



# Royal Tombs of the Joseon Dynasty

## Legacies of Elegance



National Research Institute of  
Cultural Heritage

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## **Publisher's Notes**

- The royal tombs are divided into three groups –  
East of Seoul, In Seoul, and West of Seoul –  
following the Cultural Heritage Administration's  
guideline for their management and presented in  
that order.
- Names of places and people are spelled in  
accordance to the revised romanization system of  
Korea (2001).
- In Korean names, the family name comes first,  
followed by the given name.
- All photographs of the royal tombs in this book  
were taken between January 2005 and October 2007.



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## A Stroll Through Vistas of History



Throughout its five-century rule the Joseon Dynasty built tombs around its capital for kings and queens. Today, these royal graveyards are prized historical assets and green havens in a huge metropolitan area, where tradition and modernity can be relished together.

This book introduces 40 royal tombs of the Joseon Dynasty, from Geonwolleung of King Taejo to Yureung of Emperor Sunjong, all located within a 40-kilometer radius of the old center of Seoul. The burial mounds and accompanying structures, architectural details and stone carvings are presented in photographs that capture the royal burial grounds at their best times of the year, along with compact descriptions.

These royal tombs represent Confucian teachings about ancestral worship, which were adopted by the ruling elite of Joseon as their supreme ethical principle and governing ideology. The royal tombs were built in accordance to the Five Rites of State (Gukjo orye ui) and other official manuals. Temporary government agencies were set up to oversee a royal burial, and they assembled a cadre of premier artists and engineers.

From site selections to the forming of burial mounds and installation of graveyard facilities, the entire procedure was carried out in respect to geomantic philosophy, which stressed harmony with nature. Thus the uniquely beautiful scenery of Joseon Royal Tombs was created.

The royal burial grounds, accessed across a bridge spanning the "forbidden stream" and through a red spiked gate, were designed as sacred realms. The burial mounds were placed on the highest terrain protected by a legion of guardian figures. These stone images of officials and auspicious animals have outstanding artistic quality.

The rulers of Joseon paid utmost attention in constructing the tombs of their predecessors and paying homage to them, thereby enhancing royal authority and strengthening their own position. Six centuries after the dynasty was founded, the royal ancestral rites still continue to be performed today. Hence the royal tombs of Joseon have acquired immense significance as vital cultural legacies, both tangible and intangible.

We hope that as our readers stroll through the vistas of these pages, they will feel the regal aura of the Joseon period. Finally, we also look forward to days when we can survey the two early Joseon tombs that are now located in North Korea.

