Kyongju Historic Areas

Identification

Nomination Kyongju Historic Areas
Location Kyongju City, Kyongsangbuk-do Province
State Party Republic of Korea
Date 28 June 1999

Justification by State Party

Kyongju City and its surroundings have inherited traces of the glory that flowered and withered in the ancient Shilla Kingdom (57 BCE-CE 935). The centre of the town and its suburbs contain many royal burial mounds and Buddhist remains which preserve this apogee of art and culture. Excavations continue to reveal the buried secrets of this enchanted city.

Before the arrival of Buddhism in the early Shilla period, Mount Namsan in Kyongju City was worshipped as one of the five sacred mountains. It was the seat of a refined form of shamanism with elements of native cults, fetishism, and animism. With the spread of Buddhism it became the earthly representation of Sumeru, the heavenly mountain of the Buddhist lands. Its gorges and ridges are embellished with granite pagodas, filigree works, pottery buried in the earth for more than a thousand years, impressive royal graves and palace sites, and stone sculptures and rock-cut reliefs of Buddha. It is a treasure house of thousands of relics that embody Buddhist benevolence and law. The Buddhism of the Shilla Kingdom was intimately linked with its sovereign power, with social and state affairs, and with family well-being. The Kyongju historic areas constitute a reserve of materials for studying Buddhist culture and the arts of the Far East.

The cultural properties of the area date mainly from the 6th to the 10th centuries, and demonstrate the quintessence of the Shilla art in the statues and reliefs of Buddha, the temple sites, and the royal and other tumuli. Criterion i

Kyongju City extends round the western, northern, and southern flanks of Mount Namsan. Thus its urban plan cannot be considered with reference to the mountain, which is the cultural and religious sanctuary of the city. Its beautiful slopes and streams make it a much admired natural park. Mount Namsan, the “roof of the city,” and its surroundings contain ancient statues of Buddha, pagodas, and temples in a harmonious layout. The city itself is adorned with many roadside parks, spacious and well tended historic sites, and a lakeside resort, all of which combine to make it an attractive urban landscape. Criterion ii

Mount Namsan is a sacred site containing the birthplace of Hyokkose, the founder of the Shilla Kingdom, and historical remains from the whole Shilla period. Criterion vi

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of buildings.

History and Description

History

There has been human settlement at and around the site of the present-day town of Kyongju from the prehistoric period. The Shilla clan became the rulers of the south-eastern part of the peninsula in 57 BCE. They chose Kyongju as their capital. There followed a long period of internal struggles between rival kingdoms. With the help of the Tang Dynasty in China, the Shilla Kingdom defeated its rivals in the 7th century and established its rule over most of the peninsula; this remained unchallenged until the beginning of the 10th century.

The Shilla rulers embellished their city with many public buildings, palaces, temples, and fortresses. Their tombs are to be found in the surroundings of the ancient city.

Mahayana Buddhism spread from China into Korea during the course of the 7th century and was adopted by the Shilla Kingdom. Mount Namsan, which had been venerated by the existing cults of Korea, became a Buddhist sacred mountain and attracted its adherents, who employed the most outstanding architects and craftsmen of the day to create temples, shrines, and monasteries.

With the end of the Shilla Kingdom, Korea underwent a further period of internal strife. It was unified again under Korean rule by the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty, which reigned until 1910. However, the country was invaded and devastated by the Japanese in the late 16th century and the Manchu in the 18th century, before being annexed by Japan in 1910. Throughout this long period, Kyongju has maintained its urban identity, though many of its major buildings have suffered degradation and demolition.

The ruins of Wolsong, the Half Moon Palace, the many temple and fortress sites, including Hwangnyongsa, the Temple of the Yellow Dragon, huge royal mounds, and ancient wells and bridges have provided a wealth of archaeological data and will continue to do so. The legends of the Kyongju Kim clan, the family that ruled throughout most of the Shilla Kingdom, are located in the serene woods of Kyerim. Ch’omsongdae is the most exquisite example of an astronomical observatory in the Orient.

The Kyongju Historic areas may be considered to be an outdoor museum housing many cultural properties centred on Mount Namsan and its surroundings. The craftsmen of the Shilla Kingdom worked stone and wood with spontaneity and great artistry.
Description

There are three major components (“belts”) that make up the Kyongju Historic Areas; in addition, the nomination covers Hwangnyongsa and the Sansong Fortress.

- The Mount Namsan Belt

Mount Namsan, which lies to the north of Kyongju City, covers 2650ha. There is a large number of prehistoric and historic remains within the designated area. The Buddhist monuments that have been excavated up to the present include the ruins of 122 temples, 53 stone statues, 64 pagodas, and sixteen stone lanterns. Excavations have also revealed the remains of the pre-Buddhist natural and animistic cults of the region.

