

The Development of the Buddhist Relic Cult from Unified Silla to Early Koryŏ*

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Introduction

The veneration of the physical remains of the Buddha has long been regarded as an aberration of the Buddha's original teachings, contradicting the law that there is no self, and hence no physicality to attach to. Yet after his cremation, the Buddha's remains, known as *śarīra* (relics), were distributed to many kings, and ever since they have constituted an important focus for lay and monastic devotionism. Although this has traditionally been interpreted as a concession to the needs of the masses for a figure to worship, an increasing number of studies over the past decades has revealed first that relics have always been an important part of the Buddhist religion, and second that there is a great diversity in practices regarding relics, reflected in complex doctrinal explanations that justify the continued relevance of the Buddha's physical body (*rūpakāya*). In other words, especially but not exclusively in Mahāyāna Buddhism, there is a variety of strategies that serve to incorporate the relic cult into mainstream Buddhist practice. (Faure, 137-43)

Among the most significant contributions to this field can be considered the works of Schopen and Trainor for relic worship in South Asia, Faure for China, and Ruppert for Japan. However, although it has long been known that Buddhist relics were transmitted to Korea as early as the mid-sixth century, no one has yet systematically studied the impact of the relic cult on Korean history. True, considerable attention has been

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paid to the splendid reliquaries recovered from many stūpas,¹⁾ and there are studies on questions such as the transmission of relics to Korea, but in general there has been very little reflection as to what the presence of relics means for Buddhist practices and beliefs “on the ground.” In particular, I am interested if and how the enshrinement of relics was part of an official cult that ultimately aimed to strengthen royal authority, as has been attested in most other countries where there is evidence of a relic cult.

Pankaj Mohan has recently argued for the importance of relics in the strengthening of royal authority in sixth-century Silla, but there has been as yet no attempt to look at how the relics were employed after this initial period.²⁾ This article aims first of all to reassess our knowledge of the relic cult in Korea, and then address the question of how the kings of Unified Silla (668-935) used it to enhance their authority, and whether this was continued by the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). While based mainly on textual evidence, this article will also strive to take into account archeological evidence: not just textual material (inscriptions) recovered through archeology, but also the material evidence of the *śarīra* themselves: especially the contents of the reliquaries and their context, together with some other circumstantial evidence, will be taken into account.

Although I here follow the common assumption that the presence of relics, or their implied presence through the typical containers and stūpas in which they were enshrined (the presence of relics, stored inside special reliquaries which were then hidden inside the stūpa, can only be ascertained upon opening the stūpa), indicates the existence of a relic cult, it should be emphasized that there is very little evidence of how relics were treated in Korea. For example, there is no rich vein of popular

1) Here the landmark study remains the 1991 catalogue of a comprehensive exhibition of Korean reliquaries at the National Museum of Korea. See 강우방 1991.

2) Pankaj 2005, 2007. However, the articles actually reveal very little of an active relic cult; practically the only relevant evidence cited is the fact that the term *sŏnggol* (holy bone) for the Silla royal lineage is also used to denote holy relic-bones

stories regarding the miracles incurred by the relics as exists for China and Japan. Also, we should remember that the “cult of the relics” is a term that is mainly used in Western scholarship, and is ultimately borrowed from the Christian relic cult, implying a very active veneration. However, in Korean research the term one is most likely to encounter in relation to relics is *Pulsari changŏm* 佛舍利莊嚴, meaning “adornment, decoration of Buddha relics,” and also *changŏmgu* 莊嚴具 or “objects of adornment,” or, less literally, “accoutrements.” This may be taken as an indication that the study of relics has been dominated by art historians, who have looked mainly at the art-historical features of reliquaries, and archeologists, who have studied their provenance, context, and contents. Historians, on the other hand, have looked simply at the records concerning the relics (*sari* 舍利, *Pulsari* 佛舍利), but nobody seems to have speculated much about how the relics were actually used, how they functioned within the complex of practices and beliefs that we call “Silla/Koryŏ Buddhism.”³⁾

Perhaps it should not be automatically assumed that the relics were actively “used,” that is that they were the object of cultic practices, for example their ritual display in processions. However, they were certainly the object of veneration and the nexus for many beliefs in the efficacy of Buddhism. Some studies have indeed discussed the “faith” (*sinang*) in the power of relics, but mainly in the context of miracles that are said to have occurred surrounding the T'ongdo-sa relics (e.g. 장충식 2003). Although there is very little useful source material to document practices related to relics, an early Koryŏ source that has so far not been discussed in scholarship on Korean relics, shows that kings were eager to tap into their potential. Therefore, I think it is permissible to assume the existence of a cult, or a complex of practices and beliefs, that used relics to construct royal authority, though not necessarily along the same lines as in China or Japan. This article will start with a review of the literature on

3) Interestingly, in the Korean translation of Fontein's article, the term “sari ūi yebae” is used to translate “relic cult.” However, the term sits uncomfortable and does not seem to have any wide coinage. Fontein, 94

the Silla relic cult, paying attention especially to the application of insights from studies of the relic cult in other countries; the next section will discuss archeological evidence from relic deposits, and the final section will deal with the changes brought about by the early Koryŏ kings.

