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Silla (Korea) and Persia (Iran) along the GOLD ROADS, Emphasizing Iranian Sources

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Introduction

The renowned ancient roads were named after some goods such as silk, musk, jade, lazuli, skin, tea, ceramics, peppers, etc. Gold has always been one of the most valuable commodities exchanged between individuals, communities, or civilizations; from another point of view, gold is much more durable and valuable and easier to exchange and to protect than silk. The significant role of gold, the artifacts made of gold, its economic significance, and its role in cultural interactions and economic exchanges along the commercial roads are the reasons why some roads could be referred to as “the Gold Roads” during some periods of time. Compared to the Silk Road or the Spice Route, the term “the Gold Road” does not seem irrelevant. Despite the direct relationship between the names and the function of the afore-said roads, they did not serve to live longer than a millennium. However, the historical sources and documents reveal the importance of gold from the ancient world up to now.

According to Frankopan (2015, 202–20), researchers can consider gold as one of the possible names for some ancient roads; however, the chapter focuses exclusively on the roads built in the 15th century and does not include any historical events before that such as the trade of gold in Asia and the ancient civilizations in the East. However, the historical evidences of different civilizations around the world, such as the kingdoms of Korea, China, Iran, Central Asia, Mesopotamia, and especially the Egyptian empire along the Nile River,¹ show that the gold trade was older and more significant than that of silk.

It is noteworthy that the term Silk Road had never been written in documents, maps, or texts before 1876. It was Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1877, 499), German traveler and geographer (1833–1905), who first referred to the road as “die Seidenstrasse / Seidenstraße / the Silk

Route.” Richthofen traveled to China and Central Asia, but he used the aforesaid term in his travelogue when he was describing the spread of the Persian, Islamic, and Turkic cultures into Central Asia. However, “the Role of Brocade in Nomenclature of the Silk Road,” has been neglected by the researchers who have examined the background of the term of “Silk Road” (Bastani Rad 2019, 25–51). The main materials used in manufacturing this type of textile were Chinese, Central Asian and Iranian silk and the most expensive and high-quality gold thread, perhaps imported from the Korean peninsula, specially in the age of Silla kingdom. The Persian Silk Brocade (in Persian: Zarbaft, Zari), produced in Central Asia and Iran, was very popular in Europe and has been described by European travelers, writers, and merchants as a successful product.²

Gold mines have existed in various countries, but some civilizations were not skilled enough to exploit gold and make golden artwork and handicrafts, valuable gold jewelry, brocade, and gold thread. Samples of excavated golden artefacts left from ancient times are undoubtedly varied in Korea, Central Asia, Iran, India, Europe, etc. Every so often, the final product in one country or community depended on the raw materials imported from another country of community. In fact, Iranians needed to travel to Korea to purchase the most expensive and high-quality gold thread. Merchants brought it to Iran and Central Asia and sold it to the brocade weavers and textile workshops. As a result, Persian Silk Brocade needs be woven using the best kind of materials; for instance, during the Middle Age, the materials used by Iranian carpet and textile producers for weaving this type of brocade consisted of Chinese silk and Korean gold thread. It is noteworthy that gold thread and silk were also produced in the Iranian plateau, but sometimes, they were purchased from other lands. Given these issues, the article has focused on the description of Korean gold and its export along the maritime and overland roads after passing through thousands of nautical miles during the Old Ages.

Historical researchers, especially the Korean ones, have carried out some studies on the role of gold in international interactions, the Silla civilization and

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1. According to archaeological maps of ancient metal mines in western Asia and eastern Europe, some extractable gold mines were located in Anatolia, northern Greece, and central Africa (Benzel et al. 2010, 6). In the upper reaches of the White Nile, southern Sudan, and the Aswan Mountains, there were some famous gold mines, known as “Balad al-Tebbru” and ‘Gold Mountains’ in the Islamic Arabic and Persian sources (Qazvini 1998, 59 – 65, 85; Yaqubi 1988, 172). Naser Khosrow (1985, 41; 61–75), Iranian traveler and religious missionary, has given a detailed description of the Nile’s gold mine in his 11th century travelogue.

2. For instance, “The richer tissues, such as silk, velvet, and brocade, which were made in Persia almost before they were known in Europe, have shrunk to narrow dimensions, although a few beautiful fabrics still emerge from the native looms” (Curzon 1892, 525). Marco Polo (1914, 42–57) provided similar descriptions of the production of brocade in the cities of Tabriz (Tauris) and Yazd (Yasdi brocade) and other cities in Iran (Persia) five centuries before Curzon.

gold jewels, as well as the peninsula's cultural ties with Central and Western Asia. Some of the afore-said researches have been used and referenced in this paper. However, in ancient times, Iranians continued cultural and trade relations with the East Asia countries, including Korea. On the other hand, Persian literature and the books written by Persian writers in Arabic are regarded to be the most significant sources of commercial and cultural relationship between Iran and Korea.

The Iranian sources are of paramount importance if you are to examine Korea's cultural and trade relations with the Western and Central Asia. However, Iranian and Korean scholars have not done enough studies in this regard. A significant part of these studies has been done by researchers such as Hee-Soo Lee (2018, 1–14; 2011, 759–86; 1997) and other Korean scholars who have also translated Persian sources to Korean. Nonetheless, what has not been considered in these researches is the role of gold in the financial and cultural interactions between the two historical lands and civilizations.

