

THE PRODUCTION AND TRANSMISSION OF SILLA GLASSWARE

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Glassware was frequently included as funerary objects in ancient tombs in Silla. In addition, glass urns and beads were often used as Buddhist reliquaries and offerings. Given the clear evidence of a wide variety of usages of glassware, Silla might reasonably be deemed a “Nation of Glass,” when compared to Goguryeo and Baekje, which flourished at the same time, or China, Japan or the states of the many people to the north. Glassware as an archaeological artifact is particularly valuable in elucidating aspects of ancient cultures due to the fact its chemical components do not deteriorate over time.

Many varieties of Silla glassware, spanning the period from the second through the tenth century, have been excavated. Among them, particularly noteworthy is the large quantity of funerary glass utensils (e.g. urns, cups, and bowls) concentrated in tombs from the 4th through 6th century.

It is possible to estimate the location of the production of glassware by means of chemical analysis of its composition as well as the study of forms and production techniques. As a result of such analysis, it is clear that Silla glass is classic soda glass type, similar to the Roman and Sassanian glass produced from the 4th through the 7th century. However, there are at present no signs of soda glass production in Silla, and it must be presumed that this glassware was imported from the Western Regions of central Asia.

As was the case in the surrounding countries during this period, the people of Silla were fascinated by the delicate color and beautiful forms of glass objects as well as their glistening surfaces and were enthusiastic about importing them from Tang and the Western Regions. The supreme rulers of the time thought to employ these elite and exquisite objects as tools to demonstrate to the masses their social superiority and had large quantities deposited in their tombs.

It can be surmised that among examples of Silla glassware a considerable number were brought along the Silk Road from the remote and distant regions to the west. As regards the specific import route, even given consideration of the fact that sufficient archaeological research has not been conducted in the areas of southern Russia, and central and southern Asia, it can be assumed that multiple routes across steppes, oases and southern seas were employed. A great variety of glassware spread to China, the Korean peninsula, and then the Japanese archipelago.

Taking a systematic look at Silla glassware in the above fashion, one sees that Silla was not a small and isolated country and instead it participated actively in a great stream that engulfed East and West. Although it adopted a wide variety of objects from abroad, Silla developed on its own an open, international culture. Silla directly adopted objects of the material culture from the Western Regions, but in the process of transmission of the culture of glassware from the Western Regions to the East, Silla also adopted the special culture that had been formed in China and its environs, and together with China and Japan later built up the culture of glass characteristic of northeast Asia.