The development of the Silla relic cult: an overview

In the Buddhist tradition, relics were regarded as the actual presence of the Buddha: representing his corporeality, the supernatural power of the Buddha was also transferred to his relics. For the faithful, their presence served as means to conquer death just as the Buddha had done. Rulers for their part were always interested in harnessing their supernatural power for their own ends (Faure, 132-5). The paradigmatic example of a ruler employing the Buddha's physical remains as a symbol of his own power is Aśoka, who is said to have distributed 84,000 stūpas containing relics across his empire. Later rulers, including Chinese and Japanese emperors, explicitly emulated his example (for China, see Dunnell, 92-3; 주경미2007; for Japan, see Ruppert). But even without direct association with Aśoka, relics were sometimes paraded by emperors who simply sought to adopt some of their magical efficacy (or at least harness the popular fervor surrounding their worship), as was the case for the Famen-si relic in the Tang dynasty (Huang, Chen).

Silla may well have followed that example; it is well known that sixth-century Silla rulers borrowed imagery and symbols from Buddhism, notably the Aśoka myths, so as to identify the Silla royal lineage with the Buddha or with cakravartin rulers (Pankaj 1995, 2005, 2007). However, so far I have only found one reference to the Aśokan distribution of stūpas and/or relics in Silla, attributed to King Chinp'yŏng in 582, but the source for this is rather spurious, as it dates to the closing days of the Chosŏn dynasty.⁴⁾ Given the lack of any clear evidence, we simply have to assume

4) The text records more specifically that after Chinhŭng relinquished the throne to become a monk, his grandson Chinp'yŏng distributed relics to various temples, with Tonghwa-sa alone receiving 1,200 grains of *śarīra*, which were stored in the

that Silla kings did not engage in the massive distribution of relics that took place in China, for example under Emperor Wen of Sui, and in Japan at the accession of emperors. The relics allegedly distributed by King Chinp'yŏng were the first to have been introduced to Korea: they had been brought by the Liang envoy Shen Hu in 549.⁵⁾

But while Shen Hu's may have been the first, by far the most significant transfer of relics was that achieved by the monk Chajang: the relics he brought back from China form a central thread in the (sparse) literature on the Korean relic cult, and they can be said to constitute the 'true' relics in Korea. According to Chajang's Korean biographies, he received them during his sojourn in China between 636/8 and 643; after experiencing a vision of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on Mt. Wutai, he secretly received the Buddha's *kāśāya*, a tooth, a piece of skull as well as 100 grains of relics.⁶⁾ After his return to Korea, some of these relics were stored underneath the Hwangnyong-sa nine-story pagoda, built on Chajang's suggestion upon the advice he received from Mañjuśrī, and some – including the *kāśāya* – in T'ongdo-sa.⁷⁾ There are also traditions of the distribution to other places. While Hwangnyong-sa functioned mainly for the state – it was built explicitly to subdue Silla's neighboring states – the latter functioned exclusively for the *saṃgha*: instead of being enshrined in

"Golden Hall stūpa" (*Kūmdang t'ap*). Yi Nūng-hwa quotes a text by Hō Hun (1836-1907) in his monumental *Chosŏn Pulgyo t'ongsa*, but given the late date of this source, it is unlikely to be a tradition dating back to the Three Kingdoms Period. CPT, 1017

