

The position of Korea in the world history of the Islamic world:

Silla and East Asia for Al-Mas'ūdī's worldview

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Abstract

This paper examines the medieval Islamic worldview in historical and geographic writings about East Asia in the tenth century, particularly two books, *Murūj al-Dhahab* and *al-Tanbīh wa-al-Ishrāf*, by al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956) about Korean history. This article aims to explore the conceptual elements in the texts about Silla to reconstruct the integration process of the foundation of the Islamic world's own cosmological world history.

The thesis' approach is situated within the field of the Abbasid Islamic history and geography, specifically in relation to the application of the synthesis of previous written knowledge from different ancient civilizations and the contemporary field data collected by the time's Muslim network over the world. Additionally, this research refers to the period dynamics among East Asian countries and their foreign relations with the Islamic world. The main argument is that the Islamic world history was the combination of the critical reception of the past knowledge of the non-Islamic world, the Islamic view of the world history, and the contemporarily acquired field knowledge.

The ninth-century Abbasid scholars first comprehended the world geography and history who introduced fragmented natural and human geographic knowledge of the Silla Dynasty (-935 A.D.). The tenth-century Arab historian and geographer, al-Mas'ūdī, set his own world history in the aspect of the Islamic context. He generated the history of Silla by integrating the previously written sources from diverse civilizations. *Murūj al-Dhahab* extended the realm of the descendants of Yāfīth (Japheth in the Bible) to Silla from existing domain of them in Europe, Central Asia, and China based on the Quran, the Bible, Tanakh (Jewish scripture), and other religious scripts.

A later book of him, *al-Tanbīh*, set seven regional clusters of the world named 'Umma' that this regional category system is derived from the ancient Persian geography 'Kishvar'. His seventh civilization among the primal nations is the co-ancestors of Sīlā and China under one king and speaking one language.

First Appearance of Silla in the Islamic World

Right after the establishment of Islam, Muslims began to record about the history of their Prophet orally and manually. With their following expansion to the wide regions from the

Atlantic Ocean to Central Asia and western India, the Islamic world initiated to arrange the history and geography. On the one hand, the earliest history concentrated on the story of the Prophet and his companions, then elaborated on the concrete individual event within the frontier of the Islamicdom. On the other hand, the first Muslim's geographic notions of the world were rather abstract concepts. Particularly, their first divisions of the world still consist of cosmologic concept and ambiguous shape. The earliest stage of the Islamic geographic understanding appears a strong influence from the Persian tradition. For instance, the pentatomic world geography shape of the bird is traced back to the Sassanid or older Middle Eastern traditions.¹

With the establishment of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, the massive absorption of the external knowledge and methodology innovatively lifted the level of the geography of the Islamic world. In the ninth century, the Abbasid court patronized a massive translation project throughout academic fields. Arabized knowledge from the Greco-Roman, Persian, and Indian world was examined, compared, analyzed, and independently comprehended. Simultaneously, intellectuals of Baghdad including the high bureaucrats of ministries launch to collect the information scattered among the Muslim travellers to the world. They began to publish the combined result of the previously written knowledge of the different foreign world with the contemporary information made by the Muslim informants over the world.

However, these first achievements by the ninth-century scholars faced a critical revision of tenth-century authors. These juniors underestimate the geography of their seniors as "armchaired" geographers, despite a significant number of these ninth-century authors travelled to the field of the targeted regions.² Among the travelled geographers of the tenth century, al-Mas'ūdī trialblazed the syntheses of the Islamic worldview with the known world geography. Especially, he pioneered the genealogy of Korean people in the Islamic context from the primal ethnic differentiations following the Islamic genesis.

¹ 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa and Spain Known as the Futūḥ Misr* /, Yale Oriental Series Researches ; (New Haven (USA): Yale UP, 1922), 1;

Ahmad, S. Maqbul and Taeschner, F., "Djughrāfiyā", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 30 July 2018

² Al-Ya'qūbī (d. 258/897 or 8), al-Dīnāurī (282/896), and others wrote the world history including the non-Islamic regions prior to this book. Some of them, such as al-Ya'qūbī also travelled a lot to the inner and outer Islamic world.

