



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Gerdkuh”

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Location and
Description

A fortress on the summit of an isolated rocky hill in the Alburz mountains, situated some 18km west of Damgan in northern Persia. Thrust forward into a sloping plain, the hill of Gerdkuh rises about 300 metres above its base, and seen from the south, the access direction to the site, the hill appears dome-shaped; hence its name Gerdkuh (round mountain). In medieval times, Gerdkuh was also known as Dez-i Gonbadan which Islamic sources identified with the one mentioned in the *Shahnama* (ed. Vullers, III, pp. 1550, 1552, 1635, 1643, 1671; *Mujmal*, p. 52; Rashid al-Din, 1959, p. 117; Mustawfi, *Nuzhat al-qulub*, text p. 161, tr. P. 158; idem, *Tarikh-i guzida*, p. 93).

Gerdkuh in History

The date and circumstances of the construction of Gerdkuh, possibly a pre-Islamic site, remain unknown. The earliest known reference to Gerdkuh dates back to the early 4th/10th century in connection with the early Ismaili movement in the Jibal. According to this, it was the residence of the Ismaili *da'i* ‘Abd al-Malik Kawkabi, one of the immediate successors of the *da'i* Abu Hatim Razi (d. 322/934; Nizam al-Mulk, p. 287; Rashid al-Din, 1959, p. 12). Later in the 5th/11th century, the fortress came into the possession of the local Saljuk *amirs* in Damgan (Ibn al-Athir, Beirut, X, p. 38). From the end of the 5th/11th century until the middle of the 7th/13th century, the history of Gerdkuh is closely connected with the history of the Nizari Ismaili state of Persia during the Alamut period (Daftary, pp. 343-44, 363, 365, 367, 381, 414, 421-22, 425, 428-29).

Gerdkuh and the
Nizari Ismailis

Gerdkuh was placed at the disposal of Hasan Sabbah, the founder of the Nizari Ismaili movement in Persia, by Ra’is Mu’ayyad al-Din Muzaffar b. Ahmad Mustawfi, around the year 493/1100. Ra’is Muzaffar, a secret Ismaili convert in the service of the Saljuks, had earlier persuaded his superior Saljuk *amir*, Amirdad Habashi, to acquire Gerdkuh from Sultan Barkiaruq granted the request in 489/1096 and Habashi appointed Ra’is Muzaffar as his lieutenant there, Ra’is Muzaffar, still posing as a loyal Saljuk officer, reconstructed Gerdkuh, making it as self-sufficient and impregnable as possible (Juwayni, ed. Qazvini, III, pp. 207-8, tr. Boyle, II, pp. 678-79; Rashid al-Din, 1959, pp. 116-20; Kashani, pp. 151-55). It was a strongly fortified castle with ample water and food storage facilities, capable

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of withstanding long sieges, when it came into the possession of the Nizari Ismailis. Ra'is Muzaffar served as the Nizari commandant of Gerdkuh for a long time and was succeeded by his son Sharaf al-Din Muhammad.

Situated strategically along the Khurasan road, and guarding the eastern approaches to the Alburz mountains and the Caspian highlands, Gerdkuh served as the most important Nizari stronghold in Qumis, one of the main scattered territories of the Nizari state in Persia. At various times, the Nizaris also levied rolls on travellers passing Gerdkuh (Juvayni, ed. Qazvini, III, pp. 213-14, tr. Boyle, II, pp. 681-82; Rashid al-Din, 1959, p. 123; Kashani, p. 144). Gerdkuh became the last Nizari stronghold in Persia to surrender to the Mongols. The fortress was besieged for 17 consecutive years, starting in Rabi' I 651/May 1253. The garrison of Gerdkuh finally surrendered for the want of clothing in Rabi' II 669/December 1270, some 13 years after the fall of Alamut. The Mongols did not demolish Gerdkuh, as in the case of some other major Nizari fortresses in Persia (Rashid al-Din, *Tarikh-i ghazani*, 1940, pp. 30, 56; idem, *Tarikh-i ghazani*, 1941, p. 29; idem, *Jami' al-tawarikh*, Baku, III, pp. 35-36, 140, 2727, 286-87; Juzjani, II, p. 186). Gerdkuh was still in use in 786/1384 (Yazdi, I, pp. 280-82), but there is no mention of it in later sources. It seems to have been completely abandoned by the time of the early Safavids. The ruins of the living quarters built by the besieging Mongols and the two different types of the mangonel stones, used by the Nizaris and the Mongols, are still scattered on the northeastern slope of the hill (visited by the present writer in 1985).

Of the major Nizari fortresses in Persia, Gerdkuh is the one least studied in modern times. No archaeological survey has been made of the extensive ruins and fortifications which exist on the summit and along the sides of the hill, and of the three outer walls of the site. I'timad al-Sultana, who visited Gerdkuh in 1300/1882-83, has left a brief description of its ruins (III, p. 302-7).

The Fortress Today

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