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Seeing Silla through Besila in *The Kushnameh*[*]: On Literary Interventions in the Historiography of Transcultural Silla

Jihyeong Lee

Abstract

This article reconsiders the study of Silla's interregional history with the Persian world, a field largely framed through archaeological finds from Gyeongju. While such approaches have been crucial for situating Silla within broad Silk Road networks, they often rely on an ambiguous category of "Sasanian Persian" and perpetuate the cognitive distance implicit in the enduring geographical label of *seoyeok* (lit. "western region"). As an additional avenue, this article turns to *The Kushnameh*, a twelfth-century Persian epic that contains extensive textual references to Besila—possibly a distant recollection of the long-vanished Korean kingdom, refracted through the imagined grandeur of the Sasanian Empire. Read not for factual verification but as a site where memory, imagination, and archival potential converge, *The Kushnameh* challenges positivist certainties in ancient Korean historiography and opens the field to interdisciplinary and multiperspective approaches that invite us to see the Persianate world beyond the lingering perception of the "other."

Keywords

Kushnameh, Silla-Persia Studies, Transcultural memory, Positivist historiography, New Historicism, Ḥakim Iranshāh ibn Abū'l-Khayr.

Jihyeong Lee is a lecturer in Korean art history at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany). (jihyeong.lee@fu-berlin.de)

[*] In Persian, "کوش‌نامه", transliterated variously as Kushnama, Kūshnāmah, Kūš-nāme, among others.

Rethinking the Category of "Sasanian Persian" in Silla's Transcultural History

The historical encounter of the Korean kingdom of Silla (57 BCE–935 CE) with Persian culture is among the most widely explored topics in ancient Korean interregional and transcultural history. This attention largely stems from the art historical and archaeological scholarship that has traced Silla's presence within the vast cross-continental network, often conveniently termed the Silk Road, where goods, cultures, customs, and ideas flowed and circulated. Building on these studies, it is now widely accepted that by the eighth century at the latest Silla found itself as part of this intricate intercultural nexus, part of which linked its capital, Gyeongju, through the Tang (618–907) capital of Chang'an, to regions as distant as Baghdad and Constantinople (Fig. 1).

Extensive scholarship has produced a widely recognized catalogue raisonné of artifacts that attest to Silla's interaction with the pre-Islamic Persian cultural sphere as early as the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–

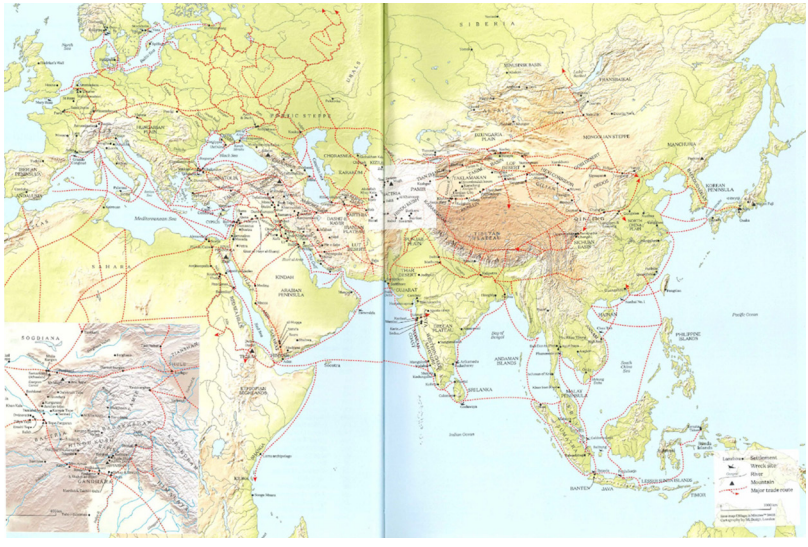

Fig. 1. Map of routes on Silk Road
Source: Whitfield 2019, 8–9.

Fig. 2. Excavation of Hwangnamdaechong Northern Mound, 1970s.
Source: Cultural Heritage Administration, accessed October 13, 2024. https://www.cha.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?nttId=82389&bbsId=BBSMSTR_1008

676 CE).[1] This chronology partially overlapped with that of the Sasanian dynasty (224–651), which has long served as a central point of reference in this established field of inquiry. The foundation of what may conveniently be termed "Silla–Persia studies" rests largely on the archaeological excavations of Gyeongju tomb sites, among which, for example, the excavation of Hwangnamdaechong in the 1970s (Fig. 2) stands as one of the most representative. These investigations provided the empirical basis for the dominant historiography and theoretical frameworks that continue to shape scholarly discussions of Silla's transcontinental presence. The excavated objects—diverse in type, form, and material—have often been interpreted as bearing Persian influence. For example, the shape of a gilt-silver bottle dated to the later Sasanian dynasty served as a com-

[1] For instance, see Gwon 1997; Lee 2016; Yim 2002; Jeong 2001a; Jeong 2001b; Ham 2008; Lee Hansang 2010; Lee Hee Soo 2009; Heo 2015; Hong 2021; Kim 2017.

Fig. 3. Comparison
(Left) Gilt-silver bottle, Sasanian dynasty (224-651), 6th-7th century, Miho Museum, Japan.
Source: Miho Museum.
(Right) Glass bottle and cups from Hwangnamdaechong Southern Mound.
Source: Cultural Heritage Administration, Korea.

