

특별기고

Dome Architecture in Ancient Asian Art and Seokguram Grotto: In comparison with Western Dome Constructions

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I. Introduction: A Silla Site on the World Heritage List and the Challenges Involved in Its Study

The Seokguram grotto was one of the first sites to be included on UNESCO's World Heritage list for the Republic of Korea in 1995 (criteria 1 and 4: "to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius"; and "to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrate a significant stage in human history"). Located in the south-east of the country, Seokguram has been considered as the best testimony to the Korean aesthetic at the time of the Silla unification (7th-10th c. AD), when the Korean kingdom was under the protection of Tang China. Emphasis has commonly been placed on the mastership of the sculpture and iconography, the monument presented with the Bulguksa temple as a Buddhist complex, and the architecture as a kind of resumé of Buddhist doctrine.

In the *cella* sits a sculpture of Sakyamuni Buddha facing the East Sea and making the earth-touching gesture (*Bhumiparsa*), surrounded by mural images of the ten eminent monks, or his first

disciples, with bodhisattvas seated above them; behind Sakyamuni stands the figure of the Kwaneum Bosal in an esoteric form, eleven-headed Ekadasamukha, between Manjusri and Samantabhadra, Brahma and Sakra-devanendra; and at the entrance appear the four lokapala, the two Vajrapani, the guardians of the Law and, before them, in the ante-room, the eight parivara.

Many studies on that aspect of the structure have been conducted since the Japanese colonization in the 1920s (despite critics of the restoration), including recent studies by Kim Won-yong and Kang Woo-bang. However, the monument has seldom been studied as architecture, even though it was erected by humans. Instead, it has been viewed as part of the rock-cut tradition that was present all along the Silk Road between India and China. Furthermore, its unusual covering has received little attention, even though it stands out as unique in North-East Asia. Why was dome architecture used in Gyeongju at that time, when this kind of process was not in use on the Korean Peninsula, or even in China? This covering is well-known in the West, in the Mediterranean world, due to the prevalence of Roman architects, but not in the East. Its use at Seokguram shows the uniqueness of the building—its exceptional character in Asia.

Considering the “grotto” in the context of Eurasia, from the 1st to 7th century CE, not only allows a better understanding of the structure, suggests new interpretations, and emphasizes its uniqueness but also attests to the influence of the West on the Korean kingdom during the Silla. In the East, Seokguram grotto (fig. 1) appears to be an exception, due to its dome architecture (fig. 2). The monument dates to the 8th century. It was built under the prime minister Kim Taesong, in 751, in Gyeongju. In the West, Vitruvius, a military engineer under Caesar, had already discussed dome architecture, in the 1st century, in his treatise dedicated to Augustus, “De Architectura” (fig. 3), the first book of that type in the Roman Empire. Is there any relation, direct or indirect, between these two extremes of Eurasia—Rome and Korea? Is the dome in Seokguram a specimen of architecture, or just an enclosure built to host a Buddhist sculpture and drawing from other references than masonry construction?



Fig. 1. Seokguram, during Japanese colonization, photo Pierre Cambon.

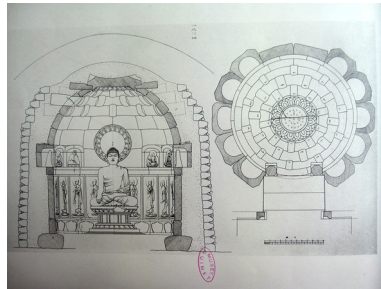


Fig. 2. Seokguram, Japanese plan, photo Pierre Cambon.

II. Seokguram

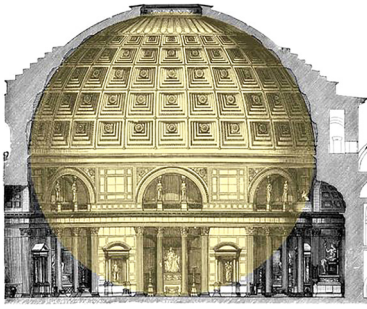


Fig. 3. Rome, Pantheon, photo from the Web, Sphere inside Pantheon, image www.aroundrometours.com.



Fig. 4. Sirkap, Taxila site, photo Pierre Cambon.

