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ARAB GEOGRAPHERS ON KOREA

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ARABIA has long been known to the Koreans through the Chinese histories as "Tai Sik Kuk" or "Ta-shih."¹ But so far as we know there is no description of that land or of the Arabian people recorded by ancient Korean scholars. On the other hand certain Arab geographers ranging in time from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries give brief accounts of Korea: these form our subject.

During the early centuries of the Christian era three rival kingdoms are to be found occupying Korea: Paikchei in the west, Shilla in the east, and Kokuryu in the north, extending beyond the peninsula into the Manchurian country. Shilla maintained an alliance with China which enabled her in the eighth century to become the dominant state in the peninsula and, in the latter half of the same century, to unite the whole of it. Subject to fluctuations this unity was maintained until the tenth century; during this period Shilla continued to cultivate close relations with the T'ang dynasty of China, and freely absorbed Chinese cultural influences. The kingdom was finally overthrown in A. D. 935 by the resurgent Koryu power. From this dynasty, which lasted until 1392, the modern name "Korea" is derived: but the name "Shilla" persisted in general use as a designation for the whole country for several centuries after the end of the old kingdom of Shilla. It is this name which the Arab geographers always use, both before and after 935, under the form "al-Shīla" or "Al-Sīla."

Their reports begin in the middle of the ninth century. The account of Sulaymān the merchant of his travels in the Far East, written down in 851, ends as follows:²

On the sea side [of China] are the islands of al-Sīla, whose inhabitants are white;³ they send gifts to the lord of China and say that if they did not do so the heavens would not send them rain. None of our companions

¹ From Pahlawi "Tājik," modern Persian "Tāzi," meaning Arab—probably going back to Ar. "Ṭayyi," a North Arabian tribe.

² *Silsilat al-Tawārikh*; ed. Langlès and Fr. transl. J. T. Reinaud, both in *Relation des Voyages faits par les Arabes et des Persans dans l'Inde et à la Chine*, etc. (Paris 1845); Book I. p. 59 of text, 60 of transl.

³ *بيض* — possibly in the sense of "pale."

has reached their country to bring back reports about them. They have white falcons.

Sulaymān's contemporary ibn-Khurdādhbih, a postal administrator of al-Jibāl in northern Iran, wrote as follows in the geographical work which he published in 846: ⁴

At the furthest limit of China near Qānṣu are many mountains and many kings, and this is the land of al-Shīla in which there is much gold. He who enters it of the Moslems settles in it because of its excellence. No one knows what is beyond it.

This statement is copied by the early tenth century geographer ibn-Rustah.⁵ Al-Mas'ūdi writing in about 947 in *Murūj al-Dhahab* ⁶ evidently also follows ibn-Khurdādhbih in part:

Beyond China on the side of the sea there are no known kingdoms nor any country that has been described except the country of al-Sīla and its islands. Foreigners from al-'Irāq or any other land who go there seldom depart, because of the health of its air, the softness of its water, the fertility of its soil, and the abundance of its resources. Its people are on good terms with the Chinese and their kings, to whom they send gifts almost ceaselessly. It is said that they are a part of the descendants of 'Āmūr who settled there in the same manner as we described the Chinese settling in their country.

Again in *al-Tanbih w-al-Ishrāf*, not long before 956, al-Mas'ūdi writes: ⁷

The last inhabited country in the east is the furthest boundary of China, and al-Sīla to where that country ends at the wall of Gog and Magog which Alexander built.

And again: ⁸

The seventh nation is China and al-Sīla and the adjoining abode of the descendants of 'Āmūr ⁹ son of Japhet son of Noah; these have a single king and a single language.

⁴ *Al-Masālik w-al-Mamālik*, ed. C. de Goeje (Leyden 1889), p. 70. Cf. p. 170.

⁵ *Al-A'lāq al-Nafīṣah*, ed. de Goeje (Leyden 1891-2), p. 83.

⁶ Ed. with Fr. transl. C. de Meynard and P. de Courteille (Paris 1861), Vol. I. p. 346.

⁷ Ed. de Goeje (Leyden 1893-4), p. 26.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁹ This 'Āmūr is presumably the biblical Gomer, first son of Japhet in Gen. x, 2.

