korean peninsula in the Three Kingdoms period, AD 300-668.

The early native tomb structures employed in Koguryō were simple cairns which gradually developed into stepped, stone pyramid-like structures. A new burial type introduced from China consisted of stone-built chambers surmounted by earthen mounds. These structures became popular interments for the Koguryō elite during the mid-4th to early 7th centuries AD. Located around the Koguryō capitals of

Tonggou and P'yōngyang, these tombs were often decorated with multi-coloured murals. Scenes of Chinese cosmological imagery and auspicious symbolism, as well as depictions of daily activity, mingled with Buddhist motifs such as lotuses and flying apsarasas.¹ Due to the easy accessibility afforded by their horizontal entranceways, all Koguryō chamber-tombs discovered to date have been robbed of their burial goods, leaving only fragmentary relics.

Amongst the scant materials from Koguryō is a gilt bronze crown discovered at the fortification at Ch'ōnggam-dong, P'yōngyang (Figure 2). The circlet is decorated with plant motifs in open-work, with six-petalled flowers attached at regular intervals. Above the circlet are a number of open-work ornaments whose design is reminiscent of leaping flames around a circular core. These ornaments share stylistic affinity with the flaming mandalas often seen on Buddhist bronze work reflecting the artistic influence of the Northern Wei period in China (AD 386-535).²

Paekche

While Koguryō was thus clearly influenced by northern Chinese traditions, Paekche enjoyed close relations with the southern courts of China. Buddhism was introduced into Paekche in AD 384, and the art of this kingdom shows a preference for Buddhist subject matter imbued with the artistic elegance of the southern Chinese

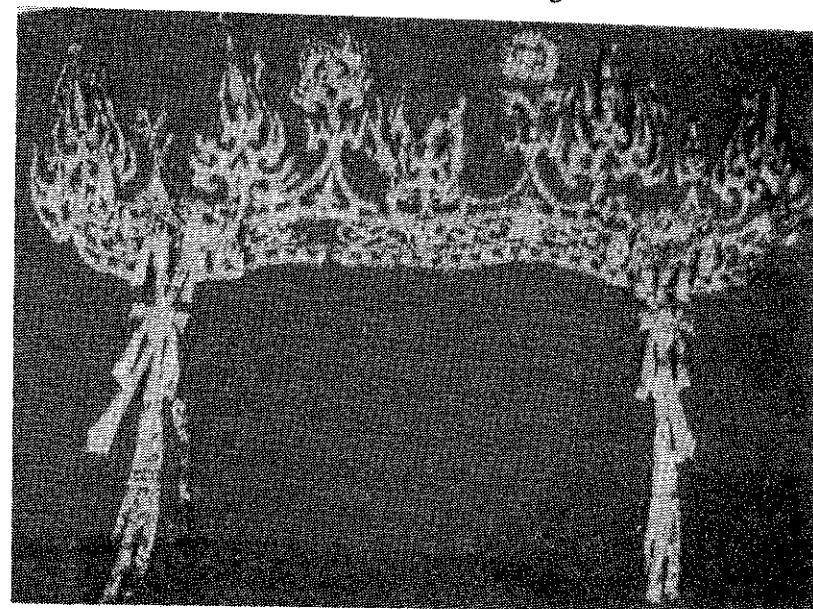


Figure 2 Gilt bronze crown from the fortification at Ch'ōnggam-dong, P'yōngyang, 6-7th c. AD. (Han 1987: pl. 188)

¹ For colour illustrations of Koguryō tomb wall paintings, see Chosen Gahosha Shuppanbu (1985).

² For similar designs on flaming mandalas of the Northern Wei period, see Sickman & Soper 1982: 103-5; figs. 63, 64, 65).

style.³ The tombs of Paekche were predominantly earth-covered mounds with stone or brick chambers and long horizontal entranceways. As with Koguryŏ tombs, they have proved easy to penetrate and rob of their contents; as a result, few burial objects have survived.

In 1971, however, a unique unspoiled Paekche tomb was discovered on the outskirts of the former capital of Paekche, present-day Kongju. Epitaph plaques identified the occupants as a famous Paekche ruler, King Muryŏng (r. AD 501-523) and his Queen (Munhwajae Kwalliguk 1974). The tomb was constructed according to contemporary Chinese funerary structures, using moulded bricks decorated with geometric patterns and lotuses. The decoration of many burial objects found in the chamber reflects a preference for Buddhist-derived floral and plant motifs, which were particularly popular in the southern Chinese court of Liang (AD 502-557). Two pairs of gold open-work cap ornaments, thought to have been originally attached to silk headgear worn by the King and Queen, illustrate this influence.

The cap ornaments of the Queen are symmetrically oriented arrangements of half and full palmette leaves which flank a central lotus base (Figure 3). Spouting from a vase-like receptacle above the base is a fully opened lotus blossom topped with a palmette leaf. A strikingly similar design is seen on a moulded tile from the brick tomb of the southern Chinese style at Dengxian, southwest Henan province, dated to the second quarter of the 6th century AD. In this symmetrical configuration, the vase with lotus base and palmette sprig is flanked on either side by flying apsaras (Juliano 1980: 102; fig. 58).

The cap fixtures belonging to the King have also been created using a similar arrangement of full and half palmette leaves (Figure 4). However, they have a more asymmetrical flame-like design, and the attachment of many small gold foils to each piece further enhances their dynamic outline. Stylistic similarities between these ornaments and Liang-dynasty Chinese motifs are evident when compared to funerary monuments in Nanking—such as the stone stele of Xiao Hong who died in AD 526 (Juliano 1980: 111; fig. 87).

Silla

While Koguryŏ and Paekche were heavily influenced by the arts and traditions of northern and southern China respectively, the kingdom of Silla, in the southeast, was shielded from direct access to Chinese culture due to its distant geographical location. It was the last of the Three Kingdoms to receive Buddhism, in AD 535; thus it maintained native cultural traditions, which are well evidenced in its funerary remains.

Excavations on the plains of the former Silla capital (present-day Kyŏngju) over the last 70 years or so, have provided a wealth of material with which to study Silla

³ For a detailed examination of the artistic similarities between Korea and southern China during this period, see Bush (1989).

