

Article

A Golden Treasure from Korea: The Gilt-Bronze Bodhisattva Statue of Silla

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Abstract: A gilt-bronze statue of a standing bodhisattva was discovered at the Söllimwŏn Temple site. The statue is notable as its halo and pedestal were found intact at the time of discovery, and the bodhisattva figure itself is almost perfectly preserved. There are only a few instances of gilt-bronze statues from the Unified Silla kingdom that can be definitively linked to the site of their original placement. Söllimwŏn was physically distant from the royal palace, but its status as a central temple of the Sŏn School 禪宗 and the activities of pre-eminent monks in the ninth century made it important enough to become the site for a splendid gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue. Based on physical, stylistic, and scientific evidence, the statue dates to the latter half of the ninth century and has ties to the Buddhist monk Master Honggak 弘覺禪師. A unique example of a gilt-bronze sculpture, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is a valuable part of Buddhist material culture in Korea.

Keywords: Unified Silla dynasty; Korean Buddhist site; gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva; Söllimwŏn Temple site; Master Honggak; copper alloy; lost-wax casting; amalgam plating



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1. Introduction

In 2015, a gilt-bronze statue of a standing bodhisattva from the Unified Silla (668–935) period was excavated at the Söllimwŏn Temple site 禪林院址 in Korea (Figure 1).¹ The Söllimwŏn site is situated in Yangyang, Kangwŏn Province, or approximately 320 km from Kyŏngju 慶州 (Figure 2). Söllimwŏn perished around the 10th century, leaving behind the vestige of a once prosperous temple. This architectural remnant was excavated in 2015, whence researchers recovered a gilt-bronze statue of a bodhisattva standing 67.1 cm high. The bodhisattva was found entirely intact, complete with a halo and pedestal original to the statue. Buddhist sculptures from the Unified Silla period are typically wrought from stone. A plethora of examples remain throughout Korea, including the renowned principal Buddha icon of Sŏkkuram Grotto. Despite the challenges of working with stone, the ubiquity of Buddhist stone sculptures can be explained by the country's natural plenitude of granite, which accounts for at least 70 percent of Korea's terrain. On the contrary, Buddhist sculptures produced using gilt-bronze are not as common. The few examples made were typically enshrined in the temples of Kyŏngju, the capital city of Silla. This paucity is partly explained by the country's deficiency of tin, a precious and thus prohibitively expensive metal essential to the production of lustrous gilt-bronze Buddhist statues. The lack of tin also limited the dimensions of any potential sculptures, though a gilt-bronze statue of any size posed a formidable commission that could only be fulfilled for temples with considerable resources and ties to the royal court. Considering these factors, the enshrinement of a relatively sizable gilt-bronze bodhisattva at the Söllimwŏn Temple site is a unique occurrence that requires further inquiry. As a relatively recent discovery, scholarship on the Söllimwŏn gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue is yet to be published in Korean or Western academia. This study attempts to fill this vacancy while also expanding the minimal scholarship on gilt-bronze Buddhist statues of the late Unified Silla period.



Figure 1. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva, Late Unified Silla (late ninth century). Gilt-bronze, 67.1 cm (height). Kangwŏn-do Province: Sŏllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties, below HICP].

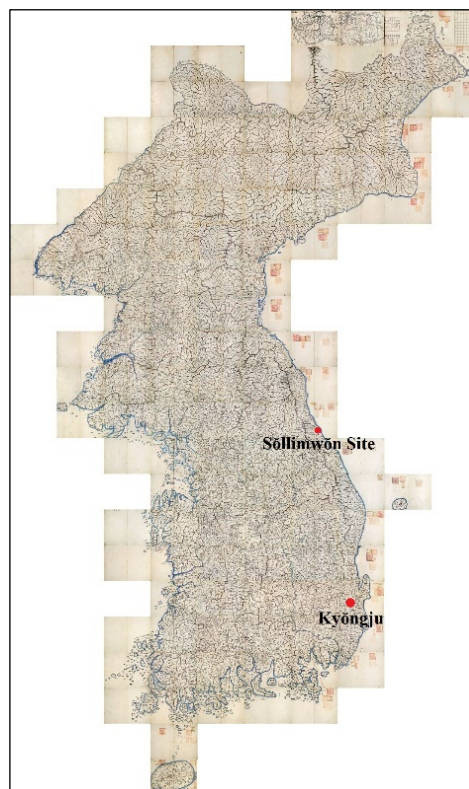


Figure 2. Taedonggyŏjido 大東輿地圖 [the great map of the East Land], Late Joseon Dynasty period (1861 CE), Seoul: Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies. [Source: Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies].

As previously observed, the Unified Silla kingdom produced a far higher number of Buddhist statues carved from stone than those made in gilt-bronze.² The most well-known instances of the latter are the seated Amitābha and Vairocana Buddhas of Pulguk Temple 佛國寺 and the standing Medicine Buddha 藥師佛 (Skt. Bhaishajyaguru Buddha) of Paengnyul Temple 栢栗寺 measuring 170 to 180 cm tall.³ Distinguished by bigger proportions, this gilt-bronze trio is an irregularity within a sculptural repertoire replete with statues typically 10 to 20 cm tall and rarely exceeding 30 cm in height.⁴ As the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is 38.8 cm tall, without factoring in the added height of auxiliary parts, it places among the pool of larger gilt-bronze Buddhist statues from the Unified Silla period.

The Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is notable in several aspects. The foremost is the statue's components, size, state of preservation, and placement. Though the halo is currently in fragments, the statue's halo and pedestal were originally found undamaged, a rare occurrence in and of itself. The optimal condition of both components also made it possible for researchers to determine the full height of the sculpture, a sum of 67 cm. Moreover, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was found unaltered and in its initial placement. This point is significant as the original circumstances of enshrinement are known to scholars for only a handful of gilt-bronze Buddhist statues extant in Korea. Additionally, the original appearance of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was revealed after five years of preservation treatment (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva, 38.8 cm (height). (From the left) Immediately after excavation, after conservation, 3D scan, Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Source: HICP].

The perfect preservation of the Söllimwŏn statue is crucial to explaining aspects of the production and decoration process for gilt-bronze Buddhist sculpture during the Unified Silla period. Finally, the findspot of the statue is most likely where the temple monks resided. Placed in their living quarters, the monks enshrined the bodhisattva figure in the same location where it was buried shortly after, to be discovered more than a millennium later.

The Söllimwŏn Temple site is famed for the many artifacts it houses. There are currently four artifacts at the temple site that were officially classified treasures of the nation. They are the three-story stone pagoda, stone lantern, monk's pagoda 僧塔 (*sŭngt'ap*), and the tortoise-shaped pedestal and dragon-shaped capstone from the Stele of Master

Honggak 弘覺禪師 (814?–880).⁵ There is also a ‘dharma bell’ 梵鐘 (*pŏmjong*) dated 804 CE that is currently in the collection of the Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum. It was not designated a treasure as only a few pieces of the bell survived a fire, but it remains an important artifact from the Söllimwŏn Temple site.⁶ Nevertheless, the gilt-bronze statue of a bodhisattva figure is perhaps the most outstanding artifact from the Söllimwŏn Temple site. This essay examines the statue from three points. First, the paper addresses the question of why such a fine artifact was placed in Söllimwŏn, a temple outside the physical limits of Kyŏngju, or the traditional center of influence and activity for the royal court. Second, there is the matter of precisely dating the statue. There are no historical records that provide the information necessary to positively date the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva. In lieu of written evidence, comparative and scientific analyses are considered. Finally, the paper concludes with a study of the statue’s production method and a review of materials analyses performed during the statue’s five-year conservation. Convening all points of inquiry, this investigation into the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva aims to explain the significance of this gilt-bronze treasure and define its place in the larger program of Korean Buddhist sculpture.

2. The Söllimwŏn Temple Site

Söllimwŏn Temple site is located in the deep valley known as Mich’ŏn, which lies under Kuryongnyŏng, or the foot of Mount Sŏraksan in Kangwŏn Province. A small mountain temple made up of five to six structures, Söllimwŏn contained a Main Hall, Grand Master’s Hall, and accommodations for monks (Figure 4). The temple was excavated in 1985 and 1986, and a third time 30 years later in 2015 (Mun 1991, pp. 164–72; Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, pp. 259–80). The initial excavations focused on the Main Hall, but the most recent activity concentrated on the monks’ quarters, where the gilt-bronze statue of a standing bodhisattva was discovered.⁷



Figure 4. Drone image of Söllimwŏn. Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

The exact date of the Söllimwŏn Temple site’s founding is unknown as there are no historical records that provide the necessary context. However, the oldest artifact discovered at the site is a ‘dharma bell’ from 804, indicating that the temple was established before the ninth century (Nam 1992, pp. 394–96). Findings from the first and second excavations suggest that the Söllimwŏn Temple site unexpectedly disappeared as a result of a sudden flood and landslide (Mun 1991, p. 164). The identical conditions of the structures at the site reinforce the idea that the entire compound was buried instantaneously and collectively. As Söllimwŏn is a mountain temple encompassed in the contours of the natural terrain, a landslide is the most probable cause of the temple’s demise. One must

also consider that the majority of the excavated artifacts date to the ninth century, while none are from subsequent periods. The limited temporal range represented among the artifacts speaks to the short timeframe wherein the temple operated before it expired. The temple's disappearance is recorded in the 'Main History of Silla' chapter of *Samguk Sagi* 三國史記 [History of the Three Kingdoms]. "(The King Sindök 4th year, 915 CE) During 6th month, summer, the water near Champo port [now Hüngdök, Yeong'il] collided with the water of the east sea, and waves soared 20 chang [approximately 6 m] high. It stopped 3 days after."⁸

The account of waves soaring six metres into the sky can be interpreted as a great tsunami. Heralding considerable winds and heavy rain, the tsunami of 915 CE hit the east coast of Yangyang, Kangwŏn-do, where only three kilometres inland stood Söllimwŏn Temple. The proximity to the coast meant the temple would have suffered considerable water damage in addition to the destruction provoked by landslides from the mountains bordering the back of the site (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Drone image of Söllimwŏn. Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

