



# GORGĀN V. PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY

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Gorgān (Latin Hyrcania), the district of “the wolves” (still seen thereabouts), north of the Alborz (q.v.) watershed, and adjoining the southeastern quarter of the Caspian Sea, is mentioned already as Varkāna- in the Behistun inscription (2.92; see [BĪSOTŪN iii](#)). The area comprises two distinct climatic zones: the rainforest of the Alborz northern slopes and the Gorgān plain, well-watered and fertile close to the mountains but passing into increasingly desert steppe as the distance from the foothills increases. Under the Achaemenids, it seems to have been administered as a sub-province of Parthia and is not named separately in the provincial lists of Darius and Xerxes. The Hyrcanians, however, under the leadership of Megapanus, are mentioned by Herodotus (7.62) in his list of Xerxes’ army during the invasion of Greece, and the district also figures in his confused account (3.117) of the hydrography of upper Asia.

After the death of Artaxerxes I (q.v.; 465-423 B.C.E.), his son Ochus, later to rule as Darius II (q.v.; 423-403 B.C.E.), remained as satrap of Hyrcania. There he was succeeded, after his accession to the throne, by Idernes, whose daughter Stateira married Arsaces (Artaxerxes), a son of the king. In turn, the king’s daughter Amestris married Terituchmes, son of Idernes, who, on the death of



his father, succeeded to the satrapy. Terituchmes, however, enamoured of his own half-sister Roxana, whom he planned to marry, conspired to murder his wife and to rebel against the king. The latter in turn, getting wind of the plot, persuaded one Udiastes, a henchman of Terituchmes, to slay his master, and so save the princess. Ctesias (Frg. 32 = Gilmore, ed., pp. 171-72), source for these dramatic events, does not report the location of these happenings.

Only with the arrival of Alexander are more details given of the region. The Macedonian led his army across the Alborz into Hyrcania, passing probably west of Damḡān, up the open valley from Čašma-ye ‘Ali to Čahārdeh (cf. Schmidt, p. 2 and pl. 58) and crossing the first range via the Tang-e Šamširbor. Thence he would have descended to lower ground, camping, as Arrian records (3.23-25), beside a modest river, naturally the Nekā (also called locally the Asp o Neyza), where he received the surrender of Nabarzanes, chiliarch (q.v.) of the murdered Darius III (d. 330 B.C.E.), and of Phrataphernes, satrap of Hyrcania and Parthia, who was reinstated. Thence he crossed the northern range to Zadracarta, the largest city and site of the “royal palace” of Hyrcania, most probably located at the great mound of Qal‘a-ye Kāndān (see below), on the western fringe of present-day Gorgān city (formerly Astarābād, q.v.).

Phrataphernes may have retained control of Hyrcania during the struggles of Alexander’s successors, though he was displaced from Parthia in 321 B.C.E. by a Macedonian, Philip, who then was killed in 318 B.C.E. by Pithon, the ambitious satrap of Media, and replaced by Eudamus, that satrap’s brother. The situation then becomes for a while obscure. However, the personage most closely associated with Hyrcania was the satrap Andragoras (q.v.), known especially from an important inscription and from his coins in gold and silver. The first document, recording the manumission of a slave at a temple of Sarapis, shows that Andragoras had been satrap of Hyrcania and of Parthia since the reign of Antiochus I (q.v.), already before 266 B.C.E. He was evidently still in charge of the province twenty or more years later, after the death of Antiochus II in 247 B.C.E. and the seizure by Ptolemy III of the Seleucid capital at Antioch left the future of the Seleucid dynasty for a moment in question. It was no doubt that situation, rather than an intention to rebel, that led the veteran satrap to assert independence by issuing coins in his own name. Although the name of the satrap appears to be Greek, it was plausibly suggested by Ghirshman that he could, in fact, as his bearded portrait suggests, have been an Iranian named Naryasanha > Naresah (Av. Nairyō.saṅha-), variously translatable as “of manly speech,” “praised by men, famous,” or



even “addressing men in the assembly,” and that his name had been “translated” into the language of contemporary administration. Though the official Greek form on his coins was Andragoras (favoring the first, or third, interpretation), the name is Hellenized by Arrian as Pherecles (“bearing fame”), and by Syncellus as Agathocles (“of good fame”), all possible translations of this Iranian original. Conceivably, the notice in the *Šahrestānhā-ye Irān* that Narsēh Aškānān (the Arsacid) founded the city of Dehestān (q.v.) in Gorgān (Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, pp. 12, 53-54) could be an allusion to Andragoras, since there was no Arsacid ruler named Narsēh.

Nonetheless, the veteran satrap’s attempt to consolidate an independent state in Parthia and Hyrcania was already doomed. In the steppe-lands to his north a new power was emerging. The nomadic tribes of the Parni and the Dahae, united under the leadership of Arsaces and Tiridates, descended on the governor, and put him to death. Thus was established the rule of the Arsacids in Parthia and Hyrcania, and the Parthian Empire founded.