December 2007



Kim Bong-gun

Director General

National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage



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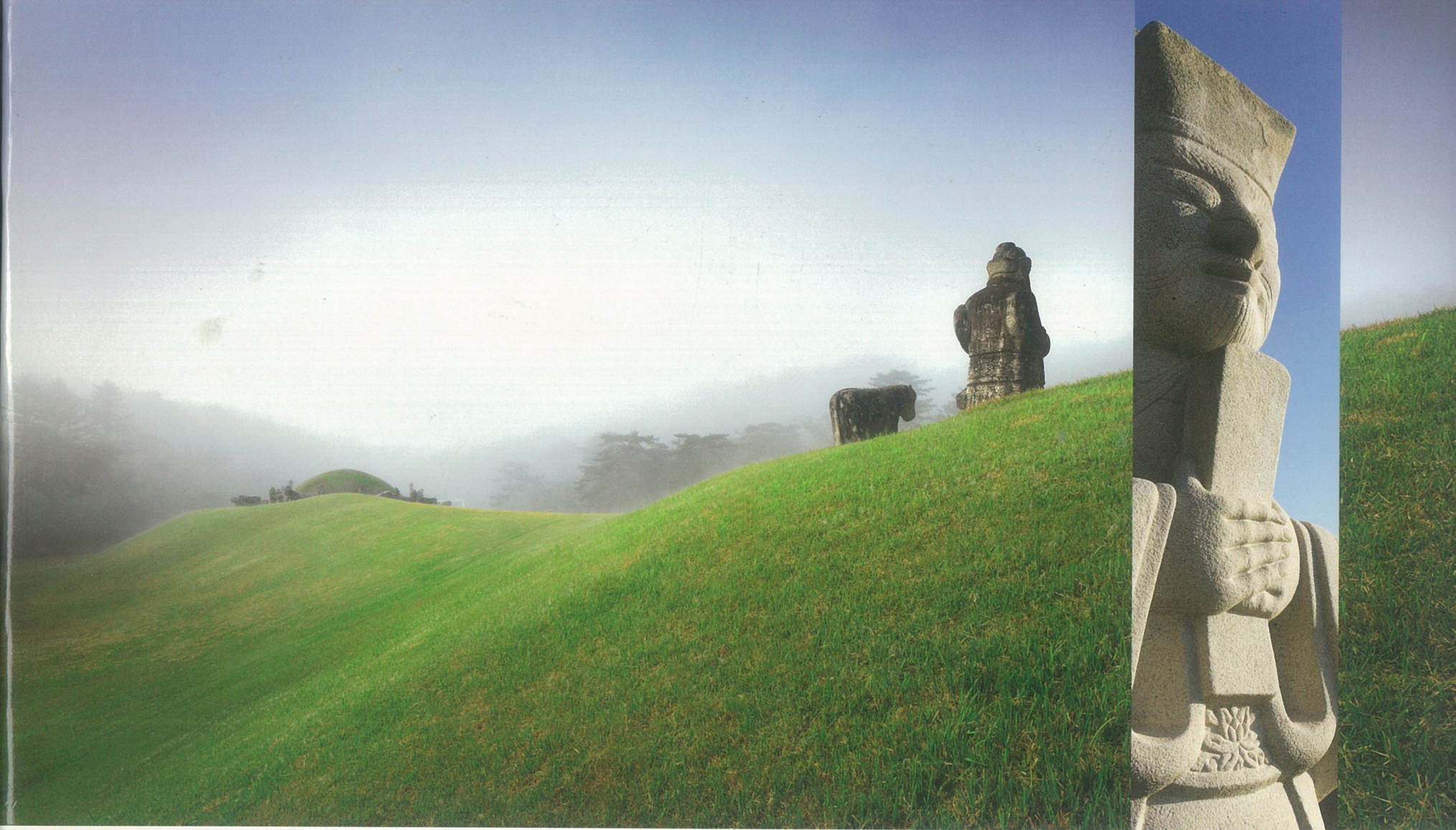
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## Royal Tombs of the Joseon Dynasty

Ancestral worship was firmly established in Korea during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), when Confucian teachings were adopted as the governing ideology and the supreme ethical principle. The clearest expression of the respect and reverence toward ancestors revolved around their tombs.

Ultimate regard, of course, was bestowed on the tombs of kings. The reigning king took care of the tombs of deceased kings and held rites to worship them as a means to strengthen the legitimacy of the state and the royal family and to protect and maintain his position.

Confucianism, which stresses family obligations through succeeding generations of descendants, remains deeply embedded in Korean society today. On major holidays, many Koreans visit their ancestors' tombs, carefully tending to them as a virtuous act that will bring good luck to themselves as well as their descendants.

Rites also are held at the royal tombs, sustaining acts of homage that are now 600 years old. This is an outstanding feature that distinguishes Joseon Royal Tombs from burial sites of ancient rulers in other countries. Royal ancestral rites are held at more than 50 locations around Korea every year. Thus, Joseon Royal Tombs are not mere burial grounds of dead kings and queens. They are the vibrant legacies where one of the mankind's longest-lived cultural traditions has been preserved most devotedly.

### Royal Tombs: Sanctuaries of Absolute Monarchs

There are a total of 42 Joseon Royal Tombs. They keep the remains of kings who actually occupied the throne, those posthumously given sovereign titles because their direct offspring ascended to the throne, and their spouses. These tombs are called *neung*, *reung*, or *leung*, according to the phonetics of the preceding syllable phonetic variation.

In a broader sense, the burial sites of other royal family members also may be called royal tombs. There are 13 tombs for crown princes and their consorts as well as royal relatives adopted from other lineages to succeed the throne (*won*); and 65 tombs for the rest of the royal family members (*myo*). Management of all three types of tombs were virtually the same.