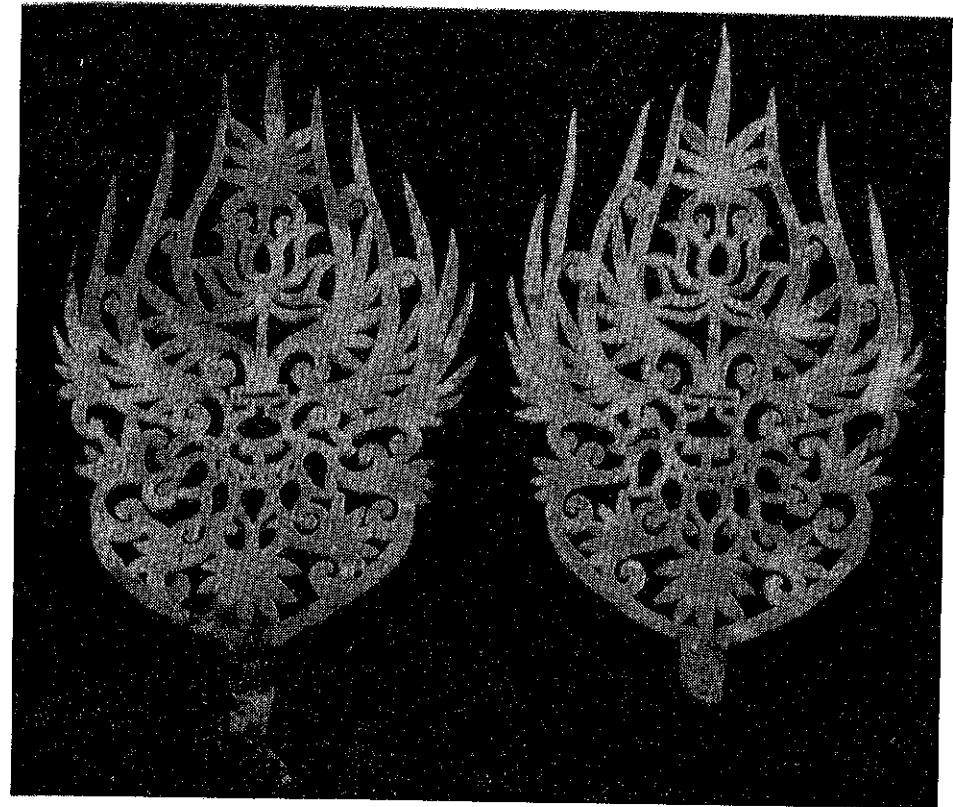


Figure 3 A pair of gold cap ornaments belonging to Queen Muryŏng, early 6th c. AD. (Munhwajae Kwalliguk 1974: pl. 2)

tomb culture (cf. Ch'oe 1992). The number of burial chambers found with their funerary objects intact attests to the impregnable and highly distinctive type of tomb structure employed solely at the Silla capital. Such structures, known as *choksok mokkwangpun* ('stone-surround wooden-chamber tombs'), were built by firstly digging a deep or shallow pit into which a wooden chamber with a vertical shaft was installed. Any gap between the pit wall and the wooden chamber would be filled in with river cobbles. At the conclusion of the funerary ceremony, the shaft was sealed with a wooden lid, which was then covered with a huge pile of stones and further mounded over with earth. In addition, layers of clay applied over the stone pile—and the outer earthen mound itself—acted as barriers to water seepage. Finally, a wall of perimeter stones was built around the mound, marking its boundaries. When the wooden chamber eventually collapsed through decay, the stones and earth above would fill in the chamber space, making it almost impossible to pilfer. At the time

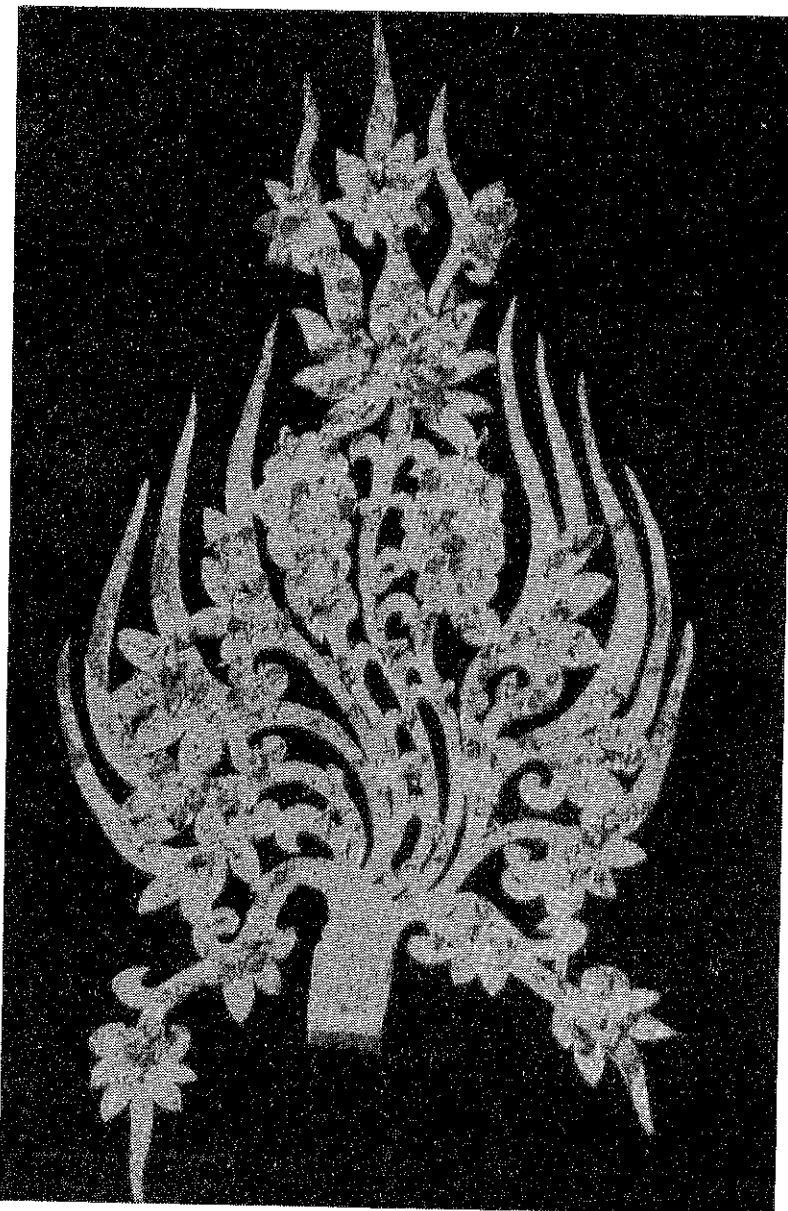


Figure 4 One of a pair of gold cap ornaments belonging to King Muryōng, early 6th c. AD. (Munhwajae Kwalliguk 1974: pl. 3)

of construction, some mounds were doubtless of impressive size: the double mound of Tomb 98 at Hwangnam is about 20 metres high and 120 metres in lengthwise diameter (Munhwajae Kwalliguk 1985).