- Al-Masudi

Abu al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Mas'ūdī (c. 896–956) was one of the first authors to combine history and scientific geography in large-scale work, based on both literature and experience. He expanded the temporal and spatial concept of Islamic history and geography. His geography and history refer to Persian literature, Indian astronomy, Greek science, and other ancient cultures. Not only the previous heritages, al-Mas'ūdī exchanged with different contemporary ideas by wide contact with philologists, poets, scientists, and philosophers.³ Furthermore, he embraced different voices of the Islamic world such as Mu'tazilites and Shi'ism⁴. With not-known patron of his expense, his description does not have an explicit inclination to any denomination⁵ or specified dedicated ordering body.⁶

On top of this literature review, he added his own fieldwork experience on his own world historico-geography. He travelled the Caspian coast, India, Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, coasts of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, and Syria by land and sea.⁷ Via the journey, he observed the Islamic and foreign lands and collected field information through the contact of travellers and other authors. Exchanging large scope of contacts during the cross-bordering travels opened up his different approaches to a civilization from diverse angles. Decisively, he could update and revise the previous literature and methodologies by contacting the contemporary informants, especially the ones who experienced China or India where direct exchange with Korea is being conducted. For instance, he met al-Sīrāfī on the coast of the Persian Gulf in 323/935 who compiled the account of the Muslim merchants in China, by the hand of Sulaymān.⁸ This meeting allowed to enrich the existing knowledge of Silla written in the ninth century, and discuss to revise the texts and beliefs.

³ Shboul. *Al-Mas'udi and His World*, pp. 29ff.

⁴ Devin J. Stewart, "Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari's *al-Bayan 'an Usul al-Ahkam* and the Genre of Usul al-Fiqh in Ninth-Century Baghdad," pg. 333. Taken from *Abbasid Studies: Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies, Cambridge, 6–10 January 2002*. Edited by James Montgomery. Leuven: Peeters Publishers and the Department of Oriental Studies, 2004.

⁵ Lisan al-Mizan [258-256/4]; Siyar A'alam al-Nubala [Tabaqa al-'Ishroon / al-Mas'oodi]; Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyyah al-Kubra [Biography: 226]

⁶ Lunde and Stone assumed that he might be involved in the trade, but they simultaneously admitted that they do not know the source and the reason for this journey. Lunde and Stone, 13.

⁷ Shboul, Ahmad A. M. *Al-Mas'udi and His World*. London: Ithaca Press, 1979, pp. 3-4. Other writers including Lunde and Stone argue he even reached Sri Lanka and China.

⁸ Lunde and Stone, 1989: 11-13. Although the majority of the scholarship accept his travel story, Shboul doubts the fidelity of the parts of Masudi's journey, see, Shboul, Ahmad MH. *Al-Masudi and His World*. 1979.

- *Silla in Murūj al-Dhahab*

The Meadows of Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar (Gold and Mines of Gems) is his representative book comprehensively arranging the world historico-geography. With his later work, *Kitāb at-Tanbīh wa-al-Ischrāf (The Book of Admonition and Revision)*, *Murūj* includes the non-Islamic world history such as the line of Chinese kings or ancient events between the Assyrians and Armenians. It is contrasted to his predecessors such as the merchant Sulaymān or the Abbasid chief of information, Ibn Khurdādhbih, who were not interested in the past of the East Asians besides any relevant issue with the Islamic world⁹ that al-Mas'ūdī devoted to grant the historical meaning of East Asia of pagans in the world. Nevertheless, al-Mas'ūdī's history of primal East Asia largely depends on the Quran Bible, *Tanakh*, and other outsider's view rather than the own believed history by the East Asians.

Murūj shared three sections for Silla which is the most lengthy and detailed among the literature by the Muslim authors by the early fourteenth century.¹⁰ This book introduces Silla three times as below:

There is no known or unknown land beyond China across sea reach beside the Silla Dynasty and its annexed islands. Few strangers from Iraq or elsewhere have left there due to its sound air, fine water, food soil, abundant kindness, and lucid gems. Its inhabitants exchange with people and king of China. This gifts between them are not ceased. It is said that “they (Silla) are the descendants of the son of Amur (Gomer), and resided there, as we talked about the people of Chinese in their land.”¹¹

And the sea reaches China and Silla, encircles around the Turkic land, and reach the Western Sea Oceanus Ocean from several gulfs. 57

This is the destination of the southernmost sea of Blacks, as Silla is connected to the end

⁹ Cf. Shboul: 1979.

¹⁰ The twelfth-century Persian Epic, *Kush Nama*, is assumed to write the longest story of Silla. However, Silla of this epic is not confirmed its identification. Besides this epic, the longest contents among the extant text of the Islamic world about Silla is *Nukhbat al-Dahr* by al-Dimashqī.