Two early Joseon Royal Tombs were built in Gae-seong, North Korea, just north of the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas. They are for Queen Sinui, consort to the founding monarch, Taejo, and King Jeongjong, the second ruler. Gae-seong was the capital of the preceding Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392).

All of the other 40 royal tombs are in Seoul or its metropolitan area because, by law, they had to be built within 4 to 40 kilometers from the center of Hanyang, which is approximately the old city center of present-day Seoul. For administrative purposes, the tombs were divided into 18 areas covering three zones: inside Seoul, east of Seoul, and west of Seoul. (Refer to Table 1 for the list of Royal Tombs, and Table 2 for the Royal Tomb Areas and Zones.)

Donggureung, or the "Nine Royal Tombs in the East," is a group of nine Joseon Royal Tombs in Guri-si, Gyeonggi-do, east of Seoul. It is the largest royal family graveyard of Joseon. The tombs include Geonwolleurung of King Taejo, the founding ruler; Hyeolleung of King Munjong, the 5th ruler; Mon-



gneung of King Seonjo, the 14th ruler; Hwireung of Queen Jangnyeol, consort to King Injo, the 16th ruler; Sungneung of King Hyeonjong, the 18th ruler; Hyereung of Queen Danui, consort to King Gyeongjong, the 20th ruler; Wolleung of King Yeongjo, the 21st ruler; Gyeongneung of King Heonjong, the 24th ruler; and Sureung of posthumous King Munjo, the father of King Heonjong, the 24th ruler. Likewise, Seo-oreung is a group of five royal tombs located to the west of Seoul. Hongyureung, inside Seoul, is also a royal tomb group. It has the tombs of Joseon's two last monarchs, Gojong and Sunjong, both emperors of the Great Han Empire at the end of the Joseon Dynasty.

Tombs of King Sejong, the 4th ruler, and King Hyojong, the 17th ruler, were moved to the present locations in search of better geomantic blessings. Both of their tombs are named Yeongneung but have different Chinese characters. Along with the tomb of King Danjong, the 6th ruler, these tombs are farthest from Seoul.

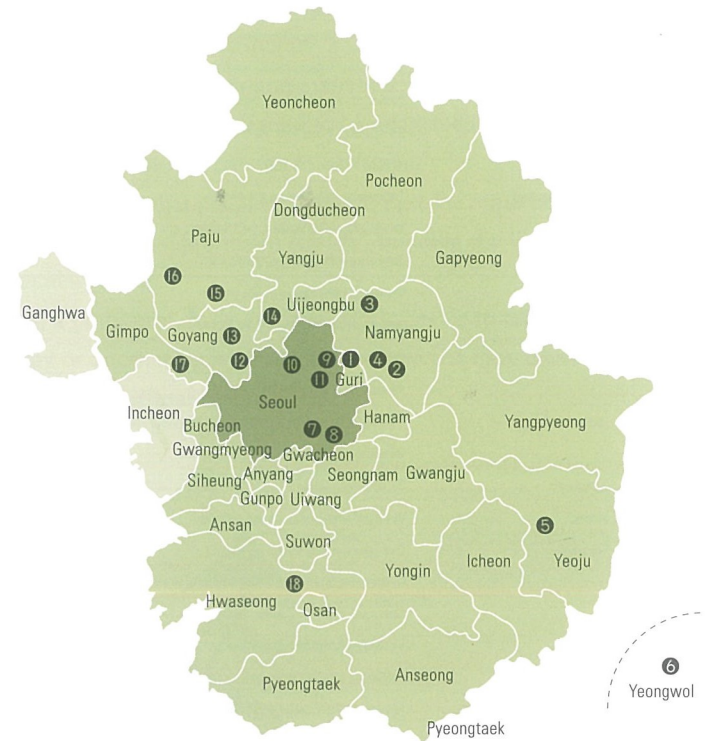
Tombs of King Yeonsangun, the 10th ruler, and King Gwanhaegun, the 15th ruler, were demoted to the third group, *myo*, so they are not included in the 42 Royal Tombs. Both rulers were dethroned for misrule.