The Seokguram grotto consists of a circular main chamber (D. 7.2m; H. 8.8m), the ceiling of which is domed; in front of it, and connected by a short vestibule (3.6×2.9m.), a rectangular ante-room (6.8×4.8m) opens to the sky. Kim Yong-won compares the ground plan to Koguryo examples in the north,¹ especially the Ssang'yong-ch'ong (tomb of the twin pillars, near Pyongyang,² even though he also suggests an influence from China in the global design. In Seokguram, the construction was done with large blocks of granite, a stone typical of the Peninsula, and, over the Buddha figure, seated in the cella, the ceiling bears the design of a huge lotus flower at its center. The motif is flat and blocks the hollow at the top of the structure, which therefore is not, technically speaking, a true dome, in terms of architecture. What are the antecedents in Asia of such a construction, in terms of plan, shape, profile, ceiling design, type of construction, and material?

Regarding proportion, Seokguram recalls by its profile the shape of a stupa, like the one in Sirkap, of the Graeco-Parthian period, at the site of Taxila, in today's Pakistan (fig. 4), but a stupa that can be entered (like in Burma or a Chinese pagoda) and looks like a refuge or reliquary. However, even if it is an artificial grotto, Seokguram seems part of that rock-cut tradition, coming from India, its last testimony at the Eastern end of Eurasia. At the same time, however, the construction also suggests a tumulus to visitors outside, a shape from the Korean tradition. However, no similar architecture appears in the East, along the Silk Road, perhaps due to the materials used, which commonly was clay. The general aspect of the monument, nevertheless, recalls an old topic in the Buddhist art of Gandhara—the Buddha meditating alone, in a distant mountain cave (fig. 5). In any case, Seokguram seems to be an exception in

¹ Kim Won-yong, *Art and Archaeology of Ancient Korea* (Seoul: Tawkwang Publishing Co., 1986), p. 327. Nevertheless, in this parallel, Kim Won-yong is referring to the plan at the ground level and to the presence of the two pillars at the entrance of the main cella but not to the covering structures, which are quite different—a dome in one case, and a *laternendecke* in the other.

² Kim Lena ed., *Koguryo Tomb Murals* (Seoul: ICOMOS-Korea, 2004), p. 34.

ancient Asian art, since it shows dome architecture and, at the same time, a stone construction.

III. East and West

In the 8th century, in Asia, from India to China, the rock-cut approach seems to be far more common for Buddhist sanctuaries than the stone construction. Furthermore, dome architecture is somewhat rare. This tradition appears more developed in the West, from the Roman Empire with the Pantheon in Rome, re-built by Hadrian in the 2nd c. AD (fig. 6), to the Islamic period, with the Masjid-i-Haji Piyada mosque, built at the start of the 9th c. (fig. 7).

The Masjid-i-Haji Piyada mosque is located in the Balkh area, and is one of the oldest mosques, from Abbasid times. It is also the earliest Islamic monument to be identified in Afghanistan. It was built after the peak of the expansion of the Islamic world toward the East under the Umayyads, with the battle of Talass in 751, against China. However, the Pantheon in Rome is cement, whereas the Masjid-i-Haji Piyada mosque is rubble, which suggests a different reference, and a connection with the Middle-East—namely, Iran. On one side, an imperial vision, with a dome over a global space, circular in plan; on the other, a local approach, nine cupolas over a divided space, based on a square module.



Fig. 5. Taxila, Giri, Buddha in the mountains, Taxila Museum, inv. N° 535-GR 27-109, photo Pierre Cambon



Fig. 6. Rome, Pantheon, photo from the Web (copyright © 2021, Walks of Italy, Via Caio Mario 14 A, Roma Italy-<https://www.walksofitaly.com/blog/art-culture/pantheon-facts>: Walks of Italy, Art&Culture. Six surprising facts about the Pantheon in Roma, September 10, 2012) .



Fig. 7. Balkh, Masjid-i-Haji Piyada mosque, photo Pierre Cambon

Built between 118 and 125, the Pantheon is dedicated to the seven planets protecting the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The plan is circular, even though the portico presents at the entrance the shape of a Greek temple from the Hellenistic period. Inside, the height of the walls, in the main rotunda, equals the radius of the dome (43.3m), with an empty space at the top, an oculus open to the sky (diameter, 9m). The walls that support the cupola have a thickness of 6m. It is the biggest cupola ever constructed in antiquity and even in the periods after. The cupola of Saint-Pierre in Rome has a diameter of just 42m). The approach in the Masjid-i-Haji Piyada mosque is far less impressive. The mosque is not large, only 10 m; an arcade of three arches, in the north-east façade, is the main entrance, covered by nine domes which have now fallen. All parts of the monument are decorated with stucco, a décor close to that of Samarra in Iraq, the Abbasid Caliphate from 836 to 890 AD. The mode of construction is different; moreover, the proportions differ, showing two distinct universes.

