

Silla: Gold and the Sacred

Royal Treasures of Korea
57 BCE – 935 CE



Guimet
Musée national des arts asiatiques

Exhibition
20 May
31 August
2026

Visit guide

Silla: Gold and the Sacred

The legacy of Silla (57 BCE – 935 CE) is defined by its splendour: gleaming gold crowns, burial mounds, buddhist sanctuaries, and treasures of stone and glass. Presented for the first time in France, in partnership with the Gyeongju National Museum, the Guimet Museum brings together a major group of masterpieces, including numerous national treasures, revealing the richness of a kingdom that left a lasting mark on the history of the peninsula.

According to the *Samguk sagi* (*Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*), Silla was founded in 57 BCE. From Gyeongju, this polity fostered a culture in which political authority and spiritual life were closely intertwined. The treasures unearthed from royal tombs, including gold crowns, jade ornaments, finely crafted jewellery and figurative stoneware, attest to remarkable technical skill. They also reflect a kingdom fully engaged in exchange networks linking Japan, China, the steppe, Central Asia and even the Mediterranean world.

An alliance with the Chinese Tang dynasty (618-907) enabled Silla to conquer the other kingdoms. During the unified Silla period (676-935), it became a leading power in East Asia. Buddhism, officially recognised in the early 6th century, played a central role in this transformation. As it spread, so too did precious materials, iconographies and techniques, particularly within monastic contexts, giving rise to a religious art of great stylistic richness and spiritual intensity. Known first through historical chronicles and later through archaeological excavations, the arts of Silla endures today as a living legacy at the heart of Korean peninsula cultural memory.

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GYEONGJU, HERITAGE CITY OF SILLA

Between wooded mountains and gently rolling plains, Gyeongju unfolds as one of the most remarkable landscapes in the south-east of the peninsula. Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000, it was, under the name Geumseong, the political and cultural heart of the Silla kingdom for nearly a millennium. This longevity has shaped an exceptional heritage landscape where royal burial mounds rise above the plain, alongside fortifications, palaces, monasteries and an astronomical observatory. Together, these sites reflect the deep connection between territory and sovereign power, whose histories were recorded in the 12th century in the *Samguk sagi* (*Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*). A major spiritual centre, Gyeongju saw the flourishing of shamanism, Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism across different periods. It was renowned for its pagodas, among the finest in East Asia and influential across the region. Archaeological excavations, carried out since the early 20th century, have brought to light gold artefacts, monumental tombs and unique architectural remains. They have gradually revealed the image of a refined kingdom, between myth and reality. Today, the Gyeongju National Museum continues to study and bring to light the major sites that shaped the Silla kingdom.

THE IRON THRONES

Between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, the Gyeongju region lay at a strategic crossroads of land and maritime trade routes and formed

part of the Jinhan confederation, a group of twelve small states. At that time, it was known as Saroguk. Long known through written sources, this polity has been brought to light through archaeological excavations carried out since the early 20th century. These discoveries reveal a complex society, structured by hierarchy and governed by ritual practices, including human and animal sacrifice. Elaborate burial chambers were constructed, their funerary goods, including ceramics, weapons, glass, jade and gemstone, attesting to the scale of exchange networks. Saroguk gradually subdued and unified the other political entities scattered across the south-east of the peninsula, emerging as the leading power within the Jinhan confederation. In the first half of the 4th century, the Bak, Seok and Kim clans consolidated their authority and centralised power, marking the transition from confederation to kingdom: Silla.

The Forge of Power

The rise of the iron industry marked a decisive turning point in the development of societies on the Korean peninsula in the final centuries BCE. The growing power of the State of Saroguk was directly tied to advances in forging techniques. Archaeological discoveries, including moulds used to produce military equipment, agricultural tools that enabled the cultivation of larger areas, and implements such as anvils and hammers, as well as the large number of surviving suits of armour, point to the central role of iron in the region's military expansion. Mastery of this industry also fostered the development of exchange networks with neighbouring territories, on the peninsula, in China and Japan.

Jewels for the final journey

Funerary assemblages from this period include not only military equipment but also finely

crafted ornaments in precious materials, placed on or worn by the deceased to accompany them into the afterlife. These adornments display a rich variety of media, including jade, jasper, agate, crystal and glass. The shapes of the stones, whether circular, comma-shaped or polygonal, and their colours, ranging from deep blue to orange-red, whose meanings remain uncertain, played a central role in the creation of these composite ornaments. At this time, jade was sourced locally, while glass beads may have been produced in the region or imported from Southeast Asia and other regions.