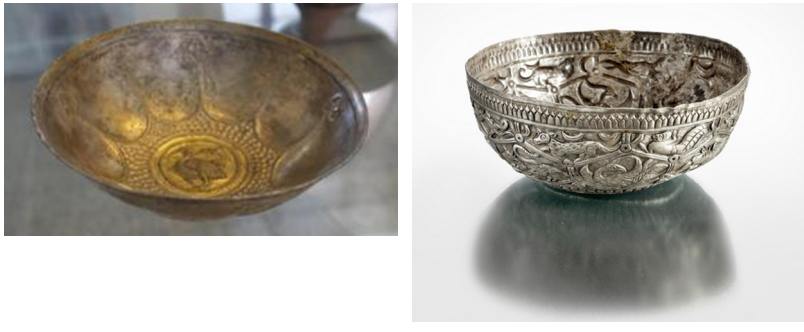

Fig. 4. Comparison
(Left) Silver vessels, Sasanian dynasty (224–651), National Museum of Iran.
Source: Kwon 2014.
(Right) Silver cup, 5th century, excavated from the North Mound of Hwangnamdaechong, National Museum of Korea.
Source: National Museum of Korea.

Fig. 5. Comparison
(Left) Stucco wall panel, Iraq, 6th–7th century. Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Inv. Nr. KtO 1084.
Source:Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin.
(Right) Decoration from the Stone with lion and peacock designs, Unified Silla (668–935), Gyeongju National Museum.
Source: Gyeongju National Museum.

parison point for a series of glass bottles and cups unearthed from the southern mound of Hwangnamdaechong (Fig. 3). Likewise, close parallels have been drawn between Sasanian silver vessels—such as one now housed in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran—and those excavated from the northern mound of Hwangnamdaechong, including an example currently in the National Museum of Korea (Fig. 4). Another case in point is the medallion design of a carved stone fragment, extensively studied by Kim Hongnam (2017) and now preserved in the Gyeongju National Museum, which has been juxtaposed with remains from the Persian cultural sphere—for instance, a stucco wall panel from Iraq, part of the Sasanian Empire until the Arab conquest of the seventh century (Fig. 5).

These kinds of visual comparisons have been taken as primary evidence of Silla–Persian interaction. This interpretive framework has become especially prominent in curatorial and exhibition contexts. A notable instance is the 2017 exhibition *Silla and Persia*: *A Common Memory*,

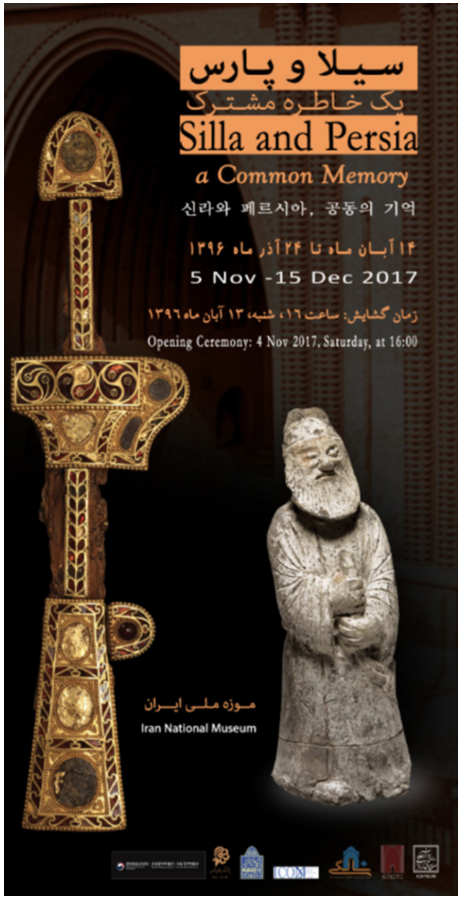

Fig. 6. Poster of the exhibition *Silla and Persia A Common Memory*, organized by the National Museum of Gyeongju and the National Museum of Iran, held at the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, November 4–December 15, 2017.
Source: Gyeongju National Museum; National Museum of Iran.

jointly organized by the Gyeongju National Museum and the National Museum of Iran, and held in Tehran (Fig. 6), which explicitly foregrounded this theme of cultural entanglement.

Yet despite the seeming clarity with which "Persian" connections have been presented, the precise meaning of this designation remains far from straightforward. The application of the "Persian" label to Silla's material remains often functions more as a conventional shorthand than as a rigorously defined category. This ambiguity is not entirely surprising, given the difficulty of delineating Persia itself as a coherent cultural system, linguistic community, or ethnic identity. When this already complex cultural entity is mapped onto artifacts discovered in the distant context of Silla, the interpretive challenges inevitably multiply.

In particular, talking about the Sasanian Empire assumes this complexity. It was not a monolithic polity but rather a dynamic formation that integrated diverse ethnicities, languages, religious traditions, and artistic

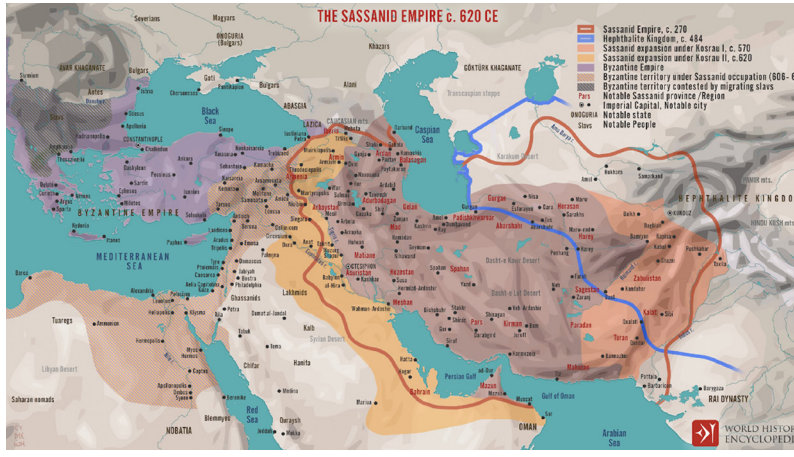

Fig. 7. Map of the Sasanian Empire
Source: World History Encyclopedia. "Sasanian Empire." Last modified January 14, 2021. https://www.worldhistory.org/Sasanian_Empire/.

practices. Its cultural sphere absorbed elements from earlier Iranian traditions, while simultaneously inheriting legacies from the Parthians (247 BCE–224 CE). Moreover, it stood at a crossroads of multiple interregional currents: engaging with Rome and Byzantium to the west, as well as the Kushans and Hephthalites to the east (Fig. 7). These exchanges created a composite cultural fabric that permeated the Sasanian realm and continued to shape the cultural patterns of subsequent Islamic dynasties as well.

