



## GEREŠK

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**GEREŠK**, a small oasis-city on the right bank of the Helmand river in Southern Afghanistan, the headquarters of the district (*woloswālī*) of Nahr-e Serāj (see below) within the province of Helmand (q.v.). It is located at an altitude of 840 m near the easiest passages over the middle Helmand. These were originally a succession of several fords practicable for foot passengers; at times when the river was unfordable, rafts or ferry-boats were usually available, apparently manned since the 18th century by a state-colony of persianized Baluchis reputedly settled there by Nāder Shah (Yate, p. 7: Sahibdad Khan, p. 255: *Gazetteer* II, p. 95): sometimes one had nevertheless to cross on elephant back (Todd, p. 349). Only in 1938 did the crossing conditions improve with the opening of a 980 meter-long concrete and iron bridge built by a German company (Nāhež, p. 423).

The place has therefore long been primarily a prominent crossroads, strategically situated at the convergence of the roads running along the Helmand, both downstream towards Sīstān and upstream towards Ġūr/Ġōr (q.v.) and Hazārajāt, with the main trunk road between Khorasan (Herat) and India via Qandahār. It has been occupied since antiquity, as shown by numerous remains around the city, some dating back to the Parthian era: the main site, known as Kohna Gerešk (Old Gerešk), 2 km northeast of the present city, reputedly destroyed by Nāder Shah in 1150/1737 and demolished by a subsequent flood of the Helmand (*Gazetteer*, p. 92), has yielded Islamic ceramics dated from the 8th to the 16th centuries (Ball, I, nos. 274, 378). The name of Gerešk, however, does not appear in sources before the 17th century,



and none of the towns of Zamīndāvar quoted by classical Arab geographers seems to be identical with it, neither Dartal nor Fīrūzqand as suggested respectively by Le Strange (*Lands*, p. 346) and Barthold (p. 74; also Cornu, map XIX). Safavid and Mughal armies bitterly fought for the control of Gerešk fort and ford in the course of their long-standing rivalry about Qandahār. In 1047/1638 there was a Persian “governor” there, an indication which points to the importance, at least strategically, of the place (‘Inayat Khan, p. 231). In the 19th century the site of present-day Gerešk was occupied by an impressive fortress that commanded the fords and was the stronghold of the Moḥammadzay branch of the Bārakzay tribe (q.v.); at the foot of it a small village of about 100 families had grown, with an unimportant *bāzār* and a toll station (Forster, II, p. 121; Ferrier, p. 310; Marsh, p. 171; Sahibdad Khan, p. 268).

The urbanization of the site exemplifies the process of administrative promotion and its ups and downs. Proper urban functions began to appear after Gerešk had been chosen as headquarters for the huge Pušt-e Rūd district (*ḥokūmat-e kalān*), a district which belonged alternatively to Qandahār, Farāh and Kabul provinces until it gained administrative autonomy as the sub-province (*ḥokūmat-e a'lā*) of Gerešk (later province of Helmand). The capital function was ultimately lost in 1336 Š./1957 to the more centrally located, albeit more isolated, new town of Laškargāh (see BOST ii), the seat of the Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA), 90 km south of Gerešk. Downgraded to the command of an administrative unit of lesser importance, Gerešk has since vegetated or even declined if the drop of its population from an estimated (but possibly inflated) level of 8,000 inhabitants in the 1940s (Ali, p. 112) to 5,000 in the returns of the census of 1358 Š./1979 is to be trusted. It remains, however, the geometrically built former administrative center, with an active *bāzār* organized along two long straight streets crossing at a right angle between the old fortress (*arg*) and the Boḡrā canal, reopened on the right bank of the Helmand in 1328 Š./1949.

In 1357 Š./1978 the service activities included a small hospital (ten beds), with a larger one under construction, three schools with 1,470 pupils, and ten mosques. The main economic activities were the *bāzār*, with 700 shops, and the Highway Maintenance Unit, with 300 employees (Radojicic). The *bāzār* seems to have expanded during the 1970s, since it had only 449 shops in 1351 Š./1972 (Wiebe, 1976a, p. 172 and map). Its central part, however, has slightly declined with 245 shops in 1356 Š./1977 against 263 in 1351 Š./1972 (Wiebe,



1981, p. 160). Decisive factors were the growth of transit traffic on the Qandahār-Herat road and the rural prosperity of the region (see below). A small industrial activity was represented by a hydropower plant opened on the Boḡrā canal in 1335 Š./1956 with a capacity of 2,400 kw, and a cotton gin newly opened in 1359 Š./1980. The mausoleum of Sayyed Moḡammad Āqā Tājdār stands near the *arg*; it has only local significance. Nothing is known of the present situation in Gerešk.

The *woloswālī* of Nahr-e Serāj takes its name from an old irrigation canal first restored in 1910-14 on the left bank of the Helmand. It covers an area of 1,663 km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of 70,000 inhabitants according to the returns of the census of 1358 Š./1979, mostly concentrated along the Helmand and the canals derived from it. The district being included in the upper part of the Helmand Valley Project area, its water supply greatly improved in the 1950s-70s, allowing an exportation of fruit and vegetables, especially melons, to Qandahār, Kabul and Herat to start (Caudill, p. 38). The area also served as winter quarter to about 500 nomadic families in the late 1970s.

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