Many tombs excavated on the Kyōngju plains have yielded a wide variety of burial objects, including earthenware vessels, glass and lacquerware, and bowls made of pure gold and silver. The bodies interred in some of these tombs were adorned with an array of personal ornaments. These included crowns, ear pendants, necklaces, belts and funerary shoes—all made from precious metals. The quantity and quality of the goods found in these tombs indicate that they were burial chambers of the high ranks of the social hierarchy.

The most sumptuous chambers can be distinguished further by the inclusion of crowns made from thin sheet gold which had adorned the head of the deceased, such as that recovered from the North Mound of Tomb 98 at Hwangnam-dong, Kyōngju (Figure 5). Dated to the mid-5th century AD, this crown is thought to be the earliest of its type found to date. The design of these royal gold crowns of Silla, of which five have so far been discovered, all follow the same stylistic pattern. This consists of a gold circlet to which five upright ornaments are attached. The three ornaments placed at the front of the circlet are each composed of a central vertical stem, with three pairs of right-angled branches—all terminating in a bulbous shape. The remaining two are gently curving, antler-shaped uprights positioned at the rear of the circlet.

All crowns of this type are embellished with small gold foils, and all but one crown—that recovered from the Gold Bell Tomb—are also decorated with *kogok* ('curved jades'), which are attached to the crown with gold wire. Pendants liberally decorated with more gold foils hang in front from thick hollow rings. One crown of this type found in the Auspicious Phoenix Tomb deviates slightly from this format. Three birds are perched on a triple branch finial which is attached to a simple inner frame of intersecting gold bands.⁴

There has been some debate as to the precise function of these crowns. Their flimsy construction and elaborate embellishment have led to the widespread belief that they were either for purely funerary use, copied from a sturdier model worn during the owner's lifetime, or used during special rituals or ceremonies.

Silla crown descendants and Central Asian prototypes

Judging from the funerary goods found to date, the distinctive design of the Silla crowns has no direct parallel in China. However, crowns following their general shape have been recovered from tombs in former Kaya territory as well as in Japan (cf. Ishikawa 1987). A gold crown, reportedly from Koryōng, North Kyōngsang province in former Kaya territory and dated to between the 5th and 6th centuries

⁴ Colour illustrations of this crown are to be found in Han (1983: 72-3; figs. 65, 66).

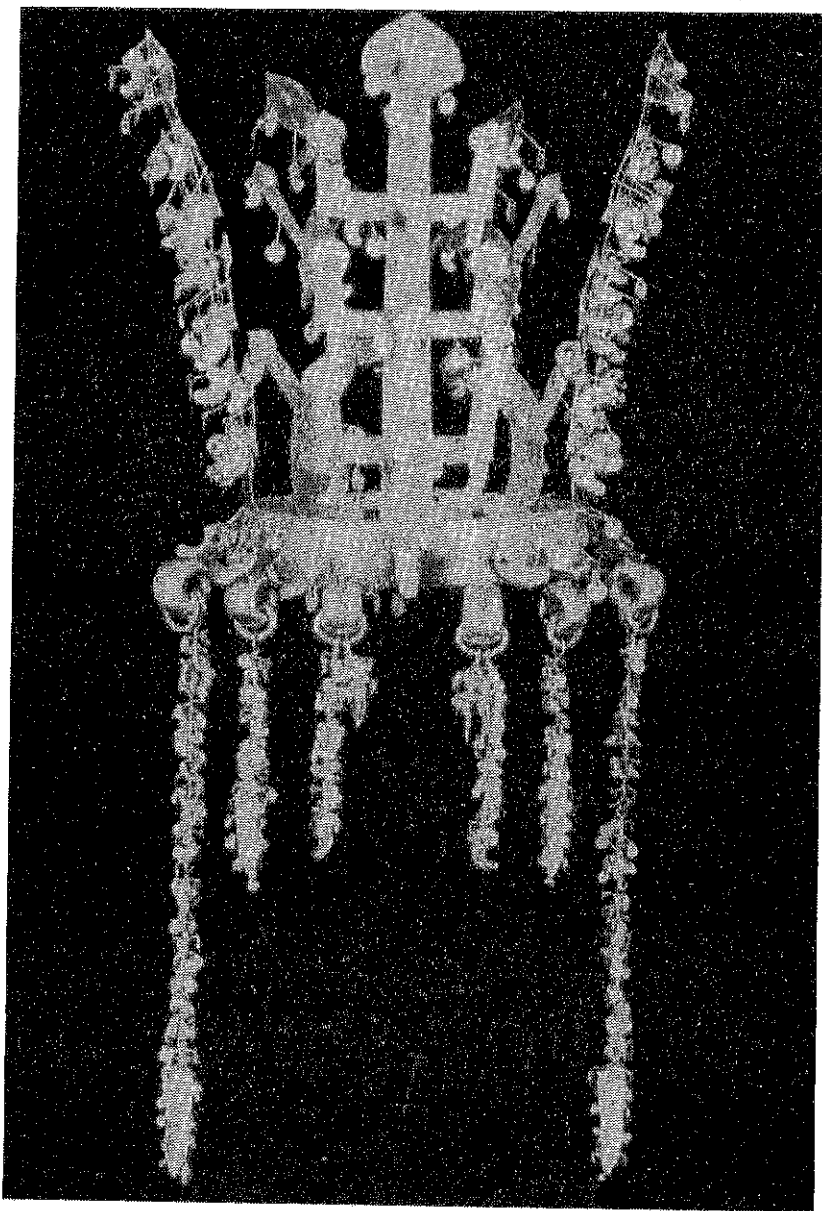


Figure 5 Gold crown from the North Mound chamber of Hwangnam-dong Tomb 98, Kyōngju, early mid-5th c. AD. (Munhwajae Kwalliguk 1985: pl. 6)

AD, shows a modest variation of the elaborate Silla crown type. It has four short uprights with the same bulbous terminating shape, while the paired branches on each stem curl downwards, rather than upwards at right angles. The crown is decorated with gold foils and curved jades in a fashion similar to the Silla crowns (Han 1983: 97; fig. 91). A gilt bronze crown recovered from the late 6th-century Fujinoki tomb in Nara prefecture, Japan, shows a similar scheme of tree and bird motifs (Kashikōken 1989: 34; pl. 60). The 6th-century Sannō Futagoyama tomb, in Gunma prefecture, Japan, also yielded a gilt bronze crown similar in shape to the Silla gold crowns, with gilt bronze foils and elongated branch-like uprights terminating in bulbous shapes (Gunma 1990: 81; fig. 115).