Persian and Arabic Sources Regarding the Significance of Silla

Undoubtedly, since Persia (Iran) has played a key role as an intercultural bridge, Persian has been regarded as a lingua franca in cultural and commercial exchanges between the East and the West for centuries. Many researches have proven the significant role of Persian language in cultural and commercial interactions along the roads. So, "Persian had become a language of governance or learning in a region that stretched from China to the Balkans, and from Siberia to southern India" (Green 2019, 1). In fact, Europeans gained knowledge about the East through the Persian language, and vice versa. Therefore, there are enough reasons to realize why the Persian descriptions of Silla are historically significant.

After the Muslim Arab domination of Iran (Persia) and the fall of the Sassanid kingdom, for centuries, Iranians wrote their historical, geographical, religious, scientific, and literary books in Arabic although they spoke Persian / Farsi or other Iranian languages such as Sogdian (Sughd), Khutani, Balkhi, Kurdish, etc. (Skjærø 2012, 345). During the 8th to 15th centuries, the scholars in Iran have published many books and the results of their researches both in

Farsi (Persian) and in Arabic because, after the arrival of Islam (the 7th century), Arabic was used in Iranian territory as the language of religion, government, and science, especially during the 9th and 10th centuries when Muslims and Iranians found their interests in Silla. Therefore, the majority of the writings that Iranians provided about Silla during the Middle Ages are written in Persian or Arabic. More importantly, Arabic and Persian were among the common and influential languages in the trade world and on the cultural routes during the Middle Ages, and there are still relics of Persian and Iranian culture in the Eastern, Southern, and Central Asia (Lee 2011; 2018).

"Shahr-e Silla," A Rich Country in Iranians' Perspective

The kingdom of Silla is described in Iranian and Islamic historical and geographical sources (9th to 13th centuries) as an interesting and attractive land with remarkable features, including a powerful and independent territory, pleasant and beautiful weather, rich civilization, and lots of gold (for more details: Ibn Khurdadhbih 1889, 170; Qazvini 1998, 94; Sirafi 2002, 169; Sirafi 1999, 125).

The political power of the kingdom of Silla did not last until the 10th century; however, Persian and Arab records referred to the whole peninsula and the land where the Korean people resided as Silla until the 18th century. The term was written in old Persian manuscripts with two different pronunciations of Silla and Shilla, as well as some other forms such as "Lesilla," "Leshilla," and "al-Silla" in the historiographic and geographical writings left from the Middle Ages, such as *Jahannameh* (*Book of the World*) (جهاننامه), an old Persian geographical manuscript written in 1209 (Najib Bakran 1963, 9), and also "Basila," the most famous Iranian epic and romantic poetic story about the relationship with Silla *Kushnameh* (*Book of Kush*) (کوشنامه), that is written around 1110 AD (Iranshan 1998, 269; 75; Lee 2018, 2–5).

Iranian and Arab sailors, merchants, geographers, and travelers, consider Silla as the most famous land in East Asia. For example, in his Arabic travelogue in the 9th century, Sirafi (2002, 169), Iranian merchant and sailor, writes: "Beyond the China Sea (Yellow Sea) and China there is no important land, except for Silla."

In his book *Mojmal al-tawārikh wa'l-qesas* (*Summary of Histories and*

Stories (مجمل التواریخ و الفصوص), written in Persian in 1126 AD, an unknown Iranian historian mentioned a key statement about Silla: “among the countries (Shahrha), most of the gold is in Silla” (*Mojmal al-tawarikh* 1939, 481). Moreover, the author of *Jahannameh* wrote exactly the terms of “lesilla and Vaq-Vaq balād” (Najib Bakran 1963, 9), after the term of “Shahr” in order to refer to China, Silla, and hundreds of islands in the Pacific Ocean.³

In the old and middle Persian language (6th BC to 7th AD centuries), the term of “shahr” has had three meanings: a city, a kingdom and an independent country, and a civilization. It resembles the term “civil” in Latin. However, in the new Persian, the term of “Shahr” just means “a city.” For example, during the reign of Sassanid kings (224–651 AD), Iran was called *Iranshahr* (the country and kingdom of Iran). Similarly, Europeans called the country Persia because of the Persian kingdom and civilization.⁴ Accordingly, “Silla, Shahr-e Silla, Shahr-e Basilla, Molk-e Silla” (land of Silla) and Zamin-e Silla (Land of Silla) refer to the independent country and kingdom of Silla and its civilization. Therefore, according to Iranian historians and geographers, “Shahr-e Silla” and “Iranshahr” had a similar position in terms of their governments and social features. Thus, in the 9th century, when the Silla kingdom was at the height of its political power and glory, Iranian merchant, Solomon Sirafi (2002, 169; 1999, 125), explicitly writes “the kings of Silla and China were independent and share royal gifts.”

Among all the Persian and Arabic descriptions, the most beautiful literary and poetic portrayal of Silla is provided by Iranshan in his poems *Kushnameh*, an Iranian epic and romantic poetic story in 12th century, which was originally

collected and compiled centuries ago. However, Iranshan (Iranshah)⁵ has presented it in a new epic poem. The book is of great value to Korean history and culture, which describes Silla in an important chapter of the book and fortunately has attracted the attention of Korean scholars. The book tells the epic story of an Iranian prince, “Abtin” (Abetin)⁶, who went to “Shahr-e Basilla,” to ask for help from Teyhour, King of Silla, to fight the occupiers of Iran. The Iranian prince had helped the king of Silla in his war against China. He eventually marries “Fararang,” the Princess of Silla and Teyhour’s daughter (Iranshan 1998, 269–70).⁷

It is also noteworthy that in old Persian texts, two other territories in East Asia are introduced, which were called “Chin” (China) and “Māchin” (the other side of China). Some researchers referred to *Māchin* as the lands in the Eastern China or Inner China. More importantly, according to *Kushnameh*, *Jahannameh*, and other Persian works, the location of “Māchin” could be Eastern China, Korean peninsula (Silla), and Japanese, Indonesian, and Pacific islands which is called “Vaq-Vaq” in Middle Persian and Arabic texts.

