



ASTARĀBĀD

ASTARĀBĀD (or **ESTERĀBĀD**), the older Islamic name for the modern town of Gorgān in northeastern Iran, and also the name of an administrative province in Qajar times.

i. History

ii. Monuments

i. History

The district and province. This lies at the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea, and is essentially a lowland and piedmont area, rather drier in climate and habitat than the semi-tropical regions of Māzandarān and Gilān further west; it forms in fact a transition area, both from the climatic and the vegetational aspects. It is bounded by the Gorgān river to the north, by the Alborz mountain chain (q.v.) to the south and east, and Māzandarān to the west. Along the Caspian coastal plain, the most prominent natural feature is the lagoon (*mordāb*) of Gorgān or Astarābād, one of the few lagoons along this coast which still has open water, though even this is now silting up and shrinking in extent; already in the early years of this century, the British consul Rabino was informed that it had greatly diminished in area during the preceding sixty years. The lagoon is about forty miles long and five to ten miles wide, and is almost enclosed by the sandy spit of Mīānkāla some thirty-five miles long, covered with scrub and only thinly populated. At the eastern tip of the spit lie the three islands making up Ašūrāda (q.v.), occupied after



1841 by the Russians, with Persian permission, as a naval station to check Turkmen piracy. At the eastern end of the district, the entry of the Gorgān river into the Caspian is marked by various of its former channels. The terrain here is semi-arid, and north of the river shades into the fully-arid Gorgān steppes, stretching to the mouth of the Atrak river and beyond it into Soviet Turkmenistan. Village and urban centers in the district tend to lie inland, where the Alborz foothills begin, and the town of Astarābād or Gorgān itself lies some twenty-five miles from the Caspian, with the port of Bandar-e Šāh on the actual sea coast (See H. L. Rabino, *Māzandarān and Astarābād*, GMS, London, 1928, pp. 67-68; *Admiralty handbook*, Persia, London, 1945, pp. 143, 152-53; *Camb. Hist. Iran* I, pp. 52-53).

Administratively, Gorgān had been considered in Sasanian times as part of Khorasan (Ya'qūbī, I, p. 201; Ṭabarī, I, p. 819; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 131 n. 1), but in early Islamic times it formed a separate unit. Under the Safavids, the old province of Gorgān was constituted as that of Astarābād, extending from Māzandarān in the west to the Turkmen tribal areas of Ḥājjīlār and Geraylī in the east (cf. for these last, Rabino, op. cit., pp. 83-84); in the course of the 10th/16th century, it was governed by Safavid princes, including Shah Ṭahmāsp's brother Alqās Mīrzā and his son Esmā'īl Mīrzā (K. M. Röhrborn, *Provinzen und Zentralgewalt Persiens im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1966, pp. 17-18, 43). Under the Qajars, the province of Astarābād was more extensive, stretching across the Alborz to Jājarm and the western fringes of Khorasan; then under Reżā Shah Pahlavī the *šahrestān* of Gorgān was more restricted. It now comes within the second *ostān* of Iran; in 1950 the *šahrestān*'s population was 155,200 (Razmārā, *Farhang* III, p. 254).

The town. The pre-Islamic history of Astarābād (Esterābād in the spelling of Sam'ānī [Hyderabad], I, p. 199, but Astarābād in Yāqūt, I, p. 242) is obscure, and it is not certain that the town existed then, although it may be identifiable, in the surmise of J. H. Mordtmann (in *Sb. Bayr. Akad.*, 1869, p. 536), with ancient Zadrakarta. It was clearly overshadowed in early Islamic times by the town of Gorgān, the name also of the province (classical Hyrcania, Arabic Jorjān), a town which lay on the Gorgān river at its confluence with the Kormā-rūd, although Astarābād is described by Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 378, tr. Kramers p. 368) as being one of the four main towns of the province, together with Gorgān town, the port of Abaskūn (q.v.), and Dehestān.