A casualty of natural disaster, the Söllimwŏn Temple was operational for merely a century. Fortunately, traces of Söllimwŏn endure through the activities of monks Sunŭng 順應 (active 766, ?–?), Yŏmgŏ 廉巨和 (?–844), and Master Honggak 弘覺禪師 (814?–880) who passed through the temple during the ninth century.⁹ Sunŭng was one of the founders of Haein Temple, and Yŏmgŏ made his name in Unified Silla as an exceptional follower of the Sŏn School 禪宗 (Sŏnjong). Master Honggak was Yŏmgŏ's disciple. The last to visit Söllimwŏn was Master Honggak, who stayed at Söllimwŏn circa 870 CE when he instituted large-scale rebuilding. He was eventually memorialized posthumously with the construction of the 'Stele for Master Honggak' and 'monk's pagoda' 僧塔 (*sŭngt'ap*).¹⁰

Though the site is presently known as Söllimwŏn Temple, this is not its original name. As the temple suddenly disappeared in the early 10th century, it remained unidentified until the middle of the seventeenth century, when locals started to refer to the site as Söllimwŏn (Nam 2012, pp. 361–434). This unofficial moniker was derived from the Stele of Master Honggak discovered at the site. Left in fragments, the section of the stele containing the temple's name was misplaced.¹¹ A rubbing of the text inscribed on one of the stele's surviving fragments in the mid-17th century revealed characters that read 'Söllim 禪林', which soon became the basis for a new appellation.¹²

A clue to the original name of the temple is evident in the Stele of Master Honggak (Ch'unch'ŏn National Museum 2014, p. 113). The stele was erected along with the *sŭngt'ap* or monk's pagoda in 886 CE when Master Honggak passed into Nirvana. The decision to

install the stele on the premises of Söllimwŏn Temple suggests that Master Honggak spent his last days here. Thus the portion of the stele's inscription stating, '[Master Honggak] again formed a Main Hall and a Buddhist sanctum at Öksöng Temple 億聖寺 on Mount Sölsan 雪山 at the end of the Xiantong reign 咸通 (860–874),' makes it highly possible that the temple's actual name was Öksöngsa (Kwŏn 1998, pp. 75–88; Kwŏn 2009, pp. 197–224). Notwithstanding this recent revelation, the temple continues to be known as the Söllimwŏn Temple site to this day.¹³

3. Production Method, Materials, and Decoration

The gilt-bronze bodhisattva of Söllimwŏn was found horizontal and faced down in an area presumed to be the monks' quarters during the third excavation survey of the temple site carried out in 2015 (Chang 2015, pp. 125–30) (Figures 4 and 6). Surprisingly, the bodhisattva statue was complete with a halo and pedestal. Although there are not many extant gilt-bronze statues in Korea, examples discovered with their nimbi or illuminating adornments intact are even rarer. As such, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is unique because it is accompanied by both its adornments and pedestal and is further notable for its large size.¹⁴ The combination of the bodhisattva figure and pedestal is 50.4 cm, but the specific height of the entire statue with all of its extraneous parts is 67.1 cm.¹⁵ Gilt-bronze Buddhist statues from Unified Silla that exceed 30 cm in height are scarce, attributing further value to the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva based solely on its size.¹⁶ In spite of its relatively large dimensions, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was not enshrined as the principal icon of a Main Hall. Even in a smaller Main Hall, the principal Buddha was approximately 1 m high and well over 2 m when adding in the halo and pedestal. To such a degree, a Buddhist statue had to be a minimum of 2 m to qualify as the principal icon. Based on this criterion and the statue's recovery at the site of what is presumed to be the monks' quarters, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was not meant for nor placed in the Main Hall.



Figure 6. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva at the time of excavation. Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

The Söllimwŏn bodhisattva statue, its halo, and pedestal were all produced as individual parts and later combined. This is not unusual as it was a commonplace practise for sculptors to cast the halo and pedestal specifically as separate parts and thereafter

attach them to the main body of the sculpture. However, in the case of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva, the sculptor made all elements apart from the basic form of the bodhisattva figure as separate appendages. These include decorative elements such as the ‘jeweled crown’ 寶冠 (*pogwan*), necklaces, ‘stringed beads or gems’ 瓔珞 (*yŏngnak*), and ‘water bottle’ 淨瓶 (Skt. *kuṇḍikā*, *chŏngbyŏng*), ornaments (Figure 7). These embellishments are customarily made simultaneous to and as an incorporated part of the main body for all Korean gilt-bronze statues of bodhisattvas.¹⁷ The deviation from this pattern is especially noticeable in the drapery of the garment wrapped around the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva (note the left arm in Figure 7). The sculptor’s unique technique is also apparent in the water bottle, which was purposely made with a hole so that the object could later be hung from the bodhisattva’s finger.