IV. Indian Art

In India, true architecture is rare before the medieval period. But there is an echo in some reliefs from Bharhut, 2nd c. BC, or Sanchi, 1st c. BC. They depict the building of different levels, or different stories, with the superposition of pavilions (Paradise of Indra, Calcutta, Indian Museum)(fig. 8). There is also the excavated tradition, with the caves of Bhaja or Karli, 1st c. BC-an apsidal plan, with a vaulted ceiling, and, at the end, a monolith stupa carved into the rock. In both cases, the inspiration comes from

wooden architecture. But, in the rock-cut sanctuaries, there is no dome, and the interpretation is sometimes ambiguous in the reliefs. However, as far as Gandhara is concerned (1st-3rd c. AD), Peshawar area, some examples can be seen with roofs that clearly resemble a dome. There is also masonry construction in the monasteries from Swat (site of Sanghao (fig. 9)) and, according to Sir Alexander Cunningham, all the chambers

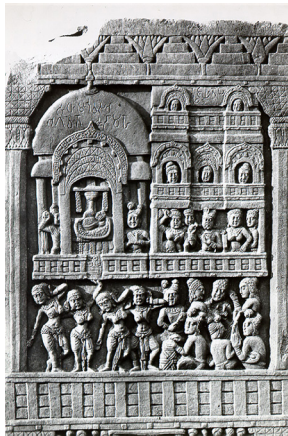


Fig. 8. Bharhut, paradise of Indra, Calcutta, Indian Museum, photo Museum of Asian Art-Guimet

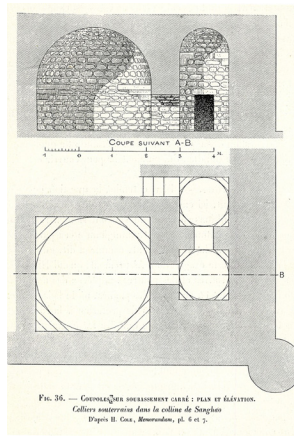


FIG. 36. — Gandhara, un monument local : plan et élévation. Celliers souterrains dans la colline de Sanghao. D'après H. Coze, *Mémoires*, pl. 4 et 5.

Fig. 9. Swat, Sanghao, in Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhàra*. Vol. I, p. 113, fig. 36.



Fig. 10. Jamrud, Siddhartha in the palace before his departure, National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, inv. N° N.M. 507, photo Pierre Cambon

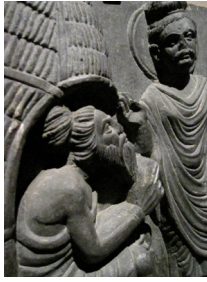


Fig. 11. Buddha and the ascetic, Peshawar Museum, inv. N° PM 2793, photo Pierre Cambon



Fig. 12. Gandhara, vihara with double-dome, in Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra*. Vol. I, p. 121, fig. 41.

of the convents in the hills were domed.³ Gandhara is the north-western part of India, open to foreign influence from the North but also the West.

These examples belong to a local tradition, but some are linked without a doubt to a Roman prototype (relief from Jamrud (Karachi Museum, which depicts the palace before the Great Departure, when the prince Siddhartha left civil life) (fig. 10). But, according to Alfred Foucher (1865-1952), the



Fig. 13. Jamal-garhi, The Nursling of the Dead Woman, Peshawar Museum, photo Guimet Museum

original model for the dome comes from the Indian tradition and refers, at the beginning, to the hut of the Brahman anchorites.⁴ In Gandharan art, the topic is frequent. The ascetics live in a natural hut, made of leaves or bamboo; these huts have an ovoid shape, and it is from that form that the dome appears in India (fig. 11). In some episodes of the life of Buddha, there are also buildings of two stories, the upper one covered by what could be a dome, even though it is hard to know if it was a wooden or stone construction (Buddha and the black serpent in the

³ Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra. Étude sur les origines de l'influence classique dans l'art bouddhique de l'Inde et de l'Extrême-Orient. Tome I. Introduction. Les édifices. Les bas-reliefs* (Paris: Nabu Press, 1905) (PEFEO V), p. 114.

