



## SORĶA

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**SORĶA** (locally: Sur), township and sub-province in Semnān Province.

SorĶa is situated 20 km southwest of Semnān and 12 km northwest of Lāsgerd (lat 35°28' N, long 53°13' E, elev 1,100 m above sea level). SorĶa and its immediate hamlets rest on a series of alluvial cones formed by clefts cut through rocky chains to their north (Bouzari et al.) that constitute the southernmost edge of the Central Alborz. The toponym “SorĶa” (“the red one”) seems to derive from the colored marls and clays of the Upper Red formation (Purkermān et al.) within the soil composition of these slopes. On the south SorĶa faces downslope to the Great Desert, with poor vegetation akin to that of the *kavir* (see [desert](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

Among the 10th-century geographers only Ebn Rosta (p. 169), in 902, mentions “S.ra” (i.e., Sura, SorĶa’s endonym even in that day), as a village between Ra’s-al-Kalb and Semnān. Four centuries later, Ḥamdallāh Mostawfi (p. 173; tr., p. 168) says the same: Deyh SorĶ is located six *farsaks* distance to Ra’s-al-Kalb and four *farsaks* to Semnān. There is no other mention of SorĶa in major medieval sources—an indication that it would be far less important than its immediate neighbors. Indeed SorĶa occupied only an intermediate position between Semnān and Ra’s-al-Kalb, two major caravan stations equipped with caravansaries, which used to be built at intervals of thirty to forty kilometers along the Great Khorasan Road. Ra’s-al-Kalb is now replaced by Lāsgerd, even if not on the exact same site.

Under Safavid rule, the inhabitants of SorĶa were distinguished for having



resisted the coercive policy of conversion to Shi'ism. According to the historian Mollā Jalāl Monajjem, under the events of 1008, in the month of Şafar (September 1599) Shah 'Abbās I imposed a severe retribution on the Sunni population of SorĶa by crippling their mullahs and fining them three hundred tomans (Monajjem, p. 193). To the same effect, a royal inscription of Shah 'Abbās I, reinstated by Shah Solţān-Ĥoseyn in Semnān's congregational mosque, decrees a tax relief by one-fifth to the people of Semnān province for their espousal of the Shi'i faith, but with exclusion of SorĶa (*velāyat-e Semnān savā-ye qarya-ye SorĶa*; Ĥaġiqat, pp. 276-77). The long belated conversion of the SorĶa'is is supported by a local joke: a Semnāni peasant, while planting a pomegranate tree, was cursing the second caliph, ignorant of the Sunni convictions of his SorĶa'i master; the latter, having overheard him, said *dār dekār, nār bexor, magar Omar te mār bekarde?* "Plant the tree and eat the pomegranates; did 'Omar do it with your mother?" (Ĥaġiqat, p. 278). It is unknown when SorĶa finally surrendered to the new faith, but its resilience reveals itself also in the preservation of its original language, called SorĶa'i (q.v.), up to this date.

SorĶa has seen continual growth in size and population since the late Qajars. Houtum-Schindler described it as a large village of 300 houses, with a rundown caravansary, a mosque, a large cistern, and extensive gardens, which was taxed 1,500 tomans by the government (apud Adamec, I, p. 628). Under Reza Shah, SorĶa was a *boluk* of Semnān with 1,400 households, inhabited by 7,000 individuals (Keyhān, II, p. 210). In the 1940s SorĶa was a rural district (*dehestān*) with eight settlements (*ābādi*) (including Lāsgerd and Biābānak) and a total of 7,200 souls. The economy was based on cultivation of grains, cotton, tobacco, and melons and production of textile and carpets (Razmārā, III, p. 152). By the turn of the 20th century, olive and pistachio horticulture and industrial poultry farming was introduced to the district. Salt and gypsum and lime mines are exploited there, and plastic ware is produced in many small shops. In the hinterland an "industrial town" (*şahrak-e san'ati*) is laid out, which, although sparsely occupied, is hoped to invite manufacturing—an achievable goal thanks to SorĶa's position on the Tehran-Mašhad railway. According to the decennial census of 2006, the town and district were home to 9,062 and 14,194 inhabitants, respectively (Markaz-e Āmār-e Irān).

SorĶa was promoted to sub-province (*şahrestān*) on 28 January 2013. It has two districts (*baĶš*): Markazi, centered at SorĶa, with Lāsgerd and Biābānak as

its rural districts (*dehestāns*), and Hafdar, centered at Mo'menābād, with Mo'menābād and Hafdar (Aftar) as its rural districts. The promotion of SorĶa to sub-provincial capital was justified by its “natural geography, harnessing of economic resources, and propagation of the culture of jihad and martyrdom” (ILNA); the third point alludes to long overdue compensation for the significant number of SorĶa'i casualties in the Iran-Iraq War. Nevertheless, this administrative reconfiguration is rooted in the local aspiration to increase SorĶa's state-allocated budget share and augmentation of local authority (see Chehabi for a comparable study on Ardabil). This ambition probably would not have been realized as easily as it was without the rise of Hassan Rouhani, who was born and raised in SorĶa (as Ḥasan Fereydon) and has climbed the ladder of political authority, winning election as president of Iran in June 2013.

The urban morphology of SorĶa is largely modern, with little architecture left from the past. The oldest edifice is probably the Čehel Sotun Mosque that has seen numerous renovations. At least one old residence still stands: that of Ḥāj Ḥešmat Lašgar, with lofty wind towers (*bādgirs*) flanking its spacious southward-looking *ayvān* (Figure 2); this house typifies a regional landlord dwelling (*kāna-ye arbābi*) from the Qajar period. Another attractive landmark of SorĶa is its old cistern beneath a conic dome.

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