

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE EARLY UNIFIED SILLA BAS-RELIEF OF PEARL ROUNDEL, TREE OF LIFE, PEACOCKS, AND LION FROM THE GYEONGJU NATIONAL MUSEUM, KOREA

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The subject of this study is a horizontal granite monolith with a bas-relief of three roundels in the collection of the Gyeongju National Museum 國立慶州博物館, Gyeongju 慶州, Korea, which has been called a “Stone with Lion and Peacock Designs” 獅子孔雀紋石 [Fig. 1]. Two roundels are well preserved — one with the “pearl-roundel” rim, the other with a plain rim. Both contain an axial tree and animals. The third and largest of the three has been effaced, preserving only faint traces of its pearl roundel. The original purpose and meaning of this artefact has until now been enigmatic. It has received no serious scholarly attention; the display label merely suggests that it is an eighth-century object of the Unified Silla 統一新羅 period (676–935), of “possible Persian” or “Sogdian” origin. Despite the existence of direct and indirect evidence in the material and written record regarding possible foreign influences, the historiography of the Unified Silla era tends to obscure what is perhaps its most defining feature, a great openness to cultural exchange and synthesis.

By examining the designs and the symbolic representation in these roundels, this study hopes to demonstrate the real message that the carver intended to communicate and establish his identity. The analysis takes us on an inquisitive journey across various cultural realms and religious spheres along the wider reaches of Silk Road in the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The conclusion here may help to unravel the mystery

surrounding this stone bas-relief and its historic significance in the land of Silla and beyond.

## Collection History and Current Condition of the Granite Slab

Nothing is known about its original location and purpose. The earliest mention of the slab is in a memoir of Koizumi Akio (1897–1993), a Japanese museum staff member working in Korea during the Japanese occupation period (1915–1945) (Koizumi 1986, p. 165). On a single page, he narrates how he saw it in 1922 at the Seogyeong-sa 西慶寺 Buddhist temple in Gyeongju in front of the main hall and heard from the temple’s Japanese abbot that it was amongst the rock debris of the ruined old city wall in the vicinity before its removal to the temple.<sup>1</sup>

Research for the current article uncovered five photographs in the collection of the National Museum of Korea taken at the temple some years before 1915 [Fig. 2, next page].<sup>2</sup> These plates reveal that the condition of the granite slab differed little from its present state. It seems that prior to the time the photos were taken, an attempt had been made to smooth the entire rock surface by cutting off the reliefs but for some unknown reason stopped after the fatal defacement of the leftmost roundel.

Fig. 1. “Stone with Lion and Peacock Designs.” Gyeongju National Museum, Coll. No. gyeongju-1241.

Photo courtesy of Gyeongju National Museum.



NO 無1136-10



Fig. 2. Two of the five dry-plate photographs, with earlier inventory numbers, National Museum of Korea. (Left) The stone displayed upright (Coll. No. 032420). (Right) The stone correctly displayed in a horizontal setting (Coll. No. 022822).



Uneven and jagged, the monolith now measures (at its maximum) L 306.5 x H 79.5 x W ca. 40 cm. Reconstruction of the damaged roundel suggests that its original height could have reached more than 100 cm. The diameters of the roundels and beads (slightly uneven and flattened) are respectively 67 and 5.5 cm for the leftmost one, 50 and 4.3 cm for the middle one, and 39.5 cm for the smallest (which lacks pearls on the rim), on the far right [Fig. 3].

### Analysis of Two Roundels

1. A Pearl Roundel with a Tree of Life and a Pair of Peacocks [Fig.4].

#### The Pearl Roundel

Formed of 19 round beads, it is undoubtedly related to the pearl-roundel ornamental tradition of Sasanian Iran (224–651) and the city-states of Iranian Sogdia, a tradition whose origins can be traced back to the an-

cient Near East and Achaemenid Persia (559–330 BCE) (Domyo 1987; Compareti 2003/2006, 2009; Mode 2002; Lendering n.d) [Fig. 5, next page]<sup>3</sup>. It became popular worldwide along the Silk Road and had a far-reaching influence particularly on textiles in Central Asia and the Far East. The role of Sogdia and its mercantile activities along the Silk Road have been singled out for the spread and popularity of the pearl roundel (Zhao 1992; Compareti 2003/2006; Rong 2014; Xu and Zhao 1996/1991; Lerner 2005). Sogdian penetration into Gyeongju, the capital city of Silla, has been pos-

Fig. 4. Pearl roundel in the middle from Fig. 1.



Fig. 3. Measurements provided by the Gyeongju National Museum, October 2015

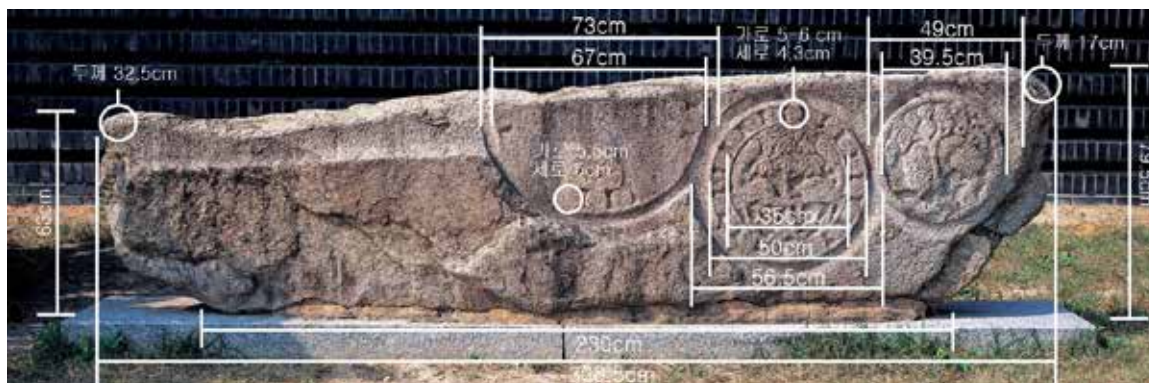






Photo sources: a) by author; b)-f) courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh; g) Wikipedia.

Fig. 5. Iranian examples showing pearl roundels and borders: a) Bronze ornament, first millennium BCE, National Museum of Iran; b) Lotus panel framed by a pearl-decorated border, excavated at Persepolis, Persepolis Museum; c) Stucco wall panel with a set of farr symbols ("farr afzum" prayer-sign, a pair of falcon wings called "Wings of Ahura Mazda," and pearl roundel) and a Pahlavi inscription, from House of Umm az-Za'atir, area of Ctesiphon (the last Sasanian Palace), Iraq, end of 6<sup>th</sup>–beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Collection of Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Inv. Nr. KtO 1084; d) Stucco wall panel with a ram, Iran (or Iraq?), 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Collection of the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Inv. Nr. I.2212; e) Investiture of Sasanian King Khosro II (r. 590–628), detail of relief depicting Ahura Mazda on the right in the Large Grotto at Taq-e Bostan, Kermanshah, Iran; f) Detail of left angel holding a diadem, on spandrel of arch of the Large Grotto, Taq-e Bostan; g) Detail of robe, mural painting depicting a Sogdian royal procession, Afrasiab (outskirts of Samarkand), Uzbekistan, mid-7<sup>th</sup> century.

ited, based on a number of Sogdian-looking guard-ian statues of royal tombs and excavated burial goods of Near Eastern origin (Gyeongju National Museum 2008; Yim 2013b, 2016).