The nomination dossier contains descriptions of 36 individual monuments within this zone – eleven rock-cut reliefs or engravings, nine stone images and heads, three pagodas, seven royal tombs or tomb groups, two wells, one group of stone banner poles, the Namsan Mountain Fortress, the P’osokchong Pavilion site, and the Soch’ulchi Pond.

The rock-cut reliefs and engravings and the stone images are fine examples of Shilla Kingdom Buddhist art from the 7th to the 14th century. They are artistic masterpieces which trace the evolution of this especially refined school of Buddhist art throughout its most prolific and innovatory period, in particular from the 7th to the 10th century. They depict for the most part Buddha, and also the saints and bodhisattvas associated with him. Skilful use is made of the landscape in siting many of the sculptural groups. The most impressive is probably the Buddha Rock, a massive natural formation in the T’apkol Valley. It is located close to a three-storey pagoda, and its three walls are decorated with vivid depictions in bas-relief of Buddha in different incarnations, surrounded by his acolytes and disciples.

The royal tombs, in the form of simple earthen mounds or tumuli, reinforced by layers of stone slabs, are those of Shilla kings from the 2nd to 10th century. There can be little doubt that many others remain to be found on the mountain, which was the preferred burial area for the Shilla rulers.

The P’osokchong (Abalone) Pavilion takes its name from a shell-shaped stone watercourse within the enceinte. This is, in fact, the only element of the detached palace group that survives. It was the favoured site of the Shilla Kings for recreation and relaxation; one of the last members of the dynasty, Kyongae, was murdered here by the founder of the succeeding Paekche Kingdom, Kyonwhon, during a party here in 927.

Mount Namsan was first fortified in 591 and greatly enlarged in the later 7th century. This is the structure, the remains of which survive today as the Namsan Mountain fortress. Much of the parapet of the massive ramparts has been demolished, but enough survives to indicate that it stood originally to a height of no more than 2m. A broken stone inscription records the fact that the construction workers undertook to rebuild the fortress if it collapsed within three years of building.

- The Wolsong Belt

The main monuments in this area are the ruined palace site of Wolsong, the Kyerim woodland which legend identifies as the birthplace of the founder of the Kyongju Kim clan, Anapchi Pond, on the site of the ruined Imhaejon Palace, and the Ch’omsongdae Observatory.

Wolsong (Moon Palace) takes its name from the shape of its compound. To the south the Namch’on stream forms a natural defence, and ditches were dug round the other three sides to create a water-filled moat. Its history goes back at least to the 1st century CE, when a princely compound was taken over by the Shilla King. A royal palace was built at the end of that century and it was enlarged and reconstructed over succeeding centuries by successive Shilla Kings, for whom it was their main palace.

Another palace was built at Imhaejon in the second half of the 7th century. Its opulent garden was graced by a beautifully configured pond (known as Wolchi), with a sacred mountain in its centre. Both palace and pond were destroyed when the Shilla rulers were ousted, but what remains of the pond has always been populated by wildfowl, from which it acquired its popular name, Anapchi, the Pond of Geese and Ducks.

The Ch’omsongdae Observatory was built towards the middle of the 7th century. The platform consists of twelve rectangular slabs, which support a structure of 365 granite blocks arranged in thirty successive layers. The circumference of the base is 5.17m and the total height 9.17m; the structure tapers towards the top to provide stability. The square internal space is filled with earth and stones up to the twelfth course and open from then for twelve more courses to the top. Access is by means of a window at this level and there is an internal staircase. The astronomical ascription derives from the fact that the number of blocks is equivalent to the number of days of the year and the number of open courses to the twelve months of the year and the signs of the Zodiac.

- The Tumuli Park Belt

The belt consists of three groups of Royal tombs. Most of the mounds are domed, but some take the form of a half-moon or a gourd. They contain double wooden coffins covered with gravel. Excavations have produced rich grave-goods of gold, glass, and fine ceramics. One of the earlier tombs yielded a mural painting on birch bark of a winged horse.

- Hwangnyongsa

This group consists of two ruined temples, Hwangnyongsa and Punhwangsa. Hwangnyongsa, built to the order of King Chinhung (540-76) was the largest temple ever built in Korea, covering some 72,500m2. An 80m high nine-storey pagoda was added in 645. The entire complex was destroyed by Mongol invaders in 1238; it was never rebuilt, but was occupied by more than a hundred families, who were moved out in 1976. Excavations have shown that in its original form the temple had seven rectangular courtyards, each with three buildings and one pagoda.

The massive pagoda on the Punhwangsa was built in 634, using dressed stone blocks. Analysis of the stone debris suggest that it originally stood to a height of seven to nine storeys. Following Buddhist tradition, a stone lion guarded each corner of the basal platform. There is a doorway in the centre of each of the four walls of the lowest storey with two sliding doors flanked by high-relief carvings of fierce warriors or kings.
Management and Protection

Legal status

More than sixty sites and monuments are designated and managed as historic sites under the provisions of Sections 4 and 6 of the Korean Protection of Cultural Properties Act and Sections 12 and 18 of the Cultural Property Protection Ordinance of Kyongsangbuk-do Province. The entire area nominated for inscription was designated as a national park under Sections 4 and 5 of the National Park Law. These two sets of protection legislation severely restrict any form of development within the nominated area. The Urban Planning Law imposes further constraints on all forms of development in and around the protected areas.