THE GOLDEN THRONE OF MARIPGAN (4TH CENTURY – EARLY 6TH CENTURY)

During the 4th century, the Korean peninsula saw the emergence of the kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla, alongside the Gaya confederation, in a context of state formation and expanding exchanges with China and the Japanese archipelago. In Silla, the increasing use of gold in personal adornment accompanied the rise of the Kim clan, which would retain the throne until the end of the kingdom. The ruler adopted the title *maripgan*, meaning 'great chief', a designation used until the early 6th century and first held by King Naemul (r. 356–402). During this period, Silla consolidated its power, expanded its territory and structured its state around the bone rank system (*golpum*), based on hereditary lineage

and governing access to office and authority. From the 5th century onwards, royal burial mounds were built, some reaching up to 80m in diameter, testimony to a power capable of mobilising considerable resources. These tombs mark the assertion of power and the consolidation of the ruling elite, for whom funerary rites appear to have played a central role in legitimising power.

The abundant archaeological discoveries, including crowns, ritual belts, weapons, vessels and imported objects, reveal a hierarchical and refined society closely integrated into Eurasian exchange networks.

Dressed as the sun: attire of power

Gold, a radiant symbol of sacred authority, gave rise in Korea to the crowns of Silla, emblematic of aristocratic power and, in particular, of the Kim clan. Worn by the royal couple, their descendants and certain elites, they were accompanied by precious adornments, including belts, earrings, pendants, bracelets and rings, as well as by richly crafted vessels in gold, silver, bronze or stoneware placed in tombs. These crowns became distinctive markers of each kingdom. In Silla, they take the form of the sacred tree, symbolising the link between earth, humankind and natural forces. In Goguryeo, they incorporate bird-feather motifs, while in Baekje they are characterised by floral designs.

Silla of a thousand paths: a kingdom open to the world

A wide range of evidence shows that Silla was integrated into networks of commercial, artistic and diplomatic exchange across Eurasia. The use of gold headdresses, as well as their styles, forms part of an artistic tradition that spread from Central Asia to the edges of Mongolia and eastern Siberia.

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Objects discovered in tombs reveal networks that crossed mountains, rivers, steppes, deserts and seas. *Gogok*, comma-shaped jade pendants made from hard jadeite, were imported from Japan, and appear on the peninsula from the 4th century onwards. Glass beads were largely produced locally, although some were imported from Southeast Asia and other regions. Roman glass circulated from Egypt or Syria to Silla, travelling by land and sea. A dagger with a sheath decorated with gold cloisonné garnets suggests contacts, whether direct or indirect, with craft traditions known in Central Asia and Sasanian Persia.

WORD OF BUDDHA: SACRED UNIFICATION OF SILLA (6TH-7TH CENTURY)

In the 6th century, Silla underwent a profound transformation that laid the foundations for its rise. Although Buddhism had been present on the peninsula for several centuries, it was adopted by the state in 527, following the martyrdom of Ich'adon, a close adviser to the king. The new religion provided the royal authority with a structured ideological framework: promoted by monks, Buddhism became a tool for legitimizing and unifying the realm. Within this context, the *Hwarang* order emerged, tasked with organising and sustaining that authority. Composed of young aristocrats as well as commoners, its members were trained in martial arts, poetry and collective discipline. Under the influence of the monk Won-gwang,

their moral code, centred on loyalty, filial piety, fraternity and bravery, had a lasting impact on the kingdom's civic and military ethos. At the same time, Silla adopted the Chinese writing system (*hanja*) more systematically, establishing it as a key administrative tool. The educated elite, trained in reading and calligraphy, used it for governance, legal codes, including the law promulgated in 520, and religious texts. This writing system unified administrative practices, strengthened royal authority and contributed to the centralisation of the state.

Under a single banner: the unification of Silla

In the 7th century, the peninsula remained divided between Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla, but the balance of power began to shift. Silla forged a decisive alliance with Tang China and launched a series of major military campaigns: Baekje fell in 660, followed by Goguryeo in 668. Through skilful diplomacy, the Silla then pushed back Chinese influence and unified much of the peninsula, while the kingdom of Balhae occupied territories once held by Goguryeo. The first ruler of unified Silla, King Munmu (r. 661-681), was a devoted follower of Buddhism. His son, King Sinmun, founded the temple of Gameunsa to honour his father, who was believed to have become a dragon.

New spiritual paths

As the Silla kingdom expanded and unified, its spiritual landscape became increasingly diverse. At the heart of this changing order, earlier funerary practices gradually gave way to new rites. In some tombs, small figurines now accompany the deceased, depicting scenes of daily life, as figures from the zodiac are used to protect the tombs. At the same time, the monumental scale of tombs diminished, while Buddhist architecture, including

pagodas and temples, flourished. Funerary practices also evolved: the deceased might be buried or cremated, with ashes placed in ceramic urns.