Consequently, to speak of the empire as a conveyor of "Persianness" to Silla risks oversimplification. Any cultural forms that traveled across such vast distances would likely have undergone processes of assimilation, fusion, and reinterpretation. By the time they reached Silla, these elements may have borne only a mediated or transformed relationship to their Sasanian prototypes. Thus, the designation of certain Silla artifacts as "Persian" points less to a stable cultural essence than to a complex, layered history of cross-continental interaction, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

This consideration requires critically reassessing the widespread

Fig. 8. Gyerim-ro Jeweled Dagger, 5th–6th century.
Gold inlaid with garnet and glass. L. 36 cm. National Treasure No. 635. Gyeongju National Museum.
Source: Gyeongju National Museum.

Fig. 9. Pre-Scythian ceremonial dagger.
Northeastern Bulgaria, ca. 8th century BCE.
Source: Topal 2024.

tendency to subsume diverse and heterogeneous artifacts under the single, and often undifferentiated, label of "Persian." To illustrate this problem, I turn to a particularly well-known example: the jeweled dagger excavated in 1973 from the Gyerim-ro area of Gyeongju, specifically from royal tomb No. 14, attributed to King Michu (r. 262/264-284)(Fig. 8). Dated to the fifth or sixth century, this object has frequently been invoked as compelling evidence for Silla's cultural ties with Sasanian Persia.

Yet the dagger's markedly non-indigenous appearance has generated a wide range of interpretations, each situating the artifact within different cultural lineages. Its polychrome cloisonné inlay—glass and gar-

Fig. 10. Comparison
(Left) Tocharian Kumtura Caves (Right) Kizil Grottoes, Cave No. 69.
Source: Kang 2019.

net set in thin strips of gold—has been linked stylistically to pre-Scythian daggers from the Black Sea region (Gyeongju National Museum 2010) (Fig. 9). The spiral-patterned roundel has invited comparisons with Celtic decorative traditions (Yoshimizu 2002), while its meander motifs have been traced to Greco-Roman origins (Lee 2013). Additional parallels have been proposed with Central Asian artistic repertoires, such as the depiction of a man wearing a similar dagger on the ceiling of the entrance to Cave 69 at Kizil in Xinjiang (Commemorating Kazakhstan 2019) (Fig. 10). Further still, the suspension mounts have been interpreted as deriving from the nomadic Hephthalite Huns, who may have

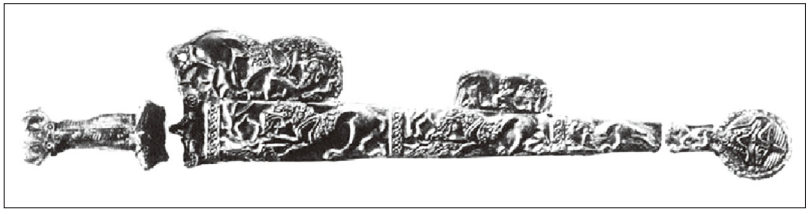

Fig. 11. Akinakes, dagger with two suspension mounts of the Hephthalites.
from the Solokha kurgan, ca. 4th century, Ukraine.
Source: Kageyama 2015.

played a key role not only in producing such objects but also in transmitting them across vast regions (Kageyama 2016) (Fig. 11).

Taken together, the Gyerim-ro dagger illustrates the broader problem already outlined: the inadequacy of 'Persian' as a categorical label. The object demonstrates rather the necessity of recognizing the complex trajectories through which artifacts traveled and the multiple cultural influences that became embedded in their forms. The recurrent use of "Persian" as a catch-all descriptor thus risks conflating a broad spectrum of heterogeneous, diasporic, and non-indigenous elements—each shaped by intricate entanglements of regional, temporal, and ethnic factors—in our scholarship. As such, the label often functions less as a marker of analytic precision than as a convenient umbrella term, one that risks obscuring, or even precluding, closer investigation into the specific affiliations, circulations, and transformations that defined an artifact's individual history.

Further, the commonplace practice of grouping artifacts as Persian in Silla studies may be reconsidered in light of the more traditional historical notion of *seoyeok* 西域, literally meaning "Western Regions." Although this term is often narrowly interpreted as corresponding to modern-day Xinjiang, in practice it encompassed a far wider expanse. Depending on context, *seoyeok* could include West and Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and, on occasion, even parts of Europe, which partly overlapped with what we now identify as the pre-Islamic Persian cultural sphere.

Rather than designating a fixed geographical entity, *seoyeok* in premodern East Asian texts conveyed a sense of cognitive and cultural distance, referring to peoples and regions perceived as lying beyond what might today be termed the East Asian cultural ecumene. The persistence of this category in modern-day scholarship—particularly within Silla studies—can be attributed not only to its frequent occurrence in historical sources foundational to our research but also to the difficulty of finding a precise contemporary equivalent that adequately conveys its semantic elasticity. Against this background, current Silla-Persia studies remain indebted to this premodern conceptual framework and are often conducted within the larger disciplinary orbit of what is called Silla-Seoyeok History (*Sillaseoyeoksa* 신라서역사). In this sense, the interpretive category of "Persian artifacts" continues to bear the associations of cultural alterity encapsulated in the term *seoyeok*—the "other" situated in a vaguely defined "beyond."