- 5) *Chŏnhu sojang śarīra*, SGYS 3-4. However according to the *Kūmdang t'apki* mentioned in the previous note, as many as 1,200 of Shen Hu's relics were later stored in Tonghwa-sa near Taegu. Sin T'ae-hyŏn (신태현 2003a: 201) explains the discrepancy between the small number brought by Shen Hu and the large number recorded in the *Kūmdang t'apki* as either a multiplication (*pun-sari* 分舍利) or a transformation of the original relics (*pyŏnsin sari* 變身舍利)
- 6) *Chajang chŏngyul*, SGYS 4-5; *Chŏnhu sojang sari*, SGYS 3-4. As Iryŏn points out, the transmission of these relics is not mentioned in Chajang's Chinese biography.
- 7) In fact, there were many more places in Korea where Chajang's relics are claimed to be enshrined. The most notable among these is Odae-san. However, no mention of this is made in the *Samguk yusa*, and the sources for the Odae-san tradition need to be scrutinized more carefully

a classical stūpa, they were enshrined under a stone dome on a platform, which was to serve as an ordination platform. (Kim Jongmyung, 남동신)⁸⁾ The tradition of Chajang's relics shows some differences in details, but it is clear that the tradition of relics introduced by him forms a dominant strain: references to his relics keep appearing throughout Korean history, and in so far that there was ever a "distribution of relics" it is the one which occurred under Chajang.

The two main places associated with Chajang's relics, T'ongdo-sa and Hwangnyong-sa, both date to the mid-seventh century, and not only suggest two very different strands for enshrining relics, they are also atypical for the Unified Silla stūpa proto-type. The stūpa at Hwangnyong-sa, built ca. 645, was a large-scale wooden construction modeled on Chinese prototypes; but while this model proved popular in Japan too, in Korea it was not continued. Here the relic cache was hidden under the central pillar, where it was discovered in 1964 following a theft. The T'ongdo-sa prototype (dating from Koryŏ in its present form) was evidently modeled on a description by the Chinese monk Daoxuan (596-667): in the last year of his life he authored a work describing an ordination platform (*jietan* 戒壇). The detailed description stipulates that on the top level of a tiered platform a dome-shaped *caitya* housing relics of the Buddha should be placed: the platform as a whole "constituted a stūpa, in effect representing the body of the Buddha himself." (McRae, 82) The T'ongdo-sa ordination platform, usually known as the *kūmgang kyedan* 金剛戒壇 answers to this description; and although there are very few similar constructions in Korea, it is important evidence that Korean Buddhist material culture was influenced as much by scriptural as visual models.

From the second half of the seventh century onwards, the Korean stūpa developed its own prototype, which can be characterized as small-scale models of the large wooden or brick pagodas prevalent in China, often in abstracted form, and usually made of granite. Whereas relics in

8) But see 장충식 2003: the current platform at T'ongdo-sa is a structure dating to the Koryŏ period; still, it is entirely possible that it was modelled on a previously extant structure.

wooden pagodas were usually buried below the central pillar, in the granite stūpas – usually 3, 5 or 7 stories high, though 3 stories seems to be the most common for Unified Silla – they were enshrined in one of the upper stories; initially more in the upper stories, and later on in Unified Silla more often in the first story (이인숙, 36-38). Perhaps this marks a shift towards a more popular devotional role of the stūpas. The small scale and the centrality of the stūpas in the monastic compound, together with the placement of the relics just above or at the eye-level of the devotees, would seem intended to draw more exclusive attention to the relics and facilitate veneration, e.g. by circumambulation. The presence of “prayer stones” (*paeryesŏk* 拜禮石) in front of some stūpas also confirms that they were the object of devotional practices (강병희).

The earliest of such stūpas with a reliable date are the Kamŭn-sa twin pagodas, dated to 682. Although no texts were found inside them, we know that the temple was founded for the memory of King Munmu (661-681), and the stūpas were probably intended for his posthumous benefit. A dedicatory inscription carved on the lid of the outer reliquary container found inside Hwangbok-sa and dated 706 confirms that the enshrinement of relics was part of the royal ancestor cult, and was apparently intended to ensure that deceased members of the royal family would attain nirvāṇa.⁹⁾ According to an inscription dated 863 found in a pagoda near Tonghwa-sa, it was constructed to the memory of King Aemin (r. 838-9), the uncle of the then reigning King Kyŏngmun (861-74). The inscription, executed on the outside of a soapstone relic container (no relics were recovered though), exalts the construction of stūpas as the most effective way of establishing merit to overcome any kind of karmic obstacles.¹⁰⁾ Several other inscriptions also show stūpas were dedicated to members of the Kyŏngju Kim royal kin group, but stūpas were also erected by ordinary people and monks. Generally the quality of the reliquaries would, as expected, be much higher for the royal stūpas.¹¹⁾

9) See recension of this text in 강우방 1991, 240

10) See recension of this text in 강우방 1991, 243-4 (note the mistake in the sequence: line 8 should be inserted between lines 6 and 7)