⁴ Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra*, p. 128, «Le point de départ», wrote Foucher, «est la hutte primitive, un toit arrondi et couvert de feuillages que les anachorètes brahmaniques ont sans doute emprunté aux plus sauvages habitants des bois. Il n'est pas sans elle de représentation d'ermitages sur les sculptures de Bharhut ou de Sanchi. A Amaravati même, le feu sacré des Kasyapas se contente encore comme sanctuaire d'une de ces cabanes». Foucher adds: «Selon la remarque de M; Senart, l'habitation du fidèle vaut aussi pour le dieu: agrandissements et embellissements viendront ensuite».

fire temple, Peshawar Museum)(fig. 12), However, others depict buildings, this time in masonry, with an ovoid profile and a domed ceiling, an echo perhaps of architecture from the West(Nursling of the dead woman, Peshawar Museum, Jamal Garhi, or V&A museum)(fig. 13).

V. From Gandhara to Afghanistan

To resume, Gandhara seems to be at the crossroads of two major trends-one from India, derived from the wooden tradition, and one from the West, and possibly Rome, of masonry construction. In terms of the monument,⁵ the sacred architecture is as follows: a vihara on a podium with stairways, railings and columns at the corners, with a four-sided curved sloping lower roof and dome; a vihara,



Fig. 14. Drawing from D. Faccenna and A. Filigenzi, *Repertory of terms for cataloguing Gandharan Sculptures-based on materials from the IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission in Swat, Pakistan*, IsIAO, Rome, 2007.

cruciform in plan, with a double two-sided curved sloping roof and central dome; a vihara, circular in plan, on a quadrangular podium, with a four-sided curved sloping lower roof and dome; a multi-story(tower-shaped) pseudo-vihara with a four-sided curved sloping lower roof and dome; an aedicule, rectangular in plan, with four-sided columns at the corners with a curved sloping roof and dome; and a multi-story(tower-shaped) aedicule, square in plan, with a four-sided curved sloping roof and dome. For the funerary architecture, there is a funerary monument with a round arch entrance and domed roof covering(fig. 14), and a funerary monument on a high podium with side stairways, pseudo trefoil arch entrance and domed roof covering.

So, the dome architecture in Gandhara seems to be of Indian origin, with sporadic influence, from the West in the masonry construction. The best example is the monastery of Takht-i-bahi, Peshawar area, where the ceilings of the dome are still visible in part-with the double-dome structure, typical of the Indian approach.⁶ The Buddha meditating in a cave, alone in the mountains, as it was shown during Kushan times, in Gandharan or

⁵ Domenico Faccenna and Anna Filigenzi, *Repertory of terms for cataloguing Gandharan Sculptures-based on materials from the IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission in Swat, Pakistan*, IsIAO(Rome) IsIAO, 2007), pl. 23, 24, 25, 29, 30.

⁶ Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, The Pelican History of Art(Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 143, fig. 84. Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhâra. Étude sur les origines de l'influence classique dans l'art bouddhique de l'Inde et de l'Extrême-Orient. Tome I. Introduction. Les édifices. Les bas-reliefs*(Paris: Nabu Press, 1905) (PEFEO V), p. 125, fig. 45; p. 126, fig. 46.



Fig. 15. Bamiyan valley, photo Pierre Cambon

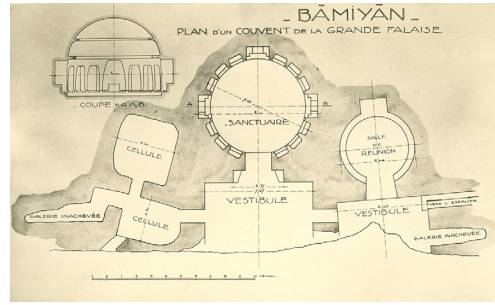


Fig. 16. Bamiyan, sanctuary C, in Joseph Hackin, André and Yedda Godard, *Les antiquités bouddhiques de Bamiyan*, p. 49, fig. 16.