Queens of Silla

Although access to the throne was reserved for men, a number of women from the 'sacred bone' rank also ruled. Queen Seondeok (r. 632-647); daughter of King Jinpyeong, was a patron of Buddhism, the arts and the sciences. She commissioned the construction of Cheomseongdae, the oldest surviving astronomical observatory in East Asia. Used to observe stars, planets and celestial phenomena, it enabled the determination of seasons and the regulation of agricultural cycles, all essential to the stability of the kingdom. Through this structure, the queen asserted the link between scientific knowledge, royal authority and cosmic order.

Power in majesty:

beauty at the Court of unified Silla

From 676 onwards, the reign of Munmu (661-681) ushered in a period of peace. This stability fostered the religious, cultural and administrative development of unified Silla, which became a major commercial power in East Asia. Merchants, monks and Japanese envoys travelling to the Chinese capital of Chang'an used its ships, while Silla trading settlements prospered along the Chinese coast. Ginseng and medicinal products were exported, while silk, tea and alcohol were imported. The capital, Gyeongju, grew in scale and density. According to the *Samguk sagi*, compiled in the 12th century, its grid plan comprised 1,360 wards and 35 large residences. Munmu enclosed the city with walls and expanded the palace complex around the Wolji pond. Within this transformed urban setting, a refined court

culture flourished, combining gold, silver, bronze, glass and gemstones.

BENEATH THE LOTUS MOON: THE AWAKENING OF SACRED BUDDHIST ART

Introduced to the Korean peninsula between the 4th and 6th centuries through networks linking China, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, Buddhism became in Silla a major cultural, artistic and spiritual force. Mountains and valleys filled with temples, monasteries and pagodas, as the religion asserted itself as a faith, an aesthetic language and a political tool. Esoteric Buddhism, with its heavenly kings, reinforced its protective role. Within this context, unified Silla (676-935) came to be known as the 'land of the Buddha'. The sites of Seokguram and Bulguksa, set in the mountains near Gyeongju, itself described as adorned with pagodas 'like clouds in the sky', offer some of its most remarkable remains. At the heart of the city stood the Hwangnyongsa, or 'Monastery of the Dragon', a major religious and political complex, whose nine-storey pagoda, completed in the 7th century by an architect from Baekje, was believed to protect the kingdom and legitimise its power. As models of compassionate rule, Silla's rulers supported temples and monasteries. This final section invites contemplation: art becomes a form of meditation, and the kingdom rises through faith and beauty.

The search for sacred texts: from China to India

Regular exchanges with China first encouraged the circulation in Korea of Buddhist images, ritual practices and doctrines. After the unification of the peninsula in the 7th century, Silla maintained structured diplomatic relations with the Tang dynasty. In the 8th and 9th centuries, the intensification of embassies, study journeys and trade enabled a more nuanced assimilation of Chinese artistic and religious models. Members of the royal family, scholars and monks travelled to Chang'an to deepen their study of texts originating in India and to engage with the meditative practices of Chan Buddhism. Introduced in the 7th century by Ponnang, a disciple of the fourth Chinese patriarch, its Korean form, Son, came to occupy a dominant place in the 9th century Buddhist landscape, before contributing in turn to the formation of Japanese traditions, notably Zen Buddhism, alongside the transmission of tea culture.

Buddhist sculpture in Silla

Buddhism inspired an unprecedented artistic flourishing, particularly during unified Silla (676-935), when artistic production reached a remarkable intensity. In creating serene statues of Buddhas and *bodhisattva*, finely worked reliquaries and refined architectural forms, Silla artists did not seek to imitate the visible world, but to give form to the invisible. The curve of a hand, the stillness of a gaze or the geometry of a pagoda convey an ancient wisdom shaped by harmony and compassion. Each work is more than an object: it becomes a path towards enlightenment, a bridge between the material world and the beyond. Materials once reserved for royal regalia and elite adornment now found their place in monasteries, pagodas, reliquaries and sacred images

SEOKGURAM GROTTO: A MOMENT OF ETERNITY

Perched on the slopes of Mount Toham, the Seokguram grotto stands as the jewel of Silla Buddhist art. This stone sanctuary, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995, was constructed in the 8th century, at the height of unified Silla. It houses a serene Buddha seated in meditation, surrounded by a pantheon of Hindu and Buddhist divinities, the four heavenly kings and its disciples. The sanctuary is conceived as a spiritual journey. From the antechamber to the circular rotunda, the visitor moves symbolically towards enlightenment. At its centre sits the meditating Buddha Shakyamuni, enthroned on a lotus and performing the earth-touching gesture (*bhumisparshamudra*), embodying the serenity and balance characteristic of Silla art. Around him unfolds a sacred assembly of *bodhisattva*, *arhat*, disciples and heavenly guardians, forming an ideal spiritual community. The *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara, particularly refined and positioned just behind the Buddha, embodies universal compassion. Above, the domed vault evokes the cosmos: a central lotus, concentric circles and lunar motifs structure a harmonious universe oriented towards the light of the Buddha. Here, architecture, sculpture and faith are inseparable, merging into a timeless moment of beauty and transcendence. Seokguram encapsulates the essence of Silla: a civilisation that brought into harmony the sacred and the artistic, the temporal and the eternal.

