

The Ancient Tombs in Gyeongju

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Introduction

According to archaeological evidence, human settlement in the Gyeongju area began in the Neolithic Age. However, no indications of tombs have been found among the archaeological sites and materials from that time. The major tomb type from the subsequent Bronze Age (c. 1000 BCE–400 BCE) is dolmens, a form of megalithic stones with a capstone placed above ground to mark the presence of graves, many of which have been discovered across the Korean Peninsula. Next, in the Early Iron Age (c. 400 BCE–100 BCE), the major tomb type is the stone-covered wooden coffin tomb (*jeokseok mokgwanmyo*). None of these have been unearthed in the Gyeongju area, however. The small number of known tombs from this period date to the latter reaches of the Early Iron Age and are wooden coffin tombs (*mokgwanmyo*) not accompanied by stones, demonstrating features indicative of the transition to the next period.

During the Proto-Three Kingdoms Period (c. 100 BCE–300 CE), the Manhan, Jinhan, and Byeonhan confederacies (collectively known as Samhan) shared the southern portion of the Korean Peninsula. This is indicated in “Records of the Dongyi” (“eastern barbarians”) from the “Book of Wei” in *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi*). At this time the Gyeongju area

was the base of Saroguk, one of the statelets comprising Jinhan. Clusters of wooden coffin tombs for the ruling class and of the subsequent type, wooden chamber tombs (*mokgwakmyo*), formed throughout the region. The mounds accompanying the tombs of this period have all been lost and no traces remain above the surface of the ground.

The Silla Kingdom covered a vast territory east of the Nakdonggang River in the center of the Yeongnam region beginning from around the mid-fourth century. Clusters of tombs topped with large-scale mounds were built on the flats east of the area that today forms downtown Gyeongju, corresponding to the central part of the Gyeongju basin. These are the tombs of the city’s ruling class from after its establishment as the capital of the Silla Kingdom. From the mid-sixth century until the fall of Silla in 935, the tombs of the ruling class were constructed as stone chamber tombs (*seoksilbun*) and their preferred sites shifted from the plains to the surrounding hillsides.

The tomb types described for the periods mentioned above are all classified as *gobun*, or ancient tomb (Kim Won-yong 1974). But nowadays in Korea, ancient tombs generally point to those built after the first century BCE, a time when peer polities began to be established in various areas in the southern Korean Peninsula, including Gyeongju. These polities were not necessarily “states” although *Records of the Three Kingdoms* refers to

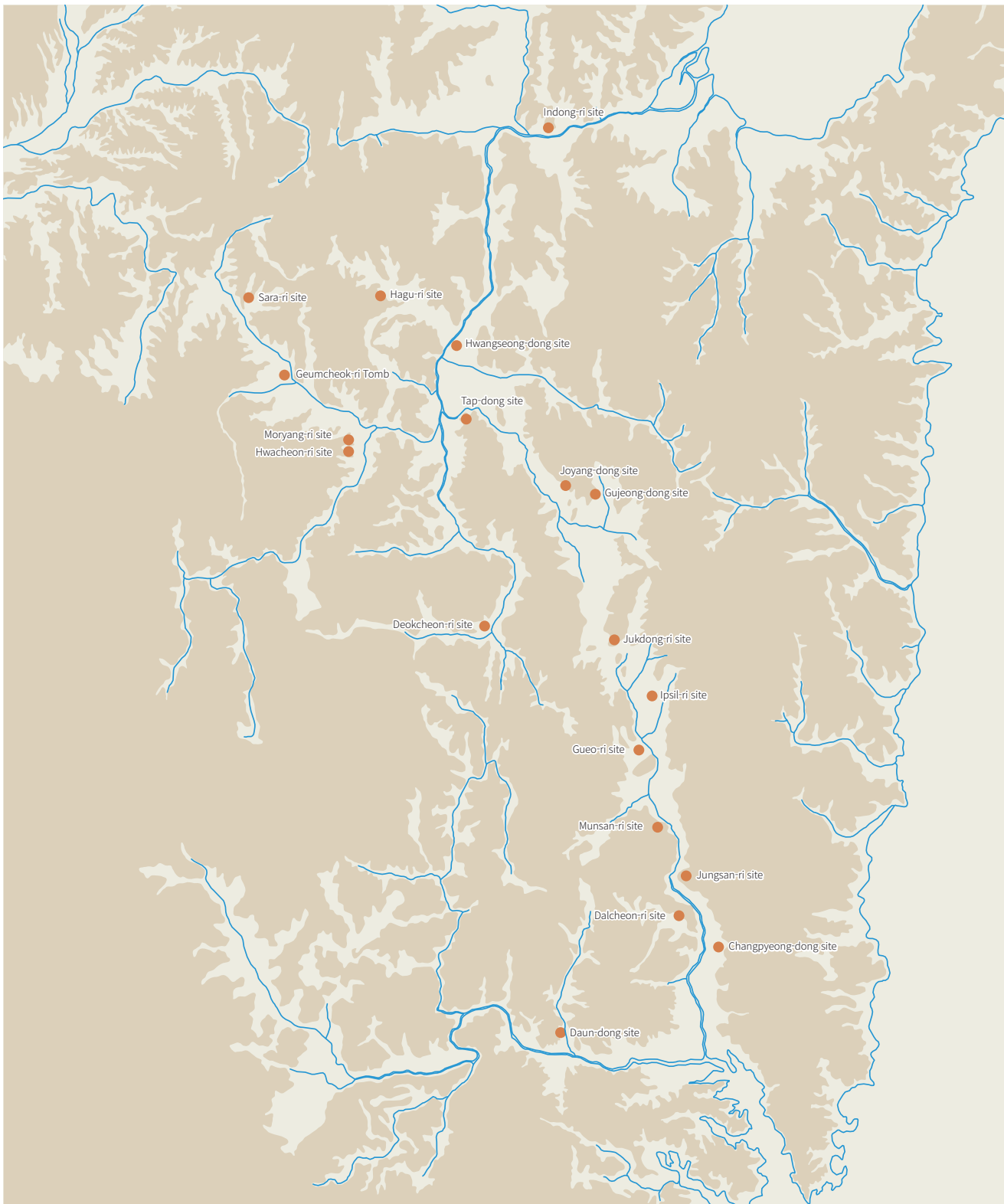


Fig. 1. Map of archaeological sites around Gyeongju dating to the Saroguk period

them *guk*, conventionally meaning “state.” Anyway, the earliest ancient tombs in Silla history are those dating to the Saroguk period.

