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THE GREAT GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE

Abstract: This year marks exactly 30 years since the discovery of the great gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje (Korean National Treasure № 287) found in December 1993 during excavations at the site of Neungsan-ri Temple. The incense burner (height 61.8 cm, weight 11.85 kg) consists of three separate parts: the base, body, and lid. The base (the pedestal that supports the body) is shaped like a dragon with its head raised, while the body of mountain peaks, and a majestic phoenix with lotus petals. The large lid is carved with layers of mountain peaks, and a majestic phoenix with widespread wings is perched at the very top. This incense burner reflects the influence of Chinese tradition, but it also includes numerous details and features that are entirely unique to Baekje. The incense burner of Baekje is widely celebrated as one of the finest masterpieces of ancient metalcrafts, not only of Korea, but also of the entire world.

Keywords: *the great gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje, National Museum of Korea in Buyeo, Korean National Treasure.*

The Great Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje (Korean National Treasure № 287) was discovered in December 1993 during excavations at the site of Neungsan-ri Temple. The incense burner, which is 61.8 centimeters in height and weighs 11.85 kilograms, consists of three separate parts: the base, body, and lid. The base (the pedestal that supports the body) is shaped like a dragon with its head raised, while the body of mountain peaks, and a majestic phoenix with lotus petals. The large lid is carved with layers of mountain peaks, and a majestic phoenix with widespread wings is perched at the very top.

Overall, the decorative scheme of the lid is believed to depict the mountainous world of Daoist immortals. The lid is delicately shaped to resemble several descending rows of mountain peaks, with five peaks in the upper row. Moreover, the spaces between the peaks are further adorned with streams, waterfalls, rocks, and plants. The mountains are also inhabited by a menagerie of animals – including tigers, wild boars, monkeys, and birds-



Fig. 1. The Great Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje:

Neungsan-risaji Temple Site, Buyeo-gun, Chungcheongnam-do, H. 61.8cm. National Museum of Korea in Buyeo, Korean National Treasure

along with various imaginary creatures and human figures. On the upper part of the lid, there are five musicians who seem to be playing joyful tunes, next to five birds that are gazing up at the phoenix. In its beak, the phoenix holds an auspicious jewel called a “cintamani,” as it stands with its wings outstretched, as if just having alit from the sky.

The bowl-shaped body of the burner is decorated with where rows of lotus petals (eight petals per row). Each of the twenty-four petals contains an image symbolizing immortality, such as a Daoist immortal, waterside animals, and imaginary creatures. Beneath the bowl, a dragon strikes a dynamic pose, with its body crouched and twisted as if it were about to ascend skywards. To form the circular base, the space between the dragon’s legs and its body is filled with cloud and lotus designs. The base is connected to the body of the incense burner via a small rod that extends from the dragon’s mouth up into an opening in the bottom of the bowl.

China has a long tradition of Bo Mountain incense burners, which were shaped like the mythical mountain where Daoist immortals were believed to dwell. This incense burner reflects the influence of that tradition, but it also includes numerous details and features that are entirely unique to Baekje. As such, the Great Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje is widely celebrated as one of the finest masterpieces of ancient metalcrafts, not only of Korea, but also of the entire world (Fig. 1).

A DISCOVERY OF ONE OF THE GREATEST MASTERPIECES OF ALL TIME

The most sought after loan item by overseas museums. Korea’s remarkable National Treasure that has drawn international attention. What secrets are hidden within the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje?

How can we learn stories of the past that were never written down? Yes, you guessed right: Objects used in the past can tell us their stories! During this talk, I intend to introduce you to the lifestyle, science, religion, thinking, and art of the Baekje Kingdom by using the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje. The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje grows even more mysterious the more we examine it and becomes all the more fascinating as the more we learn about it.

WHERE WAS THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE USED?

Baekje: In the Baekje Kingdom

Geumdong: Made of Bronze Plated with Gold

Daehyangno: Large Incense Burner

Incense Burner Used for Royal Ceremonies and Ancestral Rites in the 7th Century at the Peak of the Baekje Culture

Height: 61.8 cm, Diameter: 19 cm, Weight: 11.85 kg

Incense that Repelled Harmful Insects and Warded off Evil Spirits

Two Ventilation Holes on the Front Chest of the *Bonghwang* (Mystical Bird)

