

Ancient Korea in the Arabic and Persian Manuscripts. By Hee Soo Lee & Mohammad Bagher Vosoughi. Samarkand: IICAS, 2020, 172 pp. ISBN: 9789943357563 doi: 10.22679/avs.2020.5.2.009

Currently in 2020, as the international community faces unprecedented restrictions on international travel and activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the international academic community now has at its disposal an extremely useful new book for studying cultural contacts along Silk Road trade routes in the early Middle Ages. It is most remarkable that a book covering medieval Arab and Persian authors who wrote about Korea — the most remote eastern destination on the ancient Silk Road, was produced through the collaboration of two famous historians and specialists in medieval oriental manuscripts, representing scientific communities at opposite ends of the ancient trade routes — Professor Hee Soo Lee of Hanyang University in Korea and Professor Mohammad Bagher Vosoughi from the University of Tehran. A noteworthy coincidence is that the International Institute for Central Asian Studies, established under the patronage of UNESCO in the city of Samarkand, one of the most famous trade and cultural centers on the ancient trade route from the West to the Far East, took responsibility for publishing the book.

The authors take an exciting approach to the problems addressed in the monograph. The reader is given the opportunity to familiarize him/herself with cultural objects of Middle East origin on the Korean Peninsula that clearly testify to the intensive exchange of trade and culture between the two regions. The earliest artifacts from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire (Byzantium), or Iran (p. 13) can be dated back to the 5th and 6th centuries. This was a time of creation and development of historical and geographical literature for the peoples of the Middle East region. However, studies of these written records have yet to provide a convincing and detailed explanation for the appearance on the Korean Peninsula of these monuments of material culture.

The authors committed to undertake a reasonable search for information about Korea and Koreans in early Muslim-period written sources that contain the first merchant and traveler testimonies about the Far East and Korea, dating back to before the Islamic period. First off, the book delves into extensive Arab and Persian geographic literature dating back to the testimonies of travelers who reached the Korean Peninsula by trade routes that most likely passed through China. The book includes almost all works in this range of sources passed down to modern researchers: 23 documents that directly mention Korea and corresponding texts from 60 manuscripts authored by 31 Muslim scholars (pp. 14, 27).

The monograph proposes several well-grounded solutions to long-debated contradictions and discrepancies in the Muslim reports about Korea.

One issue concerns two variants (Basilla and Gosilla) for the name of the country, Silla. The authors identify two lines of the word's transmission in the Muslim literature and explain the appearance of the prefix to the original name of Silla (pp. 20, 27, 43-50). For many years there was no convincing explanation for the different descriptions of Korea by Muslim authors, some of whom testified to the country's insular position, while others pointed to Silla's overland connections with China. The only acceptable explanation is the authors' opinion that the traditional representation of Korea as an island separated by sea from China was influenced by the description of the sea route from China to Korea.

Early testimony about the so-called 'Ruby Island' from *Fathnāmah-i Sind* (The Arab Conquest of Sind), reportedly authored by Abu al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muhammad al-Mada'īnī (752~839) and then translated into Persian by 'Alī b. Ḥamid b. Abubakr Kufī in 1216, was traditionally thought to refer to Serendib Island (Ceylon). The monograph offers arguments that the testimony refers to Silla rather than Ceylon (pp. 41-42).

Studying medieval Muslim concepts about the extreme eastern and western longitudes of the populated earth is an interesting challenge for researchers and those interested in the evolution of geographical knowledge from antiquity and the Middle Ages. Muslim geographical literature borrowed the concept of extreme western longitude from Greek authors. The meridian line ran through the legendary Saadat Islands (Happiness Isles), or Khalidat to the west of the Moroccan sea coast. The concept of extreme east longitude was introduced into Muslim geography from the pre-Islamic Persian concept of the Kangdezh meridian far to the east. In relatively later medieval Persian Muslim literature, Kangdezh is described similarly to Silla (Korea), as a comfortable country with plentiful gold (even dog collars in this country are made of gold), where life is pleasant (pp. 29, 53-61). Isn't this the Islands of Happiness? Perhaps such associations explain the ancient portrayal of Silla as an island country. The authors convincingly conclude that as the name of the capital city of the country of the eastern meridian, Kangdezh replaces the name Silla in the late literature. The study's noteworthy hypothesis is that the late Persian geographical literature use of the name Kangdezh to refer to Korea comes from "Gyeong-ju", or "Geum-seong" (meaning Gold Castle), the ancient capital of the Korean state of Silla (pp. 52- 56, 61). The change in the country's name could have resulted from a synthesis of knowledge from the Pahlavi Iranian tradition with the information of early Muslim authors and the testimony of Muslim merchants who visited Korea.

