

PERSONAL ORNAMENT IN SILLA

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A series of large-scale royal tombs dots the landscape in Gyeongju Korea. In these large-scale tumulus mounds are found elegant burial goods and precious gold ornaments that would have been worn in daily life, as if the deceased could display his worldly authority and wealth eternally. The tumulus mounds of the Silla royal family are characterized by having a structure known as an “assembled-stone and wooden outer coffin tomb,” in which a large-scale tomb was created by piling earth atop the wooden outer coffin which housed a wooden inner coffin that had been surrounded and covered by stones. From these “assembled-stone and wooden outer-coffin tombs” have been excavated gold crowns, gold and silver ornaments for clothing, gold vessels—the golden objects that are a special characteristic of Silla.

Gold ornaments first appeared in Silla in the second half of the 4th century, and reached their peak in the period from the 5th through the first half of the 6th century. Stylized forms of personal ornaments have been excavated from the tumulus mounds of ruling class of Silla from this period.

As for gold crowns, the classic form had a round base with a band and three tree branch-like ornaments and two deer horn-shaped ornaments above it. As time passed, the form of the tree-branch ornament became standardized, changing into the form of the Chinese character 出. Additionally, crescent-shaped and dangling jewels were hung from it, creating an exquisite work of art.

The crown cap and crown ornament were, like the gold crowns, important items of personal adornment indicating the social status of the wearer, and the two were worn together. From the series of holes in the rim of the crown cap were hung on each side a double-folded cloth, which is thought to have been tied below the chin. A bird with its wings spread wide in flight was the characteristic form of the crown ornament.

Among the personal ornaments excavated from the tumulus mounds of Silla ear ornaments are numerous. The ear ornaments of Silla are very intricate and beautiful, allowing us to appreciate the aesthetic sense and the high standard of metal craftsmanship of the people of Silla. In terms of their formal classification, they can be divided according to the thickness of the ring into two types, those with a thick ring and those of a finer variety.

In ancient society, the form and material used in belt ornaments depended on social status and role. It appears that only members of the Silla royal family were permitted to wear gold belt ornaments, there are many cases of their being excavated together with gold crowns from royal tombs.

This culture of gold was restricted in the earliest period to Gyeongju and only later spread to other regions, but its use was strictly limited. In the 6th century, with the influence of Buddhism, ancient large-scale tombs ceased to be built and gold grave good also rapidly decreased.