



MĀSULA

MĀSULA, township and district (*baḵš*) in western Gilān. Located at lat 37°10' N, long 48°59' E, at an altitude of 1,050 m in the upper valley of the Māsula Rudkān, Māsula was visited between late 18th and mid-19th century by a number of travelers following the caravan or pedestrian route linking Kalkāl and Fumanāt (Gmelin in 1772, Jaubert in 1821, Monteith in 1833, Fraser in 1838, Melgunof in 1868). The most enthusiastic description belongs to Fraser (1838, p. 496; later quoted by Rabino, 1915-16, pp. 183 ff.; Adamec, 1976, p. 444) who considered Māsula as one of the most romantically situated and curious places he had ever seen: it was built on terraces superposed on the nearly perpendicular slope of the mountain to the west, under a tremendous wooded peak and in front of a high ridge with woods, rocks, and pastures. The houses were distinctively different from those of neighboring villages; all had flat, mud-covered roofs, and many were three stories high, with the two upper stories having two rows of windows. More exactly, some of these windows have two rows of wooden latticework, as the author observed (see Bazin, 1980, II, cover photograph and plate on p. 247), a disposition reported to Fraser as taken from a Lesghi model. This very compact built fabric gave an urban character to Māsula, in such a way that it was mentioned by Monteith (1833, p. 18) as one of the only towns of Gilān, together with Rasht, Lāhijān, Anzali, and Fuman.

Several traditions are reported by Rabino (1915-16, pp. 183 f.) about the origins of Māsula. One states that during the 10th century, when Sayyed Jalāl-al-Din Ašraf was defeated in Ṭārom, his companion 'Awn b. Moḥammad b. 'Ali was



wounded and died in Māsula after having asked a shepherd to bury him there, and people gradually built their houses around his tomb. A manuscript telling the story of Ṣaʿluk Moʿallem explained that after his defeat, two brothers among his disciples, ʿAyn b. ʿAli and Zayn b. ʿAli, came to Māsula district and converted the local population to Islam. Their tombs, in the hamlet of Eškālit, became a center of pilgrimage. According to another tradition, under Caliph Moḳtār, a group of people who were fleeing from Kirkuk and Mosul arrived in the mountains of western Gilān and respectively founded [Kargānrud](#) and Māsula. M. Sotuda argues that most of these stories, although still reported by oral tradition nowadays, are based on *Ketāb-e mostaṭāb-e šarḥ-e janghā-ye emāmzāda ḥāzrat-e Sayyed Jalāl al-Din Ašraf, barādar-e ḥāzrat-e Rezā, ʿalayh al-salām*, a book dating probably from Safavid time and drawing its information from Shaykh Abu Saʿid of K̄ārazm, an author whose most statements are unfounded (Sotuda, 1970, p. 130). It seems not unreasonable that the latter tradition is a result of the confusion between the nearly homonymous “Māsula” and “Mosul,” while the two former traditions, fanciful in nature, have led to the establishment of the two local pilgrimages.

Other indications about the remote past of Māsula might be sought through archaeology. There is a place above Māsula, at a distance of 10 km and not far from a pass to the semi-arid slope, called Kohna Māsula “Old Māsula” with almost erased traces of buildings; no excavation has been undertaken yet.

The population of Māsula and surrounding mountainous areas is almost integrally Ṭāleš. They speak a Ṭāleši dialect slightly different from those of adjoining districts, and they are Shiʿi Moslems. Their semi-nomadic life and tribal organization was illustrated by the title *ilbegi* of their chiefs in Hedāyat Khan’s time, Moḥammad Rezā Khan, and Fath ʿAli Khan. Širzād Beg b. Mirzā ʿAli Akbar b. Asad Beg, a descendant of the latter, became the chief of Māsula, with the title of *kalāntar* (Rabino, 1915-16, p. 183; Sotuda, 1970, p. 131). The Māsula area was generally a part of Fuman district, but under [Fath ʿAli Shah](#) it was put under the direct control of the Arsenal, because it provided the imperial army with iron bullets.

This small township depended upon a number of specific activities for its livelihood. Iron mines which supplied a forge (*kura-ye āhangarān*) in the mountains in the vicinity of the summer pasture (*yeylāq*) of Ḳalildašt, exploited when G.-H. Liddel (apud Rabino, pp. 187 f.) visited the area in 1891, were abandoned in 1915, because a rock collapse had blocked the entrance. Iron ore was melted in small charcoal furnaces around the mines, and then