This article provides an overview of the tombs of the Gyeongju area over the course of three archaeologically divided periods in Silla’s one-thousand-year history: the Saroguk period,

the Maripgan period, and the Junggogi (sixth–seventh century) and Unified Silla period.

Wooden Coffin Tombs of the Early Saroguk Period

Saroguk, out of which the kingdom of Silla later emerged, was a local polity covering some 1,300 square kilometers, presumably including the present-day Gyeongju area. It is believed to have been established at the turn of the first century BCE. This is inferred from the archaeological phenomenon that tomb clusters began to appear around parts of the Gyeongju basin at that time and such groups of tombs continued to be formed until the Maripgan period. The distribution of these tomb clusters is seen as an indication that a network of human settlement at a statelet level spanning the Gyeongju basin was formed at this point and was sustained into the future.

The Saroguk era can be generally divided into two periods. During the initial phase, from the early first century BCE to the early second century CE, the major tomb type was the wooden coffin tomb. These were created by digging a pit, placing a wooden coffin inside, and covering the coffin with a low mound of earth, similar to what is practiced in Korea today. Although the tombs from this period are conventionally called wooden coffin tombs, no wooden coffin from the time has actually been discovered in the Gyeongju area. However, a wooden coffin excavated from Daho-ri Tomb No. 1 in Changwon in 1988 and other archaeological evidence from the soil layers indicate that two types of wooden coffins were indeed used throughout the Yeongnam region. One is the so-called “log coffin” made by vertically splitting a log slightly longer than the height of an average adult, hollowing it out, and rejoining the two halves. The other type is a wooden plank casket.

Joyang-dong Tomb No. 38, a representative tomb of the Saroguk period, is dated to the latter half of the first century BCE based on a mirror found within it from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–09 CE). The grave pit measures roughly 258 centimeter long, 128 centimeter wide, and 150 centimeter deep, while the wooden coffin is approximately 190 centimeter long, 65 centimeter wide, and 30–40 centimeter deep. The considerable depth of the pit reflects a desire to completely seal off the space in which the body was placed, but there is a clear trend toward a gradual shallowing of the pits over time.

Such tombs were generally oriented east to west, and the placement of the neck ornaments within them indicates that the head of the deceased was generally placed at the eastern end. This was a typical pattern that continued at least until the Maripgan period. It is not clearly known what beliefs or ideas might have underlain this eastern orientation in Silla tombs.



Fig. 2. Joyang-dong Tomb No. 38



Fig. 3. Sara-ri Tomb No. 130

However, if we consider that the sun, the fundamental source of all life, rises in the east, this custom may be connected to hopes for rebirth or eternal life.

A classic example of a wooden coffin tomb from the later part of the early Saroguk period is Sara-ri Tomb No. 130, discovered in the western Gyeongju basin. Dating to the latter half of the first century CE, the grave pit is in the shape of a rectangle with rounded corners and measures 332 centimeter long, 230 centimeter wide, and 100 centimeter deep. The



Fig. 4. Layout of wooden coffin tombs at the Deokcheon-ri site



Fig. 5. Jar coffin tomb consisting of two joined jars



Fig. 6. Wooden coffin tomb in Tap-dong

wooden coffin inside is inferred to have been approximately 205 centimeter long and 80 centimeter wide. Traces left in the soil layers and at the bottom of the pit suggest that the coffin was made of wooden planks, with the two short planks inserted between around the ends of the vertical planks (as in the Hangeul letter ‘ㅍ’).

Although Sara-ri Tomb No. 130 is well-known for the discovery of 70 flat iron axes and other relics laid inside the coffin, a wider range and greater quantity of grave goods was in fact excavated from the space between the coffin and the pit walls. This indicates that the rites performed during the process of burying the most exalted members of the ruling class had by this time become highly elaborate and well organized. Supporting evidence is found in a wooden coffin tomb from the same period discovered in Tap-dong, on the northern slope of Namsan Mountain far apart within the same Saroguk territory. It yielded almost identical relics, with only the exception of the flattened iron axes.

None of the mounds erected over the wooden coffin tombs remain today. Indirect evidence of mounds is found in traces of ditches encircling the pits of large wooden coffin tombs at

the Deokcheon-ri site in the southwestern part of the Gyeongju basin. Based on these ditches, it is possible to suppose that the mounds would have been in a long oval or rectangular shape around 800–900 centimeter long and 600–700 centimeter wide. There are no known clues as to their height, but it is surmised that they would have been rather low and flat on top.

During the first half of the Saroguk period, tombs with pottery jar coffins were often annexed to wooden coffin tombs. Used to inter babies and young children, jar coffins were never a predominant type and therefore will be discussed here in conjunction with the wooden coffin tomb stage. Although single-jar coffins existed, such as from Gangbyeon-ro Tomb No. 1 in Hwangseong-dong, most were of the double-jar coffin type created by joining two similar vessels. Later in the period, triple-jar coffins appear in which a steamer-like vessel is added in the middle.