While the above examples provide evidence of the dissemination of the Silla crown shape and choice of motifs, they do not aid the quest for its stylistic prototype. In order to trace the origins of the Silla crown—in which tree, antler and bird motifs are present—it is necessary to consult materials from tombs of the Scytho-Siberian culture (*cf.* Kang 1983).

The term Scytho-Siberian is used to describe the people and culture which stretched across the steppe and mountain region of Eurasia in the latter half of the first millennium BC (Figure 6). This term includes, but is not limited to, Scythians in the West, Sakas in Central Asia and Xiongnu in the Far East. These nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples lived between the broad stretches of mountain ranges, with natural corridors providing accessible routes from one grassland to another. In this environment, the exchange of cultural items was swift, causing widespread coexistence of certain motifs (*cf.* Jettmar 1967).⁵ Tree, antler and bird depictions on items found in Scytho-Siberian tombs may have influenced the design of the Silla gold crown.

The popular employment of tree and antler forms in a ritualistic context is evidenced in goods excavated from the Pazyryk tombs, or barrows, dated to around the 4th century BC (Rudenko 1970). As indicated in Figure 8, the Pazyryk site is located near the Russian frontier with Mongolia and China. These interments, of which eight have been excavated, are considered to be those of Xiongnu chieftains. Interestingly, the Pazyryk burials were similar in construction to stone-surround wooden-chamber tombs in Kyōngju. All had circular mounds, the largest measuring up to 40 metres in diameter, with rectangular pits into which wooden chambers had been installed. When sealed, the chambers were covered with a thin layer of earth which was then topped with a large pile of stones.

Amongst the objects recovered from Barrow 5 were five full sets of horse trappings, all containing stag masks with large antler tines made from leather. It is

⁵ For a detailed examination of the stylistic interchange between these peoples, see Jacobsen (1983, 1984, 1988).

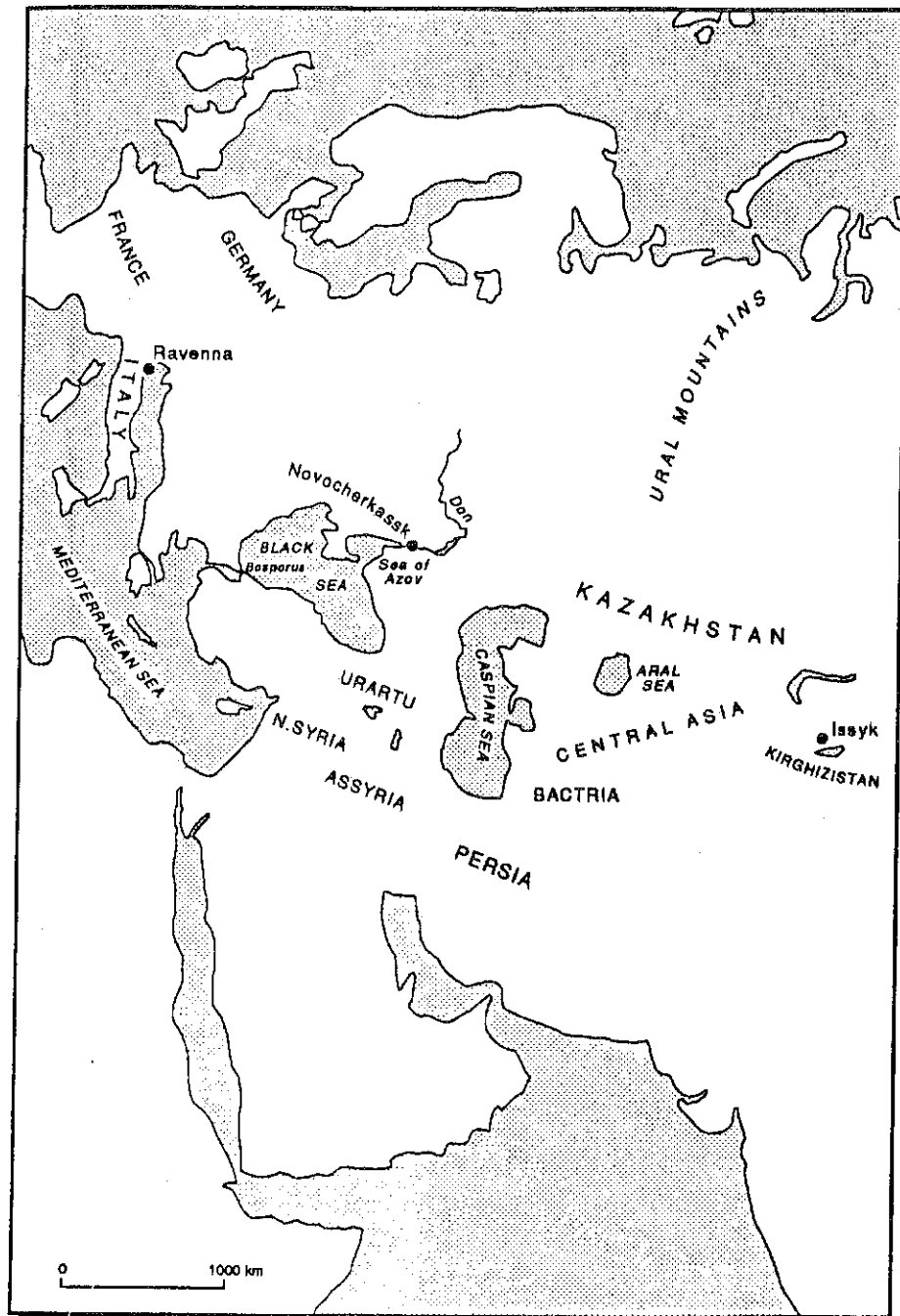
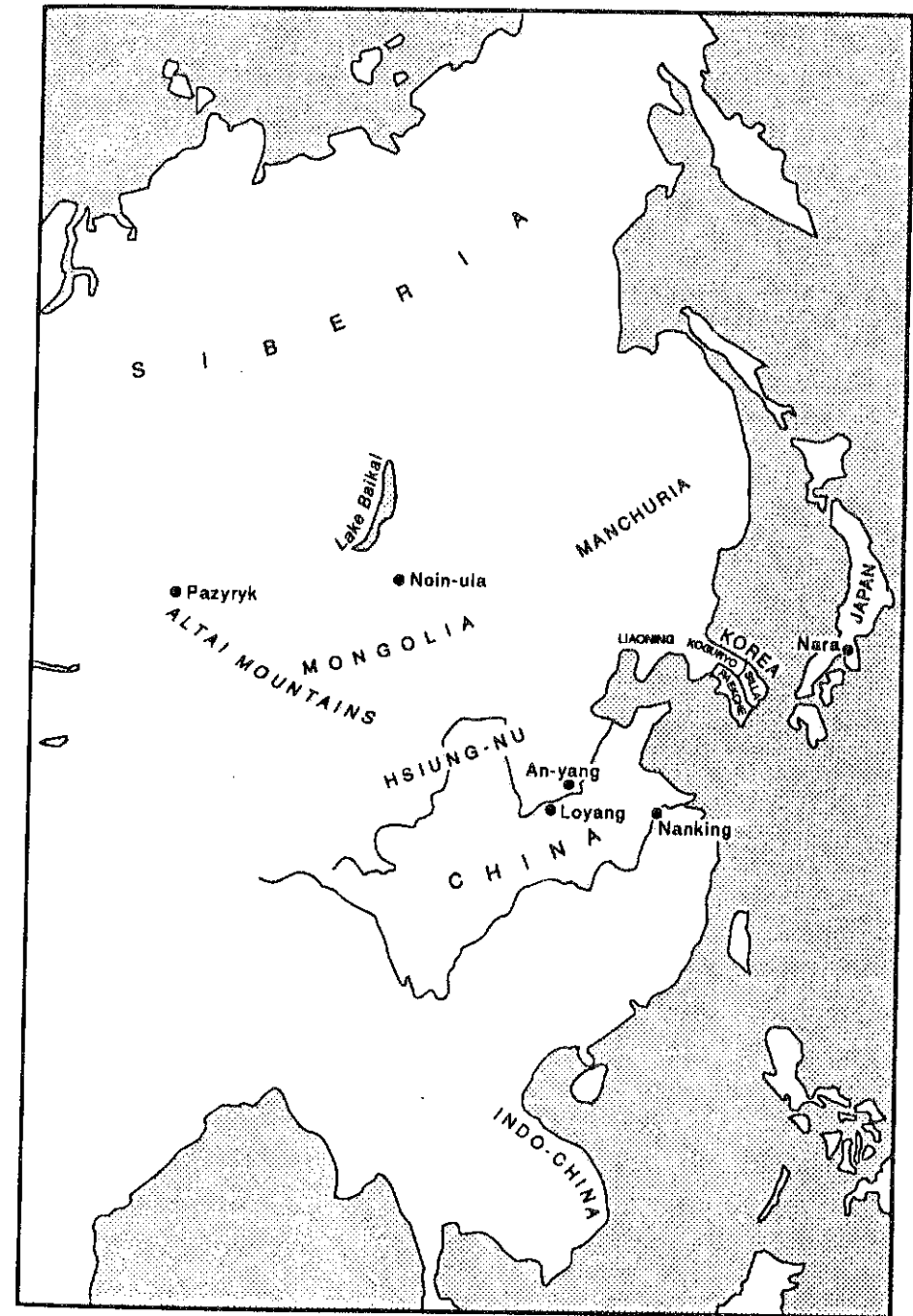