Figure 7. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva (detail). Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

Transmission X-ray images revealed that the body of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was produced from a single mold (Figure 8). A large molding hole is present on the back of the figure’s head and body, while both arms present traces of a casting hole (Figure 9).¹⁸ The interior of the statue is in a relatively clean state as the inner soil used during the production of the statue was expertly removed. The large hole drilled in the back of the statue was untouched, but the casting holes on the back of the statue’s arms were plugged and covered with a metal plate after the completion of the bodhisattva statue (Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, p. 259). It would have been unnecessary to cover the bodhisattva’s back hole as coverage was naturally provided with the attachment of the halo.¹⁹ However, the holes in the figure’s arms remained exposed and required a covering as the cavities would be visible between spaces created by the scrolling patterns of the halo. For the openings in the back, their size varied depending on the statue’s production period. Gilt-bronze statues created during the ninth century characteristically have bigger openings that occupy more than half of the figure’s back.



Figure 8. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva (X-ray image). Kangwŏn-do: Sŏllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].



Figure 9. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva (detail of rear). Kangwŏn-do: Sŏllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

The Sŏllimwŏn bodhisattva was sculpted in the lost-wax casting technique, a method that involves creating a wax mold, surrounding it with one's material of choice, and then melting the wax away to make a hollow cast for the desired sculpture. The cavity of the cast used to make the Sŏllimwŏn bodhisattva was filled with an alloy of copper and tin. The metal components of the bodhisattva consist of 95.5 percent copper (Cu), 3.53 percent tin, and 0.92 percent silver.²⁰ Conspicuously missing from the amalgam is lead (Pb), an element usually found in the Buddhist statues of Unified Silla.²¹ One of the defining characteristics of ancient Korean Buddhist statues of gilt-bronze is the dominance of copper (Pak 2017,

pp. 494–97). However, the complete absence of lead in the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is puzzling as gold–bronze Buddha statues of the sixth and seventh centuries are traditionally based on a copper–tin–lead ternary alloy.²² An analysis of the statue’s surface reveals a high content of mercury as well as the presence of gold beads in the plating layer.²³ This indicates that the mercury amalgam-plating method was used to coat the surface of the statue with gold and mercury after casting the bodhisattva (Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, p. 284). Only the hair was left ungilt and instead painted with a navy pigment that has lightened and peeled considerably with time.

Another interesting aspect of the Söllimwŏn statue is the lines on the figure’s face drawn with ink leftover from painting the hair (Figure 10). Painted lines express features such as the eyebrows, eyes, nose tip, mustache, beard, hair, hairline, and auricle. Remnants of the originally painted lines tell us that the facial hair of bodhisattva and Buddha statues were drawn during the initial creation of the images using ink. A trace amount of red pigment was also found on the mouth, suggesting that the lips were initially painted red. Additional applications of ink depict the bodhisattva’s hair tied high on the head and then rolled up and back in a bun. An elaborate crown cast as a separate part is attached to the top, framing the hair and head.



Figure 10. Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva (detail of face). Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

The upper body of the bodhisattva is wrapped in two long sheets of fabric. One is a *ch’ŏnŭi* 天衣 draped across both shoulders, while the second is a *nagaek* 絡腋 wrapped diagonally across the chest. Bodhisattva figures are commonly seen dressed in the *ch’ŏnŭi*. Variation of the garment is provided by the *nagaek*, a band of fabric that extends diagonally from the left shoulder to the right underarm. Sculptors used both the *ch’ŏnŭi* and *nagaek* to garb the bodhisattva statues of the Tang dynasty.²⁴ The *nagaek* started to appear on bodhisattva figures of the Chinese Tang (618–907) dynasty from the mid-seventh century, becoming prevalent in examples sculpted during the eighth century. In Korea, the *nagaek* was a decorative convention from the latter half of the eighth century and appears on many well-known examples such as the attendant bodhisattva statues of the rock-carved Buddha triad of Ch’ilburam Hermitage and the Maitreya statue of Kamsan Temple 甘山寺 (Im 2020, pp. 179–80). The *nagaek* continued to appear in bodhisattva statues of the ninth century, as

seen in the gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva statue in Nūnginbojōn 能人寶殿 of the Kosōng Yujōm Temple 楡岾寺 (Figure 11). The present whereabouts of the Yujōmsa bodhisattva are unknown, but its existence can be confirmed from glass dry plate photographs. The bodhisattva's solemnly depicted face and fuller body are particularly reminiscent of the Sōllimwōn bodhisattva. The two statues are also similar in size as the Yujōmsa figure is 32.2 cm tall, only 7 cm shorter than the Sōllimwōn figure. Moreover, Yujōm Temple is located in Kosōng of Kangwōn Province, not far from the Sōllimwōn Temple site. These multiple points of comparison make the Yujōmsa example a good point of reference for dating the Sōllimwōn bodhisattva.



Figure 11. (left) Gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva, Sōllimwōn site [Photograph by HICP]. (right) Gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva, Yujōmsa Nūnginbojōn [Source: Chosōn'gojōktobo 5 1917, pl. 1950].

The gilt-bronze statue of a bodhisattva at the Sōllimwōn Temple site was expertly sculpted. The figure's shoulders are covered in a thin and long *ch'ōnūi* that has a long hem extending across the arms to cover the body from left to right. The effect of the drapery gives the bodhisattva statue much more depth and a lively impression. Unsurprisingly, the drapery was made separately and attached thereafter (Figure 7). The lower half of the body is covered in a skirt with a *yop'o* 腰布 wrapped around the waist. The *yop'o* is tied with a string to prevent it from trailing the floor. The knot above the *nagaek* and *yop'o* is quite thick, its naturalistic rendering a testament to the sculptor's fine sculpting technique.

