



NEŠALJ I. THE VILLAGE

NEŠALJ

i. The Village

Nešalj is located in Niāsar Rural District, Niāsar District, [Kashan](#) Sub-Province, [Isfahan](#) Province. The name has also been spelled Nešlaj (Mošāheb, III, p. 3029; Bolukbāši, p. 36; SCI, 1969, p. 47). The unmarked form نیشال has led to an acclaimed popular etymology, on account of the near-homograph نونهال, reconstructing the word as *noh-ṭalj* “nine-snow” and interpreting it as having nine months of snow every year (see *inter alia* Bonyād-e farhang-e Kāšān); a more tenable conjecture would consider an Iranian derivation for the toponym, invoking a prefix, **ni-* “down” or **niš-* “out, sit” and a root such as **rak-* “arrange,” commensurate with the prominent ridges and gorges that surround Nešalj ([Figure 1](#)).

The village is situated 27 miles (43 km) west of Kashan, standing two miles south of the Kashan-Delijān highway, at lat 33°59′ N, long 51°4′ E and 6,625 feet (2,020 m) elevation above sea level, on the foot of Mt. Mārāhang and Siāh Armak, mostly on the shaded slopes.

Nešalj enjoys mild climatic conditions with snowy winters and cool summers, with an average annual rainfall of 8 inches (200 mm). The water is drawn from three subterranean channels (*qanāts*), as well as several springs, and is partly stored into the five water reservoirs of the village. The villagers cultivate cereals and practice horticulture, notably raising almonds and



walnuts. The traditional crafts were *taḳta-kaši* (sole-making) for men and *giva-čini* (see *GIVA*) and carpet weaving for women (Razmārā, p. 303). The village is famous for its rosewater (*golāb*), extracted in spring, as done in other villages of Kashan. The population of Nešalj grew from 467 individuals in 1296/1879 to approximately 1,000 individuals in the 1940s (Razmārā, p. 303) to 1,260 individuals in the 1960s (Statistical Center of Iran [SCI], 1969, *Šahrestān-e Kāšān*, p. 47) and to 2,168 individuals, corresponding to 663 families, according to the decennial census of 2006 (Statistical Center of Iran). However, as is the case with many other villages of central Iran, a large number of the reported residents stay in their home village only in summers.

Nešalj has a distinct appearance when compared to the neighboring villages. Its compactly built texture on grade makes optimum use of topographic and climatic conditions. This peculiar natural and architectural landscape has been a source of tourist attraction, including hikers, who camp in Nešalj as an outpost before setting off for the Domir (locally Dumey Ar “Ar peak,” also known as Ardahāl) summit, at 11,364 feet (3,465 m), which separates Nešalj from Qālhar in the south. ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Kalāntar Žarrābi (pp. 16, 43) cites the two major overlooking summits as Šir-ā’in and Mār-ā’in (locally, Širayn and Mārayn). The water released by the rapidly melting snow of the surrounding peaks in the spring exposes Nešalj to deluges; the flood of 23 May 2012 caused significant destruction. Notable quarters of Nešalj are Pāleza, Kuče pon (pā’in), Čāl Kunegā, Dar(e)deh (Majidi, p. 35), Poranda, Gomba, Dam-e-rēza, Gažvoruma, Vaḳmaja, Suseyun, Pal, and Zēr-poraz (Ḥalvāči, 2014, p. 19).

The village hosts three sanctuaries bound to the tombs of Shi’i saints: the *emāmzādas* (or *boq’a, ziārat*) of Bibi Roḳia, daughter of the Second Imam, and Ḳadija Solṭān (also known as *dād’arus*) and Šāhzāda Ešḩāq, children of the Sixth Imam; they all attract the pious on religious holidays such as Ramažān, Ḡadir Ḳomm, and ‘Āšurā. Another venerated *boq’a*, situated a mile north of Nešalj, is Qadamgāh, attributed to a certain Šāh(zāda) Ṭāher-‘Alī. Its structure is made from raw brick and stands on a square plan of 1,183 ft² (110 m²) topped by an oval dome (Figure 2); this is typologically an extended *čahārtāq* of the type found in the relics of the fire temples in the nearby Niāsar and Ḳorramdašt (for which, see Godard, p. 42; Narāqi, pp. 38-44, 46-47). Qadamgāh was registered as late as 2005 as a national treasure (no. 14165) in the Directory of National Monuments (Fehrest-e āṭār-e melli; see IRNA, 2015).

