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Sokkuram: Buddhist monument and political statement in Korea

Mark Harrell

Abstract

A brief historical setting of Sokkuram in the context of Silla unification of Korea will be followed by a further brief cultural setting of this temple – considering it a product of both an international Buddhism and an ‘international style’.

The first discussion deals with those aspects which set Sokkuram apart from its Asian rock-cut temple equivalents. It will consider what type of Buddhist building Sokkuram is, some Asian prototypes, the method of construction, its architectural elements and decoration, and a comparison with the Yungang and Longmen sites in China.

The second discussion deals with the political significance of Sokkuram, taking the building as part of a national programme of State Buddhism comparable with other east Asian countries at that time, and it considers the temple’s siting, orientation and use of iconography to underline a political, as well as a religious, message.

Keywords

Korea; Buddhism; sculpture; state; art; architecture.

Sokkuram is a stone temple designed for the worship of a principal iconic representation of *Buddha*. It was constructed 19 km. east of the city of Kyongju in South Korea between AD 751 and AD 754, forming part of the capital area of Unified Silla (AD 688–935). After setting Sokkuram in its historical and cultural perspective, this article aims to distinguish the aspects which set it apart from rock-cut temple types in Asia and to consider the political implications of this building beyond its religious role.

Historical context

In AD 668 King Munmu of the Silla Kingdom (r. 661–681) unified the Korean peninsula, defeating the rival kingdoms of Paekche to the west and Koguryo to the north (Fig. 1). This single momentous event ushered in a brilliant age for the Buddhist arts in Korea, of which Sokkuram is the crowning achievement. Silla achieved supremacy on the Korean

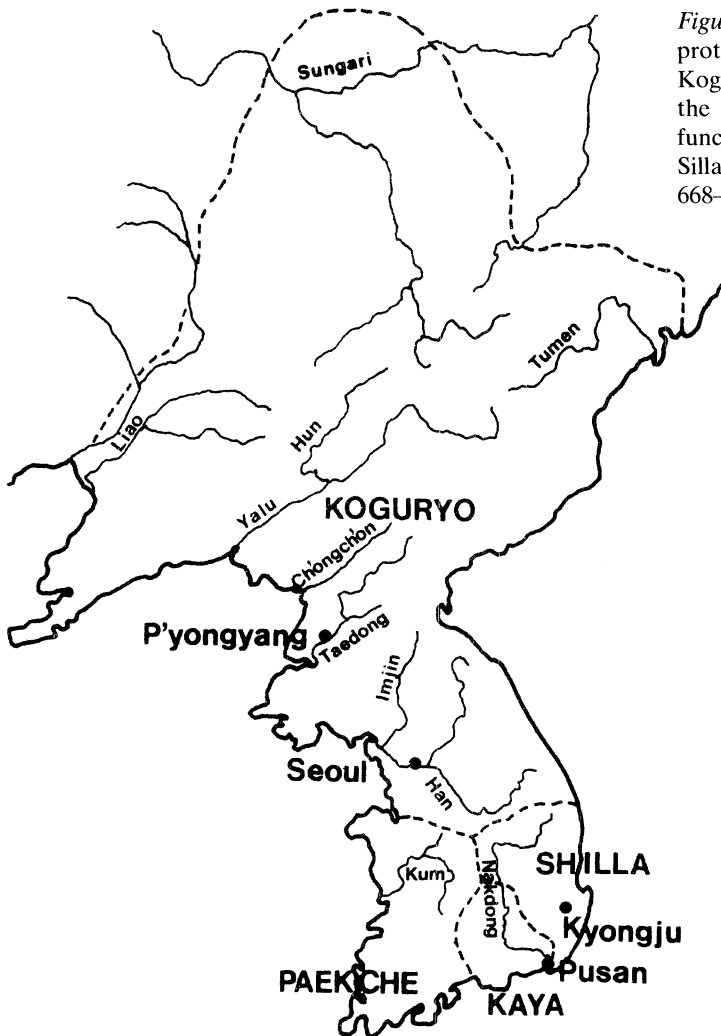


Figure 1 The Three Kingdoms of protohistoric Korea (AD 300–668): Koguryo, Paekche and Silla, with the Kaya federation. Kyongju functioned as the capital of Old Silla and Unified Silla (from 668–935) (Barnes 1990).

peninsula with the military help of her ally, the Tang Dynasty of China (AD 618–907). China, however, intended to control the country she had helped establish by then subjugating her victorious ally, but the new Unified Silla state proved so vigorous as to deny China's ambitions. Instead, a peace was made between Silla and her powerful neighbour.

These historical events had several important consequences. After centuries of rivalry between kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, the unification by Silla forged a new country under native, 'Korean' rule. Moreover, the peace fostered by this new state both at home and abroad ushered in a period of relative security, political integrity and prosperity under which patronage for the religious arts flourished. Finally, the consolidation of independence, together with the regaining of peaceful diplomatic relations with Tang China, enabled Korea to benefit from the prevalent climate of internationalism – the common and distinguishing feature of which was Buddhism.

According to the *Samguk Sagi* (The History of the Three Kingdoms) compiled in the twelfth century by KIM Pu-sik (1145), Sokkuram was erected by the command of the prime

Date	KOREA	
300	Korean protohistoric	EARLY IRON AGE
200		LATE BRONZE AGE
100		
0		
AD 100	THREE KINGDOMS (Paekche, Shilla, Koguryo)	Proto-Three Kingdoms
200		= LATE IRON AGE
AD 300		
400	UNITED SHILLA	
500		
600	KORYŎ	
700		
800	YI	
900		
1000	Korean historic	
1100		
1200	COLONIAL	
1300		
1400	North PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC	
1500		
1600	South REPUBLIC	
1700		
1800		
1900		
2000		