Figure 6 The steppe and mountain region of Eurasia during the first millennium BC.



believed that these masks indicate an earlier dependency of the nomadic peoples on the strength and supremacy of the reindeer for riding and pulling, a dependency which would be recalled at times of ceremony and ritual. In some instances, the antlers of the mask were topped with griffin heads, exemplifying the merging of tree and stylised antler motifs. Barrow 5 also yielded a felt appliqué wall hanging in which tree and antler forms are again present. The scene shows a figure, seated on a throne, holding a blossoming branch and facing a mounted rider (Figure 7). Behind the rider (not shown here) stands a winged sphinx-like creature crowned with a large splayed antler (Figure 8). The wall hanging appears to illustrate a ritual or ceremony, with the seated figure probably representing Apia, goddess of the Earth, promoting fertility and rebirth. The branch consists of five pairs of different shaped flowers which may represent the Tree of Life, symbolic of her life-giving forces. The significance of the antlered creature is unclear; but given the context, it would appear to be a benevolent force, complementing the presence of the goddess. Material from this tomb indicates the importance attached to tree and stag motifs as symbols of regeneration, fertility and strength.



Figure 7 Detail of a scene on a felt appliqué wall hanging from Barrow 5 at Pazyryk, Russia; 5th c. BC. (Rudenko 1970: pl. 154)



Figure 8 Winged creature with antler crown on the felt appliqué wall hanging from Barrow 5 at Pazyryk, 5th c. BC. (Rudenko 1970: pl. 173)

During the excavation of a cemetery site at Issyk, 50 km east of Alma Alta, a sumptuous burial yielded numerous precious ornaments including many small gold plaques, a gold belt and a headdress depicting tree and bird motifs (Akishev 1978). The occupant of this tomb, dated to the 4th or 5th century BC, was a male, and judging from the quality and nature of the items, he was probably a spiritual or political leader. The tomb consisted of a wooden chamber installed within a pit,

with rocks placed in the gap between the pit and chamber walls. A large earthen mound had been built over the chamber and a circular row of perimeter stones placed around the mound. With the decay of the wooden chamber, the central part of the mound had caved in and had filled the space of the chamber below.