Thus while the Silla relic cult may have started out against the background of the Aśokan distribution of relics – the purpose of Liang Wudi's sending of relics in 549 was undoubtedly intended to underscore his credentials as Buddhist ruler – despite their initial adoption of cakravartin symbolism, there is no evidence that Silla kings engaged in such distribution. Instead, all the evidence points to the fact that soon after unification the enshrinement of relics was mainly used as a vehicle to pray for the souls of the deceased, mainly within the royal lineage.¹²⁾ In all the available written sources, prayers for the repose of deceased royals is the main theme. Of course, this certainly does not preclude other purposes: the fact that a stūpa was dedicated to a deceased king does not exclude the possibility of popular devotion: indeed, it was likely encouraged, so that the cult of Silla kings could be combined with that of the Buddha. All the same, the fact that Silla kings were passive recipients of relics rather than the source of them, suggests that they eschewed the dominant trends of East Asian Buddhist rulership of the time. Related to this, it is noteworthy that I haven't found any evidence yet of the miraculous multiplication of relics said to have occurred, for example, under Emperor Wen of the Sui (Strong, 39), nor of the veneration of relics in the palace. Given the paucity of historical sources, such absence of information does not mean much. Such events likely occurred, yet I would suggest that the production of relics as true acts of faith was more circumscribed.

None of the above evidence, moreover, points to the efficacy or power of relics per se. In so far that the efficacy of relics is extolled, it is that of textual relics rather than corporeal relics.¹³⁾ As noted by Jan

11) The symbolism and significance of the reliquaries, such as the famous jewel-canopied reliquaries found in Kamūn-sa, is one area that remains under-explored but which might yield interesting insights on the Silla relic cult

12) Timothy Barrett (Barrett, 57-8), notes that the pagodas not only served the benefit of deceased rulers, but also to increase the life-span of their living descendants.

13) E.g. in a record for the Ch'angnim-sa pagoda dated 855, it is said "...to lead [people] into the Pure Land, nothing surpasses the establishment of an undefiled pure light pagoda." 강우방 1991., 243. For the *Undefiled Pure Light scripture*, see

Fontein in a short but interesting article on the śarīra reliquary from Powŏn-sa (975, near Sŏsan), from the beginning textual relics and corporeal relics seem to have been enshrined together in Korea. In general, in Indian practice the actual relics were initially most popular, but in the course of time the Buddha's words, as expressed in sūtras, came to be regarded as having the same properties. This is based on the famous dictum "he who sees the dharma sees me" (Boucher). Sūtras enshrined as relics therefore came to be known as *dharma śarīra* (or *dharmakāya śarīra*).¹⁴⁾ Fontein notes the importance of Chajang in this respect: according to his biography, he was given a 'secret formula' by Manjuśrī on Mt. Wutai, and according to Fontein this was nothing but the 'Buddhist creed,' a four-line summary of the teachings.¹⁵⁾

The crux of his argument is that the Powŏn-sa reliquary shows the Buddhist creed on one side, and a picture of a bodhisattva touching the crane of a kneeling monk on the other. Fontein identifies the monk as Chajang, but though it certainly brings to mind the story of his encounter at Wutai-shan, there are many other cases of monks having a vision of Manjuśrī – indeed, the fact that this vision was often induced as an act of penitence before ordination, and the fact that Powŏn-sa was an ordination platform in Koryŏ, suggest that this may well be a generic picture of a monk receiving personally the precepts from Manjuśrī rather than a reference to a specific monk. As noted above, the paradigmatic relic set brought back by Chajang was divided into two sets, one to the benefit of the ruler and one to the benefit of the samgha, so here the stūpa may have been part of an ordination platform.

Also, I am not so sure about his assertion that what Chajang received from Manjusri was the Buddhist creed,¹⁶⁾ but Fontein seems to

below

14) Fontein (p. 107) notes the use of the term *pōpsari* 法舍利 (*dharma śarīra*) in Dunhuang inscriptions. It is also used in the Hwangnyong-sa stūpa record of 872. Kang, *Pulsari changŏm*, 239

15) 諸法從緣起 如來說是因 彼法因緣盡 是大沙門說

16) Fontein bases his argument on the fact that the cover of the Powŏn-sa reliquary shows a bodhisattva touching the crane of a kneeling monk on one panel, and the

be right in arguing that Chajang brought back not just the Buddha's relics, but also the understanding that the Buddha's words have the same power as his relics. Hence the fact that relics and sūtras were usually enshrined together in Korean stūpas. In particular, from the early eighth century onwards the *Wugou jingguang da tuoloni jing* 無垢淨光陀羅尼經 (*Dhāraṇī Sūtra of Undefined Pure Light*, T. 19, 1024: 717c-721b) was very popular: it is attested not less than twelve times in stūpas of the Unified Silla period. This is perhaps not surprising, as this sūtra outlines various practices to obtain merit either by intoning specific Dhāraṇīs while circumambulating a relic stūpa or to transform a site into a relic site. Although this is the very first and in fact almost the only sūtra found in Silla stūpas, its early adoption (barely a year after it was first introduced in China) suggests that the ground had already been prepared for the combined enshrining of Buddha and Dharma relics.¹⁷⁾