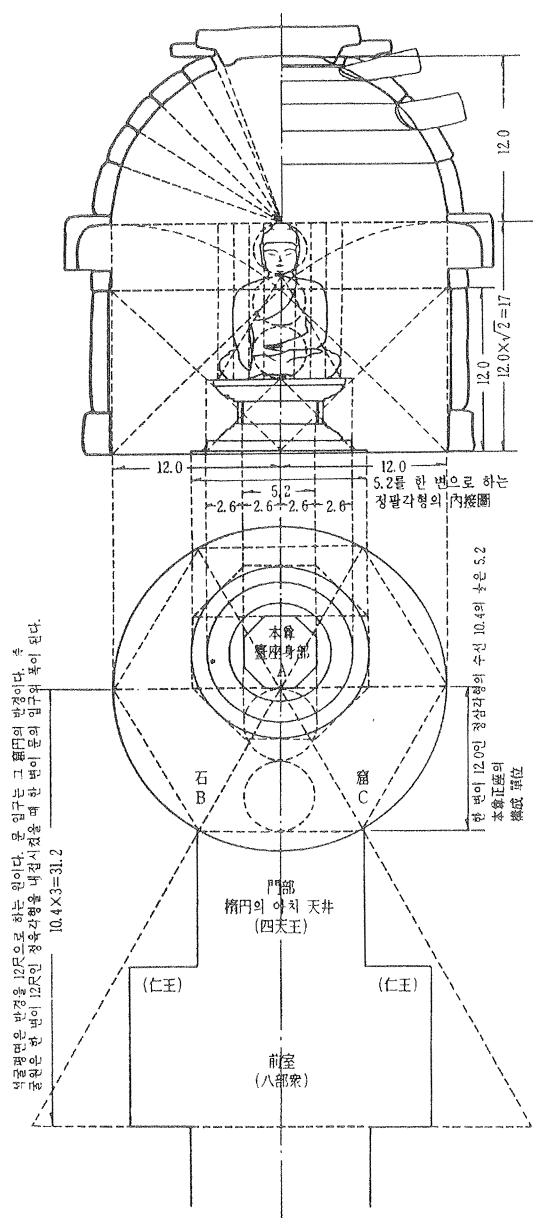


Figure 2 (left) The early historical periods of Korea (Barnes 1993).

Figure 3 (above) Yoneda's geometric calculations of Sokkuram components based on the Tang measure (Yoneda 1944: 38). Above: section of block-built main chamber with *buddha* sculpture in centre. Below: plan showing off-centre location of *buddha* sculpture in main chamber, fronted by vestibule corridor and anteroom.

minister Kim Taesong for the repose of his royal ancestors the Kim clan, then the leading royal house. The grotto stands on the summit of Mount T'oham, at the foot of which lies the Pulguk-sa complex, the Silla capital's foremost Buddhist temple. The Sokkuram grotto temple is the product of both an international Buddhism and an international art, coupled with local construction technology.

Sokkuram as a product of international Buddhism

Buddhism, preceding Christianity and Islam by several centuries, was the first true 'world religion' in that it covered vast territories and embraced many differing cultures. To the north and east of India, Mahayana Buddhism percolated through the desert kingdoms of Central Asia until it reached the huge civilization of China and beyond that, Korea and Japan. Representations of the Buddhist *sangha* (community of monks) illustrate the pan-Asiatic nature of the religion at this time. In frescoes at Qoco in the Turfan oasis of north-western China, for example, a Qoco monk, bearded, is visited by a Chinese monk, whilst elsewhere, two worshippers are depicted – one a Syrian and the other a Saka (a Scythian race) (Bechert and Gombrich 1984: 102–6)

Buddhism penetrated the Korean peninsula by the late fourth century. There is frequent evidence of Buddhist paraphernalia in the burial of ancient Korean royalty: the wall painting of Koguryo tombs (Kim 1986b), and the furniture and artefacts of Paekche and Silla burials (Kim 1983). By the time of the Unified Silla period, Buddhism had become a dominant force in society and in cultural life, as it had in most countries which had already adopted this religion (Grayson 1985).

Because of its international profile, Buddhism became a powerful factor in the legitimacy of state rule in various countries. The notion that Buddhism and state were a single entity had common currency in East Asia at this time. In Tang China, successive rulers maintained a system of state temples established to perform rituals for the well-being of state and dynasty. A similar system was adopted in both Japan and Korea, and Sokkuram can be seen as one of the many fruits of the need to endow the newly formed state with all the emblems of a dynamic religion with international credentials, a sign that Korea, too, belonged to the brotherhood of countries united by Buddhism.

Sokkuram as a product of an international art

The Buddhist hegemony throughout much of Asia had an important effect on art and architecture, for uniting the disparate nations by creed. Buddhism also acted as a vehicle for the dispersal of ideas and artistic expression; it became the arbiter of all channels of learning.

Sokkuram, as one of Silla's grandest monuments, is set firmly in the context of an international art arbitrated by Buddhism. Those qualities in which it excels, and those aspects where it deviated from the norm, are what established its exclusivity, and these shall be considered in due course. However, it remains a product of an international repertory that can be traced right across Asia to central India. The notion of such homogeneity in architecture and the arts is generally known as the 'international style'.

The international style refers to the styles and aesthetics of Tang Dynasty art: the rounded, almost voluptuous physical facial forms that become standards of beauty in the pictorial and plastic arts of this time. It was itself inspired by the art of the Gupta Dynasty (AD 320–c. 600) of India (Craven 1976).

Tang had the most powerful empire in the east, so it was natural that the sinicized version of Indian Buddhist art should become the model in East Asia. If one compares, for example, the painting on silk of Guanyin (the *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara) from Dunhuang in China (Sickman and Soper 1971: fig. 117), an excavated bronze tried from Anap-chi in Kyongju (Kim 1983: plate 23) and a wall painting from the Horyuji Temple in Nara (Paine and Soper 1975: fig. 19), a standard of idealization is readily perceived. In respect of Korean Buddhist arts, the period of Unified Silla coincides largely with that of the Tang.