A conical three-sided hood found at Issyk was covered with gold appliqué images (Figure 9). Of particular note are the rows of jagged peaks from which sprout stylized trees topped with birds. The overall scheme of the headdress, showing ascending layers of beasts, rocks, trees and birds, is thought to describe the vertical rise associated with the journey of the soul at death (Jacobsen 1985: 140-1). In this

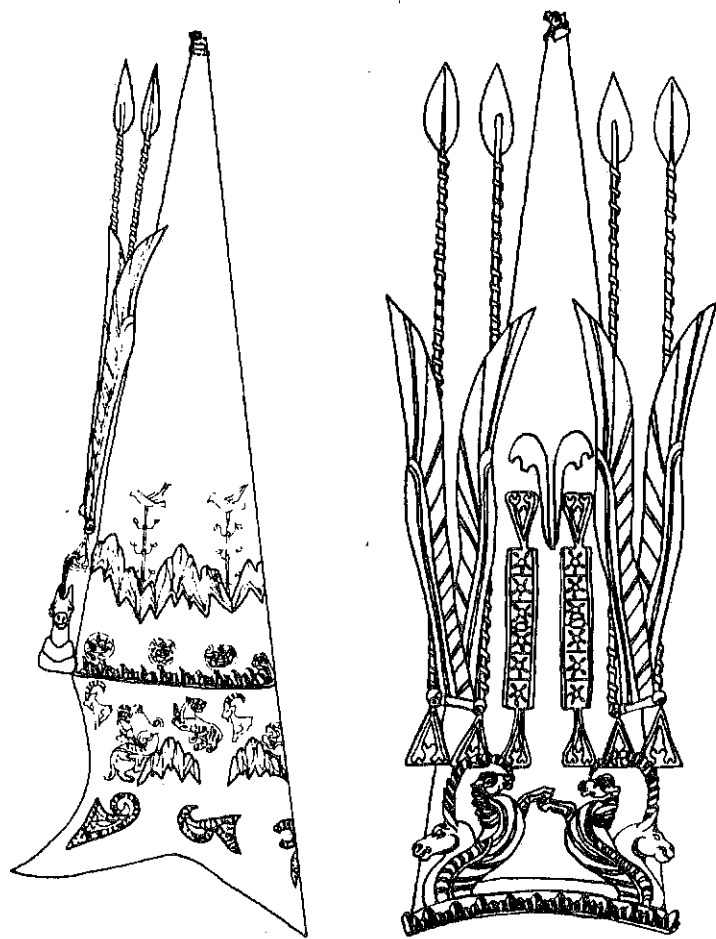


Figure 9 Hood with gold ornaments from the Issyk cemetery site, Russia 4-5th c. BC. (Akishev 1978: fig. 63)

context, the bird is seen as the ultimate mediator between earth and the heavenly realm, carrying the soul of the departed to the next world. The tree motifs within this scheme may also be interpreted *not* as the Tree of Life representing regeneration and fertility but as the embodiment of the concept of the World Tree. This symbolises a hierarchical structure which distinguishes between chaos and order, the structure of the tree itself representing an ideal organizing system. Within the mythical scheme portrayed on this headdress, the World Tree Structure is analogous to the bird or heaven at the top, the hooved animal in the middle range, and the fish and snake at the base.

Evidence of the continuing employment of these motifs on headdresses is found two or three centuries later in the Samartian *kurgan* burial in Novercherkassk on the northeastern shore of the Black Sea (Minns 1913: 230-6). Dated to around the 1st to 2nd century BC, the burial goods included many gold objects studded with precious stones and hundreds of small plaques which were originally sewn on to clothing. The quantity and quality of these goods indicate that this was probably a royal burial, possibly of a queen.

The gold crown consists of a wide gold circlet inset with a miniature bust of a Roman empress fashioned from quartz, and large amethysts and garnets (Figure 10). Gold pendants hang down from the base of the crown, as they do in the Silla crowns. Gold trees arranged around the top of the crown are interspersed with deer or stags sporting spayed antlers. The tallest tree is placed in the centre of the crown and seems to be growing out from the centrally located quartz head. This scheme is thought to depict the Tree of Life from which the antlered creatures are deriving nourishment (Martynov 1991: 110-11); it may represent a reordering of familiar motifs into a new and original arrangement.

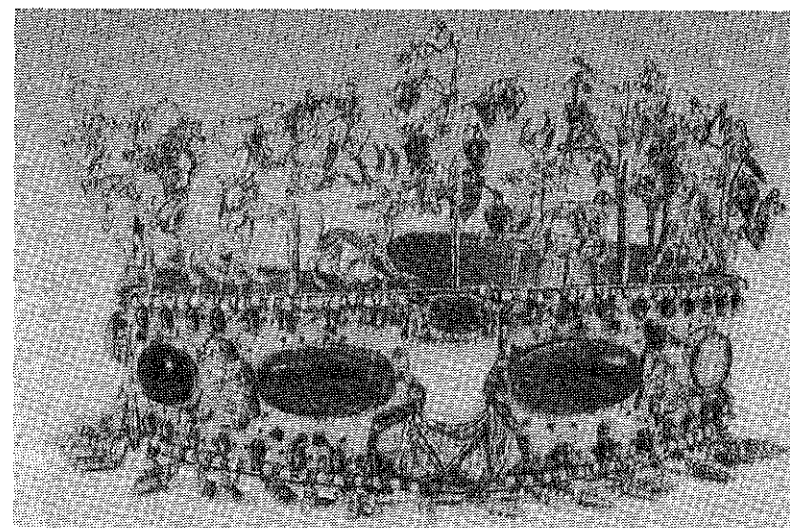


Figure 10 Gold crown from a Samartian kurgan burial in Novercherkassk, 1st-2nd c. BC. (National Museum of Korea 1991: pl. 203)

Although the design of the Silla crowns shares common stylistic characteristics with the headdresses from Issyk and Novercherkassk, the latter do not share the same lineage of metal working techniques, such as the use of thin sheet gold, gold foils and open-work designs which are distinctive features of Silla craftsmanship. A crown which bears much closer resemblance to the Silla pieces in these respects—and combines tree and bird motif—was discovered adorning the head of a young female from Tomb 6 at the burial site of the Tillya Tepe necropolis in the former kingdom of Bactria, in present-day northern Afghanistan. Dated to the 1st century AD, the site is thought to be the cemetery of a royal or noble family of Kushans who migrated from southern Siberia and settled in the kingdom of Bactria in the mid-2nd century BC (Sarianidi 1985).