In East Asia it seems first to have appeared on architectural roof tiles: in China by the 5<sup>th</sup> century as found in the Northern Wei (386–534) capital at Pingcheng 平城 (Datong 大同) and the nearby Yungang 雲岡石窟 Buddhist site (460–494); in Korea by the last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century at the site of the Moon Pond 月池 (popularly called Anap-ji) in the complex of the eastern detached palace (completed in ca. 674); and in Japan by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century at the site of Fujiwara palace 藤原宮 (built ca. 682–694), the first known Chinese-style palace in Japan (Wang 2007, p. 26; Kim 1981; Kawagoe n.d.-a; Avant d'oublier 2009) [Fig. 6].

Though their place of production is often uncertain, there are textiles decorated with pearl roundels from the 7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries in the region west of China, China proper, Korea and Japan (Watt and Wardwell 1997; Chang 2007). The one Korean example is an embroidered Buddhist banner produced at the Silla court, now kept at the Eifuku-ji 叡福寺 Buddhist Temple, Osaka, Japan [Fig. 7, next page].<sup>4</sup> A demon-face (also called dragon-face) featured in this pearl roundel was highly unusual on textile, but common on the exorcistic ridge-end roof-tiles probably related to the *Tao-tie* tradition dating back to the Bronze Age of China. The insertion of a square pendant amongst the pearls is a feature closely associated with textiles. This Silla banner seems to imply that the pearl-roundel textile was known in Gyeongju society by the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. It also presents a unique specimen of textile in which



Fig. 6. Roof end tiles with pearl roundel: (Left): Lotus tile, excavated at the Northern Wei capital Shengle site, Inner Mongolia, ca.368–398; (Middle): Tile with a pair of birds, excavated at the Moon pond (Anap-ji), Gyeongju, ca. 670s–680s, Unified Silla, Collection of the Gyeongju National Museum; (Right): Lotus tile, excavated at the site of the Fujiwara palace (built 682–694), Yamato Province (present-day Kashihara in Nara Prefecture), Japan.

Photo sources: <https://i1.kknews.cc/SIG=7mpke0/167s0003511nr8698042.jpg>; courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh; [http://2.bp.blogspot.com/\\_71OM9lkGuVg/SyFkPayaE7I/AAAAAAAUAuo/2YIU4q29r6Q/s400/IMG\\_6232.jpg](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_71OM9lkGuVg/SyFkPayaE7I/AAAAAAAUAuo/2YIU4q29r6Q/s400/IMG_6232.jpg).

Fig. 7. (Left and Center [detail]) Embroidered Buddhist banner with a pearl roundel, late 7<sup>th</sup>–early 8<sup>th</sup> century, Unified Silla period, Collection of Eifuku-ji Buddhist Temple, Osaka, Japan. (Right) Roof tile with demon face, excavated from Hwangnyongsa Temple site, 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century, Unified Silla period.

Photo sources: [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_71OM9lkGuVg/SssCCM7TGF/AAAAAAAAAT\\_A/0a4c9b-CJZ5o/s1600/P10-115.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_71OM9lkGuVg/SssCCM7TGF/AAAAAAAAAT_A/0a4c9b-CJZ5o/s1600/P10-115.jpg); <http://p8.storage.canalblog.com/87/57/119589/91020354.jpg>



the pearl roundel of Persian origin meets the East Asian motif of demon-face. The closest analogy to this demon-face in all its details is on the ridge-end tiles excavated from the above-mentioned Moon Pond.<sup>5</sup> All this material and circumstantial evidence points to the 670s as the upper limit for the appearance of the pearl-roundel in Korea and thus for the production date of this rock relief.

In Japan the specimens of pearl-roundel textile datable to the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries are kept in the Horyu-ji temple 法隆寺 and the Shoso-in Treasury 正倉院 of Todai-ji temple 東大寺, examples presumed to be of Chinese origin but in Persian style [Fig. 8] (Matsumoto 1984; Nara Museum 1996; Hayashi 1975, pp. 128–29). Given the deep connection with Korea of the two temples as well as the history of early Japanese textile and craft art which is entwined with Korea, they can be taken as indirect evidences for the shared popularity of pearl-roundel textile in Japan and Korea.<sup>6</sup> However, by the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century there had already appeared signs indicating the pearl roundel design was going out of fashion, particularly in Chinese ex-

Fig. 8. (Left): Pearl roundel of Persian lion-hunting scene with the axial sacred tree (here identified as a mango tree), 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century Horyu-ji Temple. (Right): Textile fragment with pearl roundels framing a Persian lion-hunting scene, 8<sup>th</sup> century. Shoso-in Treasury, Todai-ji, Nara, Japan.



Image sources: (Above): [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyipizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/1/m/lossless-page1-220px-Horyu-ji\\_silk.tiff.png](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyipizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/1/m/lossless-page1-220px-Horyu-ji_silk.tiff.png); <https://theheritagetrust.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/silk-21.jpg>. (Below): <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/0d/70/08/0d7008b19355d8efbe033519b87354fb--ancient-symbols-ancient-artifacts.jpg>; <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/d9/03/d6/d903d6a47dce8d3524243788861b9b6--ancient-art-tree-of-life.jpg>; (images 3, 4) courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh; <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/79/4e/c2/794ec27e096193e33d7575234ad65226--istanbul-byzantine-art.jpg>

port textile (Kageyama 2003/2006).<sup>7</sup> This development would have followed soon in Korea and Japan, whose culture was sensitive to trends in contemporary fashion in China.

### The Tree of Life

The tree, which bifurcates the space, is the common denominator and the most important constituent in two roundels of the Gyeongju relief. In the middle roundel, a pair of peacocks face each other across the axial tree. A tree accompanied by humans, animals, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic figures has been identified world-wide as a sacred tree under various names: Tree of Life, Cosmic Tree, Tree of Fertility, Tree of Resurrection and Eternity, Tree of Knowledge, etc. In Christianity the Tree of Life is identified with the Cross and Jesus Christ. The configuration in the Gyeongju roundel is undoubtedly linked to the time-honored sacred-tree imagery with confronted animals found in all religious symbolism, including Mesopotamian and Egyptian “paganism,” Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Here are examples selected for their relevance to the Gyeongju relief [Fig. 9].