The Joseon Dynasty set a unique and precious example in world history in that it maintained a consistent burial system and perfectly managed all burial grounds of the royal household for more than five centuries. Each royal tomb was made with great devotion considering geomantic principles and strictly observing Confucian etiquette. Royal tomb construction was a state project guaranteeing perfection in all respects. All of the royal tombs have been preserved in their original condition until today.

## Confucianism and Geomantic Philosophy

In addition to required distance from the capital, the selection of royal burial sites was dictated by proximity to other royal tombs, the topography of surrounding mountains and management purposes.

In accordance with geomantic principles, or *pungsu*, propitious sites had mountains at the rear and water in front. Adjacent mountain ridges or other topographical features were used to separate the royal burial grounds from



### Locations of Joseon Royal Tombs

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Donggureung        | 10. Jeongneung      |
| 2. Hongyureung        | 11. Uireung         |
| 3. Gwangneung         | 12. Seo-oreung      |
| 4. Sareung            | 13. Seosamneung     |
| 5. Yeongnyeongneung   | 14. Oileung         |
| 6. Yeongwol Jangneung | 15. Paju Samneung   |
| 7. Seonjeongneung     | 16. Paju Jangneung  |
| 8. Heonilleung        | 17. Gimpo Jangneung |
| 9. Taegangneung       | 18. Yunggeolleung   |

## Classification of Joseon Royal Tombs by Area and Zone

Area	Zone	Number of tombs	Name of tomb and the title of occupant
East of Seoul	Donggureung	9	Geonwolleurung of King Taejo, the founding ruler
			Hyeolleung of King Munjong, the 5th ruler
			Mongneung of King Seonjo, the 14th ruler
			Hwireung of Queen Jagnyeol, consort to King Injo, the 16th ruler
			Sungneung of King Hyeonjong, the 18th ruler
			Hyeung of Queen Danui, consort to King Gyeongjong, the 20th ruler
			Wolleung of King Yeongjo, the 21st ruler
			Gyeongneung of King Heonjong, the 24th ruler
			Sureung of posthumous King Munjo, father of King Heonjong, the 24th ruler
	Hongvureung	2	Hongneung of Emperor Gojong, the 26th ruler
			Yureung of Emperor Sunjong, the 27th and last ruler
	Gwangneung	1	Gwangneung of King Sejo, the 7th ruler
	Sareung	1	Sareung of Queen Jeongsun, consort to King Danjong, the 6th ruler
	Yeongnyeongneung	2	Yeongneung of King Sejong, the 4th ruler
			Yeongneung of King Hyojong, the 17th ruler
In Seoul	Jangneung	1	Jangneung of King Danjong, the 6th ruler
	Seonjeongneung	2	Seolleung of King Sejong, the 9th ruler
			Jeongneung of King Jungjong, the 11th ruler
	Heonilleung	2	Heolleung of King Taejong, the 3rd ruler
			Illeung of King Sunjo, the 23rd ruler
	Taegangneung	2	Taereung of Queen Munjeong, consort to King Jungjong, the 11th ruler
			Gangneung of King Myeongjong, the 13th ruler
	Jeongneung	1	Jeongneung of Queen Sindeok, consort to King Taejo, the founding ruler
	Uireung	1	Uireung of King Gyeongjong, the 20th ruler
West of Seoul	Seo-oreung	5	Changneung of King Yejong, the 8th ruler
			Gyeongneung of posthumous King Deokjong, father of King Seongjong, the 9th ruler
			Myeongneung of King Sukjong, the 19th ruler
			Ingneung of Queen Ingyeong, consort to King Sukjong, the 19th ruler
			Hongneung of Queen Jeongseong, consort to King Yeongjo, the 21st ruler
	Seosamneung	3	Huireung of Queen Janggyeong, consort to King Jungjong, the 11th ruler
			Hyoreung of King Injong, the 12th ruler
			Yereung of King Cheoljong, the 25th ruler
	Olleung	1	Olleung of Queen Dangyeong, consort to King Jungjong, the 11th ruler
	Paju Samneung	3	Gongneung of Queen Jangsun, consort to King Yejong, the 8th ruler
			Sulleung of Queen Gonghye, consort to King Seongjong, the 9th ruler
			Yeongneung of posthumous King Jinjong, the stepfather of King Jeongjo, the 22nd ruler
	Paju Jangneung	1	Jangneung of King Injo, the 16th ruler
	Gimpo Jangneung	1	Jangneung of posthumous King Wonjong, father of King Injo, the 16th ruler
	Yunggeolleung	2	Yungneung of posthumous King Jangjo (Crown Prince Sado and father of King Jeongjo, the 22nd ruler)
			Geolleung of King Jeongjo, the 22nd ruler

other facilities and emphasize their sacredness. Many royal tombs were placed in wooded lands near the capital, so they offer precious urban havens to enjoy nature today.

