EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
KOREAN STUDIES

VOLUME 21, NO. 1 (2021), pp. 323–333.

RESEARCH NOTE

Islamic Studies of Korea in Medieval Scripts: Medieval Muslims' perception of Korea "as a Muslims' Paradise" and the Influence of Ancient Civilizations' Golden Island in the Sea East of the Eastern End of the World

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Introduction

Silla was one of two places in East Asia frequently described by medieval Muslim writers from the mid ninth-century onwards. The earliest study of Silla in antique documents can be traced back to eighteenth-century Arabists who attached a short note to the word "Sīlā" when editing or translating manuscripts.[1] From the nineteenth century, not only in quantitative terms but also qualitatively, Muslim authors' eagerness to catalogue their knowledge about Silla caught the attention of contemporary scholars in both the East and West. In addition to Europeans, Japanese academics attempted to study the definition of Silla at this time, and owing to the colonization of Korea, Silla came to be considered not only as part of Korean, but also Japanese "history." From the early twentieth century, pioneering Korean scholars were also challenged by the task of deciphering medieval Muslim knowledge of Silla, often in conjunction with Arabic researchers.[2] However, these first attempts at the study of Silla, whilst long, were mostly limited to the translation of relevant paragraphs discussing the historicity of Silla or locating old

place names in contemporary geography. For instance, debates that designate Silla as part of Japan, partly as a Korean kingdom, or even both, have continued over decades.[3]

From around the third quarter of the twentieth century, several Korean scholars have attempted to answer the following questions: 1) Why did medieval Muslims have auspicious understandings of Silla? 2) Did Muslims really reside in Silla and if so, were they satisfied with their lives there at the cost of abandoning their families along with other Muslims outside of Silla?

The majority of existing scholarship attempted to understand the choices that these Muslims had to make given the realities of the environment in Silla. Conversely, other researchers proposed that the idea of Silla as a paradise came from either ignorance or absurd fantasies. In 2020 and 2021, I suggested three possible reasons for this understanding: first, they reflect the will and wishes of those Muslims disconnected from their companions, losing connection to them during the Huangchao (黃巢) and other rebellions. Second, medieval Muslim authors often considered their patron's expectations. When a ruler suffered the decentralization of his leadership, he often preferred to support texts that promoted patriotism. Exhibiting the presence of Muslims in a state of comfort and hospitality in a remote place, such as Silla, may be of benefit when a ruler wished to propagate his good governance. Third, when discussing the notion of Silla as a "Muslim Paradise," we should consider the break in the accounts of Muslims in Silla and China due to the withdrawal of Muslim communities from China.[4] Previous studies failed to outline to what extent this belief held by the writers and scholars was correct and do not explain why subsequent medieval Muslim authors went on to accept the idea of "paradise" and propagated it to various audiences.

Recently, the Iranian historian Voosoughi trisected the characteristics of texts about Silla into categories of history-myth, geography, and astronomy.[5] Taking an alternative approach, this research note and my research suggests distinguishing travel accounts from books detailing geography due to the contrasting content between both genres. Among these four sources that mainly deal with sets of Zīj tables,[6] which outline the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of Silla's land,[7] there is only one travel account dealing with Silla.[8] Nineteen books are about world geography and include Silla, whilst the others mainly discuss the history and myth of Silla. However, regardless of the main characteristics of each text, they often overlap each other when considering both the descriptive geography and history/myth of Silla.[9]

Scholarship infers that the first Muslim informants about Silla were marine traders to East Asia. The earliest confirmable knowledge about Silla is in the *Akhbār al-Ṣīn wa-al-Hind (The Account of India and China)*, the travel account

written in 851 by a ninth-century Muslim trader to China named Sulaymān. This account is inserted in the first half of *Silsilat al-Tawārīkh (The Chain of Histories)* in 916 by the tenth-century traveler Abū Zayd Ḥassan al-Sīrāfī. The second half of the *Silsilat* consists of al-Sīrāfī's own composition. Sulaymān himself had compiled his account based on reports about China, India, and other countries, which had been collected by his companions. Besides his name, we know very little about Sulaymān's life, although we can recognize him as a Muslim through his words. Sulaymān's account is one of the oldest Muslim trader's guides covering marine itineraries to East Asia. He introduced a variety of extensive and detailed information about China, India, and other noticeable places between them.[10] He attached the section focused on Silla at the end of his writing about Muslim trading with the east, as follows:

> In another direction (from China), that of the ocean, are the islands of al-Sīlā. They are pale-skinned people who exchange gifts with the ruler of China; they maintain that if they did not keep up this exchange, rain would cease to fall on their land. None of our circle of informants has ever made it there and brought back a reliable report. In the land of al-Sīlā, there are white hawks.[11]

As a trader, Sulaymān's book is recognized as a practical and reliable resource for those who traded to the east of the Islamic world. When it comes to Silla, it is very obvious that he observed the nation from the positionality of a Muslim trader in China.

