



GORGĀN II. DAŠT-E GORGĀN

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ii. Dašt-e Gorgān

Dašt-e Gorgān is the designation of a steppe-region of approximately 10,000 km² near the southeastern edge of the Caspian Sea, stretching for almost 200 km east-west between Morāva Tappa and the coast of the Caspian Sea near Gomišān. Its north-south extension is about 50 km and reaches from the Perso-Turkmenistan border along the Atrak River to the foothills of the Alborz range. Another traditional name for this region is Torkaman Şahrā, characterizing at the same time the specific and dominant composition of its population. While the term Dašt-e Gorgān is mainly used to denote those parts of the region within the borders of Persia, the term Torkaman Şahrā has a wider geographical application and includes the traditional grazing grounds of the Turkoman nomads north of the border. Dašt-e Gorgān is thus a transitional zone between Persia and Central Asia. This transitional character is apparent in relief and geomorphology, in climate and, above all, in its vegetation cover.

Physical geography. Both terms, *dašt* (q.v.) and *şahrā*, indicate first of all the prevailing character of this region as a plain, gently sloping and descending from a height of about 100 m near the foothills of the Alborz to the coast of the Caspian Sea (28 m below mean sea level). This means that the gradient of the slope is extremely low. Between Gomišān near the coast of the Caspian Sea and Gonbad-e Qābus, i.e., over a distance of approximately 100 km, the terrain rises by only 60 m (gradient of 0.06%). Not one single elevation disturbs the



overall impression of an extremely pronounced sand dune to the north of the area and the general flatness of the Dašt-e Gorgān. The same holds true for the results of fluvial erosion. Although three rivers (from north to south: Atrak, Gorgānrud, and Qara Su) cross the steppe-plateau in an east-west direction, their incision into the surface is rather moderate, although several terrace-systems are clearly to be differentiated. The rivers Atrak (q.v.) and Gorgānrud have developed remarkable levee features with back-swamps and meanders, indicating the pronounced lowland character of these river regimes and their response to changing sea level of the Caspian.

The geomorphology of Dašt-e Gorgān is directly affected by the recent geological history of this specific region. In terms of historical geology, Dašt-e Gorgān is nothing else but the sedimentation area of a formerly much bigger and further reaching Caspian Sea. Several times in recent geological history and for the last time during the last ice age, when the level of the Caspian Sea was 70 to 80 m higher than today, large tracts of the Dašt-e Gorgān were submerged and subjected to the accumulation of marine, lacustrine, and fluvial deposits. Silt, sand, clay, and loam are the basic materials with which Dašt-e Gorgān was built up. Easily eroded by wind and water, they nevertheless form very fertile soils, especially in areas where there is sufficient rainfall. Wind erosion, very active in the form of steadily blowing winds from a northeasterly direction, have contributed greatly to the differentiation of the steppe soils. While in the north of the Dašt-e Gorgān sandy soils prevail and even larger tracts of sand dune fields can be seen, south of the Gorgānrud finer soils are increasingly found with huge accumulations of loesses towards the southern fringe of the Dašt-e Gorgān and in the foothill region of the Alborz.

This very distinct and pronounced north-south transition is accentuated by corresponding changes in climate and vegetation. The climate of Dašt-e Gorgān is unique compared to all other areas of the Caspian lowlands of Persia and decisive for its steppe-like character. In general, rainfall, although abundant for the southern fringe of this area, decreases considerably over short distances towards the north. While meteorological stations like Gorgān or Šāhpasand may receive an annual average of 600 to 800 mm rainfall, stations like Āq Qal'a (formerly Pahlavi Dez) or Gonbad-e Qābus (located only 20 km north of the two aforementioned places) may receive only half of these average amounts. For 1964, Eckart Ehlers (1970, p. 19) observed precipitation totals of 588 mm for Gorgān and 1,097 mm for Šāhpasand, while Pahlavi Dez



and Gonbad-e Qābus received only 244 mm and 405 mm respectively. The decrease of the average precipitation is continued towards the north: the border post of Čāt on the Turkemenistan frontier received only 134 mm of rain in 1964. In contrast to precipitation changes from south to north and from west to east within the Dašt-e Gorgān, the temperature regime seems less differentiated. The overall annual precipitation average is about 16 to 18 C with comparatively mild winters and hot summers. The overall climatic situation is formed by the juxtaposition of a humid-mild winter and an arid-hot summer season.