The first Arab raids into the region of Gorgān took place in the caliphate of 'Oṭmān, when Sa'īd b. 'Āṣ appeared there in 30/650-51, and levied on the local



malek a tribute of 200,000 dirhams (Balāḍorī, *Fotūḥ*, p. 334; Ṭabarī, I, pp. 2836, 2839). A further raid by Saʿīd b. ʿĀṣ took place in Moʿāwīa's reign, but real subjugation did not come until ʿOmar II's caliphate, when in 98/716-17 Yazīd b. Mohallab imposed Arab rule on a local *marzbān* called Fīrūz b. Qūl and on the Šūl or Čöl Turks of the adjoining Dehestān steppes, founding the town of Gorgān (Balāḍorī, op. cit., p. 336; Ṭabarī, II, pp. 1323, 1332; Marquart, *Ērānšahr*, pp. 73-74). This may also be the time when Astarābād itself was founded, since one tradition connects it with Yazīd and says that he founded it on the site of the village of Astarak (other popular etymologies connect the town's name with the Persian word *setāra* (star) or *astar* (mule)).

We know little specific about the process of Islamization in the town and region, though this was probably slow, given the tenacity of Zoroastrianism and old Persian ways of life in the Caspian lands and the frequency of rebellions by local Iranian potentates against Arab domination; later, however, Shiʿism was to acquire a strong representation in Astarābād (see below). Nor do we know when Nestorian Christianity was finally extinguished there (Gorgān is described as the seat of a bishopric in accounts of the synods of 430, 499, and 577 (see I. Guidi, "Ostsyrische Bischöfe und Bischofssitze im V., VI. und VII. Jahrhundert," *ZDMG* 43, 1889, pp. 396, 399-401, 404)).

During the early Islamic period, Astarābād is sporadically mentioned in the chronicles. Thus in 275/888-89 the rebel Rāfeʿ b. Hartama besieged the ʿAlid Moḥammad b. Zayd in Astarābād for two years until he forced the latter to flee from Ṭabarestān completely (277/890), and he also received the submission of the local ruler Rostam b. Qāren (Ebn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmel*, Beirut, 1385-87/1965-67, VII, p. 434; Ebn Esfandiār, *Tārīk-eṬabarestān*, abridged tr. E. G. Browne, Leiden and London, 1905, p. 238). The province of Gorgān was disputed in these years by the Saffarids and others, and then in the early 4th/10th century by the Samanids in their drive across northern Persia and by various local Caspian and Daylamī chiefs. In 310/922-23 Astarābād was being governed by the Daylamī Mākān b. Kākī, appointed over it by the ʿAlid ruler Abu'l-Ḥosayn b. Ḥasan b. Oṭrūš, but was attacked by the Samanid generals Sīmjūr and Moḥammad b. ʿObaydallāh Baḷʿamī and temporarily occupied by them (Ebn al-Aṭīr, VIII, pp. 131-32). It then became involved in the expansionism of the Buyids towards the Caspian, so that in 371/981 the great Buyid amir ʿAzod-al-dawla's forces invaded Gorgān, and his brother Moʿayyed-al-dawla drove out the local Ziarid ruler Qābūs b. Vošmagīr to Khorasan (ibid., IX, pp. 10-11; Ebn Esfandiār, tr. p. 226). The province then fell to the Buyid amir of Ray, Fakr-al-



dawla, and it was with him that the fugitive Samanid slave general Abu'l-‘Abbās Tāš Ḥāḡeb took refuge in 373/983-84 after the ascendancy in the Samanid capital Bukhara of a faction hostile to him. Faḡr-al-dawla then granted to him Gorgān, Astarābād, and Dehestān as an *eqṭāʿ* for him and his troops; Tāš died there of plague in 377/987-88 (Ebn al-Aṭīr, IX, pp. 27-28).

