



CANDLE

CANDLE (Pers.-Ar. *šam*). The Arabic word (Ar. also *šama*) literally means “beeswax” (Ebn Manẓūr; Dehḵodā), for which Persian uses *mūm* (Dehḵodā, Moʾīn, s.v.).

i. Making and Uses.

ii. Imagery in poetry.

i. Making and Uses

Candles are a relatively late invention in human history. Egyptologists sometimes refer to candles and candlesticks, but the candles they describe are more properly torches or torch holders or lamps (Robins, pp. 16, 20). Similarly, the seven-branched candlestick of the Old Testament was not a candleholder but a group of lamps using olive oil for fuel (Robins, p. 16; Ginzberg, IV, p. 158). Candles in the proper sense, however, first appeared in the Roman period, and during the Middle Ages candles were not only used for lighting and ritual but also for keeping time (Robins, p. 16; Hazlitt, I, p. 89; Chambers, I, p. 259). In Persia a variety of candles are attested from early Islamic times in literature from the *Šāh-nāma* (see below) and in miniatures as early as the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries (Baer, p. 8). Jāḥeẓ (I, p. 362; 3rd/9th cent.) records a legend according to which a certain Jaḍīma b. Mālek Abraš was the first to light a candle.



The religious function of candles protected them from being completely replaced by electric light. In Persia the purchase of the first electrical power plant in 1313/1896 and its eventual utilization in 1316/1898 (Katīrā'ī, p. 305; see [barq](#)) does not seem to have created any sharp decline in the production of candles, the number of the plant's customers by the end of a year being still less than 1,000. By the end of 1320/1902, however, the Tehran plant had more than 17,000 customers (Kālīlī 'Erāqī, apud Katīrā'ī, loc. cit.). In other Persian cities electrical power was not generally available until much later (Katīrā'ī, p. 305). Persians, therefore, for some time after the introduction of electrical power, continued to rely on traditional means of lighting, such as oil lamps and candles, which could be cheaply produced from animal fat.

One of the more unpleasant uses of candles has probably always been as an instrument of torture. In Persia this type of torture (*šam'-ājin*) is attested as late as the 13th/19th century (e.g., Browne, 1918, p. 269; idem, 1927, pp. 111-12).

Candle making. A candle is an object made of a wick surrounded by fatty combustible substance. The flame is fed by the molten wax or tallow traveling up the wick as a result of capillary action. To make a candle the wick is dipped into molten tallow, allowed to cool, and redipped until the layers of fat on the wick reach the desired thickness. Candles were originally made of flax threads and coated with pitch (Pliny, *Natural History* 16.178; a.d. 1st cent.). Later they were made from wax (Klenke, p. 11; Robins, p. 16) or tallow. Tallow candles are greasy and have an unpleasant odor, while candles produced from beeswax produce no unpleasant odor or excessive smoke (Strose, pp. 5, 8, q.v. for details about how beeswax is made). Beeswax is initially white, but with time it turns yellow. To prepare beeswax for the production of the wax candle honeycombs were cleaned in water and left to dry for several days. They were then pressed out and boiled in the same water mixed with fresh cold water. Finally the wax was bleached by repeated boiling with sea water and drying in the open air (Robins, p. 16). Paraffin candles, made from the white, translucent, glasslike, waxy substance distilled from petroleum, were only invented in modern times, after experiments with electricity had already started (Robins, p. vi). After the opening of the sperm-whale fishery at the end of the 18th century candles were made of spermaceti (the wax crystallized from the oil of the sperm whale); these have no unpleasant odor and do not bend or soften at summer temperatures. (The old standard measure of artificial light, *candela*, was based on the light given by a candle of pure



spermaceti weighing one-sixth of a pound and burning at the rate of 120 grains per hour; Robins, p. 20). The first candel molding machine was invented by Joseph Morgan in 1834.