When a burial site was chosen, the ground plan was made in respect of Confucian ritual decorum clearly defining the hierarchy between the dead and the living, or the sacred and the secular. The Joseon royal household basically inherited the burial system of the preceding Goryeo Dynasty. But, as time passed, Joseon drafted its own ritual procedures to smoothly conduct various rites at gravesites.

When a king died, three temporary agencies were set up to carry out the funeral and burial rites. The funeral and burial rites followed prescriptions in *The Five Rites (Orye ui)* from *The Annals of King Sejong and The Five Rites of State (Gukjo orye ui)*. Both were compiled to suit circumstances of the Joseon royal household on the basis of *The family Rituals (Jiali or Garye in Korean)* by Zhu Xi.

### Unique Spatial Layout of Joseon Royal Tombs

The royal burial grounds were basically perceived as spaces for the dead to rest in peace and meet with the living. There was a strict hierarchy between the dead and the living; the former was considered sacred and the latter secular. The burial grounds consisted of three areas – the sacred burial area, the ritual area where the sacred and secular meet; and the entrance area, which is regarded as part of the secular world. Each burial ground was designed to harmonize with the surrounding nature. The nature-friendly tomb construction method of Joseon finds no parallel even in neighboring countries like China or Japan. The scale of burial ground, the method of forming burial mound and arrangement of stone objects and



other facilities basically followed a uniform installation plan. All facilities on the burial sites, including stone objects such as images of civil and military officials, were produced and installed in accordance with pertinent regulations. However, there were variations depending on the requirements of each era. Particularly, the size and carving style of stone figures, retaining stones and guardrails reflected changing artistic and aesthetic penchants of different eras. Thus the royal tombs serve as vital monuments attesting to the stream of history. (Refer to Appendix I for the styles and ground plans of tombs.)

**Burial Area** | The burial mound, of course, was the core of the royal tombs. The mounds varied in accordance with the topography of surrounding mountains. Hence, single mounds, twin mounds, joint burial mounds, three parallel mounds, double mounds on the same hill, or double mounds on different hills appeared, all of them hemispherical.

The mounds typically were encircled with stone guardrails and retaining stones that were carved with the 12 zodiac images showing directions, and decorated with lotus and peony designs. Two pairs of stone tigers and sheep were placed at the front to act as guardians, and pine trees were often planted in the rear on the hills behind the tombs because they grow well on rocky slopes.

The burial area is three-tiered, with each horizontal level bordered with long stone slabs. The uppermost level is for the dead king's spirit, the middle level for civil officials, and the lowest level for military officials. The top level has the burial mound with low, circular walls, stone tigers, a stone dais for the dead king's spirit and stone pillars. The middle level has stone figures of civil officials, a stone lantern and horses. The bottom level has stone figures of military

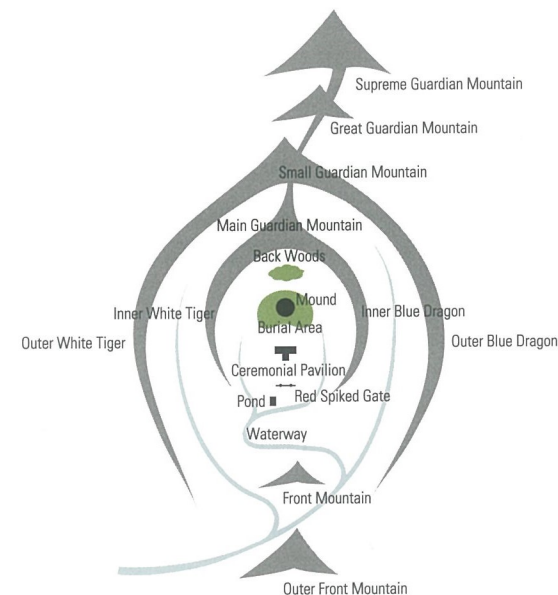
officials and stone horses. Access to the burial area is strictly limited.