The natural vegetation cover reflects the climatic variations within the Dašt-e Gorgān. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the foothills of the Alborz as well as the transitional loess-belt of the southern fringe of the Dašt-e Gorgān were covered with dense forests. Now, only isolated residuals of formerly extended forests (e.g., near Fayzābād and Šāhpasand) as well as smaller tree-stands as the basis of huge alluvial fans demonstrate the ecological potential of this region. Towards the north, the increasing aridity corresponds with a typical steppe-vegetation in which trees are absent. Instead, grasses and herbs of different kind prevail (*Bromus*, *Agropyron*, and *Trifolium* species as well as *Cynodon dactylon*, *Lolium perenne*, and others). Altogether, it is a typical *Sueda*-steppe with only a very few wooden species such as tamarisks and mimoses. North of the Gorgānrud, even the more or less dense steppe-vegetation cover is reduced to predominantly salt-tolerant species such as *Anabasis setifera*, *Salsola aurantiaca*, or *Haloxylon* species.

Historical geography. The transitory character of the Dašt-e Gorgān is also true in a historic and anthropological perspective. As mentioned before, relief and geomorphology are characterized by a pronounced monotony of the natural landscape. Pre- and early historic settlement sites in the form of mounds (*tappa*) are, therefore, the most striking topographic feature of the region. Number and location of the mounds, many of them far beyond (north of) the present-day settlement area, indicate not only a once much denser population in this area, but also and consequently much more favorable climatic conditions. Such a view is supported by archeological evidences. Pre-World War II excavations of some *tappas* have concluded not only a total population much higher than today (Arne, p. 39), but also a predominantly farming population within a natural environment, in which a very versatile wildlife reflects much more humid climatic conditions than today (Amschler). More recent archeological results (Deshayes, 1967, *passim*; Crawford) have



confirmed such views and postulate settlements dating back to the sixth millennium B.C.E. Interpretations of these and other findings in regard to the post-glacial climatic history of the Dašt-e Gorgān are to be found in Ehlers' study (1971).

The next and probably most striking feature of the transitory character of the Dašt-e Gorgān is the remains of a huge wall that used to serve as a defensive structure. This fortification crosses the Dašt-e Gorgān in an east-west direction over a distance of approximately 180 km extending in an eastward direction from the coast of the Caspian Sea to the hills of Piškamar. Long time considered to be built by Alexander the Great and called Alexander's Wall (Sadd-e Eskandar, Qizil Alan), it is now generally believed to be a defense system constructed by the Sasanians against intruders from the north (Kiani; see also [FORTIFICATIONS](#)).

Our knowledge of the Dašt-e Gorgān becomes somewhat better for the medieval times, partly due to the political importance of the city of Gorgān/Jorjān near present-day Gonbad-e Qābus and the ruling dynasty of the Ziyarids, who, starting with its founder Mardāvij b. Ziār in 315/927, established an emirate that ruled more or less independently for almost a hundred years. It is during this period that Gorgān as their capital city experienced a remarkable growth and is described by early Muslim geographers as a mighty and flourishing city protected by walls and crossed by the waters of the Gorgānrud (Eṣṭakri, pp. 212-13; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 382-83; tr. Kramers and Wiet, pp. 372-73; Moqaddasi, pp. 354, 357). It fits the transitory location of this region that the Ziyarids were not only the first to try break loose from Arab rule, but that they were also the first to be conquered by the Saljuqs under Toğrīl Beg in 433/1041-42 (Ebn al-Aṭir, Beirut, VIII, pp. 496-97). It was with the Saljuq conquests that Central Asians invaded Dašt-e Gorgān. The Saljuqs, a part of the nomadic Gōzz tribe (q.v.), must have settled here, since Abu 'Abd-Allāh Moḥammad Šarīf Edrisi in the middle of the 12th century speaks of the "Oğoz country" for the Dašt-e Gorgān. While there is only little doubt that the present day inhabitants of this region, the Turkmen, originate from the Saljuq conquerors, the term Turkman for this population seems to have come into use with the Mongol conquest of this region two centuries later (Barthold).

Up to the present, the difference in race, language, religion, and lifestyle of the Turkman inhabitants of the Dašt-e Gorgān, in contrast to the Persians further south, has deeply influenced the character and peculiarity of this region. While, in the course of time, a number of Turkmen turned to become farmers



and fishers, others kept their nomadic lifestyle. Up to the 19th and even early 20th century, robbery and slave-trade were an important part of the Turkman economy, benefiting from its traditional ties to the Central Asian khanates of Marv, Kiva, Bukhara (q.v.), Samarkand, etc. Agriculture, animal husbandry, caravan trade, and robbery were so closely interrelated that the Dašt-e Gorgān was practically barred to Persians. Fortified settlements like Āq Qal'a were isolated islands of Persian presence in this area and Persian soldiers were "prisoners within the walls of their fort" (Yate, p. 281).