The *Jāmi‘ al-tawārikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*) is a comprehensive book on the history of the world, written in 1306–1311 by Rashid-al-Din Fazl-Allah Hamadani, Iranian minister, medic, and historian of the Ilkhanate period (1247–1318). In his “world history,” he presented the term of “Māchin,” but it was pronounced “Mahāchin” in Indian which means Greater China (Hamadani 2006, 1; 13; 48–50). By China, he means Xinjiang and the western parts of China, formerly called *Khotan* by the Iranians / Persian, and “Māchin” is the Eastern China or the Greater China.

According to *Jahannameh*: “They are located in the east. They include the countries (Shahrha) of China, and the inner China which is called “Māchin,” “Lesilla” (Silla), and Vaq-Vaq balād.” Elsewhere, he explicitly writes that China has two parts, which include “China which is the inner China and ‘Māchin’ which is the outer China” (Najib Bakran 1963, 9; 70; 112). However, Najb

3. Muslim geographers and contemporary scholars have differing ideas about the Vaq Vaq (whi-whi / Vak Vak) islands. Some have described them as a complex of Indonesian island because they have counted more than 1600 or 1900 islands. Accordingly, the islands of eastern India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even Taiwan and Japanese islands are included.

4. Iran was called the Land of Iran (Iranzamin) and the Country of Iran (Iranshahr) since the ancient ages by Iranians, the wide region in the south of Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf, which was called Persia among Europeans, because of Persian kingdom and civilization. So, Persians were one of Iranian ethnics also Persian one of the Western Iranian languages’ family. Therefore, the name of “Persia” is not only today’s “Iran,” it means the cultural and historical territory of the ancient “Persian kingdom.” According to both concepts, in this article, Iran and Persia are in the same concept: historical Iran and historical Persia, which were wider than “modern Iran.” Also, in this term, when Iranians are mentioned, they do not mean only the Persians, but all the Iranian ethnics that were in the Persian territory. More importantly, most of them wrote their scientific works in Persian language or in Arabic for instance in the Islamic period.

5. Although in the edited version of *Kushnameh* by Matini, author name is Iranshan, but in some Persian sources his name is written as Iranshah which is probably more correct.

6. A Persian mythical king, the father of Fereidun in the Persian / Iranian national epic of *Shahnameh* (شاهنامه).

7. According to a Memorandum of Understanding, the book of *Kushnameh* will be translated into English and Korean in cooperation between Hanyang University and the National Library of Iran. For more detailed information on researches on the *Kushnameh* by Korean scholars see Lee 2018, 8–9.

Bakran has explained the difference between China and “Māchin,” their relationship with and distance from the territory of Iran. It is like the way Europeans use the terms Middle East and Far East. However, the important point is that he and other scholars in the Middle Ages did not consider *Silla* to be in the same territory as China; it was an independent country (Sirafi 2002, 169). Based on these data, it can be emphasized that the Korean peninsula was “Māchin” or an important part of it. There is a description about Silla by Qazvini in 1276, which goes “[t]here is a land on the other side of China” (Qazvini 1998, 94).

All of the Iranian writings both in Persian or Arabic languages show that Iranians recognized the land of Silla as an independent and powerful country, and despite the long distance between the two lands, they knew it well and would like to trade with the people of Silla.

Iran's Perspective on the Outstanding Attributes of Silla

The said Iranian writers followed a specific pattern in describing different territories based on their historiographic and geographical features. With this regard, the Korea Peninsula (Silla) has become renowned for three specific features:

- a) Great weather and the beauty of Silla,
- b) The large amount of gold,
- c) High-quality gold.

Some Iranian writers, geographers, historians, and travelers have indicated the above-said features when they described the Silla kingdom.

A'jb al-Makhlugat wa Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat (*The Wonders of Creatures and the Marvels of Creation*) is one of the most important and extensive sources focused on Iran's historiography and geography. Although several books have been written in the afore-said area, there are some historical and geographical books from the Middle Ages that have dedicated a chapter to the importance of wonders, the wonders of creation, and the land's reputation for different goods. Such descriptions have been written about the most renowned cities and territories and their specific features, commodities, and products.

The chapters on the importance of wonders in historiographic and geographical books and the books with the title of “The Wonders of Creatures

and the Marvels of Creation” are dedicated to the most significant information including the geography, wealth, climate, and history. Interestingly, Silla is one of the few lands that is renowned for its outstanding qualities and there is no sign of negative statements in the books.

Ahmad ibn Omar Rusta Isfahani, Iranian geographer, traveler, bureaucrat, and explorer in the 10th century, is one of the most important writers in this field. His Arabic book, *Kitāb al-A'lāq al-nafisa* (*A Selection of Precious Things* كتاب الاعلائق النفيسة) was written in Arabic (Maqbul 2012). The name of the book is directly related to the description of the best Muslims geographers and historians. The only available volume of the book was the 7th volume which provides the readers with a brief yet useful description of the properties of Silla.

Isfahani has written more carefully than other travelers and geographers such as Sirafi and Ibn Khurdadhbih (or Khurradāhbih) about natural geography, lands, countries, cities and their great features. He writes about Silla in a chapter of the book entitled “Characteristics of Different Lands.” It is interesting that in the chapter, after Tibet, he writes about Silla. He states that the wonders of the peninsula are so significant to him, adding that “every Muslim who enters the land of Silla—where gold is abundant there—on the other side of China, makes it his homeland and never leaves Silla” (Ibn Rusta 1967, 78; 82–83).