Finally, another piece of the puzzle to consider in trying to determine the Silla attitude towards relics concerns the relation between relics attributed to the historical Buddha and those of eminent monks. Especially with the return of monks introducing Chan Buddhism after 800, we see the emergence of stūpas for Chan monks. However, the fact that stylistically these stūpas (now called *sūngt'ap* or *pudo*) are very distinct from stūpas for the Buddha's remains (*t'ap*, *Pult'ap*), and that we do not find any elaborate reliquaries for the remains of monks, suggests that there were important qualitative distinctions between the relics of monks and those of the Buddha. Also, it is important to note that not until the mid-eleventh century the cremation of monks became prevalent (Vermeersch, forthcoming); thus the *pudo* for monks seem to have been simply funerary

Buddhist creed on another. He assumes that the kneeling monk is Chajang, as the scene is identical to the scene of Chajang's encounter with Mañjuśrī as described in the *Samguk yusa*. However, the *Samguk yusa* describes this encounter in three different places, and in one story ([O]dae-san oman chinsin, SGYS 3-4), the verses given to Chajang are quoted; though it is also a four-line verse with five characters per line, and although it also contains the essence of the teachings, it is not the Buddhist creed

17) Barrett, 57.

monuments rather than relic containers. This does not mean, however, that the relics of monks were not important – this is shown by the story of the *furta sacra* or theft of the relics of Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Chan (Jorgensen). Despite the fact that the two cults, that of the Buddha and that of the monks, may have intermingled, it is only in the late Koryō period that we briefly see the disappearance of functional distinctions between the two.

Comparing Silla and Koryō relic stūpas

Before introducing the evidence of a relic cult for early Koryō, we should take a step back from the textual record and try to look for the larger trends in the composition of relic deposits. In order to compare the Silla and Koryō relic cults, I have looked at the most important content materials and how they change: the most representative materials found inside stūpas (besides the relic containers) are the corporeal relics, dharma relics, Buddha statues and miniature pagodas. To make the comparison as relevant as possible, I have looked only at the most representative stūpas: more specifically, these are the stūpas that house Buddha's relics rather than those of eminent monks. I have also not included relics found inside statues, scripture rolls, in the foundation of buildings or in ordination platforms. Also, I have only selected those stūpas that have been systematically explored, excluding, for example, reliquaries or stūpa inscriptions that have turned up on the market. This leaves us with 26 stūpas for the Unified Silla period against 21 for the Koryō period as a basis for comparison. But even for these caveats have to be acknowledged. It is not always certain whether or not a site has been disturbed; also, it should be remembered that many organic materials, such as manuscript sūtras on paper, or the *śarīra* themselves, may have disappeared (e.g., I have counted two fragments of paper as signs of textual material though it can no longer be ascertained what was on the paper).¹⁸⁾ Also, I have not taken into account the distribution of goods

18) Also, I should note that information for the contents of stūpas is mainly derived

within the pagoda: in some pagodas the material is distributed over several levels. In the Muryang-sa 5-story pagoda (Late Koryŏ, near Puyŏ), for example, the *śarīra*, reliquary and sūtras are stored in the top level; a bodhisattva in the 3rd level; and a Buddha triad in the first tier. It is possible that objects in the first story or in the base were meant to subdue the earth spirits, and thus had a different function from those in the top stories.

When looking at the histogram this gives (see appendix), it appears first of all that the presence of *śarīra* and texts was much higher in Silla than in Koryŏ. It should be noted that this break is gradual though, as it is often difficult to distinguish late Silla from early Koryŏ stūpas. Most noteworthy though is the almost complete disappearance of the *Dhāraṇī Sūtra of Undefined Pure Light* from Koryŏ stūpas. Another interesting feature appears when we look at the distribution of these stūpas. Whereas the Unified Silla stūpas, as expected, fan out from the capital Kyŏngju, for the Koryŏ period the reverse seems through: most Koryŏ stūpas were initially situated in the southwest, far from the capital Kaesŏng. However, here we should take into account the serious archeological neglect Koryŏ has suffered until recently, and the fact that not much information is available on North Korean archeological activities – if these have taken place. Assuming that the trends shown up in the chart and the maps are a genuine reflection of historical trends, is it possible to find an explanation for these trends in the historic records?