iron was forged in Māsula by blacksmiths, who provided the whole province with iron tools. Another group of craftsmen was comprised of tanners and leather-sandal makers (*čamuš-duzān*), who were busy processing leather supplied by animal husbandry. Another main activity was transport and commerce along caravan routes linking Gilān to Tārom and [Kalkāl](#). This route was the shortest one from Tabriz to Rasht, taking 15 days instead of the 23 days for caravans following the route by Qazvin and the Safidrud valley (Bazin and Bromberger, p. 90). When caravans of camels from the interior of Persia reached Māsula, their loads were transferred onto mules, who would carry them to Gilān. Fraser (1838, p. 497) observed in 1834 that the majority of inhabitants were muleteers (*čārvādār*) or petty traders (*dowra-gard*). The latter gathered the cheese produced on summer pastures all around and could stock it in the cellars of their vertically developed houses, in large, earthenware vessels called *kom*, and thus keep it until prices reached their highest levels—a profitable speculation. Rabino (1915-16, p. 185) states that Māsula had a bazaar with some 400 shops, two or three caravansaries, two baths, seven mosques, and a total population of 500 families. The local life showed a sharp seasonal contrast, since most of the population, both craftsmen and petty merchants, would leave the village during the cold season to work in villages and towns of Gilān, especially Fumanāt, while the women staying at home were busy spinning wool, knitting socks, and weaving *šāl*. In summer the men would return to Māsula to provide goods and services to husbandmen scattered over summer pastures all around.

During the 20th century, agriculture, which consists of a combination of small paddy fields and mulberry groves, developed along the lower valleys of Māsula Rudkān and Āliān. Pastoral life has remained active. Māsula itself has relatively small flocks of sheep, fed in the village during the cold season and taken during six months to the summer pasture of Darāb (Pourfickoui and Bazin, pp. 40 f.). Rice-cultivating peasants generally take their cattle to a single level of summer pasture, where they sometimes grow a secondary crop, which makes the migration calendar even more complex; for instance, farmers from Tatafrud, in the Āliān valley, ascend a first time to their *yeylāq* of Laškargāh in early spring to prepare small patches of potatoes, and come again to the mountain with their families and cattle in June, when planting seedlings and weeding paddy fields is over; in mid-August, the majority of labor force return to the village for harvesting paddy, while a few men stay in the upper level to gather potatoes and come back with cattle when the animals can eat the stalks left in harvested rice paddies (idem, pp. 37 f.). Shepherders, who have their



winter-pasture (*qešlāq*) in wooded hills around Lāt (at 400 m high) for the entire winter, stay at an intermediate elevation (800 m) in early spring and autumn and then in two levels of summer pastureland, around 1,600 and 2,400 m (Afrākta, 1993, pp. 157 f.).

The former subdistrict (*dehestān*) of Māsula was restructured in 1998 into a district (*baḳš*) and renamed Sardār-e Jangal, an epithet of Mirzā Kuček Khan (q.v.), on the grounds that Māsula was a stronghold of the [Jangali movement](#). The district is divided into two subdistricts: (1) Sardār-e Jangal, corresponding to the catchment basin of the Māsula Ruduḳān and (2) Āliān in the valley of Āliān. The district had a population of 15,342 inhabitants according to the 2006 census (Markaz).

It is paradoxical that Māsula obtained this higher rank in the administrative hierarchy when its gradual demographic decline was most visible. The figure of 6,000 inhabitants given for the late 1940s by Razmārā (1950, p. 281) is probably an overestimate; the permanent population gradually decreased from 1,626 souls in 1966 to 1,133 in 1986 and only 554 souls in 2006. Despite its deficient population, Māsula is formally designated as a town. In the mid-1970s, the township still had a significant commercial role, due to the fact that Māsula was reached by a road accessible to motor vehicles; such an accessibility did not hold for the summer pastureland around Māsula and for the upper valleys of the interior side of the chain belonging to the Ḳalkāl and Ṭārom districts. Thus Māsula was still a place of junction between automobile traffic and mule traffic, allowing a number of families to live upon their traditional *čārvādār* activity, and it also employed teams of poor workers as porters (*ḥammāl*) between the terminal of minibuses and lorries down in the valley and the bazaar at the intermediate level of the urbanized slope. The bazaar had however lost a part of its former importance, with only 150 shops instead of 400 in the early 20th century, and this relative decline was accelerated in the following years by the completion of the road, first to the level of the bazaar (causing the quasi-disappearance of porters), and then up to the pass through the ridge of the Ṭāleš mountains and to Mājalān and Kolor in the Šāhrud district of Ḳalkāl, which diminished the need for muleteers. On the other hand, the progress of agriculture in the lower parts of the valleys kept more labor force in the villages, resulting in a decrease in the frequenting of the summer pastureland supplied by the bazaar of Māsula. Subsequently, an increasing number of migrant craftsmen and shopkeepers from Māsula have remained in their winter residence, for instance, Fuman, Rasht, and

Tehran, where they are numerous along the avenues Mellat and Amir.

In response to this decline of the traditional resources of Māsula, efforts have been undertaken in order to enhance tourism (Bazin et al., 1995, pp. 76 f.). A board at the entrance of Māsula township declares *šahrak-e tāriki-e Māsula* “historical township of Māsula,” and Māsula is the only place in Gilān labeled “tourist attraction” on a roadmap of Iran published by Gitāšenāsi in 1997. Concerns grew for the protection of the rich architectural heritage of Māsula, more so after many structures were destroyed in the Manjil-Rudbār earthquake of 1990 (see [MANJIL](#); [RUDBĀR](#)). The damaged buildings of Māsula were refurbished with reinforced concrete, while the Organization for Cultural Heritage (*Mirāt-e farhangi*) made it compulsory to hang wooden doors, windows, and latticework in the traditional style made by local joiners. A number of activities have been reoriented towards tourist taste: for instance, women knit woolen socks, gloves, and bonnets, to be sold by their children to tourists; craftsmen sew traditional sandals (*čamuš*) made from leather manufactured in Tabriz or Hamadān; the Organization of Rural Development (*Jehād-e sāzandagi*) has developed a carpet-weaving domestic industry totally artificially, since there was no carpet weaving tradition in the area; gift shops sell photographs to tourists.