Constructed from thin sheet gold, the Tillya Tepe crown comprises a gold circlet decorated with gold foils, to which five upright ornaments are attached (Figure 11). Each ornament is designed as a stylised tree with six-petalled florets, originally inset with turquoise stones, and gold foils attached with fine gold wire throughout. At the top of each tree are perched pairs of birds with upstretched necks and outspread wings. While the Silla crowns are constructed solidly, with each upright attached to the headband by tiny gold rivets, this Tillya Tepe headdress consists of six separate pieces. The ends of the headband are secured together with gold loops, and each tree ornament is attached to the band by small gold rivets, which were inserted through slots located on the inside of the headband and on the back of each ornament. This type of construction, facilitating easy assemblage and dismantling, suggests that the crown was made to be worn in life rather than purely as funerary adornment. Although its precise function is not known, it was probably either worn during specific rituals or as a symbol of leadership. It has been suggested that this crown was so designed as to be easily packed away and transported vast distances in accordance with nomadic lifestyle (Sarianidi 1985: 13).

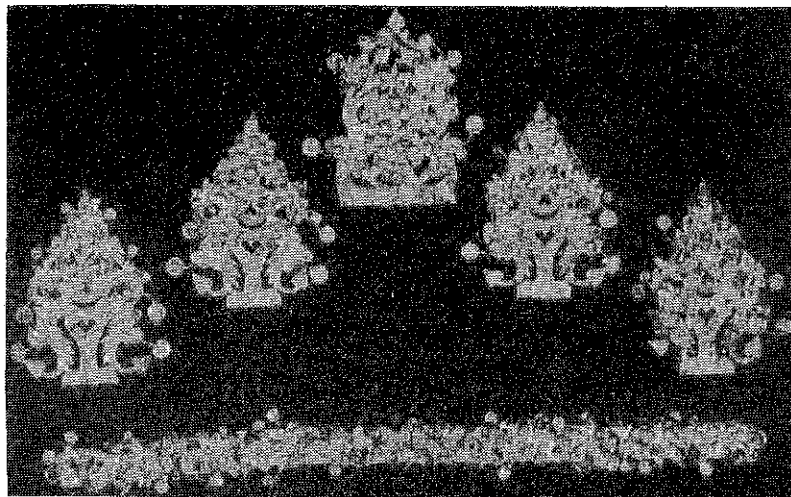


Figure 11 Gold crown recovered from Tomb 6 at the Tillya Tepe necropolis in the former kingdom of Bactria (modern Afghanistan), 1st c. AD. (Sarianidi 1985: pl. 15)

Another ornament combining tree and horned ram or ibex images within a gold headdress was found in Tomb 4 at Tillya Tepe (Figure 12). According to the excavation report, the head of the male occupant had been placed on a small cushion, which had itself been positioned on a gold bowl (Sarianidi 1985: 35). Attached to the upper edge of this bowl was the tree ornament affixed to the ibex figure, suspended above the head of the deceased. The tree constitutes a gold trunk from which protrude branches made from thin gold wire. Round gold foils and tiny pearls, representing leaves and fruit, decorate the branches.

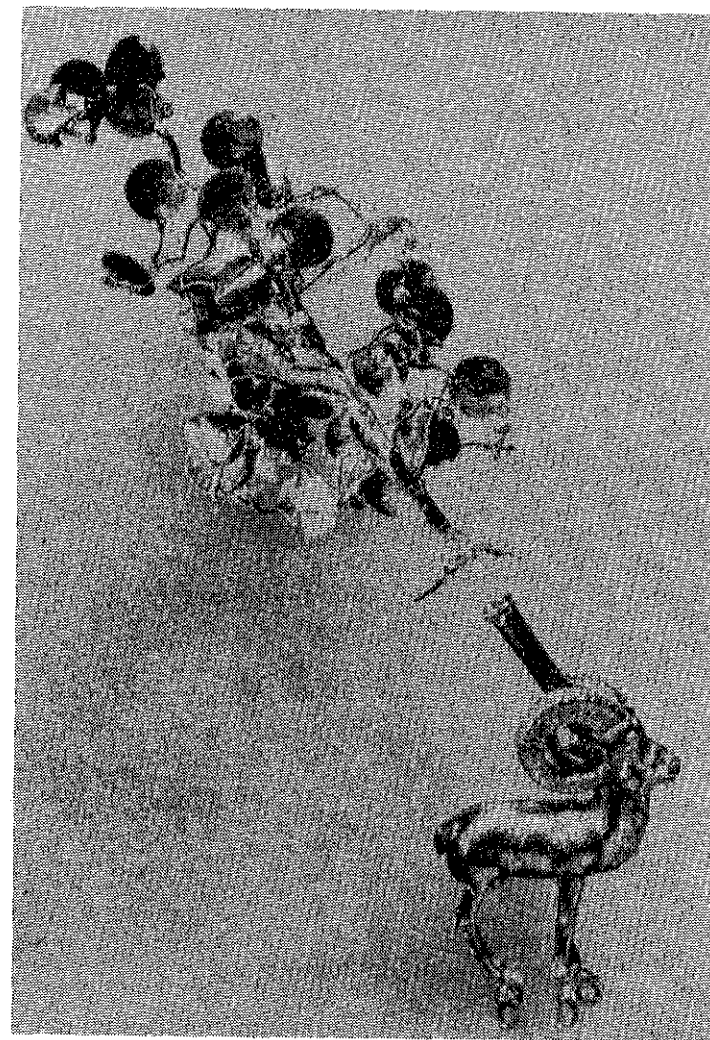


Figure 12 Gold headdress ornament from Tomb 4 at Tillya Tepe. (Sarianidi 1985: pl. 15)

Although the gold crown of Tomb 6 at Tillya Tepe is undoubtedly both technically and stylistically most similar to the Silla crowns found to date, the question of the transmission of these metal working techniques and motifs to Korea has to be addressed. Evidence from tombs excavated in Liaoning suggests that northeast China may have provided the point of entry for these objects into the Korean peninsula. Burial hoards, which include gold items, glassware, stirrups and other horse trappings, recovered from tombs in this region, confirm the presence of various groups of non-Chinese nomadic peoples who established successive short-lived states after the fall of the Han empire in AD 220.⁶ Certain tombs in particular have yielded gold objects whose design and technical craftsmanship attest to the presence of the type of gold-work seen at Tillya Tepe.