The pottery-jar coffins of the Saroguk period were mainly around one meter in length with the long axis running east-west. The grave pit was dug to a size only slightly exceeding that of the coffin.

Wooden Chamber Tombs of the Later Saroguk Period

In the wooden chamber tomb type, which appeared in the mid-second century CE, the space between the wooden chamber in the grave pit and the wooden coffin inside the chamber was filled prior to the internment with a large quantity of earthenware and iron objects. The shape of early examples of wooden chamber tombs is rectangular, but nearly square. In this respect, and in terms of the size and amount of grave goods as well, wooden chamber tombs are clearly distinct from the wooden coffin tombs of the preceding period. For example, there is a large difference in the size of the aforementioned Joyang-dong Tomb No. 38, the definitive wooden coffin tomb of the early part of the Saroguk period, and Gangbyeon-ro Tomb No. 1 in Hwangseong-dong, the classic wooden chamber tomb from early in the second half of the Saroguk period. (The latter features a pit 414 centimeter long, 338 centimeter wide, and 39 centimeter deep, and a wooden coffin that is estimated to have been around 275 centimeter long and 206 centimeter wide.) The later Gueo-ri Tomb No. 1, also a wooden chamber tomb, shows an even greater relative difference in size. Consisting of two wooden chambers (one main and one secondary), the pit reaches a full 10 meters in length.

The development of wooden chamber tombs with this structure stemmed from a desire to expand the burial space to accommodate more elaborate rites and practices reflecting the increased power of political leaders (Lee Seong-ju 1997, 31). The rather sudden appearance of this type of tomb in the mid-second century can only be explained as a reflection of dramatic social changes. The fact that the pit for wooden chamber tombs became much shallower, particularly in the Gyeongju area, strongly suggests that the wooden chamber had been elevated above ground by this time in order to emphasize the volume of the mound.

The nearly-square plan of early wooden chamber tombs gradually transitioned to a more rectangular shape, and then to a long, thin, rectangular form. This eventually evolved into a double-chambered arrangement composed of a main chamber where the body of the deceased was interred and a secondary chamber where the grave goods were placed. Such tombs can be further divided into those with the secondary chamber within the same pit (Deokcheon-ri Tomb No. 120) and those where it is placed within a separate pit (Gueo-ri Tomb No. 1). The former type dominates in the Gyeongju area. The secondary chamber was appended as an exclusive space to store grave goods for use by the deceased in the afterlife. As such, it can be presumed that a belief in a next life as a continuation of the previous life (Byeon Tae-seop 1958; 1959) was becoming firmly established among



Fig. 7. Hwangseong-dong Gangbyeon-ro Tomb No. 1, a wooden chamber tomb



Fig. 8. Deokcheon-ri Tomb No. 120, a wooden chamber tomb with a secondary chamber inside the same pit (where the pottery grave goods were located)

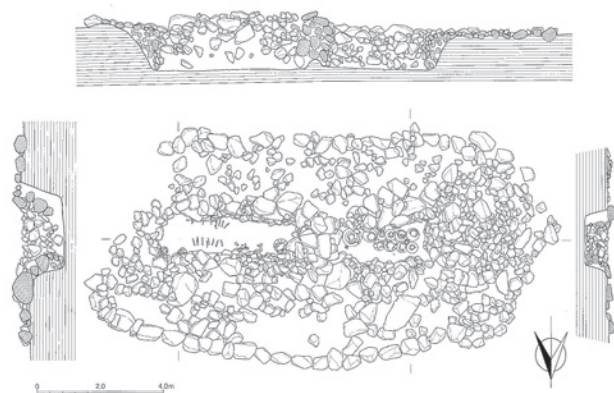


Fig. 9. Jungsan-ri Tomb IA-No. 26 in Ulsan, a long rectangular double-chamber wooden chamber tomb surrounded by stones similar to later stone retaining slabs

the ruling class of the region.

Although almost no clues remain regarding the size and shape of the mounds that would have topped the wooden chamber tombs, Jungsan-ri Tomb IA-No. 26 in Ulsan, a wooden chamber tomb surrounded by stones (*wiseok mokgwakmyo*), provides an example of a mound encircled by retaining slabs

similar to those featured on tombs of the Maripgan period. The mound forms a long rectangle with rounded corners measuring around 1480 centimeters in length and 760 centimeters in width. The presence of these stone retaining slabs from an early period suggests that this wooden chamber tombs were meant to include a high mound from the very beginning.

From Wooden Chamber Tomb to Stone-covered Wooden Chamber Tomb

Following the Saroguk period, the prevailing tomb type in the Maripgan period became the stone-covered wooden chamber tomb (*jeokseok mokgwakmyo*). From the beginning of the study of these highly original structures, much attention has been focused on their origins. It has been strongly suggested that this type of tomb originated outside of Korea. Linking it to cairns in southern Siberia dating to the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, it has been argued that the form was transmitted to Korea by horse-mounted immigrants who constituted the ruling class of Gyeongju during the Maripgan period (Choi Byunghyun 1992, 381–415). Others have contended that Goguryeo tombs, which were made entirely of stone, provided the ultimate inspiration (Shin Gyeong-cheol, 1985). However, archaeological evidence demonstrates that the stone-covered wooden chamber tomb progressively evolved out of the wooden chamber tomb form from the preceding period in the Gyeongju area (Lee Jaehong 1997).

If stone-covered wooden chamber tombs did indeed develop endogenously, their salient feature of stones piled around a wooden chamber inside and on top of a pit would not have appeared overnight. It is generally acknowledged that in the first stage of the transition, stones were piled around the wooden chamber and in the next they were placed on top of the chamber. This type was followed by an above-ground wooden chamber with stones mounded on top (Lee Heejoon 1996). Tombs of the earliest of these three types were constructed at least during the late Saroguk period.