Fig. 9. Tree of Life and confronting animal images. (Left to right): Earthen stamp seal with Tree of Life and confronting ibex, ca. 3,000 BCE, Sumer, Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago; Painted terracotta plaque with Tree of Life and wild goats, Phrygia, 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Museum of Anatolian Civilization, Ankara; Golden cup with Tree of Life and confronting bulls, ca. 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, found in Gilan, Iran, National Museum of Iran, Tehran; Stucco panel with Tree of Life (here, a grapevine) and confronting ibexes, ca. 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century, Sasanian, Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Inv. Nr. I.6197; Marble closure slab with relief Tree of Life between lions, Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens.





Fig. 10. The Tree of Life and confronted animals in pearl roundels. (Left): Silk brocade with confronted ibexes, Sasanian or Sogdian, excavated in Dulan, Tibet (now Qinghai province, China), ca. 700. (Top middle): Tracing of image with confronted lions flanking a Mango tree, from a textile excavated in Dulan ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century; (Bottom middle): Decorative border with stylized "tree" and confronted horses, Mogao Cave No. 277, Sui dynasty (581–618), Dunhuang, Gansu province, China. (Right): Riding coat with large roundels of confronted deer and a reduced and stylized tree, Sasanian or Sogdian, ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century.



Image sources: <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/e5/a1/49/e5a149ded52116c42686b329f2873a1a--opening-day-art-fair.jpg>; Compareti 2003/2006, Fig. 9; *Dunhuang Mogaoku* 2 (1984), Fig. 120; <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/f2/dc/f2f2dcf2e7a87b1987bb39a52dd1e806bf--silk-road-metropolitan-museum.jpg>

It is uncertain when and where the Tree of Life with confronted animals entered the repertory of motifs for pearl-roundels. But there are a number of specimens dating from the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries found along the Silk Road. They can be divided into three types: those which follow the original Near Eastern configuration with the axial tree flanked by animals; those which show the extreme stylization of all motifs and the reduction of the tree, making it a mere accessory for the animals; those which show near disappearance of details leaving the shadow of forms [Fig. 10]. The Gyeongju roundels belong to the first category, the tree and animals having a significant presence.

The type of tree in the Gyeongju roundel is noteworthy. On its branches are sets of three or four cascading leaves, each crowned by a round fruit, immediately identifiable as a stylized depiction of the "Indian mango" (*Mangifera indica*), a tropical tree native to South Asia where it became the national fruit (of India, Pakistan, and the Philippines) or the national tree (of Bangladesh). Endowed with the pre-Buddhist symbolism of fertility, the mango tree acquired an important status in the Indian Buddhist iconography along with the Bodhi tree identified with the Buddha's enlightenment. Examples are the famous scene of the fertility goddess *Yakshi* with a mango tree at the east gate of the Great Stupa of Sanchi and the popular depiction of Buddha in the Mango Grove in Gandharan art. It appears that all regions along the Silk Road under the spell of Buddhism adopted the sacredness of the mango tree and even embraced it in non-Buddhist contexts.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, outside of the Buddhist context, this type of mango tree appears with the pearl roundels of the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century textiles found in the far eastern limit of Central Asia all the way to Japan. Two examples are the Dulan 都蘭 piece [Fig. 10, middle-top] (Compareti 2003/2006, Fig. 9; Xu and Zhao 1996) and the Horyu-ji textile [Fig. 8, left]. The composition of these roundels has a strong affinity to the typical Near Eastern tradition of the sacred tree with confronting animals set within the Iranian-origin pearl roundel. However, the Near Eastern type of sacred tree (date palm, pome-

granate, grape, etc.) has been replaced by the Far Eastern mango tree. In this regard the Gyeongju roundel, the only known example featuring a mango tree in a non-Buddhist context in Korea, seems to show such regional adaptation.

### The Peacocks

The birds here are identifiable as peacocks owing to the crest atop the head and elongated upper tail coverts. Confronting one another, they are closely connected with the tree in the center. The right peacock's neck encircles the tree from behind, thrusting the head downward, while the left one's neck extends to the right across the front of the tree with the head down and forward. Thus they appear to be embracing the tree in veneration while their coupling necks balance each other in a peculiar symmetry. This unusual departure from the mirror-image composition common in depiction of confronting animals animates the scene with a certain degree of narrative naturalism.

The peacock is a jungle bird of South Asia and Africa which was revered as a symbol of paradise and immortality from ancient times. One famous example is a pair of peacocks in the first century Indian relief at the Great Stupa of Sanchi, though not depicted with a sacred tree. However, the peacock is not native to East Asia where its image is uncommon in the pantheon of birds. It appeared briefly in Chinese Bronze-Age art, most likely introduced via China's extreme southern frontier such as Yunnan, but by the time of the Han dynasty was overshadowed by the phoenix, the mythical bird which was the symbol of the Eastern realm in Chinese *Yin-Yang*-Five Elements cosmology and an auspicious sign of the ruler's heavenly mandate. The Chinese phoenix symbolism was duly followed by other East Asian neighbors. In esoteric Buddhism the peacock is regarded as a purifier of body and soul and a symbol of wisdom. *Mahamayuri*, one of the Wisdom Kings in the Buddhist Pantheon, is seated on a peacock throne, an image which seems to have gained currency in Buddhist art of Northern Song 北宋 (960–



Fig. 11. Confronted peacocks in Christian contexts. a) A page from a Coptic manuscript of the Acts of the Apostles (Codex Glazier), ca. 5<sup>th</sup> century, Morgan Library, New York (MS G.0067); b) A stone relief chi-rho with Greek inscription, 5<sup>th</sup> century, Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin Cathedral, Vagharshapat, Armavir Marz, Armenia; c) Floor mosaic, 6<sup>th</sup> century, excavated at Aluma, Israel; d) Marble relief, 6<sup>th</sup> century, Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy; e) Early Christian sarcophagus, 6<sup>th</sup> century, Sant' Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy; f) Fragment of a capital, a simplified tree in the center flanked by two peacock-like birds with kusti ribbons on the neck, Church of the Forty Martyrs, 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century, excavated at Mingachevir, Azerbaijan State Museum of History; g) Fragment of a ciborium, 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, from an unknown Langobard church, Italy, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Accession no. 27.563; h) Detail of a pluteo, 8<sup>th</sup> century, Villanova di S. Bonifacio, Verona, Italy.

1127) China, Goryeo 高麗 (935–1392) Korea and Heian 平安 (794–1185) Japan. Since there are no examples of a paired peacock with the Tree of Life in Buddhist art, it is most unusual to find such an image in this Gyeongju pearl-roundel.