This currency of ideas was also helped by the existence of the Silk Road whose influence was at its zenith when the boundaries of the Tang empire were at their greatest limits. The Silk Road became the great highway for the dissemination of Buddhism and the package of teachings and ideas that it embraced. In architectural and artistic terms, it ensured the proliferation of the rock-cut temple type that originated in India to as far east as the Korean peninsula. It also facilitated a cross-pollination of iconographic and decorative elements, creating a melting pot of styles across Asia that persisted over centuries.

For example, on the door jambs of several caves at Xiang Tang Shan in China (Northern Chi Dynasty, AD 550–557), palmettes edged by the typical pearl border motif of Sassanian Persia can be seen (Sickman and Soper 1971: fig. 75); whilst the cross-legged form of Sassanian sculpture is in evidence in a seated Maitreya from Yungang (Sickman and Soper 1971: fig. 57). Tantric deities inspired by India are visible at Longmen in China (Sirén 1925: plate 456) and on the Mojeon stone pagoda at Bunhwang-sa Temple in Kyongju (Hwang 1979: fig. 16). Across the sea in Japan, the Shosoin repository in Nara, which houses the personal treasures of the emperor Shomu, is a showcase of various types of arts which can be traced as far west in some instance as Persia and the Arabic world.

As far as Silla was concerned, as an independent, self-governing state, it was able to share in this climate of internationalism under the umbrella of Buddhism on its own terms. If it had been a nation subjugated to the Tang, Korea's involvement may have been more one-sided. As it was, Silla naturally benefited most immediately from contacts with Tang China by sending monks and missions there, and by modelling its capital city of Kyongju on the Tang capital of Chang'an. However, Silla's ambitions were more ambitious and trans-continental. Monks were sent beyond China to India: for example, Hyech'o (AD 704–787) who wrote an account of his Indian pilgrimage entitled 'Record of a Journey to the Five Indian Kingdoms' (Lee 1984: 81), thereby tapping the source of Buddhism itself. Influences from Central Asia and the West trickled off the Silk Road, and trade was conducted with the Middle East (Arab merchants visiting Kyongju) and with Japan. Silla's direct participation in the intellectual and artistic development of divers countries had important ramifications for Korea's own endeavours in this field.

Not content to sit passively by and absorb religious transmissions second-hand via China, Silla's active involvement reflects a custom not staled by overhandling but fresh and vigorous from direct communication. This feeds directly into Sokkuram itself which bears testament through its unique qualities both to this involvement and the many influences this involvement yielded.



Plate 1 The interior of Sokkuram through a fishbowl lens (courtesy of Korean Overseas Information Service). The anteroom sculptural panels are crowned by the wooden roof, beyond which leads the narrow corridor vestibule to the pillar and lintel construction marking entry into the main chamber housing the main *Buddha* statue. The anteroom is c. 6.5 m wide, narrowing down to the corridor vestibule at 3.5 m wide; the length of the passage through the anteroom and corridor vestibule is 7 m long, and the main chamber is c. 7 m in diameter (see Hwang and Ahn 1989: 196–8).

What makes Sokkuram unique

Sokkuram is based on rock-cut temple precedents elsewhere in Asia, the blueprint for which is the Indian *chaitya* (see Chakrabarti, this volume). On the sub-continent, the later caves excavated in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods in the Mahayana tradition sport the varied Buddhist pantheon in carved stone arrayed around the architectural features of the temple space: doorways, arches, corridors, pillars and *stupa*. Such monuments in India provide the original analogue for Sokkuram many thousands of miles away in the south-eastern Korean peninsula.

The building conforms to the plan of a classic *chaitya* (worship hall), though on a smaller scale. It comprises an anteroom, a vestibule in the shape of a small corridor and a circular chamber with a raised central pedestal on which an image of the *Buddha* sits. Around this statue is a channel for circum-ambulation (Plate 1).

Because Sokkuram exists in a granite region which precludes the option of cave excavation, the chamber's construction of large pre-cut blocks of stone became one of its outstanding features. In Korea there existed an ancient tradition of tumulus construction for the burial tombs of deceased royalty. This tradition existed not only in Silla, but in the peninsular kingdoms of Paekche and Koguryo, too. Sokkuram, with its domed main