The other historiographical book is *Mojmal al-tawārikh wa'l-qesas* written in 1126. There is only one sentence describing Silla, which is regarded as the key statement about the remarkable features of Silla, i.e. to have gold. Moreover, it has a remarkable interpretation. The unknown author of *Mojmal al-tawarikh* has referred to the highest amount of gold in Silla, an argument that has already been mentioned by other Iranian historians and geographers. However, the important point is his comments on the abundance of gold in Silla. In fact, he aimed to describe the outstanding features of buildings and lands in a chapter, where he stated that “among the countries ‘Shahrhā,’ the largest amount of gold is in Silla, in China and its mountains” (*Mojmal Al-tawarikh* 1939, 481). It is exactly like some Iranian historiographies that have focused on the importance of wonders and the reputation of lands based on the goods found there. *Mojmal* has listed a total of 15 famous places around the world, and the seventh one is the abundance of gold in Silla. However, it did not refer to any significantly strange thing in East Asia, especially in China.

One of the most comprehensive descriptions of Silla could be found in the

book of *Ātār al-belād wa akbār al- ebād* (*Monuments of the Lands and Historical Traditions about Their Peoples* (آثار البلاد و اخبار العباد). It created a remarkable portrayal of the land by pointing out the social, geographical, and cultural characteristics of Silla. The manuscript is a geographical text which is written by Qazvini, the Iranian scholar, geographer, and judge. Originally written in Arabic in 1276 during the Ilkhanate Mongol period, the book was translated to Persian by a Qajar Prince called Jahangirmirza (1830–1840). According to the Iranian geographical tradition, Qazvini has divided the land regions of the earth into seven categories based on their climate. He placed Silla in the first category. *Ātār* describes the specific characteristics of each “Balad” (country / province / territory) as follows:

“There is a land on the other side of China. Pleasant and beautiful. They say if you smell the water in the land of Silla, the smell of an ambergris grows up. Due to the good weather, nobody gets sick in the country. The people of Silla are the most beautiful ones and there are fewer diseases there. If anyone gets sick in another country, he will recover if he goes to Silla. Silla has the best weather and fruits and the largest amount of gold and silver stock” (Qazvini 1998, 94).

Silla, The Starting Point for the Ancient GOLD ROADS in the East

Golden crowns, monuments, and threads as well as “its intricately crafted ornaments, many in resplendent gold” have turned the kings of Silla and the ones in the Unified Silla Kingdom into golden kings and civilization (Lee and Leidy 2013, 7–8). These are all great examples of the role of gold in naming the roads connecting Iran (Persia) and Central Asia to Silla the “Golden Roads.” Among the golden artworks, of course, the most curious case was the golden dagger found inside Gyerim-ro Tomb 14 in Gyeongju / Kyongju, which is called “City of Ancient Tombs” and “Capital City of Silla” (Hwang 1963, 22–33; Yi 1965, 19–21). The discoveries in the great Tomb of Hwangnam / Hwangnam Daechong as the largest Silla tomb reveals that Silla has played an important role in the artistic interactions along the cultural and commercial roads (Cheo 2014, 1–20).

The artwork is the most important evidence of a strong commercial,

cultural, and political relationship between Iran and Silla around 1500 years ago. The researchers of the National Museum of Korea examined the dagger and stated that “based on its distinctive shape and production technology, which have never been seen in other Silla artifacts, the scabbard is believed to have been produced in the sixth century in Iran or Central Asia” (National Museum of Korea, Treasure 635).⁸

Although the dagger was produced in the 6th century, it is exactly like the dagger belongs to the Persian-Achaemenid kingdom which carved in Persepolis in 5th–6th centuries BC in the complex of bas-reliefs on the East Stairs of Apadana Palace at Persepolis during the Achaemenid era. There are some inscriptions of the representatives of different territories under the rule of the Persian kingdom. They came to Darius I when they had in their hands the best commodities found in their land, including a Pazyryk carpet, a lion from Ilam (Khuzestan), a camel from Balkh, Armenian golden cups, Scythian horses and dresses, and the dagger by Medians. The dagger was fastened to the belt of “the king of kings, Darius.” Moreover, the dagger has been carved on the statue of Darius in Susa and is kept in the National Museum of Iran (Mousavi 2012, 174–77).

Researchers can easily ask “what is the relationship between the dagger found in Gyeongju (in 6th century) and the one carved on the walls of Persepolis (in 6th BC century)?” This, of course, reflects the trade and cultural ties between the two lands of Persia and Korea in ancient times. In fact, the countries were two important centers for the production and consumption of gold in the ancient world.

Archeological findings in Korea, especially in Gyeongju (Geumseong), show that Korean artists have been highly skilled in the production of jewelry during the Silla era (57 BC–935 AD). The last three centuries of the Silla civilization are significant in the history of trade relations with the West of Asia, especially since 668 AD because the kingdom ruled for the next three centuries as the Unified Silla Kingdom, a period of trade and cultural contact with Tang Dynasty in China and with the Sogdians as the rulers of trade routes in the eastern territory of Sassanid Iran and Central Asia. The culmination of the art of goldsmith in Korea dates back to the 5th to 7th centuries which coincided

8. National Museum of Korea, accessed January 20, 2021 (<https://www.museum.go.kr/site/eng/relic/recommend/view?relicRecommendId=519707>).

with the Sogdians territory in Central Asia and late Sassanid kingdom in Persia and Western Asia (for more details, Lee 2018, 5). Trade and cultural relations between the Korean peninsula, China, Central Asia, and Iran (Persia) depended on the conditions, i.e. whether there was a conflict between Silla, Balhae, and Tang dynasties in the 8th to 10th centuries or not (for more information on the buffer zone for peace, Kim 2014, 108–10).