On the other hand, in the Near East the peacock must have been imported early on and was so valued in ancient Persia that it was even called the “Persian Bird” in Greece from about the time of Alexander the Great’s conquest of Persia (Gamm 2014). Analogous to the case with the phoenix in China, at some point it merged with the *simurgh* (*senmurv*), the mythical composite creature with the head of a dog, the claws of a lion, and peacock tail-coverts or falcon-wings, which became the foremost emblem of the Sasanid monarchy.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, a pair of peacocks is most frequently found in Christian art from the third century on through the medieval period, the birds flanking the Tree of Life, the Cross, the Christogram (like *tau-rho*, *chi-rho*), the Ankh Cross, or the Holy Water basin [Fig. 11].<sup>10</sup> These confronting pairs often show a head-down posture similar to the peacocks in the Gyeongju pearl roundel. This iconographic and morphological affinity poses the question of whether the carver of

Image sources: a) <http://corsair.morganlibrary.org/icaimages/6/g67.214v-215r.jpg>; b) [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Etchmiadzin\\_Cathedral\\_cross\\_relief\\_with\\_Greek\\_inscriptions.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Etchmiadzin_Cathedral_cross_relief_with_Greek_inscriptions.png); c) <https://img.purch.com/w/660/aHR0cDovL3d3dy5saXZlc2NpZW5jZS5jb20vaW1hZ2VzL2kvMDAwLzA2MS83MDAvb3JpZ2luYWwvY2hpc3RvZ3JhbS1hbHVtYS5KUe%3D>, Courtesy of Davida Eisenberg Degen; d) <https://zoticone.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/rav.png>; e) <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/93/82/83/938283e21d2485626e897b6888b8bd01e--early-christian-christian-faith.jpg>; f) [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Base\\_of\\_a\\_column\\_with\\_Albanian\\_inscription.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6e/Base_of_a_column_with_Albanian_inscription.JPG); g) [http://art.thewalters.org/images/art/large/L\\_ps1\\_27563\\_fnt\\_dd\\_t07.jpg](http://art.thewalters.org/images/art/large/L_ps1_27563_fnt_dd_t07.jpg); h) [http://worldwidemuseum.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/pluteo\\_viii-secolo\\_villanova-di-s-bonifacio\\_vr.jpg](http://worldwidemuseum.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/pluteo_viii-secolo_villanova-di-s-bonifacio_vr.jpg).

the Gyeongju relief was familiar with such Christian iconography.

Another interesting stylistic feature is the portrayal of the peacock’s train with the highly elongated upper tail-coverts. Presented most symmetrically among all components of the Gyeongju roundel, each follows the contour of the rim on left and right climbing nearly all the way to the tree top. The exaggerated verticality, the droplet-like bulkiness, and the presence of hook-like protrusions taken together are found only in the Sasanid-style depiction of the tails of *simurgh* and other birds in Persia proper and Sogdia (this design probably the original inspiration for the later creation of the emblematic droplet-shaped paisley motif) [Fig. 12, next page].

#### *The Stepped Base for the Tree* [Fig.13]

Curiously the tree stands on a three-step square pyramidal base which has an opening in the middle of the bottom tier. This motif is totally unknown in Korea before and after this stone relief. But outside of Korea there are a few textile specimens with pearl roundels featuring this type of tree-base, for example, a fragment datable to ca. early eighth century found in Astana (present-day Xinjiang, China) and another textile fragment from a tenth-century Viking ship-grave excavated in Mammen, Denmark [Fig. 14].<sup>11</sup> Such examples, though their purpose is unclear, point to the circulation of this type of pearl roundel with the Tree of Life enthroned on such a pedestal.

Possibly pertinent to the question on the origin and symbolism of this motif is its resemblance to the





Fig. 12. Images depicting a simurgh or cock in a roundel: a) Detail of a robe in mid-7<sup>th</sup>-century Sogdian mural at Afrasiab; b) Detail of robe of Khosro II, r. 590-628, Large Grotto, Taq-e Bostan; c) Stucco wall panel, Chal Tarkan, Northern Iran, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, British Museum, London, ME 1973.7-25.3 [135913]; d) Sasanian gilded silver ewer depicting simurgh and (not visible in this view) the Tree of Life, 6<sup>th</sup> - beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. No. S-61; e) Sasanian gilded silver bottle depicting a cock, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Acc. No. 58.94.



Image source: National Museum of Korea, Dry Plate Collection No. 030693.

Fig. 13. Detail of the middle roundel on the Gyeongju stone, showing the stepped base for the tree.

Image sources: Compareti 2003/2006, Fig. 7; watercolor by Magnus Petersen, <http://samlinger.natmus.dk/DO/asset/877/thumbnail/1280>; <http://samlinger.natmus.dk/DO/asset/2282/thumbnail/1280>.



Fig. 14. (Left): Reconstruction drawing of a textile pattern (with the Tree of Life on a pyramidal base and confronted stags in a pearl roundel), ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century, excavated at Astana, Turpan oasis, Xinjiang, China. (Center and right): Drawing and reconstruction of an embroidered brocade fragment (with the Tree of Life on a pyramidal pedestal and confronted animals), 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century, of possible Sogdian or Chinese manufacture, excavated from a 10<sup>th</sup>-century Viking ship-grave, Mammen, National Museum of Denmark.





Fig. 15. The Cross on a stepped pedestal: a) Gold solidus of Emperor Tiberios I (r. 578–582), reverse. Minted in Constantinople. Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine coin collection. b) Khachkar, 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century, Dsegh, Lori, Armenia; c) Khachkar, ca. early 11<sup>th</sup> century, Haghat Monastery, Armenia; d) Saint Thomas Cross, Kottayam Valiyapalli Church, Kerala, India; e) A rock-relief “Nestorian” Cross at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

Image sources: a) <http://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/byzantine-emperors-on-coins/sixth-seventh-centuries-emperors-491-717/solidus-of-tiberios-i-578-582/@images/image/preview>; b) courtesy of Masis Panos; c) Photo by Dickran Kouymjian, <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/b4/a8/00/b4a8003c6d9c4bef-f61e232e4152763a-forever-living-foi.jpg>; d) Antony 2017: <https://www.nasrani.net/wp-content/gallery/saint-thomas-cross/kottayam-valiyapalli-cross-1.jpg>; e) Ninan 2017: <http://www.talentshare.org/~mm9n/articles/sliva/wps825A.tmp.png>.

configuration of the Crucifix on top of the Tree of Life [Fig. 17].<sup>13</sup> Thus the tree in the Gyeongju roundel may in fact symbolize both the Tree of Life and the Cross simultaneously. This probability is further strengthened by the presence of the peacocks, the attendant holy birds in veneration of the Cross in Christian iconography.