His narrations about Silla itself describe it as a set of islands, the only place east of China across the sea, with pale-skinned inhabitants and hawks as a local fauna. This information is simple and short but very accurate. The composition of information on Silla presents the kingdom in a way that displays its value to Muslim merchants. The white hawks, a rare and lucrative commodity, would have caught the eyes of Muslim traders, drawing their attention to Silla as a lucrative prospect for trade and exchange.

Furthermore, the merchants regarded several pieces of knowledge about Silla as important enough to inform other Muslim mariners. These included the geographic location and composition of Silla and a description of its inhabitants, focusing on their skin tone. Most importantly for the mariners is Silla's peculiar relationship with China. As China was one of Silla's top trade partners, figuring out how to do business with traders from Silla in China would have been useful. As for the Muslim diaspora, Sulaymān neither commented nor denied the existence of Muslims in Silla. We can infer from this that the role of Muslims and their lives in Silla were not noteworthy enough for Sulaymān to share with his potential readers. Muslims' direct role in trading in Silla is also questionable since none of Sulaymān's companions experienced Silla firsthand. Finally, Silla was the only

known land to the east of China that involved a crossing of the sea; consequently, Silla was important for Muslim traders not to sail to or to live in, but instead, people from Silla were one of the most important foreign groups in China, and the farthest land to the east of China within the traders' sphere of activity.

The formation of medieval Muslims' perception of Korea as a Muslim "paradise"

Despite the fact that no Muslim travelers mentioned Muslims in Silla in their accounts, the authors who covered Silla's history and geography never failed to mention some Muslim's voluntary lifelong residence there. The nineteen sources that comment on Muslim residents in Silla are mainly derived from a single source, Ibn Khurdādhbih's (820–912) *Kitāb al-Masālik and al-Mamālik* (The Book of the Routes and the Kingdoms). This book introduced Silla and Muslim residents twice within its pages. The section of the itinerary from Basra (now in southern Iraq), eastwards, ends with Silla as:

> At the end of China opposite Qānṣū, there are many mountains and many kings, this is the country of al-Shīlā (al-Sīlā), it has much gold; the Muslims who entered this land settled in it. It is not known what lies beyond. These came from the Eastern Sea of China: silk, swords, ox bezoar, musk, aloe, saddles, sables, pottery, sailcloth, cinnamon, and Paeonia Officinalis.[12]

A further section describes the marvels of the earth and talks about Silla again, shedding light on the context of Muslims who live there:

> Every Muslim who entered into a country at the end of China, which is named al-Shīlā (al-Sīlā) and has much gold, settled there due to its pleasantness and never left it.[13]

Considering the general characteristics of this section, Silla's "pleasantness," which created an environment in which Muslims decided to stay for the rest of their lives, is important. In my review of the Islamic sources, including Ibn Khurdādhbih's book, I could not find another place like Silla described that provided such an ideal environment for Muslim visitors across genres and ages. All the authors from these sources who discussed Silla talked about it as a form of paradise, passing this concept down to scores of authors. When we approach the text critically, the historical period's situation in Korea was not always stable and affluent but mixed with natural and political fluctuations.[14] Instead, this notion of "paradise" is easier to understand when we interpret the history of Silla and its Muslim residents through the eyes of Muslims in China at that time.

The ninth-century history of Silla can be divided into two halves and in the second quarter, Silla dominated trading among China, Korea, and Japan. This period is peculiar in East Asian history as traditionally, these countries preferred to control trade by restricting private commerce overseas. Therefore, the majority of the extensive trade was conducted by various participants accompanied by emissary groups to act on each state's behalf.[15] However, as the governments of Silla and China could not extend their grip beyond their capital areas, they faced the loss of control over private trade.[16] Japanese travelers relied on Silla's ships and sailors.