The use of gold and silver in the artworks, artistic and cultural interactions by gold or silver wares—also tiles in China and the Korean peninsula, and special Persian blue and gilded ceramic in Iran and Central Asia—is an important issue that needs more research (for an example of detailed research on tiles in 12th century, Cho 2021, 127–76). In fact, the simultaneous study of the golden relics of cultures can help to discover forgotten information of the golden roads.

The discovery of numerous Sassanid coins and artworks such as silk fabrics together with the Sassanid kings' figure in the eastern cities of China can be served as important evidence that proves the Sasanian trade relations with Chinese port cities on the west coast of the Yellow Sea (Daryae 2009, 137). Therefore, it is clear that Sassanid kingdom had strong commercial, political, and cultural ties with the Silla civilization on the East coast of the sea.

There are many examples of artistic and literary works that can be analyzed if we want to study the history of cultural interactions and trade between Iran and Korea. However, the Iranian writings about Korean gold is a topic that needs to be examined from a variety of perspectives.

Precious Gold Artwork in Ancient Persia and Silla

Bronze age began on the Iranian plateau and Central Asia since the 3rd millennium BC. It is notwithstanding that several golden rings, sequins, beads, and sheets have been discovered in the Choga Sofla hill in Zeidun (Zohreh). It is south of Behbahan in Khuzestan province in the northwest of the Persian Gulf, which was once an important center in a pre-Persian civilization in Iran. The artwork belongs to the late 5th millennium BC (Moghaddam 2018, 220–21). Based on the previous archaeological researches, “the earliest gold objects so far discovered in Persia consist largely of items of foil-covered jewelry, found mostly within tombs of the late fourth millennium in western Persia also in the eastern

in Kerman, at a time of intercultural contact with Mesopotamia in 3500–3200 BC” (Ross and Allan 2012, 68). As a result, the beginning of the trade and production of gold in the Iranian plateau is estimated to be at the end of the late fifth and early fourth millennium BC. Since then, many golden artifacts have been made in the Iranian plateau and have been excavated, some of the most important of which are included: Ziviyeh (Ziwiye), Kurdistan; Kelar Dasht, Mazandaran; Hegmataneh in Hamedan; Marlik, Gilan, etc. For instance, in the north of the Iranian plateau, the most significant gold artifacts have been discovered in the southwest of the Caspian Sea in Marlik, which belongs to the 2nd millennium BC, which among them the Marlik Cup is some famous (Negahban 1962, 663–64).

According to archaeological excavations, many golden works have been discovered in Iran, Central Asia, and Afghanistan which are nowadays kept in different museums around the world. A notable example of archeological excavations was found in Balkh / Bactria, Afghanistan (1978–1979). It is the most important golden art treasury ever been excavated. The Persian name of the site is “Tillya Tepe” (Hill of Gold). More than 21,000 gold objects have been excavated. They were all located in six rooms with a combination of multicultural artifacts (Dubbini 2014, 1–22; Sarianidi 1985). The intercultural interactions of Persian-Parthian, Kushan, Siberian-Scythians, Chinese, Hellenic-Bactrian, and also Korean in the jewelry industry of “Tillya Tepe,” is the most significant point. It is noteworthy that the golden crown from tomb VI in Tillya Tepe is very similar to the golden crowns of Gyeongju, Silla.

The most important collection of golden works which dates to the period of the Achaemenid (550–3 BC) is known as the “Oxus treasure,” that is a collection of 180 artifacts of precious sculptures and ritual accessories of gold and silver which were discovered (1876–1880) in the Takht-i Sangin, on the north bank of the Oxus River in Tajikistan (Curtis 2004, 293–338).⁹

Tillya Tepe and Oxus treasure are located in the southern side of the Central Asian trade routes, a place that is exactly in the middle of the commercial and cultural roads in the ancient world. Places were not far from the “Zarafshan” River, where miners have long been digging out gold since the civilization of Ancient Persia. The Persian term of *Zarafshan* means diffuser

9. The bulk of the collection is presently housed in the British Museum, London.

of gold, and it is made up of the words “zar” (gold) and “afshan” (spreader or distributor). Until the 17th century, the river was referred to as “Sogd” and Samarkand River; which is derived from the name of the Sogdian civilization, ethnic, and the city of Samarkand, the capital of Sogdiana.¹⁰

In his Arabic geographical book, *Ketab-e Albuldan* (*Book of Lands*) (كتاب البلدان) written in 891 AD, Yaqubi (1988, 125), historian and geographer, stated that “gold ingots are obtained in the Samarkand River (Zarafshan) and there is no gold anywhere in Khorasan¹¹ except for, as I have heard, the gold that is found in this river.”

It is noteworthy that 2500 years ago, Darius I (522–486 BC), Achaemenid king of the Persian kingdom, has ordered in his inscriptions to import gold from Sardis (Anatolia), Balkh (Bactria), and Sogdia¹² (in Central Asia) to Persepolis and Susa (Susiana) in Khuzestan, southwest of Iran (Kent 1950, 144). The former cities are among the most important areas in the East-West trade and cultural roads, which today are known not as the “Gold Road,” but as the “Silk Road.”