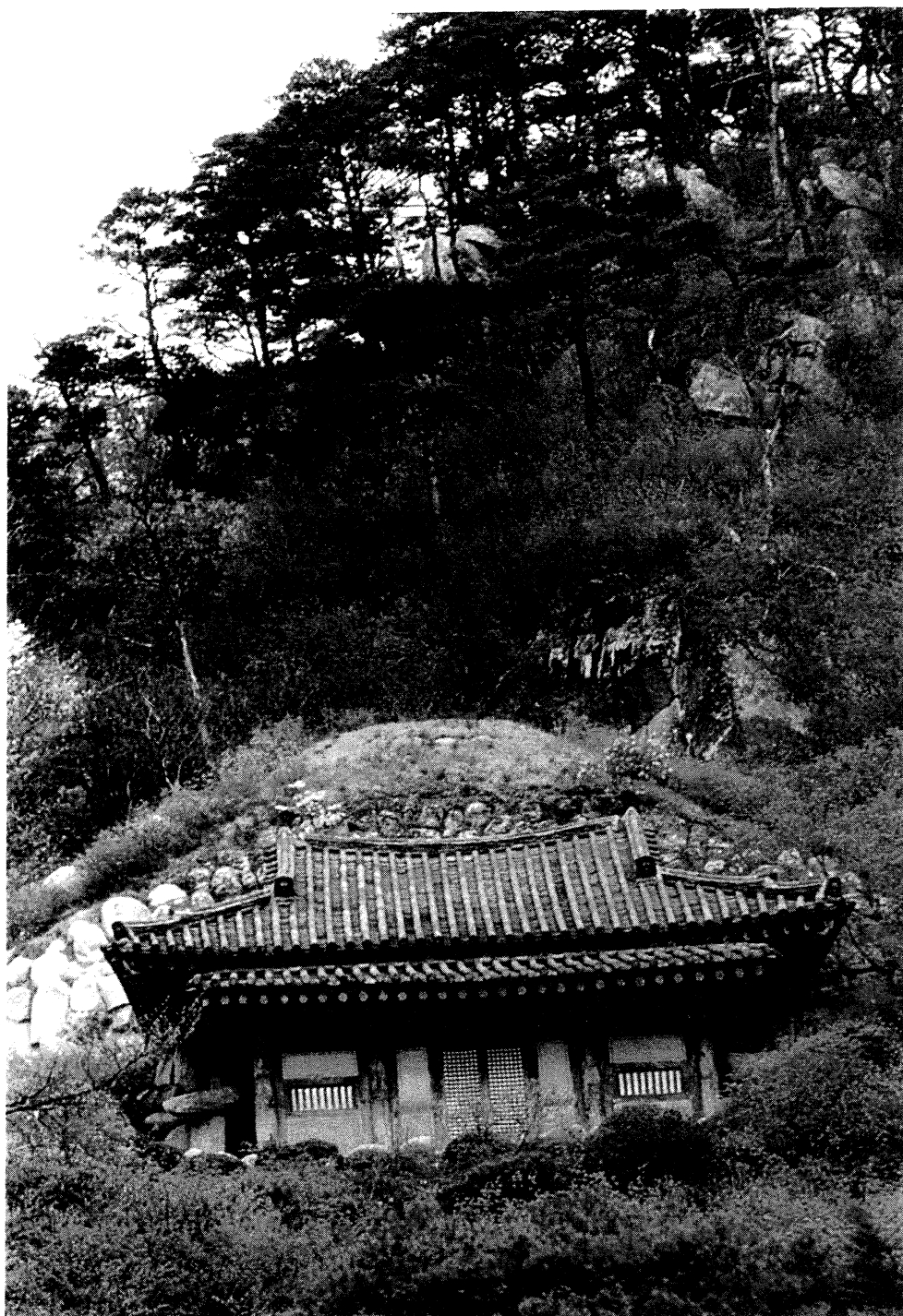


Plate 2 The exterior of Sokkuram today. Behind the temple roof protecting the anteroom can be seen the gentle mound covering the granite-block built central chamber.

chamber, undoubtedly draws on this long-tested technology of stone tomb chamber construction (Plate 2), though the current structure was rebuilt by the Japanese during their colonial period (1910–45) (Plate 3). Furthermore, the octagonal pillars with capitals and flattened arch, which divide the main chamber from the vestibule, are almost identical to the type used in the Koguryo Tomb of the Twin Pillars, Ssangnyongch'ong, dating to the fifth–sixth centuries AD.

Sokkuram, in fact, has a dual heritage: from within, its characteristics are largely international (drawing on the model of *chaitya*); but from without, its earth-dressed tumulus construction is thoroughly Korean. Its exterior, then, closely mirrors any of the Silla tumuli still extant in modern-day Kyongju.

Sokkuram is thus the product of a long experiment with cave temples in Asia, and it represents a synthesis of Asian ideas and influences. However, it immediately stands apart. Firstly, its size: in comparison to other cave temples, Sokkuram is small and dramatically compact. Secondly, unlike many extensive cave complexes in India, Central Asia or China which are cut into long soft stone bluffs, Sokkuram is entirely solitary. Thirdly, Sokkuram is, in fact, not excavated at all but constructed of quarried and dressed granite blocks and erected on the summit of a mountain, a site not noted for its ease of access.

This form of granite construction at Sokkuram allowed the architects a greater control of their building and its interior space, whereas control is not so easily achieved in the more haphazard method of excavation. The result at Sokkuram is a building of total balance and harmony based on strict mathematical principles. The ground plan and projection of the domed ceiling are based on a unit of Tang linear measurement (one TC, where TC equals 29.7 cm: Yi 1988: 37–8). It has been demonstrated that each architectural element is perfectly proportioned in accordance with a single scientific calculation, and that the edifice as a whole is infinitely divisible by this unit of measurement and thus a mathematically satisfying sum of its parts.

This aspect of the building was rigorously detailed in a survey carried out in the 1930s by a Japanese scholar YONEDA Myoji, who painstakingly conducted an intricate survey of measurement at Sokkuram and subsequently published his findings (Fig. 3). His report demonstrates Sokkuram to be a very sophisticated piece of architectural design and engineering and proof of Silla's mature scientific credentials – as the site of the nearby Ch'omsongdae observatory (built in AD 632–647) in Kyongju also testifies.

Buddhist philosophy and iconography at Sokkuram

The sense of harmony which science imposes on the temple of Sokkuram may also be perceived as a concrete analogue to certain Buddhist philosophical notions current at the time. In Korea, as in other East Asian countries, certain Buddhist *sutra*-based schools achieved periods of intense popularity, and their teachings came to be reflected in the arts which they naturally affected. One such *sutra* was the *Hwaom* ('*Avatamsaka Sutra*' or '*Flower Garland Sutra*'), a massive and highly elaborate collection of books which culminates in the construction of a vision of the pure and enlightened *buddha* world. The *sutra*'s main protagonist is a young man, Sudhana, who comes to behold this vision in the