This circuit structure of trade and relations is recorded in precise detail in the prominent Japanese Buddhist monk, Ennin's (圓仁, 793 or 794–864) diary *Nittō guhō junrei kōki* (The Record of a Pilgrim to China in Search of the Law 入唐求法巡禮行記). This Japanese monk observed the Tang Dynasty for ten years and whilst he offered little comment about the Japanese role in the Tang Dynasty, or other countries associated with it, he did devote much space in his accounts to explanations about the vast network of the Silla people and their agency.[17] According to his narrations, Silla's vessels dominated East Asian trade and passenger business, and immigrants from Silla worked powerfully and extensively in a transport network that had strong connections to commercial hubs alongside the sea, the rivers, and the Grand Canal. Particularly, the Silla people could authorize permission for travel, which was strictly controlled by the Tang dynasty government. It is likely that the autonomy of the Silla people, as described by Ennin, left a positive and lasting impression on Muslim perceptions of Silla, particularly those living in China.

Later acceptance and stabilization of the existing notions of Silla

Ibn Khurdādhbih's three concepts of Silla: the abundance of gold, Silla as an earthly heaven for all Muslim visitors, and its location at the eastern end of the world adjacent to China helped to popularize Silla amongst later medieval authors, each using Silla in their writings to suit their own purposes. It is noticeable that the dubious idea, "Silla is chosen by all Muslim visitors as the only paradise," eventually became part of Muslim writers' common knowledge about Silla.

From the late ninth century, the idea of Silla as an "earthly paradise" was shared by Muslim authors across regions all the way from Andalusia to Central Asia. It is important to highlight that five authors wrote about Silla within a century, and all of them accepted this conception of Silla.

The earliest author who took on this idea was Ibn Rusta (d. after 912), the Persian geographer and explorer, who inserted Sīlā in his *Kitāb al-Aʿlāq al-Nafīsa* (The Book of Precious Record) in 892. Despite the absence of direct referencing by Ibn Rusta, we can confirm that his knowledge of Silla consists of the selected information in the book of Ibn Khurdādhbih. Considering that *Al-Aʿlāq al-Nafīsa* was published at a similar date to Ibn Khurdādhbih's *Masālik*, Ibn Khurdādhbih's geography about Silla was quickly circulated and widely accepted by contemporary authors. The fact that several representative Muslim geographers and historians of the time reused the same idea also supports this inference. The majority of the later authors reused the same idea of Silla as an "earthly paradise" or simply abridged it when they described the kingdom.[18]

However, by attaching further concrete evidence and research findings, a significant number of authors expanded the old concepts about Silla. This expansion served to justify the choice of Muslims who had settled in Silla. These authors includes for instance, a tenth-century Persian traveller, historian, and geographer, al-Muqaddasī (c. d. 966),[19] the tenth-century Arab geographer who is also one of the most prominent historians, al-Masʿūdī (d. 956). Aside from these the most well-known Muslim geographer, al-Idrīsī relied on Ibn Khurdādhbih's *Masālik*, but he inserted extra attractions of Silla in the detail of his work.[20] Ultimately, the thirteenth to fourteenth-century geographer Al-Dimashqī (1256 or 1257–1327) reconfigured contemporary understandings of Silla by mentioning Ptolemy as the source of knowledge about the kingdom.[21]

Particularly, al-Masʿūdī added concrete ideas about the merits of nature and human environment there, to the existing single strength of Silla in Muslim writing, its abundance of gold. The way he described Silla was repeated by later authors. He illustrated Silla as:

> None of the kingdoms are known or described beyond China by sea, except for a country, al-Sīlā and its annexed islands. With the rare exceptions of some people, no strangers from Iraq[22] or anywhere else leaves here, due to the clean air, the pure water, the fertile soil, the heart-warming hospitality, and the lucid gems.[23]

The perceptions of Chinese, Persian, and Middle Easterners on "the East," "China," and on the "eastern end of the world" need to be considered, since they influenced the formation of the optimistic and positive ideas about Silla in the minds of Muslims and Muslim writers. The vast majority of the ancient world regarded the East as an auspicious and sacred direction, because the sun rises there. In connection with East Asia, the idea of Mount Penglai (蓬萊山) in the sea east of China[24] was popularized as a natural and spiritual utopia. For contemporary Muslims, Silla was the only known civilized place to the east of China and situated

in the sunrise, so Silla would have benefited from being described as an earthly paradise by al-Masʿūdī. Additionally, for this image, we have to remember al-Sīrāfī, who personally introduced Sulaymān's account of the auspicious elements of Silla, including the white hawks and the bright complexion of its inhabitants, to al-Masʿūdī.