The halo illuminating the bodhisattva from the rear is nearly complete (Figure 12). The hole at the center of the halo was meant to be affixed to a protrusion at the back of the figure's waist, and a knob at the bottom was attached to the statue's pedestal. The back of the entire adornment was gilt in gold for a second time except in places that were touching the bodhisattva figure. The halo is a plate made of 99.74 percent of pure copper and 0.26 percent silver. There are many instances of pure copper plates among Buddhist metal crafts in the ninth century (Pyōn and Cho 2021, pp. 102–3). A case in point is the Tonghwa Temple Sarira Reliquary of 863 CE, which is a pure copper plate with a purity of over 99 percent.²⁵ Like so, it is possible to create a flat plate using extremely pure copper, but a small amount of tin is needed in the production of three-dimensional images such as Buddhist statues. The addition of even a small amount of tin to copper results in a mixture that is consistently fluid at high temperatures and ideal for casting in molds.²⁶ However, tin was not easy to obtain in Unified Silla as there were very few tin mines, and their existence was a recondite fact at the time. The apparent scarcity of tin greatly limited its use in Buddhist sculpture.

Judging from extant examples of gilt-bronze Buddhist sculpture, the halo made of pure copper indicates that the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva was produced in the ninth century.



Figure 12. Nimbus of the gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva. 55.5 cm (height). Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

The statue's pedestal consists of four general parts (Figure 13). The upper and middle portions are circular, while the lower portion and base support are octagonal. The middle section is quite short. There are knobs under the sole of the bodhisattva's feet meant to lock the figure into the top of the pedestal (Figures 3 and 13). At the time of discovery, the left foot had broken off, but its knob was still affixed to the pedestal, and the right ankle had been broken off. The right foot is currently affixed to the pedestal (Figure 13). The lower section is decorated with thick lotus leaves and elaborate 'ear flower' (*kwikkot*) decoration. The center of each 'ear flower' is decorated with a glass bead.²⁷



Figure 13. Pedestal of the gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva. 17.3 cm (height). Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by HICP].

Apparent differences between pedestals from different periods are abundantly clear (Im 2011, pp. 288–94). In particular, the lower part of pedestals in the ninth century was decorated with an abundance of ‘ear flower’. These flowers are depicted not only on gilt-bronze Buddhist statues but on their stone counterparts as well, even appearing on ninth-century pagodas and stone lanterns. The large size and fleshy shape of the lotus flower on the lower pedestal is another defining characteristic, and similar elements decorate the pedestals of the stone seated Vairocana Buddha at Tonghwa Temple 桐華寺 from 863 CE and the stone seated Vairocana Buddha of Ch’uksŏ Temple 鶯棲寺 from 867 CE (Im 2017, pp. 41–75; Im 2021, pp. 31–61). Lotus flowers of identical shape can also be found on the stone pagoda erected circa 880 CE at the Söllimwŏn Temple site, where it still remains, and the lower stone supports of the temple’s stone lantern.

4. Dating the Söllimwŏn Bodhisattva

There remains the matter of dating the gilt-bronze statue of the standing bodhisattva excavated from the Söllimwŏn Temple site. The bodhisattva’s most prominent facial features are the sharp nose and full mouth. The thick philtrum precedes the deeply rounded upper lip, which protrudes further out than the lower lip. There is an identical lip structure on the face of the iron statue of Vairocana Buddha produced in 859 CE for the Porim Temple 寶林寺 reestablished by Pojo Sŏn Master 普照禪師 Ch’ejing 體澄 (804–880) (Figure 14).²⁸ Ch’ejing also stayed at Söllimwŏn and succeeded Yŏmgŏ alongside Master Honggak.²⁹ The stylistic and historical parallels inextricably link the Söllimwŏn and Porimsa statues together and allude to a common production period. The distinct upper lip is also prevalent in many Buddhist statues of the ninth century or later Unified Silla period.



Figure 14. (left) Gilt-bronze Standing bodhisattva (detail of face), Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn site. (right) Iron Seated Vairocana Buddha, Unified Silla (859 CE), Jeollanam-do: Porimsa Temple [Photograph by Author (2020)].

Other good points of comparison are the monk’s pagoda, the turtle base and dragon capstone of Master Honggak’s stele, and the stone lanterns that remain at the Söllimwŏn site.³⁰ The pagoda was decidedly dated to 886 CE, but the pedestal was the only portion that survived as the structure’s ‘roof stone’ 屋蓋石 (*okkaesŏk*), and main body 塔身 (*t’apsin*) was initially missing.³¹ Fortunately, the pagoda’s roof stone was uncovered during the recently completed third excavation of Söllimwŏn (Figure 15). The ‘roof stone’ is octagonal, and ‘ear flowers’ once adorned each corner of the roof though only one blossom remains intact today. These ‘ear flowers’ and the lotus leaves on the pagoda’s pedestal are nearly identical to the decorative elements of the lower pedestal supporting the gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue of the Söllimwŏn Temple site (Figure 16). Master Honggak visited the temple circa 870 CE to perform a large-scale Buddhist service. (Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum 2014,

p. 113) During his sojourn, Master Honggak was responsible for or at least the subject of various stone works created during the decade following 880 CE. The pagoda and stone lamps bear a close resemblance to several aspects of the gilt-bronze statue of the standing bodhisattva. The affinity provides strong evidence for dating the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva to the latter half of the ninth century.³²



Figure 15. Newly discovered roof stone from the monk's stupa, Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site [Photograph by Author (2020)].