Mathura reliefs, seems to play with the idea of a dome, as in the rock-cut sanctuaries of their tradition, like Bhaja or Karli. But, if the rock-cut tradition flourished with the Gupta period(4th-5th c.), in Ajanta, the dome appeared later, mainly in Afghanistan, with the Bamiyan valley, which was the peak for that type of structure(fig. 15). Nevertheless, the reference there seems to be different. Bamiyan stands at the crossroads between the North and the steppes, the East with the diffusion of Buddhism, and also the West and the model from Iran, since Bamiyan stood, since the 4th c. AD, within the sphere of influence of the Sassanian Empire(226-651).

VI. From Iran to Kashmir

The oldest caves in Bamiyan show a square plan and circular cupola, with arched squinches making the transition-a combination that comes directly from Iran, far from the plan of a dome over a circular cella. This profile is attested in the Parthian period(250 BC-226 AD, with the aedicule of Ferrach-Bend in the Fars province, constructed in rubble, where a dome is supported by four pillars, united by hollow arches between, the last stage of the old Persian cupola before its evolution with the addition of pendentives. In Bamiyan, this profile can be seen in cave G, close to the Buddha of 35m, from the 1st phase of activity of the site. The idea of combining a square plan with a circular ceiling already appeared in Persia with the fire altars called “tchahar-tak,” “four arches”(Yazdikavat), whose tradition refers to the Achaemenid Empire(546-330 BC). This gave rise to the later origin of the Ottoman mosque-a cube surmounted by a dome. In Turkestan, the cupola exists in the dwelling-house, whereas in Iran it is also connected to the throne room, as attested at the Damghan palace and Firuzabad(226 AD).

This approach is then very far from the Roman perspective and the Indian vision; it follows a

different model. Furthermore, the profile of the dome in cave G at Bamiyan is flat and not as round as the one in Seokguram. From time to time, similarities of plan can be found—a circular cella, with an ante-chamber of barlong plan (fig. 16). However, more than the dome, in Bamiyan, another ceiling is frequent at the end of the 1st phase of the site—the *laternendecke*, or “lantern-roof.” This one is connected to Central Asia, at the time of the Turkish Empire (6th c.), possibly originating from the steppes—beams laid diagonally across the corners of a square, with a small cupola at the top, the door to the heavens of the nomads’ tents. This type is usual in Kashmir from the 7th to the 12th c. AD, as shown by the Pandranthan Siva temple, near Srinagar, dated to the 12th c.—a square plan in ashlar blocks, with a pyramidal roof, the monument imitating the wooden forms in stone. Inside the building, the ceiling in lantern-roof, is decorated, in the middle, with a lotus flower, between flying *apsaras*.⁷

VII. From the Turkish Empire to the Hye Cho Period

This manner of covering can be seen in the East, from Central Asia to China, with Quça especially, or in the Korean Peninsula with the tombs of the Koguryo kingdom, and the lotus motif is frequent in the Pyongyang area. In the 6th c., for three decades, the Turkish Empire had close contact with the Northern Ch’i dynasty in the East and the Sassanian rulers in the West. In 551; a marriage between a Turkish prince and a princess from the Wei family testifies to that. To illustrate this point,



Fig. 17. China, Funerary couch, stone, Northern Ch’i dynasty, AD 550-577, National Museum of Asian Art-Guimet, EO 2062, photo Museum of Asian Art-Guimet.

three fragments from a funerary couch in stone—in Boston, Paris and Vienna, respectively—show the links between Central Asia and China (fig. 17).⁸ The reliefs depict the Central-Asian way of life, in Sogdian costume, like in the Kizil oasis—with a drinking party, ceremony and meeting between government and army officials. Behind the assembly, some light architecture can be seen with cornice elements and a low dome, reflecting the Middle-Eastern tradition, very far from that in Seokguram. This one has no reference in the West at that time, and remains an exception in North-east Asia.

It testifies to a later stage and could be linked, in terms of chronology, to the 2nd phase of activity of

⁸ China, funerary couch, stone, Northern Ch’i dynasty, 550-577, National Museum of Asian Art-Guimet, EO 2062.