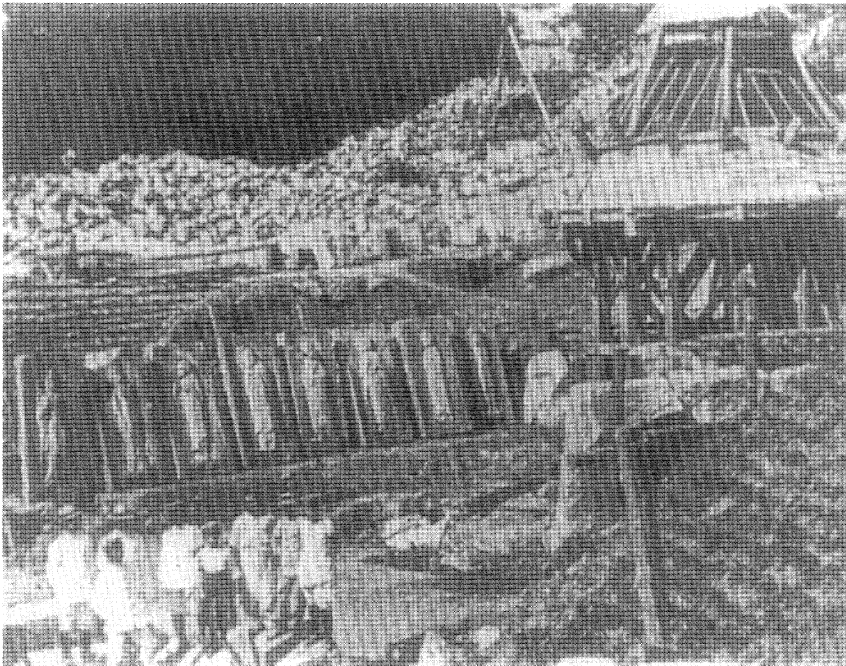


Plate 3 Reconstruction work on Sokkuram by the colonial Japanese government in the 1920s (Adams 1991: 114). Above: the wooden scaffolding erected over the main chamber with the wall sculptural panels laid out for re-installation. Below: A frontal view from the deteriorated antechamber. It is interesting that Sokkuram originally contained two stone miniature pagodas (*stupa*) which the Japanese removed from the main chamber (Hwang and Ahn 1989: 197).

form of a huge tower of the Vairocana *buddha*. This tower (and here it is a useful architectural metaphor) is seen to contain countless other towers, not interfering with each other but harmoniously intermingling so that all are contained in one, and one in all. At the heart of this insight is the notion of the interpenetration of all existence, itself a logical outcome of the Buddhist notion of emptiness (*sunyata*), which is one of the pillars of Mahayana philosophy. All things have inherent 'sameness' and consequently exist in a web of interdependence, which is in fact the *dharma* realm (the realm in which all is in accordance with *Buddha's* law). The notion that the blueprint of Sokkuram is contained in any single element of its architecture, each of which is dictated by a single mathematical calculation (as described above), can consequently be seen as a physical expression of the interdependent and harmonious *dharma* realm of the *Buddha*, the very figure who is enshrined at the core of the Sokkuram chamber. It is not impossible to consider, then, that Sokkuram is the intangible abstraction of the 'Avatamsaka *Sutra*' translated into the tangible reality of stone.

In addition to its construction, the great consideration of Sokkuram's uniqueness is its iconographic programme. It is worth noting that this exists wholly in three-dimensional sculpture: there are no wall paintings. This, however, is the exception to the norm, for in India, Central Asia and China, paintings are often an integral part of the iconography of the cave temple, along with sculpture.

In contrast to the central *Buddha* image, which is carved fully in the round, the internal walls of Sokkuram comprise a gallery of semi-relief sculptures carved on individual tablets and fitted into an overall design within an architectural framework (Fig. 4). The sculptures include twenty-nine low-relief figures, with a further eight small figures carved in high relief, making thirty-seven figures altogether. These sculptures are distributed as follows. As one enters the temple, the walls of the anteroom bear eight guardian deities, including two *vajrapani* (tantric figures). Formerly open to the sky, this room now has a wooden porch built over it and a glass wall barring entry into this first chamber. The vestibule which is next contains wall panels of four *deva* (demi-gods) standing on demons. Beyond pillars supporting a flattened arch is the domed chamber. Here the wall carvings are about 6.5 feet high, taller than the anteroom carvings which are less than life size in stature. Flanking the entrance on the interior of the chamber are two Indian deities, Indra and Brahma. To their left and right are two *bodhisattva* (enlightened beings), Manjusri and Samantrabhadra. After these follow two groups of five monks, and directly behind the *Buddha* on the back wall, completing the ring of figures, is an 11-headed *bodhisattva*, Avalokitesvara. In the upper ring are ten niches (two of which are empty) containing seven seated *bodhisattva* and one figure who is identified as the celebrated layman of Buddhist scriptures, Vimalakirti. In the centre of the floor plan of this inner chamber sits the wholly three-dimensional figure of Sakyamuni (the historical *Buddha*) (Plate 3). It is beyond the agenda of this article to discuss the stylistic importance of these sculptures which draw on many sources; however, they achieve a standard of artistic excellence which clearly marks the Unified Silla period as a golden age for Buddhist plastic arts in Korea.

This programme of sculpture represents an iconographic view of the Buddhist universe: a microcosm of the temporal and celestial worlds conjoined. The sculptures are placed so they achieve a liturgical climax within the programme: as the worshipper enters the outer rooms, penetrates the inner sanctum, and finally beholds the *Buddha* face to face.