Only with the advent of the Seleucid Antiochus III “the Great” (q.v.; ca. 223-187 B.C.E.) did the historical perspective refocus on Hyrcania (Polybius 10.29-31). The rise of the tribal Arsacids was threatening Seleucid control in northern Iran, and Antiochus marched eastwards (209 B.C.) from Hamadān to repel these invaders. After seizing their forward headquarters at Hecatompylos (Šahr-e Qumes, west of Damgān), he advanced to Tagae, more probably identifiable with Gerdkuh than with the mountain east of Damgān today called Tāq. He then thrust across the Alborz into Hyrcania, probably diverging westward after Čahārdeh via Tuya and Yānisar, where a precipitous defile on the route better fits the narrative, before crossing the final range and descending to Tambrax. A possible identification here is with the medieval Tamiša at the village of Sarkalāta. He moved on to mount a regular siege of a heavily fortified city called Syrinx, “the capital of Hyrcania” (so probably a Greek nickname for Zadracarta), and this was taken. Thence, having repelled the Arsacids to the north and effected a settlement with them, the king moved eastwards to Bactria. Hyrcania, however, remained effectively under Arsacid control.

Though the focus of the Arsacid kingdom moved west to Hamadān and Ctesiphon, Hyrcania still continued its historic role intermittently. Occasionally, it served as a royal retreat from Babylonia, as when Mithradates I resorted there in 141 B.C. When the Seleucid Demetrius II Nicator attempted the reconquest of Iran in 139 B.C., he was eventually captured by the Parthians



and sent to the Parthian king in Hyrcania, where he was lodged, treated as became his rank, and given Rhodogune, daughter of Mithradates, in marriage. A further link between Hyrcania and the Arsacid throne is provided by Himerus, the tyrannical governor of Babylonia under Phraates II (138/7-ca. 128 B.C.E.), who was of Hyrcanian origin. Again, displaced by the Roman nominee Tiridates III (ca. 36 C.E.), the Parthian king Artabanus III (12-ca. 38 C.E.) retired to Hyrcania, where he lived in poverty until recalled by popular acclaim (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.43). A similar situation arose three years later between the brothers Gotarzes II (see GÖDARZ i) and Vardanes. The latter having displaced his brother from the throne, Gotarzes fled to “the Dahae” (tribesmen of the Caspian east shore), with whose reinforcement he fought a sporadic campaign against Vardanes, but eventually agreed to retire to Hyrcania. Only when Vardanes was assassinated during a hunt (ca. 48 C.E.) could Gotarzes resume his interrupted reign.

All these developments illustrate the growing independence of Hyrcania from central Arasacid rule. In 59 C.E., the Roman general Corbulo, operating near Artaxata in Armenia, learned that Vologeses, the king of Parthia, was preoccupied with a Hyrcanian defection. A Hyrcanian delegation came through Corbulo to the Roman emperor seeking an alliance against the Parthians (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.25). On their return, however, Corbulo, having moved south to Tigranocerta, considered it unsafe for them to travel east of the Euphrates, and instead had them escorted to the shore of the Red Sea, whence to return to their homeland by water. This tactic implies that the Hyrcanians were then in league with the rising Kushan Empire in Afghanistan, and could return through Kushan territory via the Indus delta. During the Sasanian period, Gorgān appears as the name not only of the province but of a city. During his eastern expedition (225 C.E.), Ardašir I visited Gorgān on his way to Marv (Ṭabari, I, p. 819). In the inscription of Šāpur I on the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt, Gorgān is mentioned as a province, and the name also appears on administrative seal-impressions of the later Sasanian period, both in abbreviated form, GWL, and in full spelling Gwlg’n. Among the offices attested are those of the *šahrab* “satrap,” the *driyōšān jādag-gōw ud dādwar* “judge-advocate of the poor,” and an *āmārgar* “accountant” shared with the adjoining provinces of Kōmiš and Šahr-Rām-Pērōz (identified with Nesā). Within the province, there were offices of the *mgwḥ-* (apparently a priestly-function, possibly a civil registry) at Huniyāg-Pērōz, Husraw-šād-Pērōz, and Varōšag (the last apparently at Tappa Kabudān near Gorgān/Astarābād, as reported by Malīkzadeh Bayani). Procopius (1.3.2 and 1.4.10) records that during the reign



of the Sasanian Pērōz, the invading Hephthalites made their headquarters at a city named Gorgo, “close to the boundaries of the Persians.” This name should no doubt be emended to Gorgān, and identified with the later Islamic city of Jorjān, close to the present-day town of Gonbad-e Qābus, and further out on the plain than the modern city of Gorgān, successor to the earlier Astarābād.

Apart from historical references, the province of Gorgān is richly endowed with prehistoric and archaeological remains. Ture Arne (p. 17 and figs. 3 and 4) provides a comprehensive inventory of 233 mounds and earthworks noted on the Gorgan plain, of which, by far the most massive is the Qal‘a-ye Kāndān of Gorgān/Astarā-bād, now believed severely eroded by the robbing of building materials. Shah Tepe (Šāh Tappa), excavated by Arne, possessed important levels of Bronze Age deposits, with black, and grey, pottery, besides earlier black-on-red painted ware. Another important mound was Turang Tepe, where structures of the Achaemenid and earlier periods were crowned by a Sasanian fortress with towers of characteristic semi-elliptical plan. The most important earthwork of the Gorgān area is however the extensive linear fortification known as Sadd-e Eskandar (Alexander’s Barrier), or by the Turkmens as Qizil Yilan (Red Snake), which runs more than 170 km from the mountains northeast of Gonbad-e Qābus almost to the shore of the Caspian (see fortifications and gorgān v). Numerous hypotheses have been put forward to explain its origin. However in view of Kiani’s discovery here of grey pottery of apparently early date, one might guess that the work is not, indeed, as he suggests early Parthian (since the Parthians, coming from the steppe, would not have needed fortifications against it), but rather that the traditional attribution to Alexander may be justified. Other important earthworks of evident Parthian date were also reported by him at Bibi Ḥalima near Gonbad-e Qābus.

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