I believe that this binary conceptual lens has profoundly shaped the methodologies and narratives of Silla-Persia studies. It is evident in the way the construction of visual typologies and genealogies of objects has become a central scholarly task, often with the explicit aim of discerning the allochthonous within the autochthonous—that is, classifying the "foreign" within ancient Korean material culture. This approach has, in turn, reinforced what may be described as a diagnostic mode of inquiry, one that seeks to provide punctuated and definitive answers to the questions of "what," "when," and "from where to where" in order to facilitate typological categorization. Within this framework, artifacts tend to be treated as discrete evidentiary units—isolated points on a map of intercultural exchange—rather than as participants in complex and ongoing processes of circulation, adaptation, and transformation, which might be more productively envisioned in terms of continuity and relationality. The label "Persian," accordingly, has functioned as a convenient shorthand, designating any odd intervention into Silla's material record, often without sufficient regard for the multiple trajectories such artifacts may have embodied.

When Texts Become Proof

Another notable aspect of Silla-Persia studies is their pronounced focus on objects. This is largely a consequence of the scarcity of contemporaneous textual records that might otherwise serve as alternatives or complements. No extant accounts from the Korean Three Kingdoms period, nor from the era preceding the fall of the Sasanian Empire, provide direct evidence of contact between the two regions. Scholars have therefore had to rely on later sources which, though chronologically distant, are interpreted as offering indirect testimony for reconstructing the nature of such interactions. Korean textual references remain exceedingly scarce, whereas Middle Eastern writings—primarily Arabic and Persian texts from the ninth century onward—contain a comparatively richer set of some twenty-two references to Korea.[2]

In much of the earlier scholarship, these texts have been assigned a subordinate role, used mainly to corroborate conclusions readily drawn from studies of material culture. One of the most frequently cited examples is the *Book of Roads and Kingdoms (Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik)*, written in Arabic by Ibn Khurdādhbih (820/825-913), a high-ranking Abbasid bureaucrat and geographer of Persian descent. Published in 846 and again in 885, the text contains a brief but striking reference to "al-Silla," which has been interpreted as indicating Silla or as a more general designation for the Korean peninsula.

> At the far end of China, beyond Qansu, there are many mountains and numerous kings, and there lies the land of Silla, abundant in gold. The Muslims who enter it settle there because of its pleasantness, and no one knows what lies beyond.

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[2] This count is based on the report by Hee-Soo Lee, published in Lee 2011, 12. Since the foundational essay "Arab Geographers on Korea" by Chung and Hourani (1938), many scholars have expanded the list of Middle Eastern accounts on Korea included in Lee's text; see also Kim 2005 and Lee 2011.

> Whoever among the Muslims reaches the land at the far end of China called Silla, where there is abundant gold, will settle there due to its pleasantness and will never leave.[3]

Ibn Khurdādhbih describes al-Silla as a distant, gold-abundant land situated at the far end of China—unknown yet paradisiacal. Variations of this description recur in numerous later Arabic and Persian sources, suggesting that his account helped shape a lasting perceptual image of Silla within the medieval Islamic world.

It is quite striking how consistently these Arabic passages have been presented across various studies of Korean history. They are almost invariably treated as evidence to reaffirm what archaeological findings already suggest—or fail to suggest; for example, that Silla was rich in gold, as illustrated by the celebrated corpus of excavated burial goods such as the gold filigree earrings now housed in the British Museum (Fig. 12). This tendency reflects a broader pattern in the treatment of other relevant Middle Eastern texts. Far less attention, however, has been given to their semantic and rhetorical dimensions, the political or religious affiliations of their authors, their intended audiences, or the wider cultural meanings these descriptions might convey. Even in the case of Ibn Khurdādhbih—whose career, intellectual milieu, and writings are comparatively well documented by Islamic Studies (e.g., Bosworth 1997)—scholars have rarely explored the interpretive possibilities his work affords.

In my view, this approach reflects two persistent tendencies in the field. First, it shows the limited integration of non-Korean perspectives and historiographical traditions into the study of Silla's interregional history, thereby curtailing opportunities for international scholarly exchange and the use of sources of diverse origins. Second, it reveals the rigid disciplinary mindset that privileges tangible archaeological and material ev-

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[3] This reference is from the 1889 edition of Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik by Ibn Khurdadhbih as cited in Kim 2005, 81-82, 261. See also Ibn Khurdadhbih 1889, 70 and 170.

Fig. 12. Gold filigree earrings, 5th–6th century, Silla Kingdom, Korea.
British Museum, Registration No. 1938,0524.245.a–b.
Source: The Trustees of the British Museum.

idence, while relegating literary sources to a secondary role at best. Such narrowing of scope constrains the interpretive possibilities of Silla studies and inhibits the development of more multi-perspectival understandings of Silla's place within broader Eurasian contexts.

Silla and/as Besila in *The Kushnameh*

In light of these considerations, *The Kushnameh* (lit. "The Story of Kush") calls for renewed attention as a historical source that may open new avenues for scholarship within Silla-Persia studies. *The Kushnameh*

is a Persian epic that compiles orally transmitted tales of legendary Iranian history. Composed in the early twelfth century, most commonly dated between 1108 and 1110 CE, it is attributed to Ḥakim Iranshān ibn Abū'l-Khayr, a Persian poet active during the Seljuq Empire (1037–1194). The work now survives in a single fourteenth-century manuscript preserved in the British Library (Or. 2780).