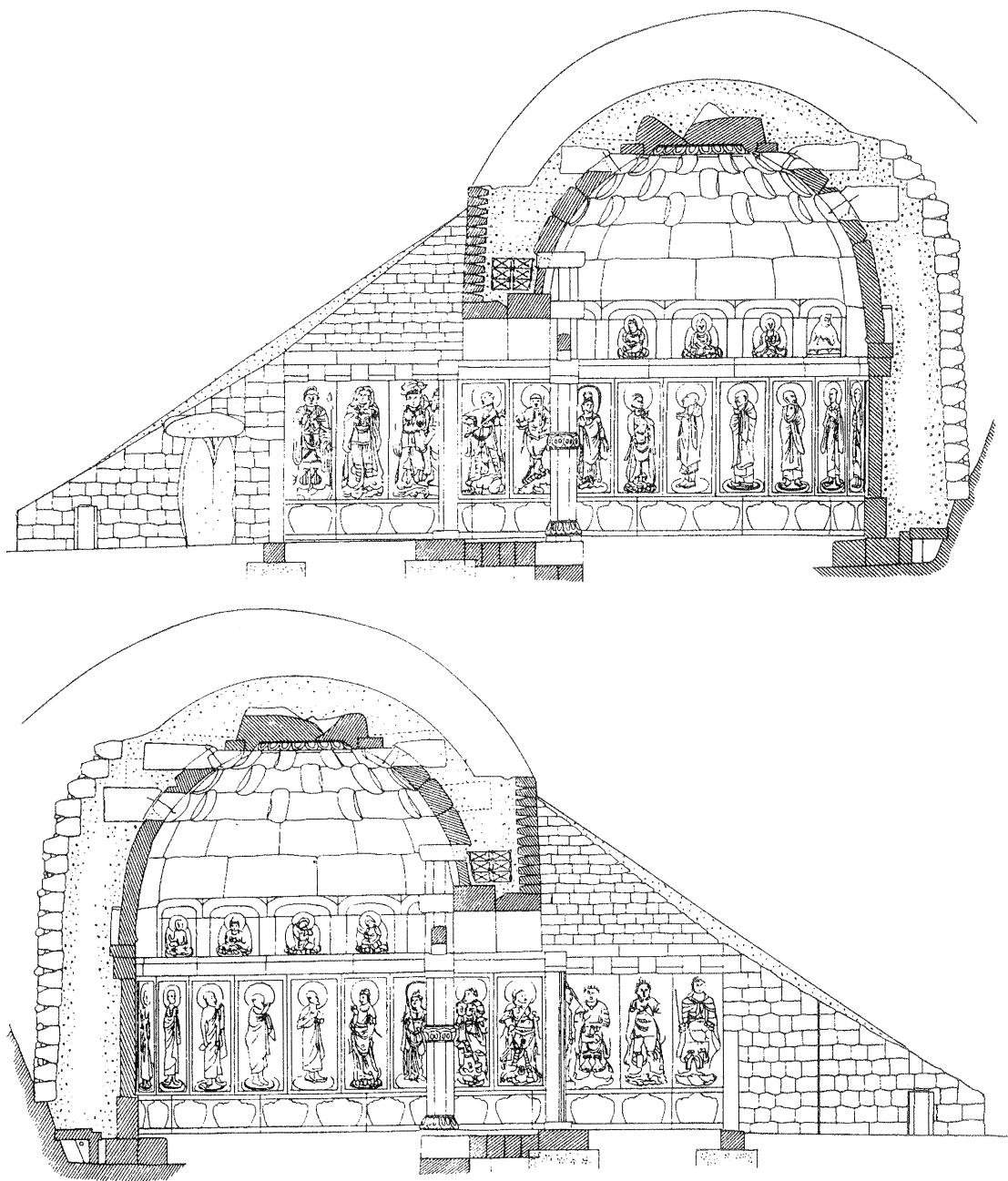


Figure 4 Section profiles of Sokkuram temple showing the building structure and arrangement of sculptural panels; the central Buddha sculpture has been omitted from the diagram (Kim 1986a: 325).

Sokkuram juxtaposes galleries of the sacred and profane. The two outer rooms are filled with the fierce tantric deities who protect the Buddhist inner sanctum. Their sculptural handling is suitably energetic and bombastic. Moving to the inner sanctum, sculptural



Figure 5 One of the guardian figures at the chamber's entrance, c. 2.75 m tall (redrawn from Hwang and Ahn 1989).

handling is softened and transformed into a curvilinear grace; this is a signal that the worshipper has come to somewhere special – the physical and spiritual world presided over by the Buddha. The monks on the walls surrounding Buddha represent his *sangha* (monkish community) on earth; it is multi-national and multi-cultural (the face of one is bearded and obviously 'foreign'). The *bodhisattva* are the intermediaries between this world and the non-physical realm. Here, then, are all the elements of the Buddhist Three Jewels. The monkish community (*sangha*) represents a forum for Buddhist law (*dharma*). The invisible *dharma* is represented by the actual interior space of the architecture itself imposing its law of harmony on the world. At the heart of it all sits the Buddha, carved in a style so rigorously honed and seemingly effortless that it appears to reach back to the other-worldly aesthetics of Gupta sculpture in India. It is Sokkuram's crowning achievement.

A comparison with China's cave sites

To highlight Sokkuram in its Korean context, it will be useful to view it in a broader setting by comparing aspects with equivalent rock-cut temple sites in neighbouring China – for example, the Buddhist temple complexes at Yungang (Sirén 1925, vol. 2) and Longmen (Sirén 1925, vol. 4).

Yungang in Shanxi Province is an impressive series of twenty enormous, and numerous lesser, cave temples 16 km. west of the Northern Wei (AD 386–535) capital of Datong. They were excavated from a sandstone cliff over two periods: mainly between AD 460 and AD 494, and later between AD 500 and AD 535 after the removal of the Wei capital to Luoyang.

Some of the earlier caves at Yungang are not conceived as temples in the true architectural sense. They are merely shallow scooped-out cavities which shelter enormous images. The inspiration for this plan seems to be the colossal Buddha image at Bamiyan (excavated between the third and fifth centuries AD), then famous throughout the Buddhist world (see Higuchi, this volume, Fig. 5). The best known cave is #20 in which a huge Buddha sits, an all-encompassing example of the typical Yungang style. The model was imported from abroad, but already it had undergone a process of sinicization, reducing the naturalism that Central Asian forms retain from a modified Hellenism (as epitomized in Gandharan sculpture) and becoming instead more stiff, angular and linear.

Cave #6 at Yungang adheres more closely to the plan of a *chaitya*. It is a hollowed-out square chamber with a large central core pillar mimicking a wooden pagoda – the Chinese version of a *stupa*. Every surface has become an area of carved decoration depicting multitudes of Buddhist deities and scenes from the *jataka* stories of Buddha's previous lives. In its elaboration of styles, this cave reflects the polyglot languages of Asian Buddhism now bound into a statement of Chinese Northern Wei faith.

In its salient features, Yungang reflects the progress of the rock-cut temple complex from India across Central Asia. Like Ajanta, it is a series of grottoes strung out along a suitable cliff, with *chaityas* adorned by areas teeming with decoration. From Central Asian models, it has picked up the use of the colossal image.