Bamiyan(7th-8th c.). Hye Cho, the Korean pilgrim(704-787), passed through the valley and could have been impressed by the forms he saw. At that time, the decoration of the dome, in the Afghan valley, was becoming increasingly complicated, showing elaborate coffering of triangles, diamonds and hexagons around a central octagon, like in cave XI, close to the Buddha of 53m. This type of decor recalls the Roman West, as seen for instance in the temple of Bacchus in Baalbeck or the Roman mosaics, although it could also be an echo of a now-vanished free-standing structure in Gandhara. However, this kind of approach had no influence in Gyeongju, but the caves by their combination of a rectangular ante-room with a circular domed cella could have. The profile in Bamiyan is flatter, by comparison, even if Takhti-Rostam, in the North, on the way to Mazar-i-Sharif, shows a circular plan, an ovoid cupola, and a lotus motif on the ceiling(grotto 1)⁹ like in the Seokguram grotto, but the site dates to the beginning of the 5th century.

VIII. Bamiyan and Korean Peninsula

In fact, if there is some link between Bamiyan and the Korean Peninsula, it is mainly through the Koguryo tombs, with the lantern-roof design; that design refers clearly to the 1st phase of activity in the Afghan valley. But, the relations between Koguryo structures and Seokguram are not so evident. The plan of the Koguryo tombs is square, without a dome. Then, if Seokguram can be compared to the tomb of the twin pillars, it is mainly in the organization of the rooms, not in the elevation. In both cases, the lotus flower appears on the ceiling, but it is just a painting in Pyongyang, in a naïve manner, whereas it is carved in Gyeongju in a very elegant style. Closer to Seokguram, in terms of profile, is the tomb of Deokheungri(408 AD); however, in that case too, the two rooms are square, and the ceilings narrow towards the top in corbel structures. The same profile appears also at the tomb of Dongmyeong(late 4th-early 5th c. AD). So, references in Pyongyang and Gyeongju are obviously different.

More than to the steppes, like the Koguryo tombs, Seokguram bears a connection to India,

⁹ “Grotte n°1. La première salle est une salle circulaire, couverte d’une coupole ovoïde, qui ne mesure pas moins de 10 m. 75 de diamètre au niveau du sol actuel. Le sommet de la voûte est orné d’un gigantesque lotus «à mille pétales», épanoui la face en dessous, d’où pleuvent quantité d’autres lotus de taille beaucoup plus petite, d’un travail également tout à fait indien. Décorant tout le pourtour, ils encadraient jadis des statues aujourd’hui disparues, mais dont les trous d’encastrement subsistent encore. En face de l’entrée, une grande niche haute de 3 m. 60 sur 3 m 25 de large et 0 m. 95 de profondeur abritait une image colossale, probablement assise. Une fenêtre ancienne située juste en face de la porte, et récemment renforcée par deux autres, projetait sa lumière en plein sur l’idole.» Alfred Foucher, *La vieille route de l’Inde de Bactres à Taxila*, vol. I, Paris, 1942, p. 127. Foucher dates the monument to the beginning of the 5th c., just before the Hunnic invasion in 425.

through Bamiyan in a way, during its 2nd phase, more specifically to the North-west of India, which was influenced by Rome. Seokguram testifies to a later stage than the Koguryo tombs, closer to the period of the creation of the giant Buddhas. These have been dated recently, in 2009: the Eastern Buddha, to 544-595 AD and the Western Buddha to 591-644 AD-in the first case, two centuries before Seokguram; but in the other, just one century before. The giant statues illustrate the revival of Indian art with a strong influence in the East, at Lungmen, under Emperor Kao-tsung(r. 650-683) or at T' ien-lung shan with Empress Wu(r. 684-705) and Emperor Hsüan-tsung(r. 713-755). However, it is interesting to note that, as far as the Koguryo tombs and Seokguram are concerned, both seem to refer first to a wooden construction or to the rock-cut tradition more than to an architectural solution, and this approach is very far from the usual démarche in the West.

IX. Seokguram and the Dome Tradition in the West

In the West, since the Roman Empire, dome architecture is frequent from the 1st c. AD on and becomes increasingly impressive, from Nero(59-64 AD) with the “domus aurea” in Rome to Justinian and the Byzantine Empire(305-565)(Saint Sophia, Istanbul, inaugurated in 537; and later Arian baptistry in Ravenna, beginning of 6th century(fig. 18). In the Pantheon in Rome, the dome was made of a single cement cast above an immense wooden structure, and it appears to be the largest masonry dome ever created, four centuries before the peak of Bamiyan. In the last period, the Byzantine churches, as well as the Syrian martyriums, directly influenced¹⁰ the beginning of Islamic architecture in the Umayyad period. The best example is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, dated to 691 AD-a dome supported by four pillars with three arches between them and a corridor around the center for visitors outside(fig. 19). The use of cupola is attested later in the Umayyad mosque, on the transept crossing-the Mosque of El-Aqsa, 702, or Great Mosque of Damas, 705.