From the late twentieth century onward, the epic underwent a process of rediscovery. In 1998, the Iranian scholar Jalāl Matīnī published a critical edition of this manuscript, making the text widely accessible to Iranian academia (Īrānshāh ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998). A decade later, Daryoosh Akbarzadeh, then curator of the East Asia Department at the National Museum of Iran, advanced the hypothesis that the epic's spatial setting of "Besila" (also "Basilla") refers to the Korean kingdom of Silla (Akbarzadeh 2008). This theory subsequently brought *The Kushnameh* into Korean scholarly debates, particularly through the extensive and rich research of Lee Hee-Soo, a specialist in Middle Eastern studies.[4]

According to Matīnī's edition (Īrānshān ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998), *The Kushnameh* comprises 10,129 couplets, of which a significant portion—3,914 couplets (Nos. 2011–5925)—is set in the city of Besila. In this context, Lee Hee-Soo (2010) has suggested that the name "Besila" may derive either from the preposition ba- combined with "Sīlā," or from the adjective *beh* (lit. "good" or "better") combined with "Sīlā," both involving phonological shifts.[5] While the precise relationship between Besila and Silla remains debated, there appears to be a broad scholarly consensus that the two are, in some manner, connected.

To understand *The Kushnameh*'s literary framework, it is important to recall its indebtedness to Abū'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (lit.

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[4] Hee Soo Lee stands as the leading authority on Kushnameh studies in both Korean and international academia, having pioneered much of the foundational research that informs the present article. See for instance, Lee 2010; Lee 2012; and Lee 2018.

[5] Lee 2018, 17–19. M. B. Vosoughi insists that the word Silā in the Islamic sources refers to the Peninsula of Korea, and the word Basillā refers to the Island of Korea. See Vosoughi 2014, 47–72. Hee Soo Lee also discussed this in Lee 2018, 17–19.

The Book of Kings), completed in the late tenth or early eleventh century. To offer a necessarily compressed introduction to this vast epic, *The Shahnameh* recounts the legendary history of Iran through the reigns of fifty monarchs, culminating in the fall of the Sasanian Empire.[6] Building upon this model, *The Kushnameh* develops the story of King Abtin — only briefly mentioned by Ferdowsi — expanding it into an elaborate narrative. Oppressed by the Arab tyrant Zahhāk, Abtin seeks refuge with King Behak of Machīn.[7] From there, he is introduced to Tayhur, ruler of Besila, where he ultimately finds sanctuary.

In this context, *The Kushnameh* describes Besila in extraordinary detail, as is exemplified by the following passages:

> "On the fifth day he [Abtin] reached the city of Besila. No one has seen anything upon the earth like Besila. Two leagues wide and just as long, filled with gardens, the gardens filled with jasmine. It was the throne of Tayhur, not a city but a heaven filled with houris. Every lane had fountains and running streams lined with cypresses. Its streets and markets were adorned, its walls built of stones laid one upon the other so neatly, nothing could fit in the cracks. Its height was so great that a hawk could not reach the top in a day. The moat encircling the city wall was so vast that the Red Sea possessed but a portion of it. Water flowed through it, and ships — more than a hundred.
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> When the city's gatekeeper opened the gate, it was as if heaven had sent a portion of itself. Such a fragrance wafted from that city that one's heart and mind would be lost. The steeds strutted spiritedly ahead and they cast gems before Abtin. Every lane and district was filled with delights, decked with Chinese embroideries. A sweet-sounding musician played on every rooftop, the whole city crying out in songs and tunes. This was

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6 For more information on the connection between *The Kushnameh* and *The Shahnameh*, see Iranshah ibn Abuʾl-Khayr. 2022, 7–26.

7 In many Arabic and Persian geographical texts, the term "China and Machin" is often understood to refer to "China and its neighboring regions." See Iranshah ibn Abuʾl-Khayr 2022, 71, fn. 11.

how the fortunate king brought Abtin to his throne.

In the elder son's soaring palace, the crowned king Abtin alighted. They decorated that heavenly abode as God adorns heaven: everywhere was gold upon lapis lazuli, the seats encrusted with rubies and yellow garnets."

(Īrānshāh ibn Abī al-Khayr 1998, couplets 2242–2260)

As a locus where Persian literary imagination intertwines with Silla, Besila is envisioned as a paradisiacal kingdom: abundant in gold, blessed with a favorable climate, and inhabited by beautiful people. Strikingly, this image resonates with other Middle Eastern references to Silla that portray the country as a hidden and mysterious land of wealth and ideal living conditions, as exemplified in Ibn Khurdādhbih's account. Yet *The Kushnameh* is distinctive in the exceptional vividness and extent of its description, unparalleled by any other Middle Eastern text. Its elaborate depictions of Besila's urban architecture, palatial spaces, natural environment, and social life far exceed the level of detail found in any other known source.

It should also be noted that the surviving manuscript contains eleven illustrations, though these have not yet been systematically studied. Akbarzadeh (2022, 163) briefly introduces one miniature dated to the 14th–15th century, interpreting it as a scene of Abtin and his retinue entering Besila depicted in Timurid miniature style. This image, however, requires closer examination for a precise reading and interpretation.[8]

Moreover, *The Kushnameh* further distinguishes itself from other accounts by presenting Besila not only as a paradisiacal land but also as a trusted political ally of Iran. By integrating Silla into a legendary narrative framework, the epic reimagines the historical trajectory of late antiq-

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[8] My own attempt to consult all of the manuscript's illustrations at the British Library was unsuccessful, as the manuscript is not currently available after the cyber-attack at the library in 2023. It is to be hoped that the remaining unpublished illustrations will be made accessible and reported in scholarship in the near future.

uity, situating Besila within an alternative, counterfactual scenario of the Arab conquest of Sasanian Persia in the seventh century. This reconfiguration culminates in the marriage between the Persian prince Abtin and Besila's princess Fararang, whose union gives birth to Faridun, one of the most prominent kings and cultural heroes of the Iranian epic tradition. Faridun eventually restores the Zoroastrian empire by overthrowing the tyrannical Arab ruler Zahhak, thereby inverting the historical outcome of the Arab conquests.

