

Early Korean Ceramics at the Honolulu Academy of Arts: The Gaya Confederacy

In the first centuries of the Common Era, the Korean peninsula underwent a fundamental shift. As political power was gradually consolidated, three states began to emerge: the Goguryeo kingdom in the north (traditional dates 37 BC-668 AD), the Baekje kingdom in the southwest (traditional dates 18 BC-660 AD), and the Silla kingdom in the southeast (traditional dates 57 BC-935 AD). These states struggled to dominate the peninsula, sometimes entering into temporary alliances with the early polities of Japan, and with the various powers that controlled China, as they vied to conquer each other. However, unity remained elusive until Silla defeated Baekje, and then Goguryeo, with the aid of Chinese troops in the seventh century. Even then, remnants of the Goguryeo kingdom were reborn as Balhae (698-926 AD) in the north, and true unification was not achieved until the rise of the Goryeo kingdom (918-1392 AD) in the tenth century.

Although the period from the first to the seventh centuries is known as the Three Kingdoms, significant stretches of territory along the west side of the Nakdong River were independent of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla for most of this time. Ruled by a group of culturally related city-states that often warred with each other (and with the Three Kingdoms), this region was known as the Gaya Confederacy (traditional dates 42-562 AD). Although the Gaya states were of great historical importance, they mark one of the most enigmatic periods in Korean history, and most of what is known about Gaya has resulted from archeological excavations conducted since the 1970s.

Located at the southern end of the Korean peninsula along the Nakdong, Gaya settlements were well situated for both regional and international trade, and archeological evidence has revealed a great deal of exchange between Gaya and Japan. In particular, the Gaya area was rich in iron, and Gaya appears to have been a major source from which Japan acquired this material and its related technological advances. Gaya also played an important role in the dissemination to Japan of new ceramic technologies introduced from China into Korea early in the Common Era, and the gray-bodied stoneware known as *sueki* that characterizes Japanese ceramics of the Kofun period (ca. 250-552 AD) clearly shows the influence of Gaya wares.

While the Honolulu Academy of Arts is world-renowned for its collection of over five hundred Korean ceramics, it is less well known that more than twenty percent of the collection consists of early ceramics from the Three Kingdoms period. Of this, a disproportionately high number, nearly one-third, have been associated with the Gaya Confederacy. For the first time in the Academy's history, this exhibition brings together all of the Gaya ceramics in the museum's collection, providing a comprehensive overview of this remarkable, yet poorly understood period in Korea's history. The exhibition also includes a comparison of Gaya ceramics with ceramics from other parts of Korea, and from Japan, together with selected early Chinese artworks of the type that were imported into or influenced the Gaya region.

The staff of the Asian Art Department would like to thank Dr. Richard D. McBride II of Brigham Young University-Hawaii for his assistance in preparing this exhibition.