On the other hand, the pedestal closely resembles the square step-pyramidal motif which is nearly omnipresent in the decoration of palatial and mausoleum architecture from ancient times in West Asia through the Sasanid period. It is particularly prominent on the Sasanian royal crowns. The form is unquestionably rooted in the West Asian sanctorum of the *ziggurat* with its symbolism of divine mandate for the ruling house. It is thus justifiable to name it a “ziggurat symbol” [Fig. 18, next page].

These two contexts look seemingly unrelated but may have had some inner relationship. Furthermore, in their origins, the crosses themselves can be connected. All of these crosses came into being by the end of the seventh century under the far-reaching influence of the Persian Empire. This was especially the case in Armenia, which most of the time was under the direct control of Persia. As the forerunners of officially approved Christian churches during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Armenian churches seem to have sought inspiration from Persia in the making of their foremost icon, the khachkar. Supporting this conjecture is the close

Image sources: <https://zoticone.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/rav.png>; <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-zGmniV64jjQ/VPyCm28LfnI/AAAAAADxQ/zAtx-rX6C-yE/s1600/Saint%2BGayane%2BEtchmiadzin.jpg>; [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d1/Rom%2CBasilika\\_San\\_Clemente%2C\\_Apsis\\_1.jpg/1280px-Rom%2CBasilika\\_San\\_Clemente%2C\\_Apsis\\_1.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d1/Rom%2CBasilika_San_Clemente%2C_Apsis_1.jpg/1280px-Rom%2CBasilika_San_Clemente%2C_Apsis_1.jpg)



Image sources: Antony 2017: <https://www.nasrani.net/wp-content/gallery/saint-thomas-cross/kottayam-cheriapalli.jpg>; Photos by Ben Bender, Wikimedia commons.

Fig. 16. (Top): Thomas Cross with two peacocks, Kottayam Cheriapalli Church. (Bottom): Armenian Church of the Holy Cross, east wall, Akhtamar Island, Lake Van, Turkey.

Such an assumption becomes the more plausible from consideration of the Christian tradition in which the Tree of Life and the Cross are interchangeable. This Tree–Cross identity is often corporeally manifest through the organic metamorphosis of the Cross with lianoid endings of four arms or the network of vegetation surmounting the Cross, and even through a

Fig. 17. The Cross as Tree of Life. (Left): Marble relief, 6<sup>th</sup> century, Sant’ Apollinaire Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy; (Center): Khachkar, ca. 700, found near the Church of Saint Gayane (founded 630), Armenia; (Right): Crucifix growing out of the Tree of Life, apse mosaic, 12<sup>th</sup>-century Basilica of San Clemente, Rome.





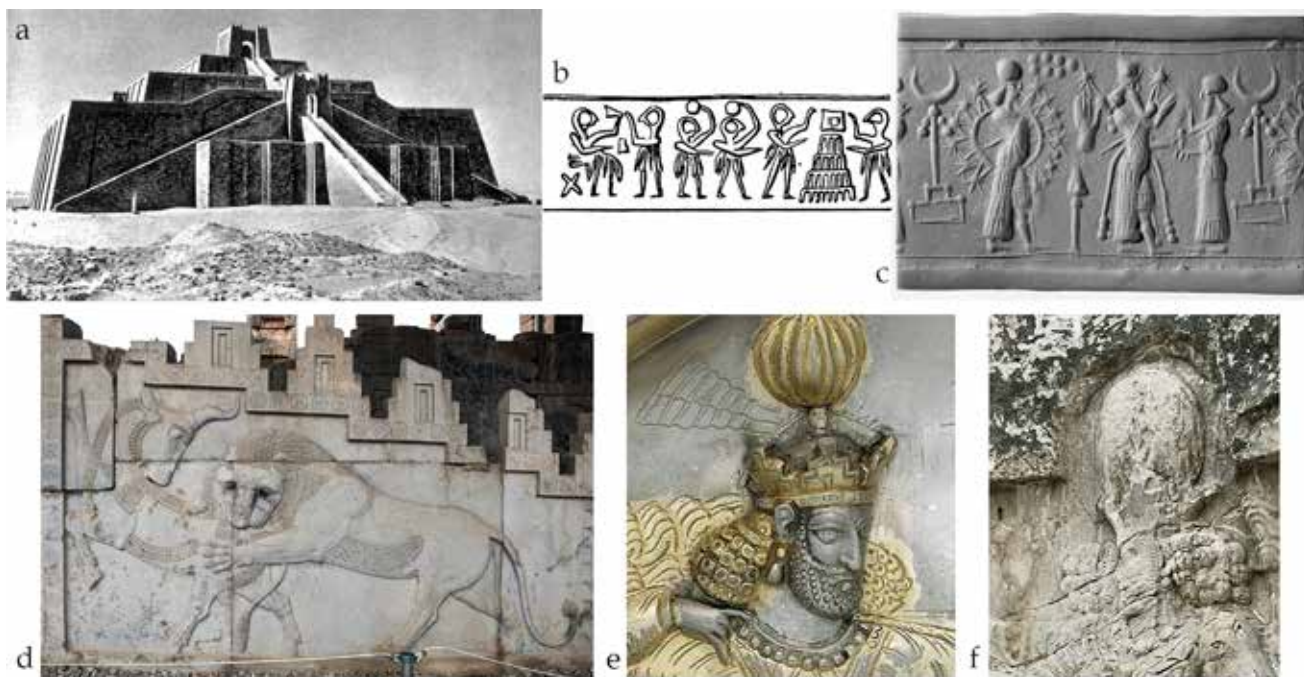


Fig. 18. Ziggurat images and their evocation: a) Reconstruction of a Sumerian ziggurat; b) Image from an Assyrian cylinder seal (first millennium BCE) showing construction of a ziggurat; c) modern impression from a neo-Assyrian cylinder seal (9<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) showing cult objects on ziggurat bases (stepped pyramids), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession No. 1985.192.15; d) Detail of staircase on the Apadana, Persepolis, 5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century BCE; e) Detail of head and crown of Sasanian King Shapur II (r. 309–379), on a gilded silver plate with a hunting scene, Freer-Sackler Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Accession Number F1934.23; f) Detail of head and crown of Sasanian King Shapur I (r. 240–270), in relief sculpture depicting the submission of Roman Emperor Valerian and Philip the Arab, Naqsh-e Rostam, near Persepolis.