The results of a scientific analysis published in 2021 mostly corroborate the idea that the gilt-bronze statue was produced in the latter half of the ninth century, as stylistic comparisons to other artifacts suggest. It is difficult to date the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva based solely on an examination of the gilt-bronze material.³³ However, there are other clues available such as the slips of paper attached to the inside and surface of the bodhisattva. Since the bodhisattva was recovered immediately from the site at the time of excavation, every material was saved, including the paper, which was crafted from a mulberry tree. There are traces of gold leaf coating on the mulberry paper, and its confinement to the back of the bodhisattva statue's head and body signify that it was used to cover the casting holes at the time of production. The precise dating of the paper is a complicated matter due to the wide margin of error in radiocarbon dating. Nevertheless, the results show that the paper is from the seventh to ninth centuries (Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, p. 294). This narrows down the range of possible periods wherein the bodhisattva statue might have been created and includes the previously proposed ninth century.



Figure 16. (left) The 'ear flower' of plate 15 (right) and 'ear flower' of plate 10. Kangwŏn-do: Söllimwŏn Temple site. [Photograph by Author (2020)].

5. Conclusions

A unique gilt-bronze statue of a standing bodhisattva was discovered in 2015 at the Söllimwŏn Temple site, the center of the Unified Silla kingdom under Sŏn School 禪宗 (Sŏnjong). Both the figure's halo and pedestal were upturned but still attached to the statue at the time of discovery. The findspot is presumed to be the grounds for monastic residences based on residual traces of a furnace and its underground passages for fire and smoke. All factors considered, the bodhisattva statue was likely enshrined in a Buddhist altar within the monk's quarters, where it inevitably could not escape the destruction wrought by natural disaster. The Söllimwŏn Temple was buried in an instant during the first half of the 10th century. That the original application of gold remained unblemished suggests that the statue was submerged in the ground shortly after it was made. The statue was found closest to the Grand Master's Hall, where the Stele of Master Honggak stood, marking the space where the monk briefly resided. The compilation of stylistic and scientific evidence makes a strong case for dating the bodhisattva statue to the latter half of the ninth century, coinciding with the reconstruction of the Söllimwŏn Temple overseen by Master Honggak, who may have directly enshrined the icon in his dwellings.

This essay discussed the original placement, stylistic characteristics, and materials of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva. As for the identity of the bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara is a feasible candidate considering that the figure is holding a kuṇḍikā in its left hand and dons a 'jeweled crown'. However, as it cannot be ascertained whether the crown contains a transformation buddha 化佛 (*hwabul*) at its center, it is not possible to definitively identify the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva. In examining the significance of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva in Korean Buddhist sculpture and art, several points were established. First, the statue is among the largest gilt-bronze images of bodhisattvas known thus far. If one considers that most of Korea's gilt-bronze statues portray Buddha figures, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is a rare and thereby precious object. Second, the statue was in near perfect condition and found along with its halo and pedestal. The pristine state of the bodhisattva was due wholly to the natural disasters that caused the statue to be buried instantaneously little more than a century after the temple's founding. The preservation of its original state and appearance is an opportunity to ascertain the sculptor's intentions at the time of production. The results of a five-year conservation project have also disclosed the details of production, the exact composition of the metal, and the plating method used. Third, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is only one of very few examples of gilt-bronze statues with indisputable findspots. As the Söllimwŏn Temple functioned as the physical center of King Sŏnjŏng's reign, it is not presumptuous to assert that the gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue discovered there is the greatest excavated artifact of the twenty-first century in Korea.

The Söllimwŏn Temple was never rebuilt after its disappearance in the first half of the 10th century. Its architecture remained entombed in the ground alongside the traces of pre-eminent monks from the ninth century, such as Sunŭng, Yŏmgŏ, and Master Honggak. Three phases of excavations commencing in 1985 gradually unearthed a Main Hall three bays wide and four bays long, a Grand Master's Hall, and the dwellings of residing and visiting monks. Söllimwŏn clearly represented more than a humble mountain temple. Despite its great distance from the capital city of Kyŏngju, an elaborate gilt-bronze statue was enshrined here close to other fine Buddhist artifacts of the ninth century. Operating as an informal base for the foremost monks of the Sŏn School, it was only natural for the Söllimwŏn Temple to house a rare and excellent example of Buddhist sculpture befitting its stature. Thus, the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva is a unique instance of a gilt-bronze sculpture of great significance, representing an important part of Buddhist material culture in Korea.

