



## MĀSĀL

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**MĀSĀL**, small town and sub-provincial district (*šahrestān*) in the western part of Gilān Province. The town is located at lat 37°22' N, long 49°02' E. The district corresponds to the two traditional districts of Māsāl and Šāndarman that resulted from the division of the large district of Gaskar at the beginning of Fath-‘Ali Shah Qājār’s reign (r. 1797-1834). These are known as the two southernmost of the *Ḵamsa-ye Ṭawāleš*, the “Five *Khanats* of Ṭāeš” (Chodzko, 1849, pp. 264-66; Häntzsche, 1867, pp. 55-56; Melgunof, 1868, pp. 250, 271; Rabino, p. 58, tr., p. 54). The first detailed account we have of the Māsāl district is by [James Baillie Fraser](#) (pp. 230-61), who crossed it twice in June 1822. In order to reach [Ḵalkāl](#) from Gilān, he took an intermediate route between Fuman and Gaskar and followed the valley of Māsāl upstream from Mir Maḥalla to Šālmā and thence ascended a difficult pass, crossed extensive summer pastures, and descended to Gilavān and Dez on the *Ḵalkāl* side of the mountains. He left a description of Moḥammad Khan Māsāl (p. 255, tr. by Rabino, 1916-17, pp. 119-20, tr., pp. 135-36), the head of the tribe of the Gaskar Ṭāleš, who held him in custody for a while on the charge of being a Russian spy. According to Fraser, he could “gather several thousand men for whom human life has a very low value.”

The information given about the two districts in the 19th and early 20th century are somewhat contradictory. Alexandre Chodzko (1849, p. 265) and Julius Häntzsche (1867, p. 55) mentioned active pastoral stock-breeding and significant silk production in Šāndarman, whereas Grigori Melgunof described it as a poor district with villages in ruins, and Zenovieff (apud Rabino, 1916-17,



p. 115, tr., p. 128) said that four of its sixteen villages were in ruins and the others slightly populated. Chodzko (1849, p. 265) underlined the absence of silk production in Māsāl, but he did not mention the other resources of the district, for instance, stockbreeding and rice production, the significance of which is shown by Häntzsche (1867, pp. 56-57) and Rabino (pp. 124-25). The latter gave data on the income collected in the two districts of Šāndarman (18,517 krans) and Māsāl (28,953 krans) and mentioned the weekly bazaars on Friday in Šāndarman (Čālasarā) and on Saturdays in Māsāl.

Under Rezā Shah (r. 1925-41), Māsāl and Šāndarman became two sub-districts (*dehestān*) constituting together the district (*baḳš*) of Māsāl-Šāndarman within the sub-provincial district (*šahrestān*) of Ṭawāleš (Razmārā, pp. 167, 281; see *ibid.*, the appended map of Gilān); they remained so until the administrative reform of 1998 created a new *šahrestān* of Māsāl.

The former sub-districts have been upgraded to the rank of districts (*baḳš*) and divided into two new sub-districts each, respectively Māsāl and Ḥuma and Šāndarman and Šeyḳ Nešin. The population, which in the 1860s still included a Sunnite minority mentioned by Häntzsche, is now exclusively Shi'ite; it speaks about the same Ṭāleši dialect in the two sub-districts, with a generalized situation of Ṭāleši-Gilaki-Persian multilinguism. The shi'itization of the population is marked by the number of existing Shi'ite mausoleums (*boq'a*; see Sotuda, pp. 107-22). Noteworthy among these for their remarkable wood latticework (*mošabbak-kāri*) are two mausoleums believed to be the burial places of three sons of Imam Musā al-Kāẓem, namely the *boq'a* of Emāmzāda Šafi' in ahamlet of the same name in the winter quarter of Šāndarman, and that of Āqā Sayyed Rezā-'Ali and Āqā Sayyed Mehr-'Ali in Šālmā, upstream of Māsāl. A number of these sanctuaries are bound to natural elements (Bazin, 1978). For instance, those of Pirānbast in Palang-sarā and Mollā Moḥammad in Vazmetar, both in Šāndarman, benefit from the shadow of gigantic Siberian elms (*derakt-e āzād*), and some others are linked to mountain heights, such as Gerda Kuh on the ridge between the Māsāl and Taniyān valleys and Ḳandila Pešt on the ridge separating Māsāl from some other neighboring areas; the latter has been celebrated by a poem in Ṭāleši by Farāmarz Masrur (1973).

The *šahrestān* encompasses the upper valley of the Šāndarman River and the whole catchment basin of the Māsāl River (also called Ḳālekāi) until its arrival into the plain. The main agricultural production is rice, cultivated in the lower valleys and the edge of the plain, in small holdings with an average area of 1.3

to 2.2 h of paddy per capita (Bazin, 1980, I, pp. 111-44). Of the three usual complementary resources of the plain (namely sericulture, tobacco, and tea), sericulture is the only one to have had a significant but highly variable role, with mulberry groves and worm-breeding sheds (*tilambar*) in most places (*maḥalla*), providing the greater part of the cocoons sold to the local agency of the Sericulture Administration in Ṭāher Gurāb (Bazin, 1980, I, pp. 150-60); but the impact of the crisis of silk production in Iran (see Black, Caspian Seas and Central Asia Silk Association) in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century on this area is uncertain. The other main activity and source of income is stock-breeding following various pastoral migration patterns throughout the mountainous area, which is totally devoid of cultivated lands (Pour-Fickoui and Bazin, pp. 33-69). Stock-breeding is done by paddy-growing peasants who raise cattle around their area (*maḥalla*) during the cold season and take them themselves to one or two (case of Markiya in Māsāl) summer pastures, or leave them to cattle-breeders called *gāleš* in the mountain, like people from Siāhmard or Čālasarā in Šāndarman, who send their cattle to the summer quarter (*yeylāq*) of Kōška Daryā; specialized stock-breeders, who have separate calendars for *gāleš* and shepherd (*čupān*), take respectively their cattle and flocks of sheep and goats to three to five different pastoral levels (e.g., Emāmzāda Šafi‘ in Šāndarman and Salimābād in Māsāl).

Unlike the valleys adjacent to the north or to the south, this area has no temporary bazaars on summer pastures because of the strong attraction and relative proximity of the Friday bazaar in Šāndarman and Saturday bazaar in Māsāl (Bazin, 1977, p. 207). In both cases, this commercial activity has launched an urbanization process by gradually gathering services and resident population around the commercial core, composed in Māsāl of a number of squares juxtaposed to the original rectangular grouping of shops (plan in Bazin, 1980, II, p. 174). The earlier access of Māsāl to this urban dimension led to its official designation as the center of a new *šahrestān* with a total population of 47,954 in 2006, of which 10,992 live in the town, 3,866 in Bāzār-e Šānderman, and 33,096 (69 percent) in the rural area (Markaz-e Āmār, 2006).



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