¹¹ *Murūj*, 2010:54

These three sections about Silla is largely referred from Sulaymān and ibn Khurdādhbih for the description of Silla, despite al-Mas‘ūdī enriched and amended a part of the inherited knowledge about Silla. However, Silla people as the descendant of Gomer freshly appears in this book. This sons of Gomers also became the ancestor of Chinese as well. His understanding of the pedigree of the Chinese and Sillaians are explicated from the biblical tripartition of the Diasporas after the Deluge. As Islam shares the same awareness of Jews and Christians, *Yāfīth* (Japheth in the Bible), the youngest son of *Nūh* (Noah in the Bible)¹², became the common ancestor of the inhabitants of Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia.¹³ While earliest pieces of literature cover the realm of the sons of Japheth to China, al-Mas‘ūdī extended it to Silla. Attaching Silla’s ancestry to Japheth is natural considering the Islamic tradition of the ethnographic dispersion.

However, the reason is not obvious why al-Mas‘ūdī picked only Silla up among different nations of East Asia for his narration of the formation of the world ethnography.

- *Kitāb at-Tanbīh wa-al-’Ishrāf*

Shortly before his death, Al-Mas‘ūdī composed *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-al-Ishrāf* (*The Book of Admonition and Revision*) in 344-5/955-6. This assumed the last work of him. Although this book is only about one fifth the length of al-*Murūj* and a large part of *Tanbīh* is just an abridgement of *Murūj*, it contains new materials and final amendment of his previous works. *Tanbīh* is also a historico-geographical text. Particularly, through *Tanbīh*, al-Mas‘ūdī exquisite the formation of the first seven world civilizations of the world. The only published editions of the folios this book are made in 1893-4 and in 1938. Carra de Vaux translated this book into French in 1897.

Al-Mas‘ūdī revealed his various sources and how he synthesizes them for each of his contents.

¹² About the Islamic viewpoint of Nūh, see B. Heller, “Nūh,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, April 24, 2012, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nuh-SIM_5966?s.num=2&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=N%C5%AA%E1%B8%A4.

¹³ B. Heller and A. Rippin, “Yāfīth,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, April 24, 2012, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/yafith-SIM_7941?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=yafith.

For his geographic division of the world, he introduced two conceptual terms, ‘*iq̄līm*, (*aq̄ālīm* in plural)’ and ‘*Umma* (*Umam* in plural)’. Although these terms widely used for the medieval Islamic geography, al-Mas‘ūdī applied these term differently from their traditional usage. *Iqlīm* is a Greek terminology to divide the world into seven different climate zone by lining drawing parallel latitudinal lines. However, his *iq̄līm* is rather close to the Persian tradition of *Kishvar* which is a Persian geographic tradition of septimal civilization zone.¹⁴ Similar to the Persian *Kishvar*, al-Masudi’s *iq̄līm*s are the seven clusters¹⁵ in a hexagonal shape. According to him, past ‘Wisemen (*Hukamā*)’ and Philosophers (*Falsafiyin*)’ classified the inhabited or the civilized regions into seven. This *iq̄līm* system set “Babil which consists of Khorasan and Pars” in the first zone, whereas China and *Yūmārīs*¹⁶ are disposed to the seventh zone.

On the other hand, he made another radial shape septenary model of the world civilizations, seven *ummas*.

- *The Seventh Civilization, China and Silla*

Umma is an Arabic term indicates a community of people. The two most general usages of this term are, a tribe or nation of common descent, history, and language; or the Muslim community often covers a whole Islamic empire.

Al-Tanbīh’s geography also basically defined in the theological framework. Al-Mas‘ūdī defined the world beyond China and Silla as the uncivilized world.

The endmost civilization at the easternmost is the boundary of China and Silla that this border ends at the wall of *Yājūj* (Gog) and *Mājūj* (Magog) which was constructed by the Alexander the Great. This wall defends from *Yājūj* and *Mājūj*¹⁷

¹⁴ About details of the ancient Persian *Keshvar*, see, Haft-Keshvar, A. Shapur Shahbazi, “HAFT KEŠVAR,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, XI/5, pp. 519-522, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/haft-kesvar> (accessed on 30 December 2012).

¹⁵ Quran also defines the heaven and the earth are structured by seven folds respectively. “God is He Who created seven Firmaments and of the earth a similar number” (LXV, 12).

¹⁶ Bernard translated this toponym into Aromatarios. In the footnote for it, he indicated that this Amromatarios is Apuyux Tapios which is Aromatophores Islands. Carra de Vaux, Bernard. "Le livre de l'avertissement et de la revision par Maçoudi." *Paris, Imprimerie Nationale* (1897): 51, 51n1.