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Notes

- ¹ For research detailing the excavations of the Söllimwŏn Temple site and the gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva statue discovered at the site, see the following scholarship (Im 2020, pp. 5–34). This paper published in 2020 revealed that the original name of the Söllimwŏn Temple site was actually Ōksŏng Temple and identified the monks who visited the site. The research particularly focused on determining which monk commissioned and then enshrined the gilt-bronze bodhisattva statue. The present paper takes a different approach by primarily focusing on the results of the five-year conservation project and is based on an examination of the scientific analysis and production method of the statue.
- ² The 59 examples of gilt-bronze Buddhist statues found in Kyŏngju are categorized by height as follows: less than 5 cm (15), 5 to 10 cm (16), 10 to 20 cm (14), 20 to 30 cm (12), exceeding 30 cm (2) (Yang 2011, pp. 262–63). Of the few extant gilt-bronze Buddhist images from the late Unified Silla period, none are similar in size to the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva statue. Thus, there are no suitable candidates for a stylistic comparison. Bodhisattva images from the Unified Silla period are rare in general and are not usually addressed in surveys of Korean Buddhist sculpture, such as the two representative publications penned by scholars Kang Woo-bang and Kim Lena. (Kang 1995, pp. 388–91; Kim 2007, pp. 83–99).
- ³ The Silla royal court also commissioned a large gilt-bronze statue of a standing bodhisattva measuring 5 m high for Hwangnyŏngsa, the designated royal temple. It was made by mixing copper and a small amount of tin and completed in 573 CE. Unfortunately, the statue disappeared during the Mongol invasion of 1238. Iryŏn 一然 (1206–1289), *Samguk Yusa* 三國遺事 (Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms) *Taishō* 49, no.2039:990a24.
- ⁴ Gilt-bronze Buddhist statues of the Silla kingdom measuring up to 5 cm high were commonly discovered in stupas, while statues taller than 10 cm have been uncovered from a variety of findspots. Examples are occasionally unearthed at the excavation sites of Main Halls but are more commonly found in stupas or at the sites of structures such as the Lecture Hall or monk’s living quarters. For research which examines gilt-bronze Buddhist statues in terms of the relationship between size and function, see the following scholarship (Kim 2014, pp. 7–41).
- ⁵ The four treasures are presently housed at the Söllimwŏn Temple site. They include the tortoise-shaped pedestal and dragon-shaped capstone of the Stele of Master Honggak. However, the stele itself was found in pieces, which are now in the collections of Dongguk University Museum and Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum. As the surviving fragments only make up a portion of the entire monument, it is not possible to restore the stele to its original appearance at this time.
- ⁶ This dharma bell is significant as it can be positively dated to 804 based on an inscription located on the interior of the bell. The bell was discovered at the Söllimwŏn Temple site in October 1948, then relocated to Wŏlchŏng Temple 月精寺 on 29 November 1949. Not even two years passed in January of 1951 and the bell was damaged during the Korean War. The surviving portions of the bell were placed in the collection of the Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum (Yi 1955, pp. 457–92). For scholarship regarding the dharma bell, see (Hwang 1998, pp. 7–14; Ch’oe 2002, pp. 55–81; Yi 2014, pp. 54–69).
- ⁷ With the exception of a gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva statue approximately 9.3 cm high, the first excavations of the site in 1985 did not produce any notable finds (Mun 1991, pp. 165–66).
- ⁸ Main History of Silla, Book 12, compiled by Kim Pusik 金富軾 (1075–1151), *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 [History of the Three Kingdoms]. King Sindŏk (r. 912–917) 4th.
- ⁹ The event of Yŏmgŏ’s sojourn in Söllimwŏn Temple is recorded in the following stele inscription. ‘Changhŭng Porimsa Pojosŏnsa ch’angsŏngt’appimun’ 長興 寶林寺 普照禪師 彰聖塔碑文 compiled by Kim Wŏn 金蘊 (?–?). The following scholarship discusses the event in further detail (Im 2020, pp. 9–13).
- ¹⁰ For more information on Master Honggak as well as monks Sunŭng and Yŏmgŏ, see the following scholarship (Im 2020, pp. 9–10).
- ¹¹ As discerned in endnote number 5, the surviving fragments of the Stele of Master Honggak are distributed across the collections of Dongguk University Museum and Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum. The stele’s tortoise-shaped pedestal and dragon-shaped capstone are registered as treasures number 446 and exhibited at the Söllimwŏn Temple site along with a replica of the stele. Scholarship on the stele and Master Honggak is as follows (Kwŏn 1992, pp. 637–43; 2002, pp. 5–16; 2008, p. 397; Ch’unch’ŏn National Museum 2014, pp. 112–21).
- ¹² The characters read ‘Söllim 禪林’, which is a common noun that denotes a temple of the Sŏn School. This point is further discussed in the following scholarship (Im 2020, pp. 10–11).
- ¹³ Though I concur with the identification of ‘Ōksŏng Temple’ as the structure’s original name, the more widely recognized term ‘Söllimwŏn’ is used throughout this essay to prevent any potential confusion.
- ¹⁴ There are two additional examples of Korean Buddhist sculptures that portray a figure exceeding a height of 50 cm. One is the gilt-bronze standing bodhisattva statue (54.5 cm) designated National Treasure number 129 at Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art. The other is a gilt-bronze standing statue of Vairocana (52.8 cm) in the collection of the Gyeongju National Museum. Notwithstanding the relatively large heights, both examples do not have established findspots (Im 2016, pp. 108–11). For scholarship on the gilt-bronze statues of standing bodhisattvas from the Unified Silla period, see the following (An 2012, pp. 65–95).