In addition to the inscriptions of Darius I, on the East Stairs of the Apadana at Persepolis, there is a procession of carved figures portraying the governors ruling over various territories of the Persian kingdom bringing tribute to the Achaemenid king in the day of Nowruz, the first day of the year in the Persian Solar Calendar. There were also some groups of people carrying golden works or golden soil brought all the way from Sogdia (on the banks of the Zarafshan River), Sindh, Balkh, and Sardis (Marquart 1901, 148–50; Mousavi 2012, 174–77).¹³ The sculptures in the carved monuments are among the oldest examples of figures offering golden gifts. More importantly, the tradition of donating gold to Persian kings has always been popular in Iran (Persia). It is noteworthy that such a tradition was also observed by the people of the Silla civilization in the peninsula.

Manufacturing jewelry and golden items was usually carried out by

goldsmiths (Zargar) (goldsmith).¹⁴ Those who work on gold form a special group. They usually work in a special part of the Persian “Bazaar” called “Bazāre-e” or “rāsteh-e Zargarān” (the Bazaar of goldsmiths or the Gold Market). Nowadays, there are dozens of historical bazaars in the old cities of Iran, Central Asia, India, Turkey, and Caucuses, where one can spot goldsmiths in a special part of the market called “Bazāre-e Zargarān,”¹⁵ which means “the jeweler’s bazaar.” A section (Rāsteh) of the goldsmiths’ market manufactured gold thread for brocades. In addition to gold with high quality, proficiency and specialty are needed in the process of making gold thread for weaving Persian Silk Brocade (zarbaft). According to the historical records, for these reasons, Iranian textile manufacturers were obliged to buy the required gold or gold thread from the lands far away, including Eastern Asia.

As mentioned before, brocade has been one of the most important textile products in Iran. It is made of colored silk, gold, or silver threads to weave the valuable fabrics, royal cloth, and carpet. It is also customary for a large number of communities in the eastern and western territories along the historical roads to weave such fabrics. One of the most famous types of brocades is called Persian Silk Brocade (Zarbaft), which consists of silk and gold thread and are woven in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.¹⁶

These evidences show there were some gold mines in Iran, but some scholars have mentioned that for instance in the territory of Safavid Iran, there were no gold and even copper mines (Matthee 2000, 225), while today some of the largest copper mines such as in Kerman, ancient gold mining site of Zartorosht in Jiroft (Momenzadeh 2002), also Zarshuran (washing gold) in

14. Many people are known by surnames which are related their grandfathers worked on gold (zar and tala in Persian) such as *Zarrin*, *Zarrini*, *Talasaz*, *Talakoub*, *Zarinkoub*, *Zarkoub*, *Zardouz*, *Zarshenas*, etc.

15. For instance: *Bazare-e Zargarān* in Kerman and Zargar-bazaar in Tabriz, Iran; *Zargarān Bazāre* in Kohat, Pakistan; and *Taq-i* (arch) *Zargarān* in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

16. The other names of “dibāy-e zarbāft” or “zabraft” include “zarbaft,” “zarafshān,” “zartaft,” “zaridoozi,” “zaribāfi,” and “zar-andar-zar.” The Persian word “zar” equals “gold” in English and the infinitive “Baftān” (weaving) has other forms such as “dooz” (douz), “tāft,” and “bāft.” Valuable goods are regarded to be the most expensive textile. After eighty years, the most important research on Persian textile and brocade (Zarbaft) is still Ackerman’s articles in *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (Upahm Pope and Ackerman 1938): “Textiles through the Sasanian period” (1: 681–715); “Textiles of the Islamic Periods. A. History” (3:1995–2162); “Textiles of the Islamic Periods. B. Russian Document on Persian Textiles” (with Vladimir Klein) (3:2163–74); and “Persian Weaving Techniques. A. History” (3:2175–220).

10. Pronunciation in Uzbek: *Zaravshan*, which also exists in Urdu, Turkic, as well as some of other languages around the Persian region.

11. Historical or Greater Khorasan is a large region in northeastern Iran and western Central Asia.

12. Also, Soghdians were influential in commercial, social, and cultural relationships along the roads between the East and the West in Sasanid and Islamic period up to 10th century (Edvard V 1997–1998, 307–28).

13. For more information on the evidence of golden treasures in Persepolis, see Mousavi 2012.

Takab. But my idea is that Iranians needed to import high grade gold from other lands, not only in ancient and medieval ages but also in later periods such as Safavid age (16th to 17th centuries).

Silla in the Glorious Age of Gold Trade

The last three centuries of the Silla kingdom (7th to 10th AD) in the Korean peninsula, coincided with the fall of the Sassanids kingdom and the Arab conquest of Persia. During that era, there were plenty of textile workshops that manufactured “zarbaft” (brocade) in many cities and villages in Iran, Central Asia, and Iraq. Moreover, royal workshops were established in order to produce valuable and aristocratic garments by brocade fabrics. Therefore, weavers needed high quality gold thread to produce the best fabrics which were later imported from Silla (Herbert 1905, 321; Chio 2006, 41).

One of the most important topics that can provide us with the required information and data on the reasons behind business travels to Silla is to describe the quality of Silla’s gold in Iranian and Muslim geographical and historiographical texts in the 9th and 10th centuries. We are indebted to travelogue writers, historians, and geographers for the available data on Silla’s gold thread. It is impossible to recognize the genuine sample of gold thread made in Silla; however, the written sources have offered adequate and accurate data on the export of high-quality Korean gold thread to the countries in Western Asia, especially Iran, and the ones in Central Asia.