No further description is found until the time of al-Qazwīni in the thirteenth century. This geographer's account¹⁰ evidently follows al-Mas'ūdi in part; no less evident are the embroideries which have accumulated in the course of the centuries. Remote and little known, al-Shīla lent itself easily to description as an Earthly Paradise:

Shīla is a country at the furthest limit of China and of the utmost excellence. Afflictions of the body are unknown there because of the health of its air, the sweetness of its water and the excellence of its soil; its people are unequalled in handsomeness and freedom from disease. It is said that when the water is sprinkled in their houses it exhales the odour of ambergris. There are few plagues or diseases and few flies or lions; sick people from other countries are brought here and their sickness ceases. Muḥammad ibn-Zakariyā' al-Rāzi¹¹ said that whoever enters this land settles in it and does not depart, because of its excellence, its abundant resources, and its plentiful gold.

Lastly al-Maqrīzi (1364-1442) writes:¹²

At the side of this eastern sea beyond China there are six islands also, known as the islands of al-Sīla; some of the 'Alids who fled in fear for their lives in the early days of Islam came and settled here.

Such are the reports of Arab writers about al-Shīla or al-Sīla. The description of this place as "islands" in Sulaymān and al-Maqrīzi led Reinaud in the forties of the last century to identify it with Japan; but all the rest of the evidence points to Korea, as later scholars have generally recognized. In the first place, the Arabic name can hardly be anything but a transcription of the Korean "Shilla." Then the statements of ibn-Khurdādhbih, al-Mas'ūdi and al-Qazwīni give the impression that the country is joined to China by land. Ibn-Khurdādhbih's description, "near Qānṣu," is of little help because of its vagueness and because Qānṣu itself is difficult to locate exactly; but at least it is plain from his account¹³ that his "Qānṣu" or "Qānṭu" is on the Chinese coast to the north of the Yangtse river, possibly as far north as the southern coast of the Shantung peninsula. The only question is

¹⁰ *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt wa Gharā'ib al-Mawjūdāt*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen 1848), Pt. II. p. 32.

¹¹ The famous doctor al-Rāzi.

¹² *Al-Mawā'iz w-al-Itibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ w-al-Āthār*, ed. G. Wiet (Cairo 1911), p. 59.

¹³ *Al-Masālik*, p. 69.

how al-Shīla came to be described in some of our sources as "islands." The answer may lie in the journey from the Shantung peninsula by which travellers would naturally approach Korea across the sea.

Korea is certainly a land of "many mountains," and has a temperate and healthy climate. The soil is generally fertile and the land well-watered. The belief of ibn-Khurdādhbih that there was much gold may be merely due to the fact that the country was remote and semi-legendary; but modern excavations have brought to light many gold crowns, gold trinkets, gold ear-rings and other objects in Kyungju, the ancient capital of Shilla.¹⁴ The "many kings" of ibn-Khurdādhbih appears to contradict both the known facts and the statement of al-Mas'ūdi, but may perhaps be understood in the context as referring loosely to all the lands beyond Qānṣu, or to local chiefs. The close ties with China mentioned by Sulaymān and al-Mas'ūdi are characteristic of Shilla at this period: here we are on the most solid historical ground.

Of the Moslems in Korea several mentions are found in Korean histories. There are records¹⁵ of Moslem merchants in the tenth century, Yaraza (al-Rāzi?), Hasen Laza (Ḥasan al-Rāzi?), and Burakah (Barakah?) and their associates, who came to Korea on different occasions with presents for the king; when they left, the king presented them with golden gifts. In the early eleventh century a certain Moslem named Minabo (Munabbi'?) became mayor in Pyengyang.¹⁶ Finally it is recorded that at some date unknown Moslems came from a part of China called Yuan to Korea, and settled in one town, there remaining until the time of the Yi dynasty (after 1392). They wore their own type of clothing and headgear; and maintained their religion unchanged, building a mosque and observing the Moslem festivals.¹⁷

¹⁴ A. Eckardt, *History of Korean Art* (Leipzig 1929), Eng. transl. J. M. Kindersley (London 1929).

¹⁵ *Chosen Yuksa* (Seoul 1932), No. 3, Vol. I, p. 222.

¹⁶ *Idem.*, No. 3, Vol. V, p. 382.

¹⁷ Yi Neung-Wha, *History of Korean Buddhism* (Seoul 1917), Vol. II, p. 605.