Archaeologically, the Three Kingdoms period in Korea subsumes a span of approximately three and a half centuries, from around AD 300 to the mid-7th century. During this period the peninsula was divided into three distinct cultural and political entities: Koguryo in the north, Paekche in the southwest and Silla in the southeast. In addition, a federation of small states known collectively as Kaya occupied territory in the Nakdong river basin (fig. 1). Kaya was eventually absorbed by Silla in AD 582; and with the help of Tang Chinese allied forces, Silla succeeded in unifying the peninsula in 668.

Study into the material culture of early civilizations such as the Three Kingdoms tends to rely heavily on tomb data. Evidence of mortuary practices constitutes the material residue of intentional behaviour on the part of the living members of society to produce a specific environment for the deceased. In this context, the choice of tomb construction, the inclusion or exclusion of certain types of burial goods, the adornment of the body and so on can be treated as social messages. When decoded, these may provide some of the lost information about any given society concerning outside cultural influence, belief systems, social hierarchy as well as funerary customs.

In this paper, I analyze such external stimuli through discussion of one type of burial object, the crown or headdress, which affected the arts and traditions of each of the Three Kingdoms. In doing so, I particularly hope to highlight the distinctive aspects of Silla tomb culture which set it apart from the rest of the peninsula.

KOGURYŌ

Bordering on China, the kingdom of Koguryō was strongly influenced by the influx of northern Chinese culture. This was facilitated through the so-called four Chinese commanderies to the north of the Han river, which existed between 108 BC and AD 313. Koguryō was also the first of the Three Kingdoms to receive Buddhism from China in AD 372. As a result, Buddhist motifs were readily adopted by Koguryō craftsmen and artisans.
The early native tomb structures employed in Koguryo were simple cairns which gradually developed into stepped, stone pyramid-like structures. A new burial type introduced from China consisted of stone-built chambers surmounted by earthen mounds. These structures became popular interments for the Koguryo élite during the mid-4th to early 7th centuries AD. Located around the Koguryo capitals of Tonggou and P’yŏngyang, these tombs were often decorated with multi-coloured murals. Scenes of Chinese cosmological imagery and auspicious symbolism, as well as depictions of daily activity, mingled with Buddhist motifs such as lotuses and flying apsarasas.1 Due to the easy accessibility afforded by their horizontal entranceways, all Koguryo chamber-tombs discovered to date have been robbed of their burial goods, leaving only fragmentary relics.

Amongst the scant materials from Koguryo is a gilt bronze crown discovered at the fortification at Ch’ŏnggam-dong, P’yŏngyang (fig. 2). The circlet is decorated with plant motifs in open-work, with six-petalled flowers attached at regular intervals. Above the circlet are a number of open-work