Image sources: a) [http://images.slideplayer.com/14/4409140/slides/slide\\_5.jpg](http://images.slideplayer.com/14/4409140/slides/slide_5.jpg); b) <http://www.native-science.net/Images/Gundestrup.Resemblance.jpg>; c) <https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/an/original/239912.jpg>; d) and f) courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh; e) <blob:null/a0d88a29-6924-4c7f-a6b7-37f346ba7f8e>

iconographical affinity between an early type of *khachkar* and the Sasanian royal crowns exemplified by the crown of Ardashir III (r. 621–629), where the common elements are a “ziggurat symbol” and a pair of falcon wings. One difference is the replacement of the *Omphalos* with the Cross [Fig. 19] [Panos 2015]. Also called the “Wings of Ahura Mazda,” the falcon-wings are the foremost *farr* symbols (along with *simurgh*) of

divine mandate for Persian monarchy, rooted in the Zoroastrian (Mazdian) Holy book, the *Avesta*. The falcon-wings of *khachkar* later on change into plant-like forms more attuned to the symbolism of Cross as Tree of Life, which nevertheless retains the “ziggurat” pedestal for some time. The Thomas Cross (also called Persian Cross) of South India and the “Nestorian” Cross of Sri Lanka are akin to this later type of *khachkar*.

Thrones of the Cross come in various forms for which there are varied interpretations. However, the Armenian borrowing of Sasanian royal emblems in the making of *khachkars* seems quite obvious. As Thomas Antony, a scholar of the Christian crosses, has put it (2017), “It is essentially a throne for the placement of the kingly cross as used in all countries of the world. They are fashioned in accordance with the culture of the country and presents the symbols of the king.” In other words, the Cross of Jesus Christ,

Image sources: a) [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/ArdashirIII\\_CoinHistoryofIran.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/ArdashirIII_CoinHistoryofIran.jpg); b) and c) courtesy of Masis Panos; d) photo by author *in situ*, 17 August 2016.



Fig. 19. Early Armenian *khachkars* and the Sasanian royal crown: a) Sasanian silver drachm of Ardashir III (r. 621–629), depicting him with pearl necklace and earrings and a diadem featuring a ziggurat base for a pole supporting a pair of falcon wings, a crescent and an omphalos; b) Armenian *khachkar*, from St. George Church of Mughni, Aragatsotn, Armenia; c) A tracing of that cross; d) *Khachkar*, 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century, Haghpart Monastery (founded ca. 976), Armenia.

the king and savior, is given the throne of the Persian ruler, "*Shahanshah*" (The King of Kings). Furthermore, it is possible to interpret the dual symbolism of the pedestal as both Golgotha and the ziggurat, so chosen to reinforce the idea of divine kingship and to encourage co-existence with the dominant Persian culture of Zoroastrianism at the time these crosses were shaped. This is an interesting topic for in-depth studies on its own.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the above discussion points to a potential association of the Near Eastern ziggurat with the pyramidal throne of such Christian crosses and their possible Sasanian connection. That connection can be extended to the Gyeongju relief, which already has as well other morphological and stylistic affinities to the symbolic art of Sasanian royalty.



Image source: National Museum of Korea, Dry Plate Collection No. 030693

Fig. 20. Detail of the right roundel on the Gyeongju stone, highlighting the cub in the lower right.

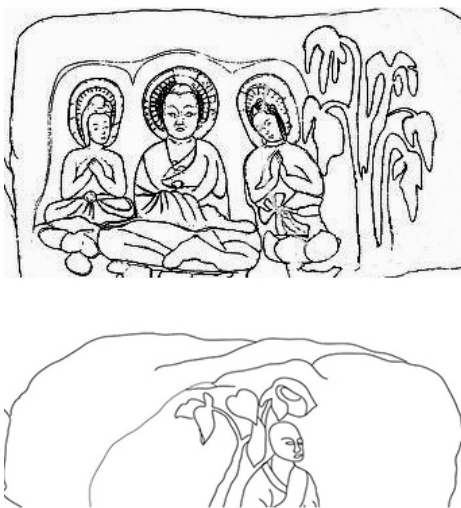


Fig. 21. Buddhist relief images on the rocks of the Pagoda Valley (Tap-gol), Mt. Nam-san, Gyeongju.

Image sources: *In situ* photographs by Author; tracings from Han 2007, 2014.

## 2. Roundel with a Tree, a Male Lion, a Cub, and a Tree-stand [Fig. 20]

This roundel on the right, the smallest of the three, measures about 40 cm in diameter. The rim is undecorated and now partly weathered. At first glance the roundel seems to contain only a leafy tree and a male lion. But close scrutiny reveals a somewhat vague image of a cub and a three-tiered pyramidal base under the tree. Since the tree-stand has already been discussed, here the focus will be on the tree, the cub and the male lion.

### *The Tree (Tree of Life)*

The tree is slightly off-center, and its drooping spade-shaped leaves resemble those of the Bodhi tree. The most sacred tree in Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhism associated with the enlightenment of Śakyamuni, the Bodhi tree gained popularity throughout East Asian Buddhist art. But unlike the mango tree, it only infrequently is part of a roundel composition. The central placement of the tree, the appearance of attendant animal figures, and the use of the stepped base all collectively bespeak its sacred nature.

The 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist rock reliefs on Mt. Nam-san 南山 in Gyeongju display the Bodhi tree next to the Buddha triad or meditating monks, evidence attesting to the currency of such motif in Silla Gyeongju at the time [Fig. 21] (Kim 2010). As in the first case, the appearance of this sacred tree in a roundel in non-Buddhist context may reflect the transnational and transcultural adaptation in East Asia of a prevailing Buddhist tree imagery.

### *A lion with a cub*

The figure of a male lion dominates the composition, crossing behind the tree from right to left. His tail



Fig. 22. (Left): Detail of a Sasanian-style gilded silver dish depicting a feasting or ritual scene, with the main figures robe displaying a lion in a pearl roundel, ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century. Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. S-47. (Right): Sasanian gilded silver dish depicting a female tiger or leopard with a tree, 1<sup>st</sup> half of 7<sup>th</sup> century. Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. S-41.



Photos courtesy of Daniel C. Waugh

stretches up along the right edge of the rim and the paw of a foreleg rests against the left edge of the roundel. His crouching upper body, in close proximity to the tree, has a forward thrust, the head lowered and nearly touching the pedestal. The lower body seems to pulsate with rippling, sinewy muscle and tendon. The mass of the curly mane is articulated in detail. This is an image evoking feline movement with the ferocity and strength expected of a lion. At the same time there is a sense of oneness between the beast and the tree.

From ancient times, the image of a lion was enormously popular as a symbol of strength and ferocity and of kingship in the religious and secular art outside of East Asia. But since lions are not indigenous to China, the lion metaphor did not circulate there before approximately the Han dynasty. By the late sixth century, lion imagery had gained wider popularity along the transmission route of Buddhism and silk trade. Statues of lions in pairs were prominently featured as guardians in Chinese public architecture, royal mausolea, and Buddhist monuments in Tang 唐 (618–907) China (Luo 1993). Similarly, in Gyeongju, the capital city of the Silla dynasty, the lion image is common in various media and forms from the seventh century on, some of which have been regarded as masterpieces of stone sculpture of the Silla period (Gyeongju Museum 2006).