All these aspects have been handled in a steadily Chinese way, however. The sculptural style of the carving reflects the fluidity of the strong calligraphic heritage of Chinese arts, which is not one traditionally disposed to monolithic sculpture. The *chaitya* is more rectangular or square than Indian models which are rounded. The *stupa* is translated into the native pagoda. Yungang speaks of a diversity of influences channelled to one point, with the native artisan struggling to experiment with and interpret these influences on his own, Chinese terms. At Yungang the prototype *chaitya* is already starting to disappear in favour of large hollowed-out areas or simple single chamber niches. At Longmen, it is abandoned altogether.

With the removal of the Northern Wei Dynasty capital to Luoyang in AD 494, a new series of Buddhist caves were carved 16 km. south of the city at Longmen, a steep gorge on the river Yi composed of dense limestone, more suitable to intricacies of carving than the coarser sandstone of Yungang. Over the next 200 years, more than 10,000 images of *Buddha* and his disciples were made, so that Longmen, along with Yungang and Mogao (see Ma, this volume), represents the peak of Buddhist art in China.

As a textbook on the evolution of Buddhist sculpture in China, Longmen cannot be surpassed. Caves excavated at quite different periods exist alongside one another so it is easy to compare stylistic and iconographic changes as they occur. In the three Binyang caves, for example, are images carved in the mature Northern Wei style. Further along is evidence of Sui and Tang Dynasty sculpture, the 'International Style' reflecting Indian tastes for sensuous looking figures conceived more fully in the round – as at Sokkuram.

Longmen's most outstanding feature is how the sculpture at this date takes precedence over everything else. The *chaitya* has all but disappeared: each grotto, large or small, is simply a hollowed-out niche whose walls and ceiling are designed to take decorative sculptural relief. All architectural features on the interior are banished. Even the once essential *stupa*/pagoda element in the centre is absent, relegated instead to shallow-relief carving on walls and ceilings absorbed into a larger iconographic scheme. Where once the architecture of the *chaitya* with its articulation of interior space punctuated by symbolic *stupa* had been the medium for Buddhist devotion, at Longmen this has been usurped by the dominance of the Buddha image. Here, the Buddha triad, Buddha flanked by two *bodhisattva*, gains total domination and is replicated thousands of times over in the many hundreds of grottoes which honeycomb the gorge.

Nowhere is this domination of sculpture over architecture more apparent than in the famous Fengxian Temple, the largest cave on the site. The temple space has been fully opened out so that it presents more an arena which shows off the sculpture to its best effect. It was carved between AD 672 and AD 675 during the Tang Dynasty and is therefore close in date to Sokkuram. Like the Korean temple, this displays the many facets of the Mahayana pantheon: a mighty central Buddha (in this case, Vairocana) flanked by *bodhisattva*, monks, gods (*deva*) and *vajrapani*. The effect is monumental verging on decadence.

Despite certain similarities and a common cultural heritage, Sokkuram is quite different from its Chinese precedents. The complexes at Yungang and Longmen are exactly those: elaborate systems of caves excavated across a wide geographical format over many centuries and embracing diverse architectural and artistic styles. Scale and diversity are possible in these cases owing largely to the accessibility of limestone and sandstone in huge quantities for carving. The sites of Yungang and Longmen rely for their spiritual power on the impressive size of their works, the awesome multiplication of grottoes and their iconographies, and (for the onlooker today) the sense of continuation evoked by the fact that Buddhist zeal inspired such effects over so long a period of decades.

Sokkuram is the antithesis to these. Its size by comparison is tiny. It was not excavated into gorge or cliff but constructed on a mountain summit with quarried granite blocks. There is but one grotto built within a short time, and it consequently achieves a great uniformity of style and aesthetic sense. The caves of Yungang and Longmen engulf the worshipper with myriad Buddhist data. At Sokkuram there exists a single well-thought-out programme of sculpture with the barest minimum of architectural decoration (only a lotus flower behind the head of Buddha). Within this programme is captured a unifying stylistic sense (more liberated and ethereal than the often heavy and ponderous monolithic sculpture of China), which becomes the standard of sculpture in Unified Silla, Korea. The beautiful handling of the central Buddha and the *bodhisattva* at Sokkuram in particular may be singled out as defining a native Korean aesthetic distinct from the rest of Asia.

Despite its relative proximity, then, to the caves of Longmen and Yungang, Sokkuram's

design remains more loyal to the Indian prototype *chaitya* with its corridor feeding into a main chamber housing the Buddha/*stupa* image. This may well be the result of Silla's ties with India, through the travels of such monastic figures as Hyech'o. Sokkuram also preserves the idea of circumambulation which originally was an act that was at the heart of Buddhist devotion. In these ways, this Korean temple follows more closely an Indian as opposed to a Chinese model, endeavouring to retain as much as possible the sense of an 'architecture of worship'.

In summing up Sokkuram's extraordinary qualities, it must be said that the site represents a crystallization of ideas taken from many sources and concentrated into a hugely satisfying single entity. Sokkuram may lack the scale of Yungang or Longmen, yet it still achieves a monumental impressiveness. Its size, artistic uniformity and integrity, and sense of hallowed space it creates for itself all contribute to its special position in Buddhist architecture. A synthesis of Asian arts, Sokkuram is arguably the finest result of Buddhism's experiment with temple architecture. It may be small, but, safe to say, it is perfectly formed.

Sokkuram as a political monument

Sokkuram has a dual role. It exists primarily as the glorification of Buddhist *dharma*. This is its religious role. But Buddhism, and its functions on a regional basis, also allows for a temporal role which is not derisory to its spiritual agenda. The temple also stands, then, as a shrine to Silla's royal clan and a memorial to their law. *Dharma*, the law of Buddha, also embraces the law of the temporal and political world: the rule of kings and dynasties. Buddhism, despite its other-worldly leanings and its doctrines of emptiness, could be very worldly too. Buddhism and state entwined in a single concept is a model as old as Asoka's empire in India.