**Ceremonial Area** | This area was used to hold rites for the deceased. Upon arrival at the red spiked gate that divided the entrance area from the ceremonial area, the king dismounted from a sedan chair, and walked past the gate on foot. He bowed four times toward the burial mound from an obeisance stand. Then the king and other ritual overseers moved to the ceremonial hall, where the ritual table was set, along the worship road made of two lanes – one for the dead king's spirit and one for the living king. Various facilities needed for holding royal ancestral rites are located around the ceremonial pavilion. They include a stone incinerating chamber, a stele pavilion, the servants' quarters and a kitchen.

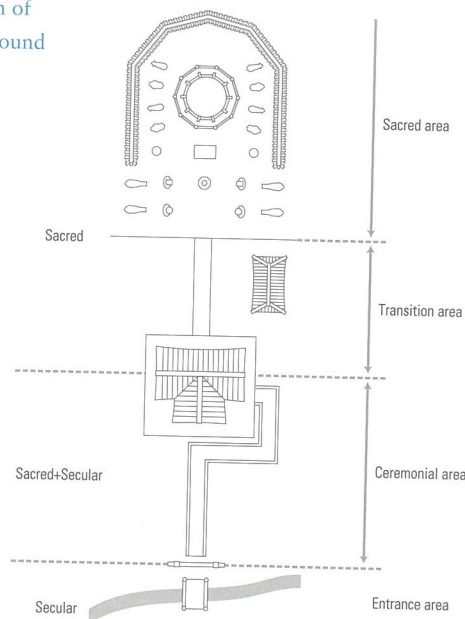
**Entrance Area** | The area was used for management of the burial ground and preparation of rites. It has the tomb keeper's house and storage buildings for incense and other ritual equipment. Past the tomb keeper's house, a stone bridge spans the "forbidden stream" dividing the holy burial ground and the secular world.

Sometimes, a pond was made as a geomantic device to reinforce the propitious energy or another red spiked gate was erected to mark the outer border of the sacred spiritual realm.

#### Basic Geomantic Elements of Royal Burial Ground

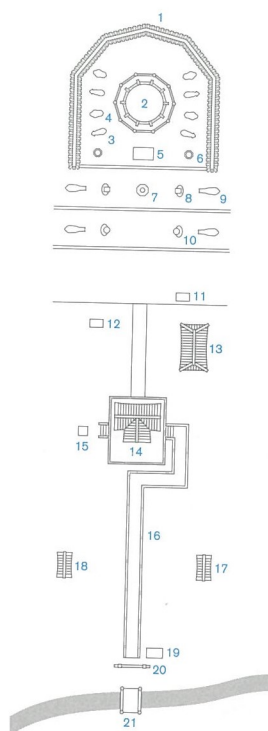


## Spatial Composition of the Royal Burial Ground



## Facilities on the Royal Burial Ground

1. Bent wall
2. Mound
3. Stone sheep
4. Stone tiger
5. Stone dais for spirit
6. Stone pillar
7. Stone lantern
8. Stone image of civil official
9. Stone horse
10. Stone image of military official
11. Ritual table for mountain spirit
12. Stone incineration chamber
13. Stele pavilion
14. Ceremonial pavilion
15. Incineration stand
16. Worship road
17. Guards' house
18. Royal kitchen
19. Obeisance stand
20. Red spiked gate
21. Bridge over forbidden stream



## Unique Aesthetics of Graveside Landscapes

*Pungsu*, or geomantic philosophy (*fengshui* in Chinese), aims to apply nature's healthy energy to the life of people by studying the topographical features of mountains and flow of water. It provides guiding principles in choosing the sites of homes and graves.

While the Chinese tried to supplement *fengshui* energy with superseding manmade structures, Koreans tended to build structures harmonizing with their surroundings to avoid damaging the natural topography. Such an attitude had great influence on the landscapes of Joseon Royal Tombs.