The stone-covered wooden chamber tomb in Masan-ri, Heunghae-eup, Pohang, provides an example of this earliest type. Surrounded by stones on all four sides, it is located just three meters to the north of a previously built double-wooden chamber tomb running east to west on top of a small hill, causing the two to appear to form a double mound. These circumstances indicate that this tomb was built in the early fourth century at the latest. This was a point of accelerated transition from the wooden chamber tomb, a form which had been steadily maintained for some time, to the stone-covered wooden chamber tomb.

The main chamber of the Masan-ri tomb is placed at the

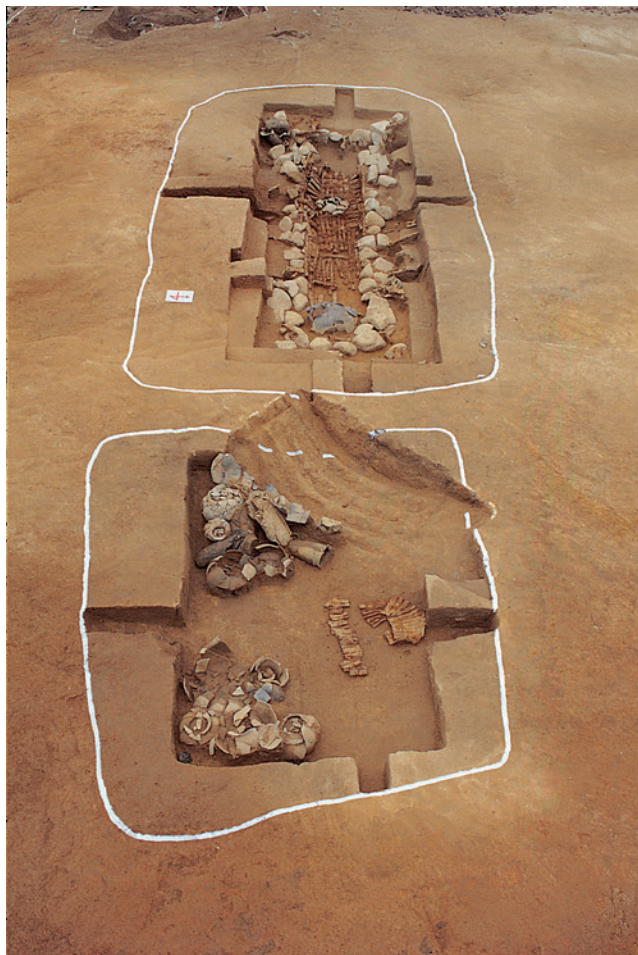


Fig. 10. Gueo-ri Tomb No. 1, a wooden chamber tomb



Fig. 11. Stone-covered wooden chamber tomb in Masan-ri in Pohang, surrounded by stones on all four sides

center of the grave pit and flanked by a secondary chamber on one side and a chest for grave goods on the other. The grave pit is 800 centimeter long, 320 centimeter wide, and 50 centimeter deep. It is surmised that the gap of around 60 centimeters between the walls of the grave pit and the main chamber and secondary chamber was filled with stone slabs and crushed stone 15–30 centimeters in width. A small degree of sinking

observed in the soil layers inside the main and secondary chambers suggests that no stones were piled on top of the wooden chambers. The location of the gold earrings discovered inside the tomb indicates that the body was placed with its head toward the east.

Political Status of the Occupants of Wooden Coffin Tombs and Wooden Chamber Tombs

During the Proto-Three Kingdoms period, the political system for each area, including Saroguk, was fundamentally a chieftdom comprised of several towns and villages (*eumnak*). Each of these chieftdoms demonstrated a settlement pattern based on a three-tiered hierarchy featuring a central community and lower-level secondary communities within set geographical boundaries. The tomb clusters of the Saroguk period that have been excavated so far consist essentially of the graves of the heads of lineage groups who ruled communities within the top two tiers.

Sara-ri Tomb No. 130 and the Tap-dong tomb are wooden coffin tombs with almost no parallels in the Yeongnam region in terms of size or the burial practices involved. Interred within these tombs are the leaders of a number of Saroguk-period communities from the first century CE. No other tomb meeting the same standard can be found within the respective clusters to which each belongs, indicating that no dominant group had yet appeared. It is inferred that the occupants of the two tombs were buried with grave goods of such exceptional quality and quantity due to superior individual leadership capabilities.

No wooden chamber tomb of an outstanding size or standard that would indicate the burial place of a local political leader has yet been found in the Gyeongju area among the Saroguk tombs dating from after the mid-second century. However, according to an analysis of the changes in the tombs of leaders over time from the Bronze Age to the Proto-Three Kingdoms period (Lee Heejoon 2011), leaders from the wooden chamber tomb stage had obtained military power as well. This is in contrast to the leaders of the wooden coffin phase who had yet to achieve military backing among the three types of power bases: economic, ideological, and military (Earle 1997). They would certainly have engaged in a fierce competition that triggered a considerable reshuffling of the ruling class, at least at the chieftain level. The wooden chamber tomb clusters include a number of tombs of a superior standard, suggesting that a dominant group had appeared by that time.

Tombs of the Maripgan Period

Stone-covered Wooden Chamber Tomb Exclusive to the Ruling Class of Gyeongju

A survey of the changes in the tombs of the Yeongnam region reveals that those of the Maripgan period, which began around the mid-fourth century, are distinguished by large mounds that have since been maintained in nearly their original condition. This type of tomb with a mound of earth on top of a grave is known as a tumulus (*gochong*). Such imposing mounds were created to reflect the power and authority of both the deceased and of the family members and kin group who erected them.