Each of the components of the nominated area is surrounded by a 100m wide buffer zone. All proposals for construction within these zones requires authorization in the form of a permit from the Provincial Governor, as prescribed in Section 8 of the Building Law Enforcement Act. Furthermore, no extraction of gravel or other aggregate material is permitted within a zone 2km wide around each of the protected areas.

The sites are also designated as Natural Environment Preservation Zones under Section 13 of the National Land Use Management Act. Any changes that might affect the topography require authorization by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Management

The nominated areas are all the property of the Republic of Korea.

At the national level, the Cultural Properties Administration is responsible for establishing protection policies and enforcing them. Its subsidiary, the National Research Institute of Cultural Properties, carries out scientific research and field surveys.

Direct management is delegated to the administration of Kyongju City.

Repair work and maintenance on national designated sites and monuments is financed by national (70%) and local (30%) funds. For locally designated monuments the proportions contributed by national and local government are 50:50.

There are currently management plans in force for the Kyongju Historic Areas, on the Preservation of the Original Status of the Historic Areas, Preservation of the Surrounding Environment of the Historic Areas, and Utilizing the Kyongju Historic Areas for the Education of Citizens and for Field Studies by Students. However, little information about these plans is provided in the nomination dossier.

They include the establishment of long-term plans, the strengthening of measures against forest fires, floods, and other natural calamities, a scientific research programme, including archaeological excavations, and a policy of seeking systematic investment and site-management proposals that are eco-friendly and consistent with world-class tourist policies. In addition there are programmes for regular conservation and maintenance of sculptural and monumental antiquities and for selective restoration, based on thorough prior scientific research.

There are proposals for the purchase of private land adjoining the protected areas which are known to contain significant archaeological evidence.

Regular monitoring will be carried out on the open sites, to check any illegal use of the land for unauthorized burials or shamanistic rites. Parking facilities are to be extended and marked paths laid out so as to prevent uncontrolled access to the land.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Research leading to conservation projects has been in progress on the Kyongju Historic Areas since the 1970s. This has become more coordinated and systematic in the past decade with the formulation and implementation of the management plans.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the overall complex is high. The individual elements are largely archaeological sites and carvings, where the authenticity is equally high. Little restoration has been carried out, and that in accordance with scientific evidence from excavation and other forms of research.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Kyongju Historic Areas in February 2000.

Qualities

There was an exceptional flowering of Buddhist art in Korea during the Shilla Kingdom, and in particular between the 7th and 10th centuries. The monuments and sites of the Kyongju Historic Areas are outstanding evidence of the quality of this artistic manifestation.

Comparative analysis

There is no comparable concentration of Mahayana Buddhist art on the Korean peninsula. There are other fine examples to be found in China and Japan, but the Korean style may be considered to be unique, even though it shares many characteristics with the other artistic schools in East Asia.

ICOMOS comments

Some reconsideration of the buffer zone of the Mount Namsan component of the nomination was proposed by ICOMOS. The 100m zones proposed were acceptable for individual monuments and small sites. However, so narrow a buffer zone was inappropriate in the case of the 2650ha of Mount Namsan. It should be extended to the main roads around the site, so as to protect the views from those roads, or even to the two rivers that form natural boundaries to the mountain.

This point was considered by the State Party and fully taken into account in a revised nomination.

There is a railway line running through the Wolsong Belt. ICOMOS recommended that this line should either be
removed from the nominated area or rerouted so as to pass outside it.

Although the management plans are only dealt with in summary form in the nomination dossier, the ICOMOS expert mission was able to study these in detail and is satisfied that the Kyongju National Research Institute for Cultural Property has drawn up plans that fully meet the requirements of paragraph 24(b)(i) of the Operational Guidelines.

At its meeting in June 2000 the Bureau requested the State Party to consider the eventual removal of the railway line in the Wolsong Belt. This undertaking has been given by the State Party: plans are in hand for it to be phased out by 2005.

Brief description
The Kyongju Historic Areas contain a remarkable concentration of outstanding examples of Korean Buddhist art, in the form of sculptures, reliefs, pagodas, and the remains of temples and palaces from the flowering of this form of unique artistic expression.

Recommendation
That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria ii and iii:

Criterion ii The Kyongju Historic Areas contain a number of sites and monuments of exceptional significance in the development of Buddhist and secular architecture in Korea.

Criterion iii The Korean peninsula was ruled for nearly a thousand years by the Shilla dynasty, and the sites and monuments in and around Kyongju (including the holy mountain of Namsan) bear outstanding testimony to its cultural achievements.

ICOMOS, September 2000