A well-known Iranian geographer and bureaucrat of the 9th century (826–912), called Ibn Khurdadhbih,¹⁷ was born in Khorasan, Iran. He worked for many years in the ministry of Islamic government in Baghdad and wrote his book almost at the same time as Sirafi in the 9th century. The significant point is that Ibn Khurdadhbih “was not, apparently, the first geographer to write in Arabic, but he is the first whose book has survived in anything like its original form” (Bosworth 2011, 37). Ibn Khurdadhbih is among the first Iranian geographers to describe Silla. His Arabic *Kitāb al-masalik wa'l-mamalik* (*The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* كتاب المسالك و الممالك) is the oldest Arabic reference

book on the Islamic period, which provides information about the lands of East Asia, especially Silla, the civilization and culture of Korean peninsula, and the export of gold. Two chapters of the book provide important facts about Silla, geographical attributes such as sea, mountains, weather, as well as gold exports: “On the other side of China, along with Qansu (Guangzhou),¹⁸ there are many mountains and kings, there is the land of Silla, which has a lot of gold. The Muslims who go to the land, stay there and after that the land is not a well-known land” (Ibn Khurdadhbih 1889, 70).

He is the first Muslim geographer who recorded his observations about Silla. His findings were later confirmed by other authors, including his statements on the abundance of gold and the reasons why Muslims stayed in Silla and did not return to their homeland: “Whoever goes to the land of Silla—that has a lot of gold—will never leave, because the weather is so good” (Ibn Khurdadhbih 1889, 170).

Ibn Khurdadhbih did not refer to the export of gold thread from Silla in the 9th century, but later geographers and historians will talk on it. In spite of its glorious days during the Sassanid era, after the Arab conquest of Iran (651 AD), the use of gold threads in weaving Persian Silk Brocade was banned for several centuries, because it is Haram (unlawful) for Muslim men to wear gold (Haram / unlawful). The reports written by Ibn Khurdadhbih who lived about 250 years after the advent of Islam indicates that the gold thread was not considered to be one of the essential goods imported into Iran and other Islamic lands. Brocade textiles manufacturing revived in the 10th century, especially in Khorasan and Transoxiana, based on the ancient heritage left from the Sassanid period. Therefore, Iranians began to produce Persian Silk Brocade and needed Korean golden thread.

Iranians have always portrayed brilliant pictures of Silla in at least a single part of their books on world wonders. For instance, in his travelogue, Solomon Sirāfi (Sulaymān, al-tājir) provides one of the earliest and most important descriptions about the weather and the glory of the Silla civilization and the reasons behind the migration of Muslims, in particular. He was an Iranian merchant and sailor (the 9th century), born in Sirāf, an ancient port on the

17. Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Abdallah ibn Khordadbeh (Ebn Khurradadhbih).

18. Muslims went to Qansu (Khanfua / Canton / Guangzhou) for trading. They also started their journey from Canton to go to Silla and other ports in eastern China, the Korean peninsula and Japan; and hence, Muslim geographers in their books addressed the direction to Silla from Canton.

north coast of the Persian Gulf and traveled from Sirāf Port (probably in 852) and through the northern beaches of the Persian Gulf to the Yellow Sea along the maritime road. The significant feature of Sirāfi's travelogue was that he is neither a political ambassador nor even an academician. In fact, he was a sailor and merchant. Most importantly, his book shows no signs of religious or patriotic prejudices. His journey was important since he wrote the events during his journey and narrated them to others. Sirāfi named the book as *Akhbar al-sin wa al-hind* (أخبار الصين والهند) which is سلسلة التواریخ (Silsilat al-Tawarikh) now available to us. The title of his book was "Silsilat al-Tawarikh" (Renaudot 1733, VI; Bastani Rad 2016, 32–33).

An excerpt of Sirāfi's descriptions of Silla in the 9th century is as follows:

Beyond the China Sea (Yellow Sea) and China, there is no important land, except for Silla. Anyone from abroad and foreigners, from Iraq and other lands, who traveled to Silla, never went back to his own homeland since Silla has a healthy weather, fresh water of springs, and arable soil. There are just a few people who have returned. There is peace between the people of Silla and China and the kings of two countries send presents to each other. These are the children of Amur,¹⁹ and a group of Chinese people have migrated to the land of Silla. (Sirafi 2002, 169)

During the 10th to 20th centuries, there were silk fabric workshops in most cities of Iran and Central Asia (Schmidt 1935, 284–94). Iranian artwork, particularly woven fabrics and textiles, such as brocade, rug, and carpet, have always been of great importance and popular among Europeans. There are major examples of Persian woven fabrics in famous European museums.²⁰ Moreover, there are many descriptions of the said artwork in the travelogues of Europeans (Polo 1914, 42–57). At the same time that the Mongols ruled wide parts of Asia, brocade and gold thread production became widespread in Iran, Central Asia, China, and East Asia (Shea 2021, 381–415).

The majority of the portrayals of Persian Silk Brocade by Europeans belonged to the 16th–19th centuries. Henry-René d' Allemagne (1863–1950), Librarian, historian, and researcher of French decorative arts, has offered a more detailed description of the said brocades than other travelers who had visited Iran and Central Asia (Allemagne 1911.). It is noteworthy that his trip to Iran coincides with Richthofen's creative idea of naming the historical road of Asia "The Silk Road" in 1876. The main purpose of Henry's journey was to collect the most expensive and valuable woven fabrics and textiles, particularly the Persian Silk Brocade in Central Asia and Iran (Bastani Rad 2019, 25–51).

In his book, *Khorasan-Bakhtiari travel literature*,²¹ Allemagne has provided the most comprehensive data on Iranian fabrics, including the description of fabrics with velvet and flowerbeds with gold thread, the way gold thread was used in weaving silk carpets and manufacturing brocades, the production of women's dresses embroidered with gold thread and pearls of golden textiles, and the use of gold inscribing holy books, like Qur'an, illuminating book covers and painting with gold.