Entering the Maripgan period, small tombs continued to be built in each alluvial area on the fringes of the Gyeongju basin where the tombs of the preceding Saroguk period had been sited. However, a large cluster of tumuli of various sizes was formed in the area north of Wolseong at the center of the capital. Another group of tumuli was established in Geumcheon-ri, some 10 kilometers to the west. These are the only two places in Gyeongju where tumuli clusters are found.

Excavations over the years have revealed these tumuli to be stone-covered wooden chamber tombs, and it was in this type of tomb that the renowned golden ornaments of Silla were discovered. The unique structure of stone-covered wooden chamber tombs demonstrates a clear contrast when compared to tombs in areas east of the Nakdonggang River, which fell under Silla control at the time. There, tombs were mostly stone-lined pit tombs (*suhyeolsik seokgwakmyo*) or stone-lined tombs with a horizontal entrance (*hoenggusik seokgwakmyo*). Hence, it can be understood that stone-covered wooden chamber tombs were preferred by the ruling class of Silla as a symbol of their identity.

In a typical example of a stone-covered wooden chamber tomb, not only the space between the grave pit walls and the wooden chamber, but also the top of the burial chamber, are piled with stones approximately the size of a human head. But as examined above, the three types of tombs with stones added to a conventional wooden chamber tomb appeared sequentially over time. For a period during the Maripgan era, all three types were being built simultaneously.

Of course, all these tombs have both a mound with a nearly-circular oval plan and a surrounding ring of retaining slabs, one of the conditions of tumuli, which sets them apart from earlier tombs. The mammoth tumuli in the center of Gyeongju, the royal capital of Silla, are all stone-covered wooden chamber tombs above ground and a complex structure of triple or more burial chambers. During the Japanese colonial period



Fig. 12. Northern tumuli cluster to Wolseong-dong



Fig. 13. Tumuli cluster in Geumcheok-ri

(1910–1945), some 155 tumuli were tallied, including these large examples, but many smaller versions whose mounds had been leveled over the years remained obscured underground.

Stone-covered wooden chamber tombs came to be concentrated onto two localities at the start of the Maripgan period as Saroguk gave way to Silla and members of the ruling class from the alluvial areas around the Gyeongju basin moved into the capital. They formed a new and powerful social element and constructed tombs that could reflect their status and identity. In other words, with the formation of the six *bu* (部, divisions) of Silla, the ruling classes of these divisions continued to erect stone-covered wooden chamber tombs. Not only resources from the Gyeongju area went into their construction, but also human and material resources requisitioned from regions east of the Nakdonggang River that they ruled indirectly through a tributary system.

Scattered among the large tumuli in today's downtown Gyeongju are some small stone-covered wooden chamber tombs and small stone-lined pit tombs. In terms of scale and of the relics found within, these stone-lined pit tombs are inferior and have consequently been judged to be the graves of people from a



Fig. 14. Excavation of Yeonsan-dong Tomb M3 in Busan (a stone-lined pit tomb with secondary stone chamber)

lower social rank than those buried in the stone-covered wooden chamber tombs. There are some wooden chamber tombs from an early stage of the Maripgan period that succeed intact the traditions of the preceding period, and these are considered graves of people of lower rank as well. For example, Tomb No. C10 in the Jjoksaem district of the old royal capital is a relatively large wooden chamber tomb with a main and a secondary chamber, but none of the golden ornaments that are commonly found in tombs of that type and scale were discovered within. All that it yielded was a horse bard and a set of armor suggesting that the individual interred belonged to the warrior class.

Stone-covered wooden chamber tombs can be roughly classified into single-mound tombs (*danjang*), double-mound tombs (*pyohyeong*), and multi-mound tombs (*dahyeong*) consisting of three or more mounds. The presence of double-mound and multi-mound tombs is a distinguishing feature of the stone-covered wooden chamber tombs of the Gyeongju area. These tombs were generally joined by removing part of the retaining slabs around an existing mound and installing the new tomb within the space.

Royal Tombs of the Maripgan Period

When comparing the tumuli clusters of the Maripgan period with wooden chamber tombs from the preceding era, an important point of distinction is the pluralization of tombs in different categories of size and quality and quantity of grave goods. Documentary evidence has shown that the ruling class was divided horizontally into six *bu* competing units. However, the existence of multiple types of tombs with unique standards attests to a well-developed vertical organization as well.

Royal tombs from the Maripgan period are likely to be found among the tumuli in the center of the city of Gyeongju, especially the large tumuli in Daenuengwon or Nodong-dong

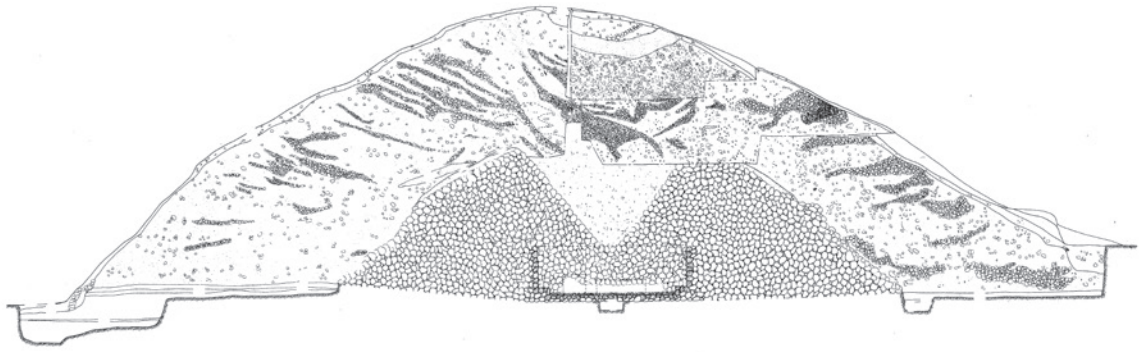


Fig. 15. Cheonmachong, an above-ground stone-covered wooden chamber tomb



Fig. 16. Relics showing the inside of the wooden coffin found within Cheonmachong Tomb