Koryŏ records of the relic cult

Unlike Silla, no evidence has been found in Koryŏ stūpas for the religious activities by Koryŏ kings.¹⁹⁾ On the other hand, the historical

from secondary literature, chiefly 강우방 1991 and 1993, and from this it is not always clear in what form textual fragments were found: it is possible that in some cases only a reference to it in an inscription was found

19) The only apparent exception to this trend is the colophon to a copy of the Lotus tra, dated 1283, stating that it was made so that no ill would befall the king and queen. However, it was commissioned by a high official, Yŏm Sŭng-ik, not the king.

records give clear evidence that, at least initially, Koryŏ kings did actively venerate relics.²⁰⁾ For example, according to the *Koryŏsa*, in 946 the third Koryŏ king Chŏngjong himself carried a Buddha relic all the way from the palace to Kaeguk-sa outside the city walls to enshrine it there.²¹⁾ King Kwangjong – according to a somewhat less reliable source – wanted to see for himself the *kāsāya* brought back by Chajang to T'ongdo-sa, and ordered someone to bring him the stone box containing it (and the other relics) to the palace. But whenever the king opened the box, he could not see anything, except frightening insects. Then, in a dream a monk told him the box should not be moved from its original place, so after the king traveled to T'ongdo-sa, he could finally witness the *kāsāya*.²²⁾

The importance of the relic cult in early Koryŏ can be best witnessed in the construction of Hyŏnhwa-sa between 1020-1021. This temple was built by King Hyŏnjong (r. 1009-1031) and dedicated to the memory of his parents. The stele erected at the temple in 1021 documents all the filial acts Hyŏnjong performed for his parents, and the spontaneous retribution this caused. Thus the stele inscription claims that *śarīra* appeared miraculously on various places associated with Hyŏnjong's parents: in the tenth month of 1020, true-body *śarīra* appeared in Hwangju, the birthplace of the king's mother; at the same time a magical tooth appeared near his father's tomb. A seven-story stūpa was built in Hyŏnhwa-sa to store and venerate the tooth and 50 grains of *śarīra*.²³⁾ This

Also, this scripture was apparently the only object found in the stūpa suggesting that the copying of this sūtra was the meritorious act, rather than its function as a relic. For the colophon, see 강우방 1991, 251-2

20) We can therefore also assume that active relic worship also took place at the Silla court, but there is no evidence in the sources.

21) KRS 2: 25. In 1018, the Kaeguk-sa pagoda was repaired, and relics enshrined (or perhaps re-enshrined). At this occasion an ordination platform was set up and more than 3,200 monks were ordained. KRS 4: 26b. This shows the continuation of the custom established by Chajang to ordain monks in the presence of relics, and thus the Buddha.

22) *T'ongdo-sa ch'angjo yusŏ*, in *Chōsen jisatsu shiryō* (Seoul: Chōsen sōtokufu, 1911), vol. 1, p. 534

23) Moreover, in the fourth month of 1021, 500 grains of *śarīra* appeared near Sangju:

provides the most explicit evidence I have seen yet of the active promotion of Buddha-relics by a Korean king to substantiate his power (in this case, of his filial power!)

As discussed above, the production of relics through acts of faith, while common in many Buddhist cultures, is not seen in Silla. Although it is often described in almost casual terms, according to some traditions the magical appearance of relics was not a mean feat; some sūtras, such as the Mahamegha sūtra, emphasize how rare such a feat is (Forte, 257-8), so that the appearance of relics may have aided the king in cementing his status as a divine Buddhist ruler or cakravartin – the Hyōnhwa-sa inscription also quotes the *Golden Glow sūtra* (*Kūmgwangmyōng kyōng*) to stake such a divine descent.

The reality was likely more prosaic. The Koryōsa makes no mention of any miraculous appearance of relics, but notes that in 1021, King Hyōnjong sent an official to obtain relics (actually, bones rather than *śarīra* beads or crystals) from two temples in Kyōngju, Kosōn-sa and Ch'angnim-sa.²⁴ The fact, however, that this fact was known and recorded, may be an indication that Hyōnjong did not quite succeed in achieving the aura of supreme Buddhist ruler, while the fact that the *furta sacra* could also be seen as a lack of trust that the relics could be miraculously produced.