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1. **Dagger**
Korea, Gyeongju, Sara-ri, tomb 130, 1st-2nd century, iron, bronze, Gyeongju National Museum, Sara 2093
© Gyeongju National Museum
2. **Faceted decorative cup**
Korea, Gyeongju, Heavenly Horse Tomb, 6th century, glass, Gyeongju National Museum, Gyeongju 2386
© Gyeongju National Museum

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3. **Bas-relief depicting one of the Four Heavenly Kings**
Korea, Gyeongju, monastery of the Four Heavenly Kings, unified Silla period (late 7th-10th century), around 679, green glazed earthenware, Gyeongju National Museum, Gyeongju 199, Gyeongju, Gyeongju National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, s.n
© Gyeongju National Museum

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**4. Crown**

Korea, Gyeongju, Gold Crown Tomb, 5th century, gold, jade, Seoul, National Museum of Korea, Bongwan 9435

© National Museum of Korea



5. Stirrups

North Korea, Hwanghae province, Pyeongsan, 8th-10th century, silver, iron, gold and silver incrustations, bronze, Seoul, National Museum of Korea, Bongwan 13557
© National Museum of Korea

6. Pectoral necklace

Corée, Gyeongju, Wolseong-ro, tomb 13, 4th-5th century, glass, gold, jadeite, Gyeongju National Museum, Gyeongju 5854
© Gyeongju National Museum

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7. Feminine figure

Korea, Gyeongju,
Hwangseong-dong,
7th century, earthenware,
Gyeongju National Museum,
Gyeongju 7149

© Gyeongju National Museum



8. Standing Buddha

Korea, Monastery Hwangboksa,
Guhwang-dong pagoda, 692,
golden bronze, Seoul, National
Museum of Korea, Bongwan
14753

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20 May – 31 August 2026

Curators

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Around the exhibition

Full program available at guimet.fr

EVENTS

Night of Museums

Saturday May 23

Fête de la musique K-music

Sunday June 21

Night of Philosophy

Friday July 17

PERFORMANCES

RÉSONANCES. Le moine, la chamane et les fleurs de lotus

Friday May 22 | 8pm |

Tr-edition: Life Is But a Dream by Pacino Yang

Friday June 26 | 8pm |

Performances by Pacino Yang

Saturday June 27 | 3pm |

LITERARY ENCOUNTERS AND CONFERENCE (IN FRENCH)

Enter the kingdom of Silla: archeology, history and origin of a millennium Korean State

Saturday May 30 | 10:30am – 5:30pm |

Literary encounter: Once upon a time three Korea(s), with Patrick Maurus

Saturday May 30 | 3pm |

Literary encounter: Between history and legends: the kingdom of Silla, with Jean-Noël Juttet, Choi Mikyung and Hervé Péjaudier

Friday June 5 | 3pm |

CINEMA

The Wedding Day, film by Byung-il Lee (1956)

Wednesday May 27 | 8pm |

Piro Piro, short films for young audiences by Baek Miyoung and Min Sung Ah (2020)

Sunday May 31 | 4pm |

The King and the Clown, film by Lee Joon-ik (2005)

Wednesday June 24 | 8pm |

GUIDED TOURS (IN FRENCH)

Adult Discovery Tour

From May 28 to July 4 on Mon, Thu, Fri and Sat,
and from July 6 to August 31 on Sat | 4pm |

Family Tour

Saturday June 14 | 3pm |

Descriptive Tour

Friday June 19 | 2pm |

Lip-reading Tour

Saturday June 27 | 11am |

WORKSHOP

Merveilles du royaume de Silla

Saturday May 23 | 10:30am – 4:30pm |

WORKSHOPS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES AND FAMILIES

Narrated Family Tour

Saturday May 23 and Saturday July 4 | 3pm |

Couronnes des rois et reines de Silla

Saturday May 30 and Saturday June 13 |
2:30pm |

Practical information

Open every day except Tuesday | 10am – 6pm |
Closed on January 1st, May 1st December 25

The Guimet - National Museum of Asian Arts, France

6, place d'Iéna 75116 Paris
guimet.fr



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