Through this genealogical fiction, *The Kushnameh* symbolically locates the ancestral homeland of Iran's epic savior in Besila, transforming the distant eastern kingdom into a narrative site of resistance and resilience. In this way, paradisiacal Besila is recast as the generative source of Iran's cultural renewal under the weight of foreign domination.[9]

Composed under Turkic Seljuq rule in the twelfth century, *The Kushnameh* is best understood as a retrospective reimagining of the Arab conquests and the subsequent collapse of the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century. Its considerable temporal distance from the actual events, together with its deliberately mythical register, sets it apart from other accounts of Silla that are regarded as "historical"—that is, factual, verifiable, and grounded in evidence. These very qualities of fictionality and retrospection have contributed to the text's marginalization in scholarship. Previous studies of Silla's history have often approached it in a narrowly extractive manner, concerned chiefly with evaluating its degree of "historical reliability."

Much like Ibn Khurdādhbih's account, *The Kushnameh* has thus been consulted in a largely passive way: valued only insofar as it might corroborate preexisting knowledge, rather than engaged on its own terms as a work of Persian literary imagination since its first appearance in Korean historical discourse. One prominent example of such efforts to "historicize" the text is the attempt to identify an actual prototype for Abtin.

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[9] My understanding of *The Kushnameh's* plot is based on the English translation in Iranshah ibn Abū'l-Khayr 2022.

Scholars have pointed to possible parallels with the flight of Peroz III (636–c.678), son of the last Sasanian king Yazdegerd III (624–651), who sought refuge at the Tang court during the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (628–683) after the Arab conquest of 651 (Comparati 2024). Read in this light, Abtin's journey from Machin to Besila has been interpreted as a literary recasting of the historical episode, in which the fantastical realm of Besila offers refuge to royal exiles after China's withdrawal of support for the Sasanians, until their hoped-for restoration of the homeland—thereby casting Abtin as a fictionalized counterpart to Peroz III (Lee 2018).

Such endeavors are undoubtedly meaningful and intellectually rewarding. Yet they also reveal how deeply our reading of *The Kushnameh* remains bound to positivist historiography and its promise of certainty. Scrutinizing the text's factual accuracy is, of course, important—if only to satisfy our curiosity about its correspondence with reality beyond the text. Yet such an approach ultimately reinforces the entrenched assumption that history—unlike, or in contrast to, literature—must necessarily mirror an external reality, a conviction that has become increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly if we acknowledge the postmodern critique that has sought to dismantle the rigid boundary between faction and fiction, within the discipline of history. Why, then, should we expect this fantastical medieval Persian epic "to be an exact mirror or have a one-to-one relationship with objective reality" (Pasco 2004, 374).

It might be useful to pre-empt possible misreadings of the argument developed here. At this present stage—when the material, textual, and contextual sources on Silla-Persia relations remain markedly limited—it is clear that *The Kushnameh* cannot be mobilized to expand or sharpen our understanding of "actual" relations between Silla and the Persian world.[10] To be clear, I am not proposing that, for example, Silla

[10] Interpretations that rely on literary sources to advance speculative factual claims have long faced criticism, a concern fully acknowledged in the present study. Such claims often center on the Cheoyong tale in the Samguk yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), particularly within what is now termed "Silla-Seoyeok history." Readings that take the tale as evidence for a Muslim

and Persia possessed any form of political closeness resembling what the narrative of *The Kushnameh* sets forth. Nor do I intend to imply that the text offers evidence for any bidirectional encounter between the Korean peninsula and the Seljuk world through concrete, verifiable contact.

My point, rather, is that *The Kushnameh* provides an opportunity to test how the disciplinary boundary of history might be extended when literary intervention is allowed to operate beyond the criterion of correspondence to "facts." In this sense, not only the historical elements embedded within the literary text, but also the historicity of its fictional dimension, may be recognized as deserving a status parallel to the forms of scholarly attention that currently prevail.

Instead of limiting our inquiry to verifying accuracy or exposing fabrication, we might ask how legend, myth, and fiction functioned as constitutive elements within medieval and later Persian historiography. In this light, the significance of *The Kushnameh* for Korean history emerges not simply in its factual claims but in the way it incorporates Silla into the symbolic recollections of the Sasanian Empire. The literary image of Besila, transmitted through subsequent traditions as a vehicle of cultural memory, thus offers new insight into how Silla was imagined and remembered beyond its borders. This perspective allows *The Kushnameh* to illuminate the "states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and emotions of the people that lived then" (Pasco 2004, 373) in relation to the Korean kingdom—as a locus of historical reality and imagined geography alike—while at the same time challenging the object-centered, Korea-focused historiography that has long dominated studies of Silla's interregional connections—where Persia has too often been reduced to a vaguely defined "western region."

Acknowledging this perspective opens the way for history and literary criticism to collaborate in Silla studies toward shared intellectual goals. As Wiener notes, "historical scholarship can profit from adopting

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community settled in Silla—common across literary studies, history, musicology, and folklore—risk conflating imaginative projection with historical fact. For a study adopting this critical stance, see Lim 2022.

Fig. 13. A Depiction Potentially Interpretable as either Abtin's Arrival in Besila or Taihur Riding in Procession.