Further the question of sources of information, Muslims relied upon secondary data when they collected information about Silla. Therefore, traditional legends in East Asia maintained Muslims' belief in an idealistic concept of Silla. As a result, this optimistic vision of Silla was not shaken through the Middle Ages. Also, the location of Silla in Islamic Kishwar geography potentially fortified the positive perception of Silla. The Seven Kishwar system, derived from the ancient Persian tradition, largely spread across the medieval Islamic world. The Seven Kishwar system categorized the world into seven zones and distributed a respective hierarchy for individual sections. According to the medieval Muslims' redistributed division of the ancient Persian Kishwar, the seventh section roughly covers the mid and southern part of modern East Asia and Central Asia, which was mainly agricultural land, and excludes the nomadic steppe. In contrast to the negative perception on the sixth sector of northern Eurasia, the seventh section, including Silla was regarded as one of the most ideal and auspicious zones. In the historic and theological aspects, the sixth section, the land of the Yājūj and Mājūj, was described as much inferior to China and Silla both in natural and human terms. One of the reasons for this difference could be the direct and frequent military conflict between Islamic and pre-Islamic West Asia and the steppe nomads in history.[25] Contrary to this, the Islamic world experienced less direct conflict with China and even less with Silla, and the lack of conflict could have contributed to the construction of positive ideas about Silla in the minds of Muslims. On top of this, the pale skin of East Asians, at this point a complexion favored in the Islamic world,[26] provided a positive image of Silla in the minds of Muslims.

By the second half of the ninth century, Silla's official trade shrank due to the Tang government's extensive crackdown,[27] and Chinese merchants took the leading role in East Asian trade, reducing the role of private local merchants in the Korean Peninsula. Two decades later, Muslims in China retreated from the Chinese coast following the rebellion of Huangchao between 875 and 884.[28] Al-Sīrāfī, the Persian seafarer who included the merchant Sulaymān's account about Silla, elaborated the damage of this revolt on the Muslim community.[29] The reconstruction of the Muslims' compound in China took decades. In the meantime, Muslims settled in southeast Asia. These events distracted authors and scholars from updating the whereabouts of missing Muslims in China and their situation in Silla.[30]

When we look back at the contemporary situation of China, it was positioned as the Islamic world's main hub for trade and exchange with East Asia, and knowledge of the historic existence of permanent Muslim compounds in large numbers along the coast spread frequently within the Islamic world, which made for quick updates both negative and positive. On the other hand, Silla probably welcomed Muslims irregularly and in lesser numbers. The even nature of exchange, and particularly the pausing of Muslims' direct activity in China through local compounds there, would have disrupted updates on the changed situation in East Asia. For different reasons, Japan is not depicted as a fantastic land in this period within Muslim writing. This situation was probably because of the temporary situation that, at the time, saw little direct exchange between Japan and China, with consequent impressions of Japan as being of little importance with no Muslims there. During this period, Japan paused its embassies to the continent, and Japanese sailors had insufficient skill and capabilities to cross the sea by themselves.[31]

The temporary disconnection of Silla from the Islamic world, due to these disruptions in China, meant that the remaining idealistic and positive impression of Silla as a "paradise" could not be later confirmed by Muslim writers and travelers. Instead, the idea of Silla as a "paradise" lasted many centuries after the kingdom had ceased to be and without regard to whether there were actually any Muslims there. Since there are few places satisfying the idealistic and legendary conditions offered by this imagined Silla in the Islamic context in history and geography writing, with historical examples of direct exchange and a complex of diverse optimistic symbolism, medieval Islamic authors failed to seek any substitutes for Silla as "a paradise for Muslims."