The dome covered the mihrab in the Abassid times in the 8th century, as orientalization was increasing. But, apparently, there is no direct link between Korea and Iran, or with the Middle-East, even if the distances are not so far, as attested by the Haji-i-Piyada mosque, in the Balkh area. In Seokguram, the profile of the dome is more accentuated, more stressed, and more rounded than in

¹⁰ From the same period, and from Ravenna too, the mausoleum of Théodoric(493-526) could also be mentioned-a building in white stone, of two levels, the upper one of a circular plans, being covered by a dome with a limestone monolith of 11 meters in diameter and 300 tons).



Fig. 18. Ravenna, mosaic, detail, photo Pierre Cambon.



Fig. 19. Jerusalem, Dome of the Rock, 691, in Ulya Vogt-göknil, *Grands courants de l'architecture islamique, Mosquées*, p. 33.

the low domes used in Islamic art, or the ones in Bamiyan. It looks closer to the Roman tradition and recalls at the same time the portable Buddhist shrines in wood (Dunhuang Collection or Walters Art Museum). It gives the sensation of a grotto, almost natural, even if the dome is not completely perfect, technically speaking, in term of masonry, without the audacity of Roman architects. The references are in fact different. On the one hand, it is a building construction for civil use; on the other, it looks like a reliquary. Seokguram is hollow inside, containing a seated Buddha. In reality, it was perfectly possible to excavate a cave like the Kunwi grotto, which is from the same period and not so far from Gyeongju; however, the choice of this method was surprising.

X. Seokguram as Sculpture or as Architecture

So, why a stone construction used in a country of wooden architecture, where the rock-cut tradition was practiced? Why was dome architecture used in the Peninsula, when it seems to be an exception in the North-East of Asia? Is the Silla monument due in a part to influence from outside, or was it an endemic creation, and why? Did it draw from India through Bamiyan, and especially Gandhara, with Roman influence, or was it a Korean creation? These questions in fact are still problematic. Seokguram has the shape of a stupa from old India, or more exactly from the North-west of India whose form is more elongated (fig. 20)), a stupa whose origin is also tumulus-even if it is not possible to enter the monument. By its silhouette, it looks like a Gandharan reliquary from the Peshawar area, in stone, with the same motif of a lotus at the top. This kind of décor is also visible in the stucco stupa of Hadda, close to Jelalabad, in today's Afghanistan. But, why this ambivalence between rock-cut tradition and masonry construction?

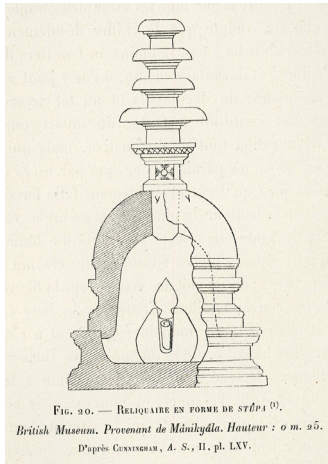


Fig. 20. Gandhara, reliquary from Manikyala, British Museum, in Alfred Foucher, *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*. Vol. I, p. 75, fig. 20.

According to Kang Woobang, the Seokguram Buddha was carved before the grotto construction, and the monument bears similarities to the one of Bodh-gaya, in India,¹¹ following the testimony of Xuanzang.¹² But he does not explain the uniqueness of the cave in terms of architecture. Seokguram gives the impression of a dome, even if it is not complete; it gives the impression of a cave, even if it is artificial. Seokguram is a masonry construction in stone, but a masonry construction that seems to refer first of all to the wood, as attested by the many excrescences on the ceiling, rivets of 2 m long to sustain the structure, looking like beans or flower petals. A big stone closes the ceiling, conceived to host the statue of Buddha. More than architecture, Seokguram looks like a sculpture in three dimensions, a reliquary more than a true construction (fig. 21)–

“dome” as “home” for a seated Buddha, from the ancient Greek “doma,” “house”-Seokbulsu, as the temple of the Buddha in stone, or Seokguram, as just the hermitage in stone.¹³