Nevertheless, the composition depicting a single lion with a central tree in a roundel is an isolated case in Korea and throughout East Asia. It also departs from the customary pairing of confronting animals with a sacred tree. The most comparable imagery is on some silver plates of Sasanian courtly tradition dating from the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries, where a single female feline (if not a lion, a tiger or panther) is a metaphor for the mandate of royalty, and its power is manifest [Fig. 22].<sup>15</sup> The similarity is, however, a distant one, especially due to the unique presence of a cub in this Gyeongju roundel where the main image is a male lion.

A cub stands upright on the right bottom corner of the roundel. The damaged upper part of the body hinders a clear identification of its species. But the legs are visible and offer two possibilities of its being either

a lion cub or a lamb. It makes little sense to regard it as a simple expression of a member of the lion family in a natural habitat, given the extraordinary combination of the Tree of Life on a ziggurat-shaped stand, a male lion, and the smaller animal. The interchangeability of the Tree of Life and the Cross, as discussed above, would suggest instead that the “cub” is a lamb in the biblical lion-lamb metaphor for Jesus Christ. In fact the lion-lamb pair appears with or without the Cross in Christian paintings often bearing the words, “Lion and The Lamb, our Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>16</sup> The Syriac Church of the East had reached China by the seventh century or even earlier (Gillman and Klimkeit 2013, pp. 287–314; Jiang 2004). There is also ample evidence, direct and indirect, for the inflow of Eastern Christians into Korea and Japan, despite disapproval from the hard-core conservative scholars and staunch Buddhist clergy (Kim 2002; Lee 2001; Pulleyblank 1991/2011).

Of note is the unusual decorative stylization of the lion’s tail which resembles the *rinseau* ornamental plant pattern of world-wide popularity, commonly called the “Tang-arabesque pattern” in East Asia (Gyeongju National Museum 2010). In stark contrast with the rest of body, its decorative intensity is analogous to the manipulation of the tail ends of the peacocks in the first roundel. This stylization seems to have been utilized to complement the circular form of the roundel and shows a designer par excellence with a sense of design and control of a given space. But the overall naturalistic, sculptural quality of the relief in this roundel is comparable in sophistication with some of the lion sculptures in Gyeongju datable to the early and mid-eighth century. Examples include the granite lions guarding the main bridge leading to the Silla palace compound, which displays a very similar treatment of the curls of mane, and another high-relief granite tomb guardian-lion in a heraldic pose paired with a distinctively Central-Asian-looking figure of comparable vitality [Fig. 23, next page] (Lee 2015, Figs. 17, 34; Chin 1995).



Photos by author

Fig. 23. (Left): One of the two lion guardian statues for Woljeong-gyo Bridge, Gyeongju, early 8<sup>th</sup> century, Unified Silla, Gyeongju National Museum. (Upper center): A close-up view of the head of one lion. (Lower center): Detail of Fig. 20 – close-up view of the lion in the Gyeongju roundel. (Right): A corner stone for a rectangular tomb, Gujeong-dong village, Gyeongju, late 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century, Unified Silla, Gyeongju National Museum.

### Summarizing the Study Results

- Although individual motifs in these two roundels appear in various cultural contexts, as found together here they have no parallels in and outside of East Asia.
- The combination of the central Tree of Life on a zigurat-like pedestal, the sacred animals, and the Persian-style pearl roundel shows the designer/carver's first-hand understanding of the iconography of the ancient Persia for his own creative application. Significant in this regard is the revelation of the artist's particular attachment to the readily identifiable Sasanian "droplet" design in the depiction of the peacocks' tails. The exaggerated extension of the lion's tail is again in the same stylistic vein.
- The three-tiered pyramidal base under the Tree of Life evokes Christian crosses with the same type of pedestal. The inter-changeability of the Cross and the Tree of Life in Christian tradition supports the possibility that the tree in these two roundels is meant to be a metaphor of the Cross, that is to say the Cross in disguise, hidden but recognizable to the believers who, assuming they existed, must have been an extreme minority in the Buddhist kingdom of Silla. The presence of sacred animals also strengthens this possibility (Kim 2002; Art History Association 2001; Korean Studies 2000).
- Even if what we have here is a simple auspicious symbolism with no religious intent, it should be viewed as historically significant, indicating that these extraordinary motifs of foreign origin and the overall compositional scheme were in the visual repertory of the designer/carver.
- Although the two types of tree depicted are popular in the Buddhist context, the roundels lack a Buddhist overtone and thus can be viewed as a popular adoption of these tree motifs reflecting a transnational style developed along the eastern Silk Road.

- The delineation of details in the relief demonstrates an experience of working hard granite stone at a level of skill comparable with that of the best stone sculptures from 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century Silla.
- The time of production likely falls in the period between the 670s when pearl roundels are assumed to have first appeared in Korea and sometime in the mid-eighth century when the Silla art of stone sculpture was at peak (epitomized by the Sokgulam Cave Temple in Gyeongju).
- The varying sizes and haphazard placement of the roundels on the Gyeongju slab eliminate a possibility of its being a single monument in its own right. Instead one can conjecture that they were carved as sample designs for garments or rugs (possibly religious) in consideration of the worldwide popular usage of roundels on textiles and the existence of pearl-roundel textile from seventh-century Silla.

### Conclusion

Analysis of the Gyeongju stone relief offers clues as to the identity of its designer/carver and the time of production. It appears that he was someone who was in possession of an authentic understanding of iconography and symbolism practiced in the Persian cultural sphere, which was unachievable among natives of Korea; a person who was familiar with the Christian adaptation of such Persian religious and royal iconography; someone who was engaged in textile craft and/or stone carving residing in Gyeongju between the end of seventh century and mid-eighth century. The stone relief needs to be regarded as tangible, convincing evidence for the transmission of pan-Iranian art and culture with a possible Christian undertone into the Korean peninsula. It offers evidence for a settlement of people of Persian-Sogdian descent in Gyeongju who contributed to the rich multi-cultural milieu of Unified Silla culture (Kang 1991; Kwon 2015).



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## Notes

1. The city wall was first built in 1012, destroyed during the Japanese invasion (1592-1598), and rebuilt in 1746. It was demolished in the Japanese occupation period so that little remains (Gyeongju National Museum 2013). The temple still stands but is used for cultural activities.

2. Gukrip Jung-ang Bakmulgwan 國立中央博物館 National Museum of Korea, Dry-plate photo collection Nos. 022822, 030417, 030420, 030421, 030693 (*List of Dry-plates* III [1999], p. 292; *List of Dry-plates* V [2001], pp. 36, 51).

3. The pearl-roundel carries the pearl symbolism of Persian royalty represented by the Cydaris (the pearl ring of divine power), one of the Farr/Farrah (Persia's royal symbols of divine mandate), which grew out the Zoroastrian praise for its sublimity in the Avesta.