Ten Ventilation Holes at the Front and Rear of the Five Musicians

Boshan-shaped Incense Burner

This type of incense burner with a saucer and a lid shaped like the peak of Boshan Mountain was popular during the Han Dynasty in China. The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje, one of the most splendid and elaborate incense burners in the world. Its name refers to a large incense burner made in the Baekje Kingdom out of bronze plated with gold. People in the Baekje era used this type of incense burner during royal ceremonies and ancestral rites. From ancient times, incense was considered to repel harmful insects and ward off evil spirits. The Baekje royal court burned incense in the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje to communicate with the heavens. Incense burner of Baekje has twelve ventilation holes. When incense is burned, smoke is released from seven of them. Air enters through the other five to help the incense burn well. This incense burner is highly prized not only for its ornate decoration, but also for its scientific structure. The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje resembles the Boshan-shaped incense burners that were popular in Han dynasty of China. Because of this similarity, it was misidentified as a Chinese artifact when it was first discovered. However, in-depth research revealed that it is in fact a local product of the Baekje Kingdom.

HOW WAS THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE MADE?

Lost-wax Casting

1. A mixture of beeswax and resin is sculpted into the shape of the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje.
2. Layers of clay are added to produce a solid mold.
3. Heat is applied to the mold to melt the wax.
4. Molten bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, is poured into the channels left by the wax.
5. The Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje is revealed by breaking the mold.

The beautiful and mystical decorations of the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje are so elaborate that it is difficult to perfectly reproduce them even today. The secret of the Baekje master artisan's exquisitely sculpted decorations lies in the wax. Depending on the temperature, wax softens and hardens. Therefore, metalwork with delicate details could be produced using it. Let's try to replicate the incense burner by using the lost-wax casting technique.

HOW WAS THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE PRESERVED?

December 12, 1993

Neungsan-ri in Buyeo

The First Exhibition by the National Museum of Korea to Feature a Single Item: The Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje

First Key: Mud

Second Key: Gilding Technique

Mercury Amalgamation Gilding Applied to the Surface of the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje

Overlayer Thickness of the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje
0.001 cm

Mercury amalgamation gilding

1. A mixture of liquid mercury and gold powder is wrapped in cloth, squeezed, and kneaded.
2. This kneaded mixture is applied to the surface of the incense burner using a wooden spatula or cloth.
3. The mercury is evaporated by heating the surface, but the gold powder remains attached.

EXTRAORDINARY TECHNICAL SKILLS OF THE PEOPLE OF BAEKJE

In 1993, the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje was found at a temple site near some tombs of Baekje kings. When it was discovered, the incense burner remained surprisingly intact. The National Museum of Korea held an exhibition featuring just a single object, the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje, for the first time in its history. People from across the country crowded into the museum to view this relic that had remained well preserved for around 1,400 years.

There were two keys that helped it retain its original form for all these years. The first was mud. The mud surrounding the incense burner blocked out the air and created a vacuum state. This prevented the incense burner from corroding. The second key was a special gilding technique known as mercury amalgamation. By employing this method, Baekje master artisans added a uniformly thin layer of gilding. Let's take a close look at this gilding method.

Aren't the outstanding technical skills of the Baekje master artisans surprising? There is something even more amazing in this incense burner, however. As shown by computed tomography images, while the body and dragon-shaped pedestal were produced separately and then joined, the lid and the *bonghwang* (mystical bird) at the top have no marks from being connected. These reflect the remarkable metal crafting technology of the Baekje Kingdom.

A NEW HISTORY FROM THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE

The Baekje Kingdom defeated by Silla-Tang-tang allied forces in the 20th year of the reign of King Uija. Gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje embodies the religion, politics, culture, art, and metal crafting of the Baekje Kingdom. The Baekje Kingdom collapsed under attacks from the allied forces of the Silla Kingdom and Tang China. It has been called the "lost kingdom" since so few written records remain. However, when the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje was rediscovered 1,400 years after its creation, the Baekje Kingdom had to be reevaluated. A priceless artifact, the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje awoke from a deep slumber and was presented to us.

WHO CAN BE FOUND IN THE WORLD OF THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE?

The world-renowned cultural heritage with various stories of the Baekje Kingdom. The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje, which could

barely be replicated even with modern equipment, has been described as universe unto itself. This universe holds many interesting stories, including secrets about the history of the Baekje Kingdom.

HOW IS THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE DESCRIBED?

Dragon-shaped Pedestal.

Lotus Flower-shaped Body.

Mountain-shaped Lid.

Bonghwang phoenix (Mystical Bird) ornament.

The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje, an artwork where confucianism, buddhism, and daoism coexist.

Five musicians symbolizing the confucian ideal of ruling the state through music.

Penglaishan mountain, where spiritually cultivated daoist immortals reside.

Lotus flower in which all creation is born.

Dragon symbolizing yin.