For example, amongst the numerous precious items recovered from Tomb 2 at Fangshen, in Liaoning province, dated to the Northern Jin period (AD 265-316) were two pairs of gold crown or cap ornaments. Two small open-work plaques decorated with gold foils are thought to have been attached to a cap made of a material which has long since rotted away (Figure 13). The open-work patterns of

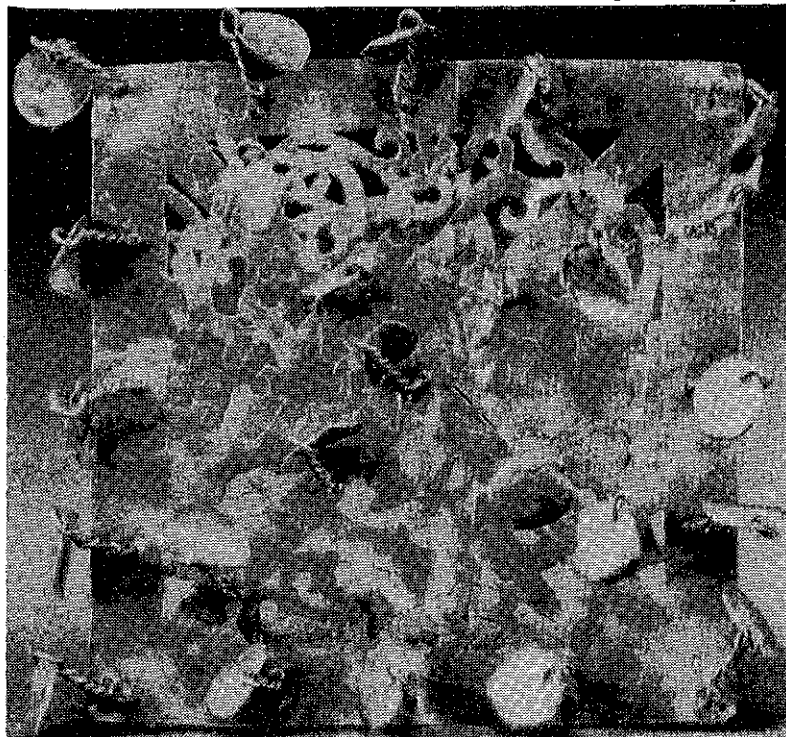


Figure 13 One of a pair of gold headdress ornaments from Tomb 2 at Fangshen, Liaoning province, China; Northern Jin period, AD 265-316. (Kashiwara Hakubutsukan 1992: pl. 2)

⁶ For a detailed examination and comparative study of burial goods found in tombs in northern China, southern Korea and Japan dated to the 3rd-5th c. AD, see Kashiwara Hakubutsukan (1992).

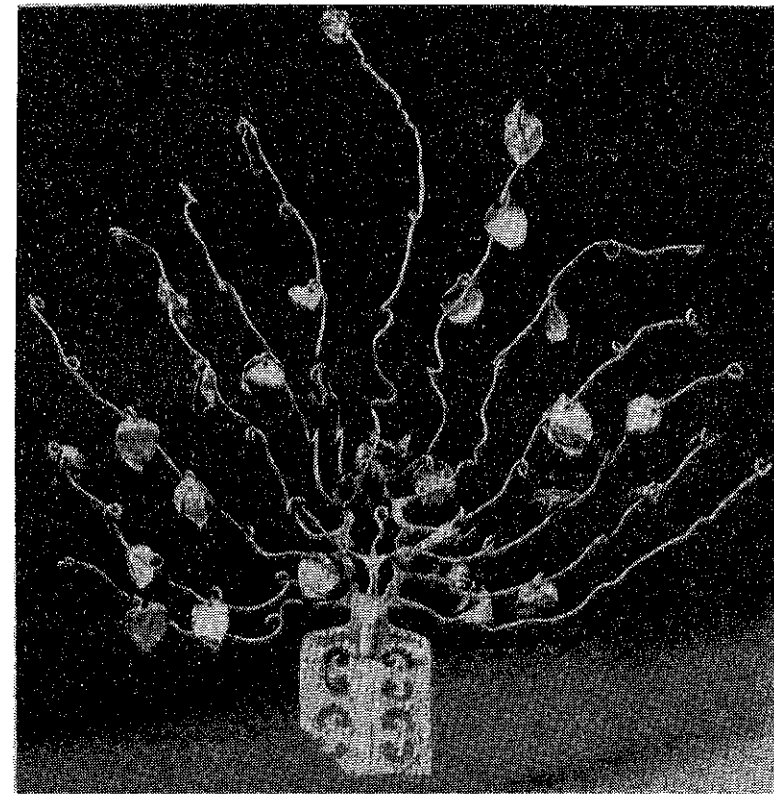


Figure 14 One of a pair of tree-shaped headdress ornaments from Tomb 2 at Fangshen. (Kashiwara Hakubutsukan 1992: pl. 3)

facing and opposing phoenixes and dragons produce a symmetrical design. This seems to indicate that they were not worn squarely on the headdress but with the intersecting bands of gold running horizontally and vertically. The other two pieces show striking similarity to the tree ornament found at the Tillya Tepe Tomb 4 (Figure 14). However, the gold foil leaves are secured to the branches by simply twisting the wiry branches to form loops. The open-work bases have a hollow shaft running up the centre for the attachment to a spike or pin protruding from the headdress.

Conclusions

From the examples of crowns and head ornaments discussed—which share permutations of a common collection of tree, antler and bird forms—it is clear that

over a period of seven or eight centuries, certain motifs spread throughout the whole steppe region. The wandering life of nomads was clearly a major factor in this stylistic diffusion. Their frequent hostile encounters and raids to plunder enemy goods all contributed to a wide interchange of material possessions between different social groups, eventually reaching northern China and Korea.

However, it was possibly not only the nomadic lifestyle which contributed to the continued employment of the tree, antler and bird motifs within headdress forms. If these crowns were worn during specific spiritual or religious ceremonies—with their designs symbolising fundamental beliefs about life, death and regeneration—then it is not surprising that they endured the passage of time. In contrast to the ever-changing environment of daily life, the enactment of a religious ceremony involves a conscious effort to imitate the previous ceremonial performance, and by extension, all previous performances of that ceremony. In this context, ritual related items imitate their predecessors and thus tend to resist stylistic change in a way that everyday objects do not.

Judging from the limited tomb material available, it is evident that the kingdoms of Koguryō and Paekche were both heavily influenced by Chinese culture in tomb construction, religious and spiritual beliefs, and decorative and artistic taste. In contrast, the distinctive tomb structure of Silla, employing wooden chambers and huge stone and earth layered mounds, together with the design of certain burial goods, particularly that of gold crowns, strongly suggests the influx of culture from the steppe region, via northeastern China, into the Silla kingdom by the 5th century AD.

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Figure 1 drawn by G.L. Barnes and Figure 6 redrawn by Catherine Lawrence. Permission to reproduce the plates has been applied for in all cases.

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