A tradition that binds Nešalj to Kashan is Esbandi, held on the eve of the month Esfand, as counted on the old agricultural calendar, corresponding to

February the 14th. Besides the customs of spreading *Haft Sin*, sending gifts to the fiancées, rewarding the carpet weavers with annual bonus, and *mardgirān* (see *KASHAN vi. The Esbandi Festival*), which were commonly held throughout Kashan districts, Nešalj had their own way of making the Esbandi soup (*āš*); they would gather ingredients of the dish to be cooked on a scheduled date on a cliff in Darband-e Nazād, located some two kilometers from Nešalj (Enjavi, pp. 98-99). Since Enjavi's documentation in the 1960s, Esbandi seems to have been entirely forsaken in Nešalj; a surviving relic is a scorpion amulet (*roq'a-ye každom*) intended for repulsing noxious creatures, as shown in *Figure 3*.

Other reported feasts were Dar-e Gār held on the 7th day of Farvardin; the feast of *Ebn Moljam* on 27 of Ramadan, involving setting fire to his effigies (Ḥalvāči, 2014, p. 18); and Humbābā'i in the evening of 15th of Ramadan, when children played treat and trick by going door to door and singing songs in praise or curse of the house owner (interviews). Contrary to an endemic view among local intellectuals that relates Humbābā'i to either the Sumerian epic of Humbaba or the Avestan ritual plant *Haoma*, the name simply reproduces the melodic coda *hum-bābā*, repeated after each stanza of the song.

Jom'a-ye Nešaljihā. The Friday of the people of Nešalj is among the most celebrated holidays of the village. It is observed annually one week after the culminating Friday of the Qālišuyān festival held in the neighboring Mašhad-e Ardahāl. The Friday of the Nešaljis commemorate the seventh day for the martyrdom of Šāhzāda Solṭān-'Alī, who is claimed to have been aided in his battles against the oppressors by the pious inhabitants of Nešalj. The latter afforded to the sacred cause three hundred martyrs, of which seven are believed to be buried in Nešalj. The story further relates that, as the people of Nešalj were late in joining the burial of the Šāhzāda, they decided to have a ceremony on the seventh day (Bolukbāši, 1964, p. 37; idem, 2000, pp. 63-66). Subsequently, on the Friday of the Nešaljis, early in the morning, the villagers congregate in the square (*meydān*) of the village and form a sizable procession that walks five miles, in some two hours, to Ardahāl. Upon reaching the holy shrine of Šāhzāda Ḥosayn therein, the Nešalji pilgrims perform a set of religious rites comparable to those held on 'Āšurā, namely *sina-zani*, *nawḥa-kvāni*, *naql-gardāni*, and *šabih-kvāni*, the most imposing being an elaborate *ta'zia* (Shi'i passion play), which attracts tourists besides the pilgrims. A vibrant festival marketplace is held in the plain of Ardahāl, partly carried over from the previous week during the Qālišuyān festival. As the evening



approaches, the convoy sets off for Nešalj, with a stop by the aforementioned Qadamgāh, for blessing. Maḥmud Ruḥ-al-Amini (pp. 181-82) reports that the Nešalji Friday is especially popular among the newly wed couples.

The Friday of Nešaljis immediately follows that of Qālišuyān, which is held on the Friday closest to the 17th day of the seventh month of the Iranian calendar (Mehr), but based on the pre-modern agricultural calendar (see [CALENDARS](#)), which reckons every month as 30 days (as opposed to the current calendar that counts 31 days for the first six months of the year). The Nešalji Friday is thus calculated to be the Friday closest to the 204th day after Nowruz (i.e., 6 months × 30 days + 17 days + 7 days = 204 days); hence, counting by the formal calendar of Iran, the Nešalji Friday was held on 21 Mehr 1391 Š./2002 (that is, 6 × 31 + 21 = 207 days after Nowruz), 18 Mehr 1393 Š./2004 (= 204 days after Nowruz), and 17 Mehr 1394 Š./2015 (= 203 days after Nowruz).

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