Conclusion

In truth, however, Hyōnjong's interest in obtaining relics seems to be the last expression of such interest – and the corresponding awe the relics inspired – in Koryō. To be sure, in 1130 King Injong venerated a relic in the palace (KRS 16: 9b), and in 1362 King Kongmin went to

50 were stored inside a clay Buddha, the rest was stored in the palace ritual area, where the king made food offerings. See *Hyōnhwa-sa pi*, HKC 180, 440-54

24) KRS 4: 35b Yi Ka-do was ordered to collect gold-brocade *kasaya*, Buddha-skull and bones from Kosōn-sa in Kyōngju, and Buddha's tooth from Ch'angnim-sa, and install them in the palace. (fifth month, 1021) These may have later been sent to Hyōnhwa-sa, or the Hyōnhwa-sa relics may have been procured through similar means.

Songni-sa (Pŏpchu-sa) to admire the Buddha-bones, *śarīra* and *kāśāya* that had been stored in T'ongdo-sa (KRS 40: 10a-b).

But by the time Iryŏn wrote his *Samguk yusa* in the late thirteenth century, relics had become more of a curiosity item than emblems of power. When a general visited T'ongdo-sa in 1235, he wanted to inspect the relics stored there for himself. He observed that there were merely four, and though he did pay his respects, this time no frightening insects were said to appear, as they supposedly did in King Kwangjong's time or at the time of a visit by Koryŏ officials as described by Iryŏn.²⁵ Iryŏn also notes that around the same time, it was discovered that the Buddha tooth kept in the palace had disappeared. However, this disappearance was only noticed five years after it had gone missing during the removal of the capital from Kaesŏng to Kanhwa in 1232.

As noted by Faure in the case of Japan, in the course of time relics came to be seen as commodities – in other words, they were no longer treated as subjects, but as objects (Faure, 143). This may have been the case in Koryŏ too; by pushing the use of relics outside the perimeters established in Silla, Hyŏnjong may have helped to devalue them. To be sure, relics were produced at later times also, for example in the fifteenth century under King Sejo, showing that belief in relics remained strong, though likely more in the private arena of faith than the public arena of politics.

Also, the fact that the last evidence of a serious relic cult occurred during Hyŏnjong's reign may offer another explanation. Hyŏnjong's attempt to venerate his parents marks the culmination of a trend in Koryŏ to use memorial temples as the foci for the royal ancestor worship through Buddhism. In these temples, the portraits of royal ancestors, housed in special shrines within the temple compound, were the main vehicles for worship.²⁶ Even in Hyŏnhwa-sa, the enshrining of relics was thus perhaps only a subordinate part in the royal ancestor worship and the establishment of merit for the deceased. Moreover, during

25) Although they were said to have appeared because the relics had been displaced.

26) Vermeersch 2008, 335-349

Hyōnjong's reign work on the printing blocks of the first tripitaka had started. It is likely that the spread of prints from this blocks had become a more convenient and effective vehicle to spread the image of a royal court identifying with Buddhist ideals across the country. It is also a telltale sign of the fact that texts displaced relics that Iryon, in his essay on the history of relics in Korea, includes the transmission of Buddhist texts seamlessly at the end of his discussion of corporeal relics.²⁷⁾

The wide availability of prints may also explain the relative scarcity of texts in Koryō stūpas, as the replication (of texts, but also of small stūpas) advocated by the *Dhāraṇī Sūtra of Undefined Pure Light* had become more commonplace and thus, like corporal relics, texts had probably become more of a commodity than objects of veneration. However, this did not spell the end of the śarīra cult in Koryō: by late Koryō stūpas were erected containing the relics of masters such as Chigong and Naong, thus conflating the cult of Buddhist masters with that of the Buddha, and probably going some way towards restoring the credibility of the relic cult. However, the more detailed discussion this shift merits falls outside the scope of this article.

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27) SGYS 4, *chōnhu sojang sari*.

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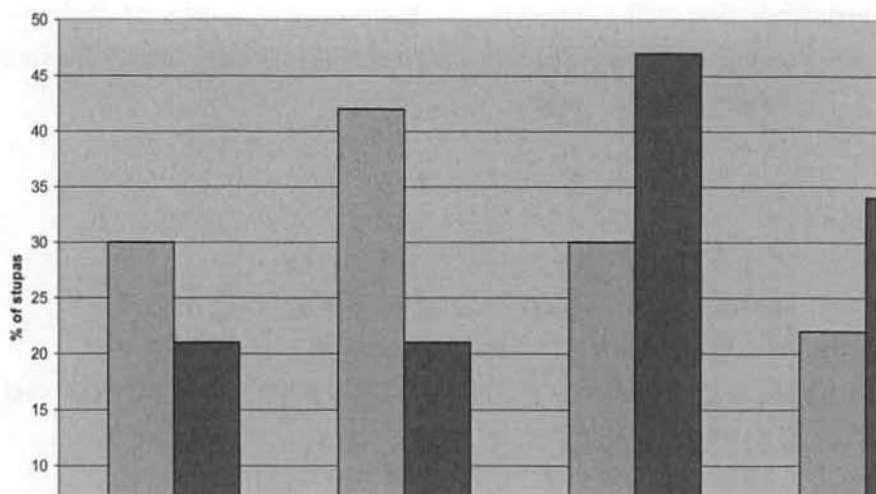
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Appendix: chart – contents of relic stūpas