Illustration from *The Kushnameh*, British Library Manuscript Or. 2780 (f. 202v), dated 1108–11 or 1397–1398, following the reading by Daryoosh Akbarzadeh.

Source: The British Library Archive. https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/1861/

literary practices—such as tolerance of complexity and contradiction in one's sources, a readiness to put off closure, and a greater sensitivity to the workings of imagination, to the 'fantasy' dimensions of human experience" (Wiener 1998, 620). Ultimately, this mode of inquiry requires a genuinely interdisciplinary platform, where historians, literary scholars, and specialists in area studies and material culture engage in sustained dialogue across fields.

Imagined Besilla, Remembered Silla: *The Kushnameh* and Diachronic Zoroastrian Inflections in Persian Visual and Literary Traditions

The purpose of this article is to raise a critical question concerning dominant patterns in the historiography of Silla–Persia relations within transcultural Korean history. Rather than advancing definitive historical claims, it argues for the heuristic value of allowing literary and imaginary materials to participate in historical inquiry, with the aim of broadening the scope of research to include sources that are known, overlooked, or yet to be examined.

Given the limits of space, I introduce a single example that has received little attention in Korean historical scholarship in order to illustrate how *The Kushnameh* might be foregrounded in the manner suggested here. The material appears in a brief study by Akbarzadeh (2022), who reproduces an image (Fig. 14) preserved in the National Archives of Iran that bears particular relevance to the discussion.

The illustration belongs to a lithographic edition published in Tehran in 1904 by Ḥājjī Muḥammad Nāṣir Khānsārī, based on the widely transmitted *Ajāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharāʾib al-mawjūdā*t (Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence),[11] preserved in multiple copies span-

[11] One of the earliest introductions of the Arabic text of this source to a Western scholarly audience was produced by Heinrich Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (1808–1899) in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. His edition, issued in two separate parts, is now available online; see Qazwīnī 1848 and

Fig. 14. A Man of Silla and White Falcons
From the lithographic edition published in Tehran in 1904 by Ḥājjī Muḥammad Nāṣir Khānsārī, based on Ajāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharāʾib al-mawjūdāt and illustrated by Abbās-Alī Tafreshī.
Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

ning several centuries. Composed in the thirteenth century by Zakariyyāʾ ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī (c. 1202–1283)—a cosmographer writing in both Arabic and Persian and serving as qāḍī in Wāsiṭ and Ḥilla during the reign of the last Abbasid caliph, al-Mustaʿṣim (r. 1241–58) (Smithsonian Institution 2025)—the text functioned as an authoritative exemplar of medieval Persian imaginative geography and cosmography. The lithographic version prepared by Khānsārī was illustrated by Abbās-Alī Tafreshī, about whom virtually nothing beyond his name is

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Qazwīnī 1849.

known (Akbarzadeh 2022, 164).

In visually accompanying the text, Tafreshī produced a striking representation of the people associated with the conventional toponym *Silla*: a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a long firearm, while four birds — identified as falcons and hawks — occupy the compositional center in a disproportionately dominant scale (cf. Akbarzadeh 2022, 166). Such an image feels puzzling when presented as a depiction of a man of Silla, and prevailing scholarly habits would readily emphasize the absence of correspondence to Korean attire or the irrelevance of the motifs to the country. Yet a more productive approach is to ask what interpretive possibilities arise from this visual incongruity and how its fictive features illuminate the imagined status of "Silla" in a twentieth-century source.

Akbarzadeh proposes that the motif of falcons or hawks draws upon medieval Persian literary and visual conventions and possibly upon pre-Islamic Zoroastrian symbolism in which such birds signified auspiciousness, divinity, and nobleness (2022, 167-168). He further observes that the figure's European-style clothing may have conveyed connotations of refinement or elite status within Qājār-period visual culture (1789-1925) (2022, 169). This stands in contrast in Khānsārī's edition to depictions of neighboring regions such as Japan — designated by the traditional toponym "Vāq vāq"[12] — whose inhabitants, along with those representing South Asian territories, appear half-naked and thereby implicitly aligned with visual codes of primitivism or civilizational inferiority (Fig. 15 and Fig. 16).

Interpreting the aristocratic coding of the Silla figure together with the pronounced Zoroastrian motifs in this otherwise unexpected twentieth-century lithograph becomes most coherent when considered in relation to the depiction of "Besilla" in *The Kushnameh*, as it is the only known textual source to explicitly formulate such an association. Reading *The Kushnameh* alongside Tafreshī's image suggests that the literary

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[12] For further discussion of toponyms associated with Japan in classical Persian sources, see Akbarzadeh 2015.

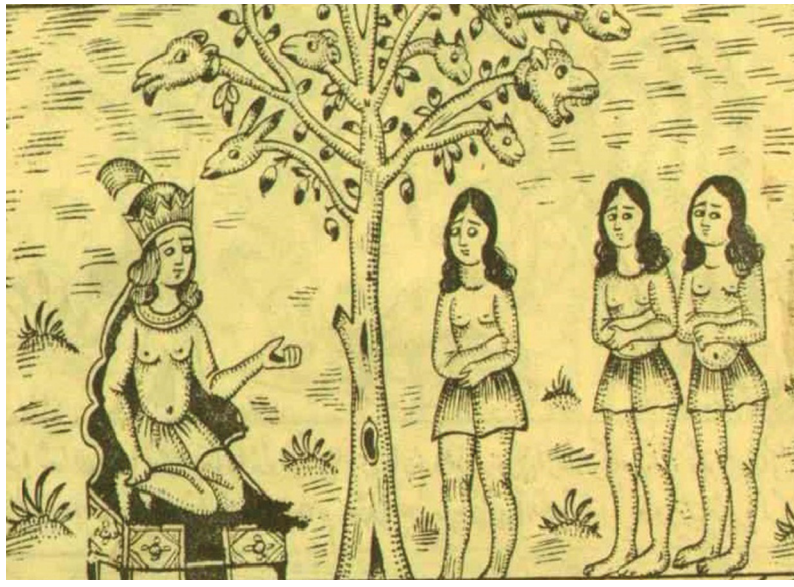

Fig. 15. People from the Island Vāq vāq
Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

imagining of Besilla continued to circulate into the early twentieth century within Persian cultural memory, likely intertwined with the enduring significance of the seventh-century Arab invasion as a "critical event" (Veena Das 1995) that remains formative well into modern Iranian identity and historical consciousness (Fozi 2015, 12).