The burial area lies on a much higher terrain than other areas to emphasize its holiness strictly forbidden to the living. Mysteriously, though, it remains invisible for visitors until they reach the ceremonial pavilion past the red spiked gate and the long worship road, a result of meticulous architectural planning to keep the sacred realm of the dead out of sight as long as possible. It is a unique aesthetic pleasure that can only be experienced on the Joseon royal burial grounds.

The ceremonial pavilion is simple but well represents the elegant style of Joseon palace architecture. It has the solemn beauty suiting the royal burial ground. The round burial mound is also simple but beautiful, succinctly harmonizing with mild contours of the surrounding topography in ways reminiscent of the tumuli of the Unified Silla period (668-935).

## Graveyard Rites: A Living Tradition

During the Joseon period, ancestral rites were performed by people of all classes, from the royal family to the literati class to commoners. Graveyard rites, in particular, were meaningful rituals awakening the participants to the significance of their family lineage

traced back to ancestors.

From its early days, the Joseon royal household faithfully observed ancestral rites at the gravesides. The tradition was maintained until the dynasty fell in 1910 with Japan's annexation of Korea. The royal family of a demolished dynasty had no means to continue to hold ancestral rites under colonial rule. The Jeonju Yi Family Association, organized with descendants of the royal family, revived the time-honored rites after national liberation in 1945. The association continues to hold rites today, sustaining the illustrious tradition that is now six centuries old. (Refer to Appendix III for the royal ancestral rites performed at the tombsites, especially at the tomb of King Taejo, the founding monarch of Joseon.)

#### Numerous Recorded Documents

The Joseon Dynasty recorded details of major state events in official documents that are now known as *uigwe*, literally "exemplary protocols." The records of state funerals were made by the three temporary agencies in charge of the funeral and burial rites – the Office of State Funeral (*Gukjang Dogam*), the Office of Mortuary Operations (*Binjeon Dogam*) and the Office of Royal Tomb (*Salleung Dogam*).

The royal protocols recorded in detail the motivations in choosing each royal burial site, who took charge in making the tombs, the finances and materials, and when the funerals began and ended. The documents were accompanied by fine illustrations precisely depicting the funeral processions and the newly made royal burial grounds. The protocols were important references for holding the royal funerals in elaborate procedures, repairing the royal tombs and preserving them in their original condi-

tions throughout the dynasty.

The custodians of each royal tomb also kept a journal of their duties, which resulted in the official history of each burial site. These records, called *neungji*, or the "tomb records," attested to the efforts exerted by numerous people over the centuries in order to keep the royal tombs in impeccable states.

Other records concerning Joseon Royal Tombs included *The Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* (*Joseon wangjo sillok*), the official chronicles of the 27 reigns of the dynasty; *Grand Code for State Administration* (*Gyeongguk daejeon*), the main statute of Joseon based on its Confucian-oriented governing ideology; and *Five Rites of State* (*Gukjo orye ui*), a comprehensive work prescribing the mode of conduct of major state ceremonies including royal succession, funerals, marriages, welcoming foreign envoys and military reviews.

These records form the world's richest compendium on the construction and management of royal graves, significantly adding to the cultural value of Joseon Royal Tombs.



# East of Seoul

## 1. Donggureung Area

Geonwolleurung of King Taejo, the founding ruler

Hyeolleung of King Munjong, the 5<sup>th</sup> ruler

Mongneung of King Seonjo, the 14<sup>th</sup> ruler

Hwireung of Queen Jagnyeol, Consort to King Injo, the 16<sup>th</sup> ruler

Sungneung of King Hyeonjong, the 18<sup>th</sup> ruler

Hyereung of Queen Danui, Consort to King Gyeongjong, the 20<sup>th</sup> ruler

Wolleung of King Yeongjo, the 21<sup>st</sup> ruler

Gyeongneung of King Heonjong, the 24<sup>th</sup> ruler

Sureung of Posthumous King Munjo, father of King Heonjong, the 24<sup>th</sup> ruler