- 15 After conservation treatment, the bodhisattva figure measures 38.8 cm and 4 kg heavy, while the pedestal is 11.6 cm large and weighs 3.6 kg.
- 16 Refer to endnote number 2.
- 17 One exception to this rule is the Avalokitesvara bodhisattva from Baekje enshrined in the Treasure House of Hōryū-ji in Nara, Japan. The basic form of the bodhisattva figure was carved from wood. All other elements, such as the crown, necklace, and water bottle, are individual pieces separate from the body. The exception was borne of practical circumstances as the figure is 2.09 m tall and thus considerably large. The complexities of carving such intricate ornamentation would have posed a challenge to even the most skilled sculptors. A simple solution was to create any decoration as a separate component that could be attached at convenience. However, this was a highly unorthodox method of production during a period when Buddhist sculptures less than 1 m high typically came from a single block of the original material.
- 18 When the method of lost-wax casting was applied to the production of gilt-bronze Buddhist sculpture, a casting hole was created to connect and secure the inner mold to the outer mold. Upon completion of the sculpture, the inner mold was scraped away and removed from the final product through the hole.
- 19 There is also the possibility that the hole was covered using paper covered in gold as a way of hiding the cavity carved into the figure's back.
- 20 Though trace amounts of silver have been detected, they amount to less than one percent of the overall composition, which suggests that the metal was probably not added intentionally (Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, p. 284).
- 21 Though there is only a limited amount of data, the available analyses indicate that in the case of Buddhist sculpture of the ninth century, lead (Pb) is either absent or less than one percent of the overall composition (Sin and Kim 2020, pp. 11–12; Ch'unch'ŏn National Museum 2014, pp. 284–85).
- 22 Data is still being compiled, but the present analyses do not yet provide sufficient grounds to determine the production place or date of Buddhist sculpture based on the presence or absence of lead alone.
- 23 (Hanbit Institute of Cultural Properties 2021, pp. 284–85). Mercury (Hg) was detected on the surface of the statue, indicating the use of amalgam-plating with gold (Au) dissolved in mercury. This plating method is a common surface treatment technique used for small gilt-bronze statues in ancient Korea (Sin and Kim 2020, pp. 1–16).
- 24 In China, the *ch'ŏnŭi* and *nagaek* are known as *tianyi* and *luoye*, respectively.
- 25 The bottom plate of the outer sarira reliquary consists of 99.39 percent copper and 0.49 percent silver. This particular combination is nearly identical to that of the halo decorating the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva (Pyŏn and Cho 2021, pp. 102–3).
- 26 Many Buddhist statues made of pure copper remain in Japan, where copper is an abundant resource (Min and Kwŏn 2017, pp. 473–74).
- 27 Glass beads that were embedded in the *kwikkot* ornamentation were also found at the site.
- 28 The Söllimwŏn bodhisattva has a nose with a prominent bridge, while the iron Vairocana Buddha of Porim Temple has a flat and low nose. Albeit this difference, the two Buddhist sculptures share an identical basic form and style. For scholarship on the iron statue of the seated Vairocana Buddha at Changhŭng Porim Temple, see the following (Pak 2020, pp. 7–31).
- 29 Ch'eijing became the disciple of Yŏmgŏ at Ōksŏng Temple. The details of this event are recorded on the Stele of Master Pojo at Changhŭng, Porim Temple 長興 寶林寺 普照禪師塔碑 erected in 884 CE.
- 30 Of the various stone artifacts found at the Söllimwŏn Temple site, the three-story stone pagoda is dated to the latter half of the ninth century. It is thought to be the continuation of a sculptural and architectural tradition inherited from the three-story stone pagoda dated to the first half of the ninth century at the nearby Chinjŏnsaji Site (So 2002, p. 48).
- 31 The monk's pagoda of the Söllimwŏn Temple site was disassembled during the Japanese occupation of Korea but restored to its original state in 1965 (Chŏng 1974, p. 232; Chŏng 1996, pp. 204–6). The pagoda's current location is not original, as it was first erected in an area some 50 m above the midpoint of a mountain bordering the rear of the Söllimwŏn Temple site. The pagoda was likely constructed in 886 CE along with the Stele of Master Honggak.
- 32 For more information on Korean gilt-bronze Buddhist Images, see the following scholarship (An 2012, pp. 65–95; Im 2019, pp. 35–58; Im 2001, pp. 229–63).
- 33 Additional analyses and examinations may provide data that will allow future scholars to establish an accurate date and place of production based on the chemical composition of the Söllimwŏn bodhisattva. However, the current data is yet insufficient for such an endeavor.

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