A diachronically recurring Zoroastrian inflection attached to Silla endowed the imagined land of Besilla with a form of historical presence in Persian collective memory. Attending to this phenomenon, I propose, offers a productive point of entry into interregional and transcultural discussions of Silla-Persia relations — not necessarily as evidence of empirical historical contact, but as evidence of historical imagination.

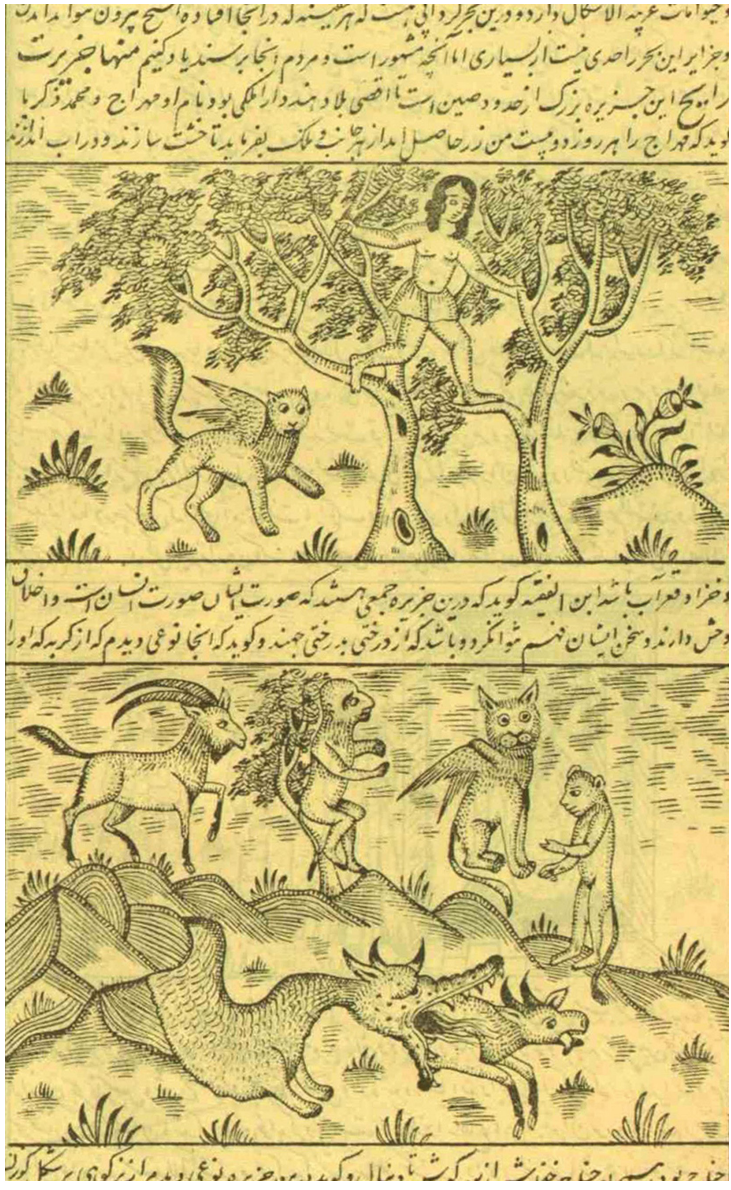

Fig. 16. People of South Asian territories

Source: Reproduced from Akbarzadeh (2022), after the original held by the National Archives of Iran.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has sought to problematize the category of "Persian" in the study of Silla's material culture and to reframe the terms of inquiry through which Silla-Persia connections have traditionally been understood. By tracing how artifacts have been labeled "Persian," how the conceptual legacy of *seoyeok* shaped those designations, and how textual sources like Ibn Khurdādhbih's *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* and *The Kushnameh* have been mobilized—or marginalized—within scholarship, it becomes clear that the prevailing frameworks of Silla-Persia studies are at once both productive and limiting. They have enabled the recognition of Silla as an actor in expansive trans-Eurasian networks, yet they have also risked reducing complex cultural entanglements to typological categorization.

Attending to *The Kushnameh* as "literature as historical archive"[13] highlights the potential of approaching Silla's intercultural history not solely through positivist confirmation but through an interdisciplinary method attuned to imagination, memory, and the porous boundaries between fact and fiction. Such a perspective encourages us to see Silla's place in Eurasia not as a series of fixed exchanges between discrete cultural units but as a long unfolding of circulation, reinterpretation, and symbolic reconfiguration across centuries.

Ultimately, interpreting Silla through the lens of Besila in *The Kushnameh* opens a site of intersection: a space where Persia and Silla converge, where history and literature meet, and where fact and fiction intertwine. At this interdisciplinary and interregional crossroads, we gain not only a deeper understanding of *The Kushnameh* but also a renewed awareness of the textuality of our own historiography. It is here that the study of *The Kushnameh* may find its most vital contribution: reframing the connectivity of Silla-Persia relations from a fresh perspective.

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[13] The expression is borrowed directly from the title of the article Pasco 2004.

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