¹⁷ Al-Masudi, *Tanbih*, 1937: 24

Al-Mas'ūdī's made China and Silla a pair of the seventh *Umma*, contrarily his seventh *iqlīm* consist of China and *Yūmārīs*,

... The sixth region (*Umma*) is Hind and Sind. And they were connected as like. Their king was one and their language was one. The seventh region is China and Sila. And they connected as from the descendants of the son of 'Amrū (Gomer), the son of Japheth, Noah's son. Their king was one and their language was one.¹⁸

The seven *ummas* are the seven initial civilizations of the world history. Similar to the *iqlims*, the first *umma* is located in the centre of the world, and the other six civilizations are surrounding this first *umma* in hexagonal allocation. The seventh *umma* covers the regions to the east of Central Asia and between India and Turkic land. During the last twenty years before his composition of *Tanbīh*, the international situation of China and Korea had experienced extreme civil wars. About two decades before the completion of this book, the Silla Dynasty was already altered by the Goryeo. But al-Mas'ūdī kept the old regime's name, Silla, instead of the new ruler of Korea, Goryeo. In addition, all other nations of the time's East Asia such as Japan were excluded from this civilization cluster list. Why China and Silla were listed for the origin of East Asia?

Firstly, al-Mas'ūdī's East Asia basically depends on the ninth-century knowledge of the ninth-century Muslim Merchants in China. Since he never been to Korea or China, he should collect the data from others. He met al-Sīrāfī who is one of the most reliable informants about East Asia who compiled the account of India and China inherited from the merchant Sulaymān. In addition, he wrote that he referred to *Masālik* (of Ibn Khurdādhbih) which is largely based on the geographic knowledge of the information delivered to the Bureau of Baghdad. Since both of them were made around the half of the ninth century, and both the merchant and the chief of intelligence collected the newest account of East Asia, their geographic knowledge reflects generally of the second quarter of the ninth century.

The dynamics of East Asia during this second half of the ninth century was peculiar. Only

¹⁸ Al-Masudi, *Tanbih*, 1937: 72

during this period, the triangle trade among Korea, China, and Japan was dominated by the Silla Dynasty by the establishment of Cheonghaejin by Jang Bogo. In addition, there are significant volumes of the immigrants from Silla actively attended in the domestic and international trade of the Tang Dynasty. According to the diary of Ennin, this traders' community dispersed along the Great Canal and the coastline south to Jiangnan (the regions to the south of Yangtze River).¹⁹ The main Muslim informants about East Asia was the merchant group in China of which majority works around the coast of China north to the Yangtze River. Therefore, Muslims easily acknowledged the existence of Silla by direct and indirect contact in China. Moreover, contrarily to the sparse direct exchange between Japan and China during this season,²⁰ Jang's fleet gave an impression of the strong and wealthy image of Silla to the contemporary Muslims in China. From this period, the Muslim authors always shared a section for Silla to describe East Asia.

With the given importance of Silla in the Islamic geography written above, the diplomatic relationship between China and Silla made al-Mas'ūdī to imagine the co-ancestral kingdom in East Asia. He accepted his predecessors' notion about the regular tributary between China and Silla which is even sacredly evaluated being a condition for rains from heaven. In this aspect, Silla and China secured their unrivalled position in East Asia in the earliest Islamic geography, which later inherited by al-Mas'ūdī. With the special bilateral relationship between these two countries, al-Mas'ūdī contrived his own model of the world ethnic history in the Islamic context.

In sum, al-Mas'ūdī conceived an Islamic world history. His genesis before the establishment of the world civilizations is based on the theological belief which largely shares lots of common stories of the Bible and *Tanakh* (Jewish scripture). From the birth of the seven world nations, the primitive civilization of East Asia consisted of the people of Silla and China who commonly served a king and spoke one language. The numbers and the allocation of these seven civilizations are directly influenced by the Persian tradition of the world geography. However, the components of this cluster, Silla and China is a result from his critical reception of his

¹⁹ Ennin, (圓仁, 793 or 794 – 864) is a Japanese Buddhist monk who left a travelogue to the Tang Dynasty for ten years (838 – 847), '*Nittō guhō junrei kōki (The Record of a Pilgrim to China in Search of Law 入唐求法巡礼行記)*'. His diary elaborates on the Silla traders' network on the three East Asian countries.

²⁰ The Japanese official emissary of Japan of the time was Kentoshi (遣唐使) which paid the tributary to China in national level. Since 835, Japan had failed not dispatch Kentoshi to China and officially abolished it in 894. The Japanese private direct exchange with China shrank as well which accelerated the dependence of Japanese visit to the Tang Dynasty on the seafarers of Silla. This international is observed in the diary of Ennin.

seniors' literal inheritance with his own fieldwork for the contemporary hearsays of the experienced travellers to East Asia.