Fig. 18. Tomb No. C10 in the Jjoksaem district



Fig. 17. Stones revealed after removing the earthen mound from the southern mound of Hwangnamdaechong Tomb



Fig. 19. Overall view of Hwangnamdaechong Tomb, a double-mound tomb

and Noseo-dong to its north. The separate tumuli group in Geumcheok-ri to the west are considered to be the graves of members of Jamtak-bu, one of the weaker of the six *bu*. There is little likelihood of royal tombs being found among them since all the reigning king, the Maripgan, was also the leader of Tak-bu and Satak-bu, the two most powerful divisions at the time.

Meanwhile, there has been a tendency to consider tombs yielding gold crowns with stylized tree-shaped uprights to be the

burial places of royalty, but the discovery of such a crown cannot be considered definitive proof. Among the large tombs yet to be excavated, many are much larger than the tombs where gold crowns have been found. For example, there are nine tombs larger than Cheonmachong (Tomb of the Heavenly Horse), which is capped with a mound 49.6 meters in diameter and within which a gold crown was discovered.

First, if size is taken as the primary standard for a royal



Fig. 20. Tombs yielding gold crowns located in Daeneungwon, Nosedong, and Nodong-dong

tomb, Tomb No. 98, named Hwangnamdaechong (Great Tomb of Hwangnam), a twin tomb with north and south mounds each measuring 76 meters in diameter, must be posited to belong to a king and queen. This could give rise to a hypothesis that all large twin tumuli constitute the tombs of royalty. In this light, other large twin tumuli, such as Tombs No. 90 and No. 134, are strong contenders as royal tombs. In the same line, the largest of the single tombs, Tomb No. 125 (82.3 meters in diameter) and No. 130 (74.6 meters in diameter), must also be put forward as potential royal tombs. Another likely candidate is Tomb No. 106 (51.6 meters in diameter) (Yun Sangdeok 2014).

If this theory does hold, then potential royal tombs of the Maripgan period are found in the vicinity of other tombs of a smaller size. That is, members of royalty who belonged to the same *bu* shared grave sites with other powerful members of society, suggesting that the king had not yet achieved transcendental status during this period. It also clearly attests to a situation in which the king was both the reigning monarch and the head of the *bu* to which he belonged.

Tombs of the Junggogi Period and Unified Silla Period

Shift in Location and Introduction of Stone Chamber Tombs

During Silla's Junggogi period (literally "middle ancient" period) (514–654) many reforms were attempted, including a reorganization of the system of governance with the aim of strengthening centralized government. In ruling class tombs, an overall shift took place from stone-covered wooden chamber tombs to stone chamber tombs (*seoksilmyo*), but not immediately at the start of the period. First, their location shifted from flat areas within the city center to the surrounding hillocks, as evidenced by the stone-covered wooden chamber tombs found there. The tomb known as Bubuchong (Husband and Wife Tomb) dating to around the mid-sixth century was excavated during the Japanese colonial period. It was found on a hillside in Bomun-dong, east of the present city center. One of the tombs was a stone-covered wooden chamber tomb, but the other was a stone chamber tomb supposedly sharing a double-mound with the former.

This change in location is generally thought to be the result of Silla's territorial expansion in the mid-sixth century, which led to an influx of population into the capital and a subsequent need