Notes

1. Su-il Jeong (published name: Muhammad Kanso), *Sīlā Sŏyŏ kyoryusa* (Seoul: Danguk University Press, 1992), p. 158.
2. Jeong, Jin Han. "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea". PhD dissertation, SOAS. University of London, 2020, pp. 56–60.
3. Ginzo Uchida. *Shira no Shima Kyu Gōresu ni Tsukite* (Tokyo: Geibun, 1915), quoted in Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, *Chungguk ŭro kanŭn kil, Vol. 1*, trans. Su-il Jeong (Seoul: Sagyejeol, 2002), pp. 358–360, 360n39.
4. Hyunhee Park, Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds: cross-cultural exchange in pre-modern Asia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 86.
5. Mohammad Bagher Vosooghi, "Geographical Location of Sillā in Muslim Astronomical Literature of the Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries CE." *Acta Koreana* 21.1 (2018), pp. 66–69.
6. An astronomical handbook consists of tables containing longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates which mostly derived from Persian *Zīk*, Indian *Sindhind*, Greek *Almagest*, and other

ancient civilizations' science, see David King and Samsó, J "Zīd̲j," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

7. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," Appendix, table 1.
8. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," pp. 77–78.
9. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," p. 176.
10. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," pp. 77–78.
11. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī and Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and *Mission to the Volga*, trans. Mackintosh-Smith, Tim, and Montgomery, James (New York: NYU Press, 2015), p. 67.
12. Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī and Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga, p. 97.
13. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," p. 97.
14. Yun, Sunok and Sangil Hwang. "*Samguk sagi* rŭl t'onghae pon Han'guk kodae ŭi chayŏn chaehae wa kamum chugi," *Taehan Chiri Hakhoeji* 44.4 (2009): 497–509; For more details, see Young Jin, Choi, "Kwŏllyŏk chipchung ŭi shinhwa- Silla hŭngmang ŭi chŏngch'i kujo-jŏk kiwŏn," *Han'guk chŏngch'ihak hoebo* 42.4 (2008): 33–57.
15. Yun, Jaeun. "8–10 segi Tong Asia muyŏk net'ŭwŏk'ŭ" *Han'guk kodae sat'amgu* 12 (2012), pp. 127–131.
16. Kwon, Deok-young "Kodae Tong Asia ŭi Hwanghae wa Hwanghae muyŏk: 8, 9 segi Silla rŭl chungshim ŭro." *Sahak yŏn'gu* 89 (2008), pp. 16–18, 23–50.
17. See Tae-Gyou Ko, "9 segi Ilbonin ŭi Chungguk yŏhaeng e taehan chaedang Sillain ŭi yŏkhal: Ennin ŭi *Iptang kubŏp sullye haenggi* rŭl chungshim ŭro," *Kwan'gwang yŏn'gu chŏnŏl* 34.2 (2020); Kim, Sun-Bae. "*Iptang kubŏp sullye haenggi*, Ennin i mannan kilwi ŭi irŭmdŭl," *Taehan chiri hakhoeji* 55.3 (2020).
18. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," p. 185.
19. André Miquel, "AlMuḳaddasī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second edition (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
20. Al-Idrīsī, Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fi Ikhtirāq al-Afāq (The book of pleasant stroll into faraway lands) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīnīya, 1992), p. 92.
21. Al-Dimashqī, *Nukhbat Al-Dahr Fī ʿAjāʾib al-Barr Wa-al-Baḥr*, ed Abd al-Muftaqir (Saint Petersburg: Imperial Academy, 1865), p. 130.
22. André Miquel, "'Irāḳ": in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
23. Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," p. 184.
24. Several Chinese Classics including *Liezi* (列子), *Shanhaijing* (山海經), and *Shiji* (史记), described Mount Penglai as a legendary mountain on Penglai Island in the east of the Bohai Sea. They depicted the island and mountain as possessing abundant gold and silver. In addition to this, the island is believed to be inhabited by hermits. See Jeong, "Creating the Medieval Geography by using Korea," p. 37n87.
25. Adam J. Silverstein, "The Medieval Islamic Worldview: Arabic Geography in Its Historical Context," in *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 275–79.
26. See Bernard Lewis, Race and slavery in the Middle East: an historical enquiry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
27. Jaeun Yun, "Shillahadae muyŏkkwallyŏn kiguwa chŏngch'ak," *Sŏnsawa kodae* 20 (2004), pp. 271–272.
28. Park, Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds, pp. 69–70.
29. Park, Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds, p. 70.
30. Park, Mapping the Chinese and Islamic worlds, pp. 70–71.
31. See Jaeun Yun, "8–10 segi Tong Asia muyŏk net'ŭwŏk'ŭ" *Han'guk kodae sat'amgu* 12 (2012).

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