4. Eifuku-ji is a Buddhist temple attached to the mausoleum of the Crown Prince Shotoku Taishi 聖德太子 (574–622) and his mother and wife. This banner bears a seven-character inscription, reading "A Buddhist banner presented by the Silla Kingdom 新羅國獻上之幡," written in black-ink in Chinese. According to the Eifuku-ji this Silla banner was originally kept in the Horyu-ji 法隆寺 (first built ca. 607, rebuilt in 711) (Kim 2013; Yim 2001). Yim's article offers a convincing argument for the Korean origin of the Horyu-ji Buddhist banners. Also see Avant d'oublier 2015 (which does not mention the inscription).

5. Roof-tiles with a demon face were produced in China, Korea, and Japan before the pearl-roundel was introduced. For China, see "Shou mian wa 兽面瓦" [Animal face tile] <<https://baike.baidu.com/item/兽面瓦/5240274>>, last accessed 26 December 2017. For Japan, see Yamamoto 1998; also see Avant d'oublier 2015. For Korea see Ko and Han 1989; Kim 1992.

6. *The Dyeing and Weaving Regional Dictionary* (Nishijin ori n.d.) writes that Kyoto's famous Nishijinori 西陣織 began with about one-thousand Korean silk textile craftsmen who migrated to Kyoto in the fifth century. The Horyuji temple

preserves fragments of a large embroidery of a mandala-paradise scene whose production involved some Korean weavers residing in Japan. Commissioned by the family of Crown Prince Shotoku Taishi upon his death (d. 622), it was meant to be a prayer for his rebirth in paradise (Tokyo National Museum 2006).

7. Most of the Shoso-in textiles likely predate the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, and some show a sign of sinicization in design devoid of pearl-roundel. The production of pearl-roundel textile was probably not so much meant for domestic consumption in China, since it is curiously absent on the garments of Chinese court ladies in Tang metropolitan figure paintings, the one exception being the depiction of a Tibetan envoy in a work attributed to the leading court painter Yan Liben 閻立本 (d. 673). Pearl roundels are also found on the clothes of Sui-early Tang Bodhisattvas and Sogdian donors at the remote Dunhuang cave temples 敦煌石窟 (such as Caves 277, 394, 401, 402, 420 of the Sui period 581–618; Cave 57 of the early Tang, ca. 618–712) and on the female clothes in the tomb murals of the northwestern region such as the Xu Xi-anxiu 徐顯秀 (d. 571) tomb at Taiyuan, Shanxi (Lingley 2014; Juliano 2003/2006).

8. The mango tree is found on the murals of the Mogao caves at Dunhuang — No. 320 of early Tang, No. 172 of the middle Tang, etc. — and on the steles of the Buddhist triad as illustrated by a seventh-century plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession No. 30.137). It is also found on the secular mortuary furnishings of the Sogdian tombs of the late seventh century excavated in northern China (Lerner 2005).

9. The figure can be found in all periods of Iranian art and literature and is also evident in the iconography of Georgia, medieval Armenia, the Byzantine Empire, and other regions that were within the realm of Persian cultural influence. The simurgh is also depicted in Iranian art as a winged creature in the shape of a bird, gigantic enough to carry off an elephant or a whale. It appears as a peacock with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion — sometimes, however, also with a human face. See Simurgh n.d.; Schmidt 2002; cf. Compàreti 2006, who argues that it is a “pseudo-Simurgh”, not the actual beast as originally designated.

10. The earliest Christian images of peacocks are said to be the ones found at the Catacombs of Priscilla, as a part of ceiling fresco, though not a confronted pair (Klug 2015).

11. For the Astana piece, see Compàreti 2003/2006, Fig. 7. The Astana piece is extraordinary in design because, in addition to the pyramidal pedestal, the imposing stags of regal posture have a pearl-studded neck-band with the Persian royal symbol of flying ribbon attached and even a Chinese title “Flowering Tree with Confronted Deer” on the square cartouche on the tree. For the Mammen piece, see Vedeler 2014, pp. 29–30, 40–41; Vogt 2013; Jones 2002/2005. Most consider the textile fragments from the Viking graves to be datable much earlier than the tenth century.

12. The Golgotha Cross began to appear on the gold solidus of Emperor Tiberios I (578–582) in Byzantine Constantinople and received official recognition during the time of Pope Innocent III (r.1198–1216) (Marucci 1908). For a discussion on the Sri Lanka cross, see Chapter XV “ANURADHAPURA CROSSES, SRI LANKA,” Ninan 2017.

13. “The Cross of Christ, the Tree of Life” (Corinthians 1:18–31). The Eastern Orthodox Church has traditionally understood the Tree of Life in Genesis as a prefiguration of the Cross. Christ himself is identified as the Tree of Life. Perhaps the finest and best known example is the mosaic in the apse of the church of San Clemente, illustrated here, portraying the Crucifix as the Tree of Life, from which the tendrils of a vine grow out to encompass all walks of human life.

14. Nevertheless it is worthwhile to note that the botanical transformation of the Persian falcon wings occurred at the later stage of evolution of khachkars and that it may signify a shift in the Armenian attitude away from the symbol of Zoroastrian origin to more recognition of true nature of the Cross as the Tree of Life, the Living Cross. The so-called “lotus-flower” motif enthroning the Thomas Cross, very similar to that of the late khachkars, can be understood in this context. It is certainly not totally groundless to interpret the motif as an Indian transformation. Such regional adaptations were practiced for popular propagation and sometimes as a secret sign of the faith. In China, “Nestorian” crosses come with such auspicious symbols as lotus or clouds in Chinese culture; the Virgin Mary appears as a Bodhisattva holding Jesus probably in awareness of the Chinese Buddhist community. Early Buddhist images in Central Asia and the Western Region of China often display the royal attire of Persia during the time of its influence.

15. These plates have been dated to the late or post-Sasanian period, produced in the regions still under Persian influence (Alram 2015, Fig. 18; Bashiri 1998; cf. Trever and Lukonin 1987, p. 114, who date to the early 7<sup>th</sup> century the plate with the feline, which they, probably correctly, given its stripes, designate as a tiger [Hermitage No. S-41]). There is a small four-footed mammal below the feline, alongside of similarly small images two birds. There is an analogous plate with a female feline suckling two cubs (Hermitage No. S-22). The most popular themes on the Sasanian plates are the scenes of royal hunting and banquet. Others include simurgh, griffin, a singular peacock, birds amongst grapevines, royal portraits or the goddess Anahita.

16. A set of lion-and-lamb with a Cross or a Crucifix appears in contemporary iconic paintings with the quotations from John 1:36 (“And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God!”) and Revelation 5:5 (“And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David...”). See <<https://www.pinterest.co.kr/pin/164099980149779241/>>; <<https://www.pinterest.co.kr/pin/164099980147583629/>>.