## 2. Hongyureung Area

Hongneung of Emperor Gojong, the 26<sup>th</sup> ruler

Yureung of Emperor Sunjong, the 27<sup>th</sup> and last ruler

## 3. Gwangneung Area

Gwangneung of King Sejo, the 7<sup>th</sup> ruler

## 4. Sareung Area

Sareung of Queen Jeongsun, Consort to King Danjong, the 6<sup>th</sup> ruler

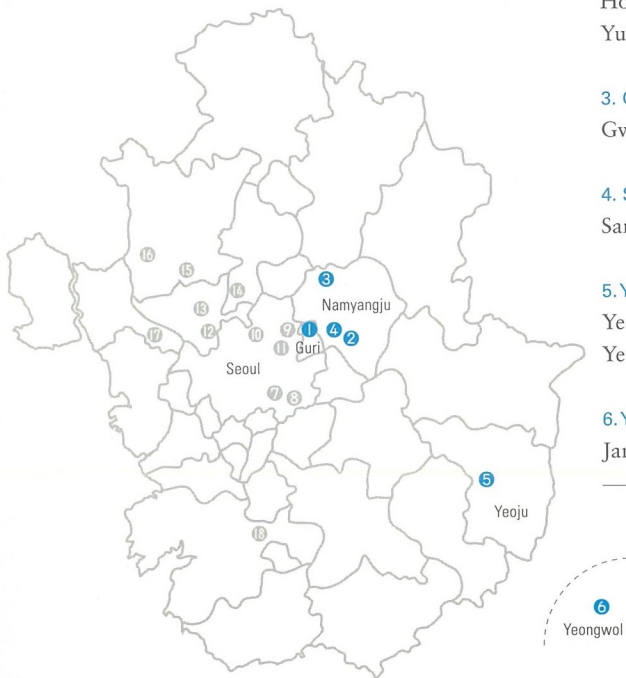
## 5. Yeongnyeongneung Area

Yeongneung of King Sejong, the 4<sup>th</sup> ruler

Yeongneung of King Hyojong, the 17<sup>th</sup> ruler

## 6. Yeongwol Jangneung Area

Jangneung of King Danjong, the 6<sup>th</sup> ruler











Donggureung Area

## Geonwolleung of King Taejo, The Founding Ruler

King Taejo (1335-1408) was the second son of Yi Ja-chun, head of a powerful gentry family in Hamheung, Hamgyeong-do at the end of the Goryeo Dynasty. He earned his reputation as a military officer with prominent archery skills at young age. He fought against the invasion of the Liaodong region of Manchuria and marched back from Wihwa Island to help King Gongmin ascend the throne. He eventually usurped the throne from King Gongyang, the last king of Goryeo and proclaimed the founding of a new dynasty named Joseon. King Taejo ruled for six years and two months before abdicating in 1398 in favor of his second son, Bang-gwa (later known as King Jeongjong), born from his first wife, Queen Sinui.

Geonwolleung, the tomb of King Taejo, is in the deepest quarter of Donggureung, the Nine Royal Tombs in the East. It is a single mound tomb, basically following the style of the tombs of King Gongmin and his wife, Princess Noguk, known to be the finest royal tombs from the Goryeo period. But it is surrounded by low walls on three sides. The size and arrangement of stone objects also differ from Goryeo tombs, setting an example for other royal tombs of Joseon.

Particularly, the stone figures of civil and military officials look robust as if to manifest the founding spirit of the newborn dynasty. There is a stone dais used for paying homage before the mound, which was not installed in later royal tombs, as well as an epitaph engraved with the king's achievements.

The tomb of Taejo's first wife, Queen Sinui, called Jereung, is located in Gaeseong, now in North Korea. His second wife, Queen Sindeok, is buried in Jeongneung in Seongbuk-gu, northern Seoul. ●

King Taejo, born Yi Seong-gye, the founding ruler of the Joseon Dynasty, is buried here, in the deepest quarters of Donggureung, the largest royal burial ground of Joseon.







**Left** Descendants of the Yi Royal Family hold memorial rites for King Taejo on his death anniversary on June 27 at his graveyard.

**Right** Geonwolleung followed the style of the tombs of King Gongmin and Princess Noguk of the Goryeo Dynasty, but also introduced a new layout of stone objects as well as bent walls enclosing the burial, setting a model for other royal tombs of Joseon.