The geographers of the 4th/10th century do not give us a great deal of information about Astarābād. Eṣṭaḡrī praises it as an important center for the raw silk trade, and on the testimony of the *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, it also produced finished silk textiles of the *mobram* and *zaʿfūrī* varieties. Interesting is the mention in the latter source that the people of Astarābād spoke two languages, the *l.w.trā* of Astarābād and the standard Farsi of Gorgān province; Minorsky (*Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr., p. 386) noted that the local Astarābād dialect was still used in the 9th/15th century by the Ḥorūfī sectaries for their religious propaganda. Maqdesī (Moqaddasī) enthuses over the town, mentioning its Friday mosque, built soon after the Arab conquest. Its fortress was, however, ruinous by his time (ca. 370/980) as a result of the Buyid-Ziyarid fighting, and its defensive ditch filled in; a severe earthquake in Astarābād recorded by the historians for 345/956-57 (Ebn al-Aṭīr, VIII, p. 517) may also have been a factor here. Much reference is made by the geographers to the port on the Caspian which served Astarābād, Abaskūn (Eṣṭaḡrī, p. 213; Maqdesī, p. 358; *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. p. 134, see 32.4; Yāqūt, I, p. 242; Le Strange, *Lands*, pp. 375, 378-79; R. B. Serjeant, *Islamic Textiles; Material for a History up to the Mongol Conquest*, Beirut, 1972, p. 81).

Astarābād is not much heard of under the Saljuqs, but in the 6th/12th century it came within the dominions of the local Bavandid ruler Šāh-Ġāzī Rostam (534-58/1140-63, see [Āl-e Bāvand](#)), whom we find in 554/1159 mediating in a fierce outbreak of *fetna* within the town in which the local ‘Alids and their Shi‘ite partisans had trounced the Sunni Shafe‘ites; and had beaten up their *qāzī*; though himself a Shi‘ite, he took severe measures against the ‘Alids and restored the injured *qāzī* to his position (Ebn al-Aṭīr, XI, p. 250). At the time of the Mongol invasions, the Great Khan Ögedey’s lieutenant Čin-Temür appointed the local Espahbad Noṣrat-al-dīn of Kabūdġāma (the easternmost district of the Gorgān region, modern Ḥāġjīlār) as governor of all the province (Jovaynī, tr. Boyle, II, p. 487). Some years later, in the middle years of the 7th/13th century, the ravages of the Isma‘ilis of the Alborz Mountains fortresses at Astarābād and in Kabūdġāma are mentioned (*ibid.*, II, p. 542).

From this time onwards, Astarābād replaces Gorgān as the most important



town of the province, and there also accelerates the infiltration into the eastern part of the province of substantial Turkmen elements. Hence the region suffered much insecurity only momentarily assuaged when in 916/1510-11 the Safavid Shah Esmā'īl I led his campaign into Khorasan and drove out the Uzbek governor from Astarābād (Röhrborn, op. cit., pp. 17-18). By the end of the 11th/17th century, Astarābād was the main concentration-point for the Qajar tribe of Turkmen, comprising the Qoyunlū or sheep-herders and the Develū or camel-herders, and it served as the tribe's base as it consolidated its power in the confused decades of the 12th/18th century consequent on the fall of the Safavids. Āqā Moḥammad Khan's father Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan was governor of Astarābād and Gorgān in 1163/1749 and made himself virtually independent there; and it was in Astarābād that the future first Qajar monarch was born. Under the Qajars, it acquired the by-name of *Dār-al-mo'menīn* from the large number of *sayyeds* resident there. In the early years of the present century, when Rabino visited it, Astarābād still retained its mud-brick walls and towers, some four miles in circumference and provided with five gates, but these were much in disrepair and presented no barriers to Turkmen marauders. Its importance as a center of Shī'ite piety was still to be seen in the considerable number there of mosques and tekkes (40), shrines (11) and *madrasas* (8), and the population numbered some 10,000 (*Mázandarān and Astarābād*, pp. 71-77, listing all these buildings and also describing the inscriptions on them).

Under Reżā Shah Pahlavī, Astarābād was re-named Gorgān, thus acquiring the name of the old province and its former capital (the site of the former town of Gorgān being now deserted). In 1950, the *šahr* (town) of Astarābād/Gorgān had a population of about 25,000 (Razmārā, *Farhang* III, p. 255).