The study of the text of the epic Persian Muslim work "Kushnameh" occupies a special place in the book. Central to the study of medieval Muslim contact with Korea is the interpretation, with reference to real events, of the legendary journey of the hero of *Kushnameh*, the Persian prince Abtin, to a remote country where he was warmly welcomed by the ruler Tayhur and married his daughter Frarang.

After spending some time in the hospitable country of his father-in-law, Prince Abtin decides to return home with his family, following well-known sea trade routes. Study of the text led the authors to several important conclusions:

- (1) Kushnameh is connected to the Pahlavi written tradition during the Parthian and Sassanian periods of Iranian history. In all likelihood, the Pahlavi text was orally transmitted and translated into Neo-Persian in the 11th century by Hakim Iranshan Abu-l-Khay, whose authorship of the text has survived to this day (pp. 24-27).
- (2) The term 'Basilla' for Korea, found in some of the later works of Muslim authors probably dates back to the term 'Kushnamh,' which retains a variant derived from the original Pahlavi form of Wosilla. The authors also very convincingly explain that the use of a prefix before the word Silla resulted from a scribal error that often occurred during the translation of Pahlavi texts into the Neo-Persian language (pp. 46-47).
- (3) Many details describing the conditions of Prince Abtin's host country, including the climate, nature, food, music, palace rituals, the military system, and hunting and sports customs echo the information in later sources about Silla (p. 24).
- (4) The Study of information from Chinese sources allowed the authors to establish a connection between the content of Kushnamh and the legendary story of the journey of the Sasanian prince Peroz to the Tang emperor Gaozong (649-683). The last Sasanian shahinshah Yazdegird III sent his son to China in a search for help against the Arabs. But Emperor Gaozong refrained from confronting a new unknown enemy, preferring instead to establish diplomatic relations with the Arabs. In 651, Prince Peroz and his retinue were forced to leave China. No information about his future fate has been preserved in the sources. And it makes sense to assume that he could have traveled farther east to neighboring Korea (pp. 25-26).
- (5) The name of the hospitable country in Kushnameh is not provided as 'Silla,' as in most Arab sources, but as 'Basilla.' The authors already demonstrated, though, that referring to Korea as 'Basilla' continued back to the tradition of Kushnameh (pp. 65, 154).
- (6) The author's close textual study of Kushnameh and accompanying Muslim literature allows them to conclude that the hospitable country that provided shelter to the Iranian prince was the Korean state of Silla.

(7) This information is also evidence of early Korean contact with the Near and Middle East in the pre-Islamic period. Reports about Korea from *Kushnameh* developed in subsequent works of Muslim geography, which had been changing with accumulated information about the Far East from Muslim merchants and settlers who reached Korea along the Silk Road.

The work's shortcomings include some technical errors. The authors repeatedly refer to a detailed study of Professor Lee Hee Soo "Evaluation of *Kushnāmeḥ* as a Historical Source in Regard to Description of Basillam" *Acta Koreana*, 2018, Vol.21, No.1. (pp. 39.51) which is absent from the list of cited literature. One can also disagree with the widespread use of the terms "Persian literature" and "Persian sources," since the study covers both Arabic and Persian-language literature within the framework of a coherent evolution of the Muslim geographical tradition. Perhaps the terms "Arabic Muslim literature" and "Persian Muslim literature" would be more correct.

Professor Hee Soo Lee and Iranian researcher Mohammad Bagher Vosoughi's collaborative publication is the most complete study of medieval Arabic and Persian geographical literature's perception of ties between Korea and the Muslim world. Without exaggeration, this book can be considered an encyclopedia of contact between the Muslim world and Korea in the Middle Ages. The book analyzes and summarizes almost all modern research literature on early Muslim writing about the Korean states of Silla (57 BCE - 935 CE) and Goryeo (918-1392). The publication's almost complete collection of information about medieval Muslim authors who had reported about Korea, along with the texts of their messages, is an exceptional achievement. The duplications of these manuscripts published in the book's appendix, make the publication an invaluable resource companion for anyone interested in Korea's contact with the medieval Muslim world: medieval historians, specialists in Oriental manuscripts, experts on primary source studies, and curious readers.

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