A more traditional type of tourist attraction has been considered as well: the pilgrimages (called *ziārat* “visit”) to a number of sanctuaries bound to the tombs of Shi‘i saints (*boq‘a* or *emānzāda*), such as the abovementioned *boq‘a* of ‘Awn b. Moḥammad b. ‘Ali, near the Friday Mosque of Māsula, and of the brothers ‘Ayn b. ‘Ali and Zayn b. ‘Ali in Eškalit, or Emānzāda Hāšem and Emānzāda Ebrāhim respectively at the beginning of the roads from Māsula to Ṭārom and to Kalkāl (Sotuda, 1970, pp. 133-40). Moreover, there are the sanctuaries bound to mountains in various parts of Ṭāleš and southeastern Gilān: Šāh Mo‘allem, located on the summit of the Māsula Dāg at an altitude of 3,050 m, where a cairn in a hollow circle has taken the place of a ruined building, which would attract in 1976 a fair number of visitors (Bazin, 1978, pp. 100-102). But all this remains limited to a purely local scale, in contrast to the sanctuary of Emānzāda Ebrāhim in the valley of Čenār Rudkān farther to the southeast (see [ŠAFT](#); Bazin, 1978, p. 209), around which a real tourist-industry township has developed.

Thus the example of Māsula illustrates the difficulty of developing modern forms of tourism in an isolated location without convenient infrastructures, in spite of its extraordinary natural and architectural landscape.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

L. Adamec, *Historical Gazetteer of Iran I*, Graz, 1976.

H. Afrākta, “Dāmdāri-e sonnati dar Fumanāt,” *Faṣl-nāma-ye taḥqiqāt-e joḡrāfiāʾi*, ser. no. 28, 1993, pp. 141-61.

M. Bazin, “Les bazars saisonniers de montagne dans le Tāleš,” in G. Schweizer, ed., *Beiträge zur Geographie orientalischer Städte und Märkte*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B, 24, Wiesbaden, 1977, pp. 201-11.

Idem, “Le culte des arbres et des montagnes dans le Tāleš (Iran du nord-ouest),” in R. Dor and M. Nicolas eds, *Quand le crible était dans la paille ... Hommage à Pertev Naili Boratav*, Paris, 1978, pp. 95-104.

Idem, *Le Tālech, une région ethnique au nord de l'Iran*, 2 vols., Paris, 1980.

M. Bazin and C. Bromberger, *Gilân et Âzarbayjân oriental. Cartes et documents ethnographiques*, Paris, 1982.

M. Bazin (Bāzan), A. Purfikuʾi, B. Raḥmāni, and H. Afrākta, “Taḡyirāt-e jadid-e eqteṣādi o sāzmāndehi-e fażā dar Tāleš,” *Faṣl-nāma-ye Taḥqiqāt-e Joḡrāfyāi*, ser. no. 38, 1995, pp. 65-79.

A. Chodźko, “Le Ghilan ou les marais caspiens,” *Nouvelles annales des voyages et des sciences géographiques*, N.S., 1849, no. 4, pp. 266-67.

J. B. Fraser, *A Winter's Journey (tatar) from Constantinople to Tehran II*, London, 1838.

S. Gmelin, *Reise durch Russland zur Untersuchung der drey Natur-Reiche, Dritter Teil: Reise durch das nordliche Persien in den Jahren 1770, 1771 bis in April 1772*, St. Petersburg, 1774, pp. 399-403.

A. Jaubert, *Voyage en Arménie et en Perse, fait dans les années 1805 et 1806*, Paris, 1821, p. 430.

Markaz-e Āmār-e Irān, *Saršomāri-e 'omumi-e nofus o maskan* [decennial national census], Tehran, 1966-2006.

G. Melgunof, *Das südliche Ufer des Kaspischen Meeres, oder die Nordprovinzen Persiens*, Leipzig, 1868, pp. 259-60.

Colonel Monteith, "Journal of a Tour through Azerbidjan and the Shores of the Caspian," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 3, 1833, pp. 18-20.

A. Pour-Fickoui and M. Bazin, *Elevage et vie pastorale dans le Guilân (Iran septentrional)*, Paris, 1978.

H.-L. Rabino, *Les provinces caspiennes de la Perse: le Guilân*, RMM 32, 1915-16.

Ḥ.-'A. Razmārā, *Farhang-e joḡrāfiā'i-e Irān II. Ostān-e yekom*, Tehran, 1950.

M. Sotuda, *Az Āstārā tā Estārbād I*, Tehran, 1970.