Contents of stupas Silla-Koryo



Abstract

The Development of the Buddhist Relic Cult from Unified Silla to Early Koryŏ

Sem Vermeersch

While the relic containers of Unified Silla and Koryŏ have been extensively studied, there has been comparatively little reflection on the religious practices associated with these relics, in other words there has been no attempt to define the Korean "relic cult." This article aims to show that the concept of a "relic cult," though mainly shaped by the study of Christian practices and later also Indian and East Asian Buddhist practices, is also relevant for Korea. Although there is little textual evidence regarding the use of the relics and the beliefs in them, it is sufficient to show that there are both parallels with the Buddhist relic cult in China and Japan and interesting divergences. The main question addressed is how the sponsorship of reliquaries and the stūpas in which they were placed could help to strengthen royal authority. While all the evidence points to the fact that Unified Silla kings used the power of the relics for private ends, especially to pray for the good rebirth and enlightenment of deceased kings, from the 1021 Hyŏnhwa-sa stele inscription we know that early Koryŏ kings, perhaps for the first time, used the magical reproduction of relics as a sign of their authority as Buddhist monarchs (cakravartin). We can therefore speculate that whereas Silla kings strictly treated the relics as "subjects," in other words not as "things" but as actual presences of the Buddha, in the course of the Koryŏ dynasty there was a shift towards treating them more as "objects," material things that can be reproduced. While aimed at strengthening the image of kings as Buddhist monarchs, this does not seem to have succeeded. Henceforth, the importance of relics would remain mostly in

the domain of private faith.

Key words: Buddhist relics, relic cult, religious authority, Unified Silla, Koryŏ

국문초록

통일신라기와 고려 초기 불사리 신앙의 전개

셈 베르메르스

통일 신라와 고려 시대의 불사리 장엄구에 대한 연구가 널리 이루어져온 것에 비해, 이러한 사리들과 관련한 종교적 신행들에 대한 조명은 상대적으로 적은 편이었다. 다시 말해 한국의 ‘사리 신앙’을 설명하려는 시도가 없었던 것이다. 이 논문에서는 기독교 의식들이나 인도 및 동아시아 불교 신행에 대한 연구를 통해 주로 형성되어왔던 ‘사리 신앙’의 개념이 한국에서도 중요하게 자리하고 있음을 보이고자 한다. 사리의 이용이나 그에 대한 신앙을 보여주는 문헌 증거는 빈약하지만, 중국과 일본의 사리신앙과 비교해 보면 비슷한 양상들과 독특한 양상들을 각각 찾아볼 수 있다. 이 논문에서 다루고 있는 중심 문제는 사리를 담고 있는 사리함이나 탑을 후원하는 일이 왕권을 강화하는 데 어떻게 보탬이 되었느냐는 것이다. 모든 증거들을 통해 볼 때 통일신라의 왕들은 개인적인 목적을 위해, 특히 죽은 왕들의 명복이나 깨달음을 기원하기 위해 사리의 힘을 빌었다. 그러나 1021년 현화사 비문에서 볼 수 있듯이 고려 초기의 왕들은, 아마도 역사상 처음으로, 불교도 군주들처럼(전륜성왕) 자신들의 권위를 나타내기 위해 사리의 신비로운 재현을 이용했을 것이다. 그러므로 신라의 왕들이 사리를 철저하게 “주체”로, 다시 말해 “사물”이 아니라 붓다의 실제 현존으로 여긴 반면, 고려 왕조 시기에는 사리를 보다 “객체”로, 즉 재생될 수 있는 물질적인 것으로 보는 시각의 변화가 있었다고 추정할 수 있다. 이는 왕들의 이미지를 불교도 군주들의 모습처럼 강화하는 데 목적을 두고 있었지만, 이러한 시도가 성공적이지는 않았던 것으로 보인다. 그 이후 사리의 중요성은 주로 개인적인 신앙의 영역 안에 남게 되었을 것이다.

주요어: 불사리, 사리 신앙, 종교적 권위, 통일 신라, 고려