For modern Astarābād see [Gorgān](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also G. Melgunov, *Das südliche Ufer des Kaspischen Meeres*, Leipzig, 1868, pp. 101-24.



J. de Morgan, *Mission scientifique en Perse* I, Paris, 1894, pp. 82-112.

A local history of the town (of which the author was a native) and of Samarkand also (where he lived) was written in Arabic by one Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Edrīsī (d. 405/1014-15), but has not survived; see Barthold, *Turkestan*³, p. 15, and Brockelmann, *GAL*, S. I, p. 210.

For a useful collection of documents related to the history of Astarābād see M. Dabīḥī and M. Sotūda, *Az Āstārā tā Estārbād* VI- VII, Tehran, n.d.

See also E. Ehlers, *Iran—Grundzüge einer geographischen Landeskunde*, Darmstadt, 1980, s.v. Gorgān. Kayhān, *Joḡrāfiā* II, pp. 304-10.

(C. E. Bosworth)

ii. Monuments

Medieval geographers speak more about Astarābād's fine climate and products than its architectural setting. Moqaddasī (p. 358), however, mentions that by the 4th/10th century, its citadel (*ḥeṣn*) was in ruins (undoubtedly from Buyid incursions against the Ziyarids) and notes that its congregational mosque (*jāmeʿ*) was located in the bazaar (*sūq*) beside the river. The oldest extant building is the brick minaret attached to the congregational mosque (Iranian National Monument 181; illustrated in Hutt and Harrow, *Iran* I, pl. 67). Its brick patterns and Koranic inscriptions band suggest a 6th/12th century attribution, but the surrounding structures are more modern. A number of inscriptions attest to constant renovations. A 1018/1609 wooden inscription now placed above the *menbar* states that the mosque was begun under Abū'l-Qāsem Bābor Bahādor Khan and completed during the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-1629), while a second wooden inscription dated 1157/1744 records a restoration under Nāder Shah Afšār (r. 1148-60/1736-47). Several stone plaques in the lecture hall dating from the reign of Shah ʿAbbās through the Qajar period record other royal decrees, edicts, endowments, and restorations (texts in Rabino, *Mázandarán*, Persian text, pp. 25-34).

The other major extant monument in Astarābād is the Emāmzāda Nūr (Iranian National Monument 346; illustrated in Hutt and Harrow, *Iran* I, pls. 131-33), a polygonal baked brick tomb which, according to a prayerbook kept inside, honors a descendant of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem. In the interior is a superb cut plaster *mehrāb* and a plaster cenotaph with Kufic inscriptions encased in a wooden lattice. While undated, on the basis of its brick



decoration, the mausoleum may have been built as early as the 6th/12th century, but with later restorations. The doors, for example, were made by the joiner Ḥājjī Moḥammad on the orders of the Amīr Jalāl-al-dīn Bāyazīd Jālīlī Ḥosaynī in Raḡab, 867/March-April 1463, and similar doors dated 873/1469 are found in the Emāmzāda ‘Abdallāh (Rabino, op. cit., p. 75).

Safavid monarchs called Astarābād a *dār-al-molk*, and another popular epithet, *dār-al-mo'menīn*, probably refers to the large number of *sayyeds* living there. While the congregational mosque and the Emāmzāda Nūr are the only two extant, classified historical monuments, many other religious buildings must have existed. The early twentieth century traveler and scholar, H. L. Rabino, lists numerous mosques, shrines, and *madrasas* and gives the text of several inscriptions dating from the 16th to 19th century, including various endowments of water and a 17th-century minaret.

See also [Gonbad-e Qābūs](#).

N. Meškātī, *Fehrest-e banāhā-ye tārikī o amāken-e bāstānī-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970, pp. 190-91; tr.

H. A. S. Pessyan, *List of the Historical Sites and Ancient Monuments of Iran*, Tehran, n.d., pp. 178-79.

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Description of the town in the early 20th century and list of inscriptions in H. L. Rabino, *Mázandarán and Astarábád*, GMS, N.S. 7, London, 1928, pp. 71-77; Persian text, pp. 25-52.