For the 19th century we have comparatively detailed information as to the number of people and the character of their settlements within the Dašt-e Gorgān. According to Baron C. A. de Bode (1852) and J. C. Häntzsche (1862), Turkmans were split up into three groups: (1) the Yomuts inhabited the area between the Caspian Sea and Gonbad-e Qābus, while (2) the Guklān (q.v.) lived further east up to bordering hillside. The third and most powerful group, the (3) Tekke Turkman, had and still have their main settlement area in Khorasan near Bojnurd. The population of the Yomut is given by Häntzsche as 9,215 "huts" or 22,188 persons, while that of the Guklān (q.v.) was considered to be about 2,500 houses (pp. 101-2).

The most obvious and striking feature of the cultural differences of the Turkmans in regard to their Persian neighbors has always been their settlements, not to mention differences in language, religion (Turkmans are mostly Sunni Muslims), and race. Unlike Persians, they did not have permanent village settlements. Instead, they used to live in the typically Central Asian round tents (*kibitka* or *ālāčiq*), which could be moved very easily and were normally clustered together in the form of village-like congestions, called *oba*: "I found that, excluding the Charwa obahs scattered around over the plain, the settlement or village of Gurmish Tappa itself consisted of 300 to 400 *kibitkas* struck pretty close together, and stretching for about 300-400 yards along either Bank of the old bed of the Gorgān" (Yate, p. 271). Now *kibitkas* are hardly to be found in this area, although traditional forms of agriculture and nomadism are still in existence (Irons, 1969, 1975).

Economy today. As in the past, climatic and other ecological factors are decisive in the distribution of population and settlements as well as in the regional differentiations of agriculture and other forms of land use. Population and settlement density show a steady and almost linear decline from the foothill region of the Alborz towards the north. All major settlements, some of which do not belong to the Dašt-e Gorgān in the proper sense of the



word, are located here: Gorgān, ‘Aliābād, Šāhpasand, and Minu Dašt. Only Gonbad-e Qābus and Āq Qal’a are located in the steppe itself. Accordingly, their population is predominately Turkman. The same holds true for the villages of the steppe-region, many of them founded as permanent settlements before World War II in order to sedentarize the nomadic parts of the Turkmans and to avoid political conflicts with the former Soviet Union, into which some tribes used to migrate in search of their winter grazing grounds (Irons, 1975, fig. 3)

Agriculture and animal husbandry are still the main economic activities within the Dašt-e Gorgān. While animal husbandry has changed dramatically from the nomadic forms to those of a more sedentarized type (cf. Iron, 1975, pp. 155-58), it is still a decisive part of the Turkman economy. Agriculture, too, has undergone considerable changes. Originally based mainly on the cultivation of irrigated as well as rain-fed barley and wheat, since the 1930s cotton has gained importance and finally great superiority in the overall agricultural production. With Reżā Shah’s endeavor to boost economic growth and independence, large tracts of the ecologically very favorable Dašt-e Gorgān were turned into cotton-growing areas, a development very closely connected with the establishment of large-scale farm units with holdings of up to 2,800 hectares per unit (Okazaki, pp. 7-14). These developments coincide with the beginnings of industrial enterprises of different kinds. Cotton was not only exported from this area, but partly, at least, used as the basis for a rapidly growing food and textile industry. All major urban centers of the Dašt-e Gorgān, especially the cities of its southern fringe such as Minu Dašt, Šāhpasand, ‘Aliābād, and Gorgān, received plants for cleaning and carding the cotton as well as shortening oil industries. Textile plants were constructed in the Caspian cities of Behšahr and Šāhi. Besides animal husbandry and market-oriented agriculture, carpet weaving is a major source of income for many Turkman households. Wool and hair of camels, sheep, and goats are used, above all for the production of Turkman “Bu-khara” rugs, which are also exported. Other items include flat woven rugs, felts for the interior of the yurts, for horse blankets, and cloaks (Irons, 1975, p. 159). Other, though minor sources of income for the inhabitants of the Dašt-e Gorgān include hunting and gathering, and trading (See also vii below).



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