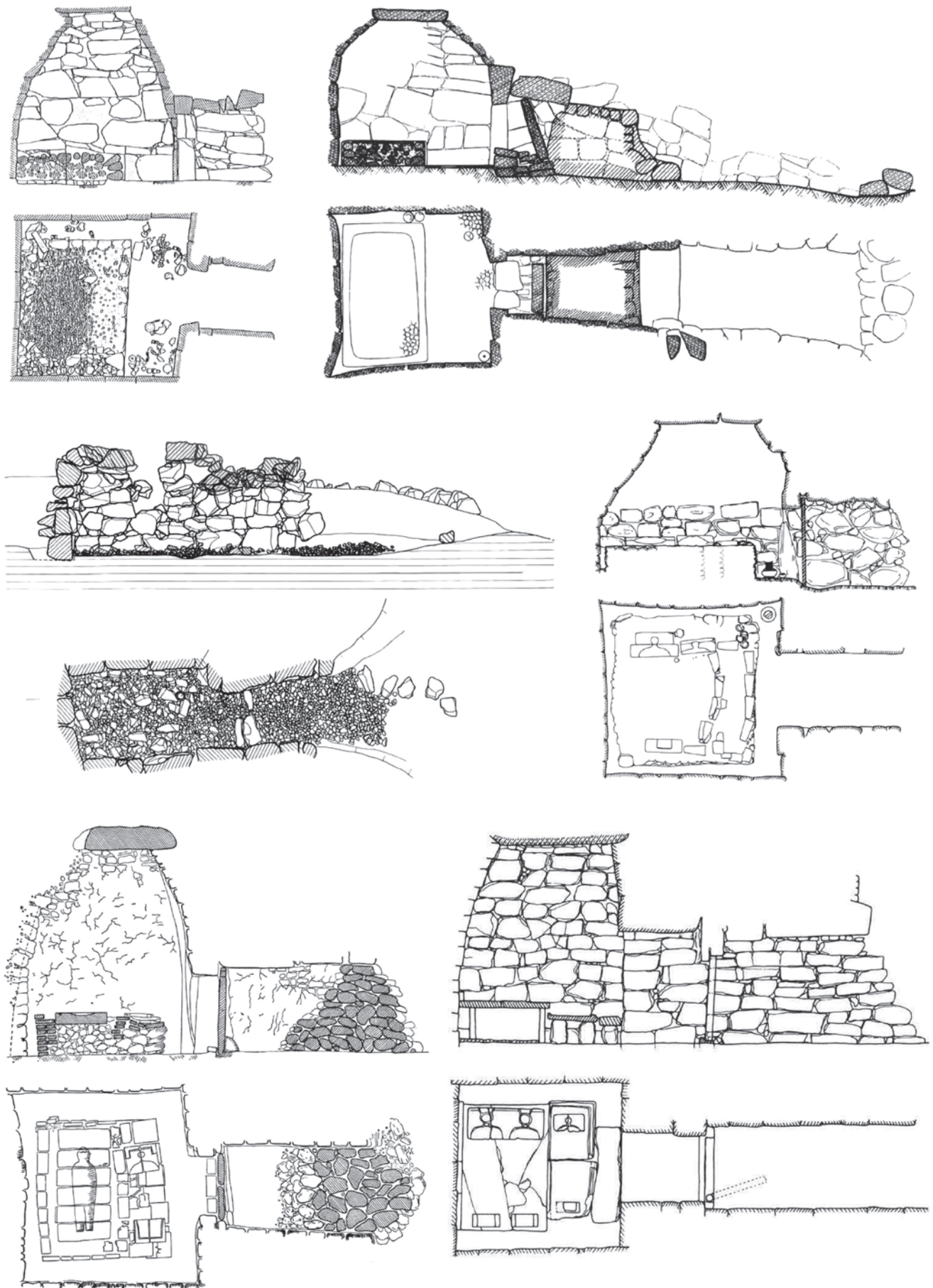


Fig. 21. Plans and sections of stone chamber tombs with horizontal entrances in the Gyeongju area

for additional flat land for housing. However, considering that the slightly elevated flat land with a mountain-soil bed where the stone-covered wooden chamber tombs are located is completely occupied by tombs, it could be more accurate to suppose that Gyeongju was running out of space for additional burials even prior to the introduction of stone chamber tombs. New tombs had to be sited in the surrounding hills, and that is where stone chamber tombs began to be built in earnest.

Underlying the introduction of stone chamber tombs in the mid-sixth century was the transformation in the view of the afterlife that arrived with the adoption of Buddhism as the national religion. Not only did tombs experience a complete change in structure, the practice of placing the head toward the east and performing lavish burial rites disappeared.

Unified Silla Tombs after the Mid-Sixth Century

The dominant forms for tombs of the Unified Silla period built after the mid-sixth century were stone chamber tombs with a horizontal entrance (*hoenghyeolsik seoksilbun*) and cremation tombs (*hwajangmyo*). A number of small stone-lined pit tombs were also constructed. The chamber was built above ground for most of the stone chamber tombs with a horizontal entrance, rendering them large and high like the tumuli of the Maripgan period. The stone chamber was first surrounded by a structure somewhat like an inner circle of retaining slabs, and then the whole external mound was banded with another circle of stone slabs. Construction of such tombs on the hillsides around Gyeongju began to gain momentum from the mid-sixth century.

Stone chamber tombs with a horizontal entrance were designed on the basic premise that additional burials would be included later. Therefore, they consisted of four main elements: a stone chamber where bodies were buried; a roofed passageway allowing access to the burial chamber (*yeondo*) from the outside; a passageway leading from the outside of the chamber to the outside of the tomb (*myodo*); and a mound. Naturally, the passageway leading to the outside of the tomb was sealed and covered after interment. In these stone chamber tombs, the body was generally not placed in a coffin. Instead, the internal space features various platforms upon which a body could be laid (*sidae*). These can be counted as a further important compositional element of the tombs.

If the stone chambers take on a high rectangular cuboid shape, that will make a ceiling difficult to install. To address this, the side walls were tapered inwards before the ceiling stones were placed on top. In most cases, the walls began to narrow from the top of the vertically closing gate (*hyeonmun*) of the *yeondo* corridor. The ceiling of the corridor is naturally lower than that



Fig. 22. Stone platform for the body inside Touchong Tomb in Jangsan



Fig. 23. Outer stone funerary urn for burial in a cremation tomb

of the stone chamber.

Stone chamber tombs with a horizontal entrance are generally divided into types according to the shape of the plan and the location of the corridor. The corridor can be placed in the center or to the left or right, and the chamber can be either rectangular or square in plan. The earliest of these tombs were likely to feature a rectangular stone chamber, while later ones took the form of a square. The later type has higher ceilings.

One distinguishing feature of Silla stone chamber tombs with a horizontal entrance is the variation in corpse platforms. Over time, low platforms gave way to higher versions. Many of them were lined with large stones and filled on the inside with smaller stones. However, as in Touchong (Tomb of the Clay Figurines) on Jangsan Mountain, some of the platforms consist of a single bed-like slab. Some have separate rests or supports for the head, upper body, and feet, while others, such as Ssangsangchong (Double Platform Tomb), have a single large support for the entire body. In the latter case, the full-body support is made of tuff that has been shaped and finished.

Cremation tombs can be classified into those consisting of a pit in which a funerary urn containing the ashes remaining from a cremation is simply buried and those where the urn was covered with a protective facility or another vessel prior to its



Fig. 24. Diverse funerary urns unearthed in the Gyeongju area

burial. In the provinces outside the capital, the former type is more common. The latter type is most frequently found in the Silla capital area. The protective facilities or vessels include stone coffins, stone caskets, stone niches, or earthenware vessels. The funerary urn was generally an earthenware vessel with an intricate stamped design or a porcelain vessel imported from China. Particularly from the eighth century on, urns made specifically for funerary purposes and equipped with rings or hooks to connect the lid with the body were generally used.