Bonghwang (Mystical Bird) symbolizing yang.

Dragon-shaped pedestal only found in the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje.

The gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje consists of four parts: a pedestal shaped like a dragon, a body imitating a lotus flower, a lid in the form of soaring mountain peaks, and a *bonghwang* ornament on top.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism all coexist in harmony within this incense burner.

The more you look at it, the more you might be surprised by its delicacy.

Our eyes are drawn to the dragon flashing its horns, teeth, and claws while dynamically lifting a leg as if it is about to ascend to the heavens.

There are no other known examples of an incense burner with a dragon-shaped pedestal.

WHO RESIDES ON BODY OF THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE?

Lotus flower symbolizing the birth and rebirth of all creation.

Three rows of eight lotus petals.

Relief carvings of twenty-five animals and two human figures on and between the lotus petals.

Four-footed creature with wings.

Creature with four legs and wings on both shoulders and tail.

Animal with a long tail.

Animal with a large face relative to its body, four thick legs, and a long tail.

Human figure practicing martial arts.

Round-faced figure wearing a coronet that narrows at the top.

Divine beast.

Daoist immortal riding the divine beast with his knees bent.

THE BODY OF THE INCENSE BURNER IS SHAPED LIKE A LOTUS FLOWER

Lotus flowers are also included as designs in Baekje tiles. However, the lotus petals of the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje are depicted in a beautiful and lively manner. If you look closely at each petal, you will see that each one is decorated with something. Relief carvings of mysterious and unusual animals are found on and between the petals. What could these animals be?

WHO IS LIVING IN THE LID OF THE GILT-BRONZE INCENSE BURNER OF BAEKJE?

Seventeen daoist immortals and forty-two animals living on the mountain-shaped lid. Gorgeous *Bonghwang* (Mythical Bird) of the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje. Curves in the *Bonghwang* as Beautiful as Humanly Possible. Five musicians playing *wanham* (lute), *buk* (drum), *geomungo* (zither), *baeso* (pan flute), and *jongjeok* (pipe). Human figure on horseback. Figure riding on a horse and pulling a bow with his body turned backward. Elephant / Monkey / Crocodile. Animals indicating active exchanges with china and Southeast Asia. Bird with long beak. Imaginary creature with the body of a bird and an elephant's trunk (Fig. 2).

Posu: Creature warding off evil spirits below the tail of the *bonghwang*. *Oesu*: Fish-faced animal walking upright on two bird feet while controlling thunder and lightning. Human-faced beast. Imaginary creature with the body of a beast and a human face. Human-faced bird. Imaginary creature with the body of a bird and a human face. Unidentified mysterious-looking animals. The lid shaped like a soaring mountain also includes animals and human figures that seem mystical beyond imagination. Seventeen Daoist immortals and forty-two animals leisurely wander amongst the peaks and valleys.



Fig. 2. Gorgeous phoenix on the lid of the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje.

A *bonghwang* (mythical bird) perched at the peak of the incense burner is considered the most beautiful example among all the *bonghwang* found in historical records and artifacts. Its imposing posture and soft curves from chest to tail display the pinnacle of beauty. The detailed portrayal of the *bonghwang* enlivens and beautifies the bird. A close examination of it shows that the shapes and lines of the two wings differ. The five Daoist immortals right below the *bong-*

hwang are known as the Five Musicians. A Daoist immortal on horseback is also found here. This figure allows us to visualize the armor and helmets worn by the people of Baekje at the time.

In between the mountains are animals which did not inhabit the Korean Peninsula. They are an elephant, monkey, and crocodile. How did people in Baekje 1,400 years ago depict animals they had never seen?! The presence of these animals suggests that the Baekje Kingdom conducted active cultural exchanges with other countries. Mysterious-looking and still nameless creatures can be observed on the Gilt-bronze Incense Burner of Baekje.

We can consider the world of harmony and unity within on the gilt-bronze incense burner of Baekje. This vessel blends a traditional Korean culture with foreign influences. Incense burner of Baekje is still countless intriguing stories and spectacles to be uncovered.

Юн Хевон

БОЛЬШАЯ БРОНЗОВАЯ С ПОЗОЛОТОЙ КУРИЛЬНИЦА ПЭКЧЕ

Аннотация: Бронзовая позолоченная курильница рассказывает о духовной культуре пэкчесцев, о тех обрядах, которые проводились при дворе вана. Она показывает, как творчески воспринимались инокультурные (в частности, китайские) заимствования на Корейском полуострове.

Ключевые слова: курильница Пэкче, курильницы бошанью, даосизм