Emperor Asoka (c. 268–239 BC) inherited the Magadhan Empire through which Buddhism spread widely to become a 'world religion'. He embraced Buddhism in remorse for the destruction he had caused in broadening and securing his empire, and he came to be a model of the compassionate Buddhist ruler, carving Buddhist edicts on rocks and stone pillars in a variety of languages. In him were encapsulated the qualities that meet Buddha's own ideal of kingship: an enlightened ruler who practised tolerance, preserved social harmony, supported the *sangha* and who governed as a *chakravartin* ('turner of the wheel': a synonym for Buddha who expounds the *dharma* by turning the wheel of the law) – a leader with overriding concern for Buddhist *dharma* and morality.

In Asoka's example, the concept of state Buddhism was born. The power and legitimacy of the king is underpinned by Buddha and his *dharma*: Buddha and *dharma* in turn are protected and promoted by the king. Eventually, all over East Asia, Buddhist laws and political rule became joined so that religion and state were one; and within this new world view, it is not unusual to find conflated the actual image of Buddha and the king or emperor himself.

Across East Asia, in China, Korea and Japan, national politics conformed to this idea of state Buddhism. In China, Buddhism as a foreign religion conflicted with the native traditions, most noticeably the social tenets of Confucianism, and it is no accident that the

greatest promoters of Buddhism in China were themselves foreign dynasts. The Northern Wei, for example, who were largely responsible for the excavations at Yungang and Longmen, produced these set-piece monuments close to their power bases (the first capital at Datong, and then Luoyang) to highlight their political control of the country and to make legitimate their claim to power over the Chinese – which was extremely important in a rule which believed in a ‘mandate of heaven’ (the wisdom of acknowledging that a ruler could lose power through poor government and incompetency, and that power could shift to another).

The setting up of vast national temple complexes for the well-being of the states illustrated Buddha’s acknowledgment of this mandate. The founder of the successive Sui Dynasty (Wen-di; r. AD 581–604) consciously posed as a *chakravartin*. And in the Tang Dynasty, the notorious Empress Wu (r. AD 690–705), who ruled capably for fifteen years, used Buddhism to justify her seizure of power by claiming to be an incarnation of a *bodhisattva*.

Korea’s neighbour across the sea, Japan, also used Buddhism to bolster the state through grand Buddhist projects serving as external evidence of Buddha’s blessing on the empire of the sun. ‘*Opo Bupo*’ (‘King’s law, Buddha’s law’) was a state slogan in the reign of Emperor Shomu (r. AD 724–756), who decreed that a pagoda should be constructed in every province. Shomu’s chief building project, the Todaiji temple in Nara (dedicated in AD 752) with its cast bronze Great Buddha (fragments of which still exist today), was a symbol both to Japan and the outside world that Japan was prepared to be considered an equal in the brotherhood of international Buddhist states. The Todaiji represents the equivalent of a Chinese Longmen, as it required a huge national effort to construct what was then the biggest wooden structure in the world and to install within it a massive bronze image of Vairocana which rivals that at Longmen. The symbolism of Vairocana, the great sun Buddha at the eye of the universe, was especially efficacious for an emperor whose lineage was drawn from the native sun goddess Amaterasu. By conflating the image of emperor with the cosmic potency of Buddha, Emperor Shomu was emulating a strong tradition already prevalent in other parts of Asia.

So, too, in Korea was state Buddhism enshrined in the political system. ‘*Hoguk Pulgyo*’ (‘Nation defending Buddhism’) is how this concept was recognized. Unified Silla kings modelled themselves on the idea of the *chakravartin*, defending the faith and the unity of the newly founded united kingdom and instigating huge Buddhist building projects. The Anap-chi site in Kyongju, for example, was built as a pleasure palace surrounding an ornamental lake. It was intended as a retreat for royalty but was filled with Buddhist ephemera and objects of devotion. Also, the temple dedicated as the premier state temple in the manner of the Todaiji in Japan: Pulguk-sa, ‘Buddha Nation Temple’, which sits at the foot of the mountain on which Sokkuram is built.

Sokkuram itself, both in its architecture and iconography, masks a sophisticated political message. It enshrines at its heart a model of the perfect, Buddhist universe, which may be seen as the mirror of the ideal political state. The Buddha, who expounds *dharma*, is served by his envoys and intermediaries (the *bodhisattva*), and attended by a large worldly community of monks whose lives are in his service. Here, then, is the model state, presided over by king, served by his political advisers and court, and loyally followed by his nation. The worshipper at Sokkuram thus pays his respects to two parallel systems which serve one another.

The political ramifications of Sokkuram’s location and siting may also be measured. It is

constructed on the top of Mount T'oham, like a satellite religious shrine to the great centre of Pulguk-sa which lies at its foot. From its vantage, it overlooks the Eastern Sea and also the underwater mausoleum of King Munmu the Great, who unified the Korean peninsula under Silla rule. The worshipper, beholding the image of Buddha inside the temple, faces west – the traditional Buddhist direction of paradise and heavenly re-birth, whilst the gaze of the Buddha is directed east and across the sea, offering symbolic protection over Munmu's tomb and the vulnerable coastline of the kingdom. In this case Buddha is perceived as guarding the memory of Unified Silla's founder and protecting the royal lineage and the homeland from overseas invasion – the risk coming from Japan and Japanese pirates who were notoriously active at that date.

In a subtle way then, Sokkuram has been sited so as to make a political statement whilst serving Buddhism. It is a monument to a relatively young state with a nationalistic propaganda to proclaim. In accordance with the concept of state Buddhism, it bolsters the legitimacy of the king and presents the model of an ideal social order all beneath the presiding genius of Buddha.

Due to geological features, the rock-cut temple is unknown in Japan. Korea, therefore, represents the easternmost limit of this architectural form. Here at the very edge of the Eurasian landmass, the experiment has run its course and brought off in Sokkuram the most sophisticated and spectacular results.

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