Royal Tombs of the Junggogi Period and Unified Silla

At the start of the Junggogi period, the king ascended beyond the status of head of his *bu* to become the leader of all six and gained the title of “great king” (*daewang*). Accordingly, the burial sites of kings began to be recorded, as evidenced in *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, History of the Three Kingdoms), which specifically mentions “north of Yeonggyeongsa Temple.” In addition, tombs for royalty and the aristocracy were no longer built on the flats in the center of urban Gyeongju, but in the hills on the surrounding mountains instead. Primary examples include the tombs that lie in a row behind the tomb of King Taejong Muyeol, the first monarch of the Middle period (654–780).

Of these four large tumuli, the one closest to the Tomb of

King Muyeol is estimated at 62.9 meters in diameter. The plan of its mound is not round, as would be the case for a stone chamber tomb with a horizontal entrance. Instead, it takes on an oval form resembling the tumuli of the Maripgan period. Hence, the interior structure is likely to be a stone-covered wooden chamber tomb. The other three tombs behind it are round in plan, with diameters ranging from 46 to 50 meters. Their scale and circumstances clearly indicate them to be the tombs of royalty. The lowest tomb is the oldest, and presumably the tomb of King Beopheung (r. 514–540) of the Junggogi period. The tombs of King Jinheung (r. 540–576) and King Jinji (r. 576–579) are believed to be among the remaining three (Yun Sangdeok, 2014).

As for the tombs of King Jinpyeong (r. 579–623) and Queen Jindeok (r. 647–654), records state that they were sited in Hanjibu and Saryang-bu, respectively, suggesting that they were built on flat land. The tomb of Queen Seondeok (r. 632–647) is thought to be a single tomb on the southern slope of Nangsan Mountain, north of Sacheonwangsa Temple (Temple of the Four Heavenly Kings).

As seen above, the royal tombs of the Junggogi period formed clusters in an area removed from the tombs of the aristocracy in order to suit the elevated status of the king as a transcendental being. They gradually came to be built each



Fig. 25. Tumuli in the area around the Tomb of King Muyeol (surrounded by trees in the lower part of the photo) in Seoak-dong



Fig. 26. Base and capstone of the Stele of the Tomb of King Muyeol



Fig. 27. Capstone of the Stele of the Tomb of King Muyeol

in a separate location rather than in groups, symbolizing the expansion of royal authority.

The tomb of King Muyeol (r. 654–661), who ruled at the start of the Middle period, is a rare example of a tomb for which the interred can be clearly identified. The dragon-head capstone (*isu*) on the stele in front of the tomb carries an inscription that unambiguously states “Tomb of King Taejong Muyeol.” This stele is noted for its sculptural brilliance and is Korea’s earliest example of this type of funerary monument introduced from Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) in China.

Royal tombs originating in the Middle and Later periods (which fall within the Unified Silla period) are scattered around the fringes of the Gyeongju basin some distance from the city center. Since most were simply declared royal tombs by the Gyeongju clans during the first half of the eighteenth century, the credibility of their status is unconfirmed.

Aside from the Tomb of King Muyeol, the only other tombs certain to belong to royalty are the Tomb of King Heungdeok (r. 826–836), which is likewise named on a memorial stele, and the Tomb of King Wonseong (r. 785–795), which is identified on a



Fig. 28. Tomb of King Sinmun



Fig. 29. Stone figures in front of the Tomb of King Wonseong

stele inscription at Sungboksa Temple.

Notably, these tombs are all found at separate locations in low hills far from the center of Gyeongju. They are encircled by balusters and have retaining slabs around the mound that bear carvings of the twelve zodiac animals. Stone sculptures of humans and lions stand in front. These are the most complete of the surviving Silla royal tombs. The circle of retaining slabs has its origin in layers of smaller stone circle with supporting big stones at regular intervals the Tomb of King Muyeol. This developed into the form found in the Tomb of King Sinmun, where trimmed rectangular stones are stacked in multiple layers with large supporting slabs placed around them. This later evolved into a form in which the entire circumference is encircled by large stone slabs interspersed at regular intervals by slabs carved with the twelve zodiac animals.

Images of the twelve zodiac animals originated in China. The practice of placing small clay figures of human bodies with the heads of animals inside the tomb to represent the twelve directions (including the ox for the north, the rabbit for the east,



Fig. 30. One of the twelve zodiac animals (a horse) on the retaining slabs surrounding the Tomb of King Heungdeok

the horse for the south, and the rooster for the west) began in Su China and was succeeded in Tang China. Silla adopted this custom and advanced it by carving the images into the retaining slabs around tombs. The funerary urn from the cremation tomb at Hwagok-ri has relief clay figures of the twelve zodiac animals



Fig. 31. A funerary urn lid bearing twelve zodiac names, unearthed in the Gyeongju

encircling its body. These figures were also applied to a range of other objects in diverse manners. For example, they were carved into the lids of funerary urns and cast in metal for use as scale weights. The wide application of these images indicates the faith in the twelve zodiacal animals that existed in Silla society at the time.

The arrangement of zodiac animals bearing weapons on the retaining slabs surrounding Silla royal tombs is the result of combining the guardian role of the divine generals of Buddhism with these zodiac animals that originally represented prayers for the permanence of time. The other sculptures found at royal tombs, such as stone lions, are basically tomb guardians. These twelve zodiac animals on the retaining stones are an important sculptural feature of the royal tombs and attest to the creativity of the people of Silla as they assimilated foreign cultural elements and made them their own.

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