Persian Silk Brocade has been valued for several reasons which are as follows:

- a) The quality of silk thread,
- b) The quality, delicacy and thinness of the gold thread,
- c) The art of knitting,
- d) Continuity in manufacturing after hundreds of years,
- e) Variety in design, tailored to the geography of knitting, etc.

Iranians produced high-quality silk threads in the Sassanid era. In fact, while they imported silk from China, they gradually developed silkworms and produced silk (Shepherd 1951, 145–47). There were silk fabrics woven by the Sogdians in the Sassanid era discovered in China. Among the Iranian silk artworks, some pieces which have been discovered in China are on display in the China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou (Zhau 2012, 58–70).

However, the role of high-quality gold thread used for weaving brocade should be given special attention. In fact, gold thread, Silk and cotton cloth have been the most important gifts of the Korean emperors to other kings and lords (Herbert 1905, 321).

19. A mythical human-prophet in Arab pre-Islamic religions who believe that the people of East Asia are of his race.

20. Such ones are Museum of Fine Arts Boston (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/66579>), Textile Museum of Lyon (<https://en.lyon-france.com/Discover-Lyon/culture-and-museums/Museums/textile-and-decorative-arts-museum>), and Victoria and Albert Museum, London (<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O153351/textile-unknown/>).

21. *Du Khorassan au pays des Backhtiari* (Allemagne 1911).

There is no doubt they usually gave away their best goods, i.e. gold thread as gifts. On the other hand, thousands of kilometers away from the land of Silla, in West Asia, the Iranians were well-known brocade weavers and have had a long history of designing fabrics, rugs, and carpets. Although Iranians have been artisans in goldsmithing, they were no longer allowed to manufacture gold thread. As a consequence, they had to import it from other countries. Silla has been designated as the most important exporter of gold thread in the Middle Ages. Weavers in Iran and Central Asia needed gold thread made in Silla to produce Persian Silk Brocade. Therefore, traders had to take one of these two roads to reach the Korean peninsula: the overland road from Iran to Central Asia, China, and the Korean peninsula, the maritime road from the Persian Gulf to Yellow Sea, and the Korean coasts which were commonly used more than the land road.

The maritime road was longer than the overland one. For instance, in order to travel from Central Iran to the Korean peninsula, caravans passed more than 10,000 kilometers through Central Asia and northern China. In fact, they needed to go 20,000 kilometers east to get to Silla along the maritime. It is noteworthy that the voyages to Silla were much more successful than the long journey taken by caravans. It is most probably due to the dangers of land routes which are more than those of maritime routes. Providing those sailors owned great knowledge and competence in dealing with their ships and weather forecast in the ocean, especially the Indian monsoon, they could have a safe voyage to China and the Korean peninsula. Therefore, more merchants took the sea road. As a result, we have more access to the data gathered on the maritime road. Consequently, examining the history of the Silla kingdom and the Persian kingdom confirms that their communications and interactions were developed through maritime routes rather than on overland roads.

Conclusion

According to the cultural and commercial background of the ancient roads, the two lands of Iran and Korea have long developed cultural and commercial interactions although their territories are thousands of miles apart. One of the top Korean products have been the works of goldsmiths that have provided Iranian textile industry with some basic embroidery supplies that help them

make their manufactured fabrics and rugs more elegant. There are some historical records found in Iran that can provide proof for the import of gold from Korea to Iran over the past millennium. These evidences have long been neglected by many scholars. Based on the issues discussed here, not only silk but also other commodities such as gold were transported from one country to another along the ancient roads. In fact, some of these roads could have been called "Gold Roads / Routes of Gold." Researchers on the history of art and textile industry experts can study the role of Korean gold mines in the development of Iranian artworks based on the descriptions found in ancient Iranian sources as well as the artistic works, especially the Persian Silk Brocades displayed in museums.

On the other hand, the excavation of the earliest objects from the Silla kingdom in South Korea indicate the export of these objects from Iran (Persia) to Korea (Silla). In addition to reviewing the artifacts discovered in archaeological studies, we examined the description of Iranian sources in Persian and Arabic languages. The results showed that, although the two civilizations were very far from each other and even sometimes they were exposed to foreign invasions, like Iran in the 7th century, their relationship continued to grow.

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Abstract

The Korean archaeological excavations and the available Persian, Arabic, and Chinese historical and geographic sources from the Middle Ages speak of a longstanding commercial and cultural relationship between the two ancient civilizations of Iran (Persia) and Korea (with emphasis on the Silla kingdom), particularly from the 6th to 10th centuries. The history of trades and cross-cultural interactions between different territories along overland and maritime roads in the ancient world have always referred to gold as an essential and valuable commodity. Moreover, according to the historical evidences found in a number of Iranian sources as well as the results of the excavations in Silla's capital city of Gyeongju, Korea has been one of the top gold-producing countries. Regarded as one of the most valuable traded commodities, gold thread was needed in Iran and Central Asia where it was utilized in the textile industry of Persian Silk Brocade. According to a number of Iranian travelers, geographers, and historians, Persians and Arabs traveled to the Korean peninsula mainly because of the abundance of gold, good weather, and the beauty of Silla. The Iranian records indicate that the trade of gold has had a significant role in the business market. Based on these records, some of the ancient commercial and cultural roads, or their branches such as the main road from Korea to Central Asia, Iran, and Anatolia, could be renamed as the Gold Roads / Golden Roads.

Keywords: Gold Roads, Korea (Silla), Iran (Persia), Central Asia, brocade, gold trade