¹¹ As Kang Woo-bang has stressed, the main point at Seokguram is the statue. The architecture is just a casing to host it. He stressed also the connection between images from Seokguram and Bodh-gaya. But he could have stressed, at the same time, the parallel in the display between the two statues; Xuanzang, depicting Bodh-gaya, wrote: “The figure still exists in its perfect state as it was made by the sacred art of the god. It stands in a dark chamber; lamps and torches are kept burning therein; but those who wish to see the sacred features cannot do so by coming into the chamber; they should in the morning reflect the sunlight by means of a great mirror on the interior of the room; the sacred marks may then be seen. Those who behold them find their religious emotions much increased.” (*Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World*, translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (AD 629) by Samuel Beal, Paragon Books Reprint Corp., New York, 1968, vol. II, book VIII, p. 122).

¹² Regarding Bodh-gaya, Xuanzang mentions local legends: after the construction of the *vihara*, he said, when it was requested that a figure of Tathagata be made, a brahmin proposed to do it (it was Maitreya). His conditions? Just put him inside the building with some scented earth and a lighted lamp, fasten the door, and wait six months. Nevertheless, after four months, the priests opened the doors and found a magnificent statue, the lamp still lit. But, later, the image had to be concealed when a king wanted to destroy it and install a Sivaite temple at the place. So, to protect it, a wall was erected and the statue hidden behind, with a burning lamp. Very soon, the king died; so, the wall was destroyed and then the sculpture reappeared, intact, with lamp still burning (Xuanzang, op. cit., vol. II, book VIII, pp. 120-122).

¹³ See Cultural Heritage Administration, *National Treasures of Korea* (Seoul, 2007), p. 349: “Sculpture of a type known as *Bulgam-Bulgam* is a term originally used to refer to Buddhas or Bodhisattvas sculpted inside a niche created in a rock face, or placed inside such a niche. Later on, smaller Buddhas of such type, coming with their own niches, were fabricated in

XI. Conclusion

In spite of contact with Iran or Islam, Korea is faithful to the tradition of India or the land of the Buddhist Law, but deals with it in a singular way. So, the dome architecture in Seokguram is unique. It appears to maintain the rock-cut traditions from India to Afghanistan, through Bamiyan or Haibak, with its specific background inspired by wooden architecture, as in the Indian sub-continent. But, it does so in its own way, following its own perspective, very far from the Koguryo approach or the Bamiyan scenery, testifying to a different *démarche* than that in the West. For Ilyon, in the *Samguk Yusa*, “The seated image of Buddha and the bas-relief of Kwanum on the walls and ceiling of Sokkul-am are unsurpassed in workmanship among the artworks in the temples of Korea.” It is a true Korean creation, even if it is also an echo, or an adaptation, of a model in the West, and through India. The dome in Seokguram, nevertheless, is more the creation of a sculptor than of an architect and refers to a religious context or a private approach⁽¹⁴⁾, and not to urbanism or civil life like that in the West.



Fig. 21. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Buddhist portable shrine, Song period, 10th-11th c.

wood or metal. These *Bulgam* were either carried around or kept inside a house for home worship services.”

¹⁴ The tradition of portable shrines is well attested in Central Asia (*National Museum Paris, Arts asiatiques-Guimet-Album*, Paris, 2001, pp. 30-31, Buddha seated in meditation, Xinjiang, Kucha, Duldur-Aqur, 6th-7th c. wood with traces of polychromy, EO 1107, Pelliot expedition, 1906-1909), in China (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Buddhist portable shrine, Song period, 10th-11th c.), but also in Korea, even if very few ancient *Bulgam* works have been found, See Cultural Heritage Administration, *National Treasures of Korea*, p. 349: wooden Buddhist triptych, *gukpo jae 42 ho*, wood, 8th-9th c., Songkwangsa, Chollanamdo—“This wooden *Bulgam* triptych belonged to a famous Goryeo monk by the name of Jinul (1158-1210), who is said to have carried it on his person.” Showing Indian influence, and resemblance to Tang dynasty sculpture, it depicts a Sakyamuni triad. Between Samantabhadra mounted on an elephant and Manjusri on a lion, Sakyamuni is seated on a carved lotus pedestal. “The Buddhist triptych is widely believed to have been brought from Tang China.” Nevertheless, “Its author remains unknown.” Accordingly, “uncertainties surround its origin.”

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