In Persia the earliest candles were made of tallow, *šam'-e pīhī* (from *pīh* “animal fat,” also used in oil lamps, cf. *pīsūz* < *pīh-sūz*; Ar. *bīsūs*; Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, I, pp. 420-21). Wax candles made of beeswax, came to be used somewhat later (Robins, pp. 16f.; Stroze, pp. 5f.). From early times tallow and wax candles were made with aromatic substances, for instance, *šam'-e kāfūrī*, made with **camphor** and *šam'-e 'anbar* or *šam'-e mo'anbar*, made with **ambergris**, both of which are well attested in early Persian sources (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, II, p. 174 v. 64, IX, p. 301 v. 17, etc.; Sa'dī, ed. Kaṭīb Rahbar, p. 84 and n. 8; cf. Šahīdī, p. 538). Other substances used were **cinnamon** oil (*rowḡan-e dāṛčīn*), and clove oil (*rowḡan-e mīkak*; Kaṭīrā'ī, pp. 300f.; Chardin, II, p. 220). Paraffin candles (*šam'-e gačī*, lit. as white as chalk) were introduced into Persia from Europe (Kaṭīrā'ī, p. 300; Dehḡodā, s.v. *šam'*) about 1900. A special kind of tall candles *šam'-e qaddī*, lit., as tall as a man) used to be lit at the pulpits of mosques during religious ceremonies, especially those associated with the night of '*āšūrā*'.

Traditions connected with candles. Candles and incense are burnt in many cultures not only for the dead (cf. Dendy, pp. 92-108, especially 102f.) but also for the living (Onians, p. 282, n. 9). The burning of wax and tallow candles may in fact represent an offering of oil, or fat, which in many religions is equated to life substance (Onians, pp. 287, 287 n. 3). The religious importance of candles in Muslim countries is amply demonstrated by their use at the Dome of the Rock (Qobbat al-Šakra) and the Aqsa Mosque (al-Masjed al-Aqṣā) in Jerusalem, which were lit by some two thousand wax candles in addition to five thousand suspended lamps (Baer, p. 7; Le Strange, p. 148). Wax candles are especially valued in religious contexts because of their association with bees and honey, which the Qur'ān and *ḥadīṭ* explicitly refer to as a substance of heavenly origin, possessed of medicinal value (Sura 16:69, “The Bee”; cf. Ebn Māja, II, p. 1142, traditions nos. 3450-52; Meybodī, V, pp. 408-12). The bee as the producer of honey is also praised for its obedience to God and as an example to be followed by the pious (Meybodī, V, p. 420). Sufis refer to the candle symbolically as the “divine light” and the “light of the divine guidance,” whereas the Qur'ān is sometimes called “the divine candle” or “the candle/light of God” (cf. Qur'ān 61:8, “the light of God”; and Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī, *Maṭnawī* VI, p. 391 v. 2082, “the candle of God”; see also Sajjādī, pp. 290-91; Gowharīn, VI,



pp. 76-80; Melikian-Chirvani, pp. 117f.). The association of the honey bee with the soul is well attested in Hellenic, Latin, and German traditions (Gubematis, II, p. 219). This association together with the religious and ritual importance of the wax as a fatty substance endows the wax candle with an especial suitability for use in magical ritual (cf. Thorndike, I, pp. 87, 385, and II, pp. 736-37, 786f). Compare also motifs such as “soul as taper (candle)” (E742.1) and “life bound up, with candle, when the candle goes out person dies” (E765.1.1) in folk and high literature (Penzer, VIII, p. 107, n. 6).

The use of candles in Persian folklore is quite widespread. Aside from holy shrines, *emānzādas*, and mosques, especially at the night of ‘*āšūrā*’ (Hedāyat, 1342, pp. 84, 160; Dānešvar, II, pp. 141, 175; Šakūrzāda, pp. 90-91), candles are also lit at places with no special religious significance as a means of obtaining a wish. For instance, it is reported that in Shiraz women used to light candles at the tomb of Ḥāfeẓ (Dānešvar, II, p. 57). In Tehran, Khorasan, and other provinces people lit candles at the *dabbāg-kāna*, “tannery” (Šakūrzāda, pp. 85-86; Katīrā’ī, p. 5 n. 3), at the site of the Tūp-e Morvārīd (Pearl Cannon, on the Meydān-e Arg, q.v.; Katīrā’ī, p. 269), and in Isfahan at the famous graveyard Takṭ-e Fūlād (Dānešvar, II, p. 129). Young women who have not been able to find a suitable mate light candles in holy shrines, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish (Katīrā’ī, p. 96). In Hamadān they ask the help of a much damaged stone lion sculpture, *šīr-e sangī* (said to be Parthian), which they rub with oil before lighting a candle on its head (Dānešvar, p. 210). In Isfahan they may go to a minaret called *monār-e kūnberenjī* (the minaret with the brass bottom), where they perform certain ritual acts and recite an incantation with sexual implications (Katīrā’ī, p. 98; Massé, p. 308). Others, having received some money and some provisions by ritual begging, fast on the following Friday, then buy a candle, cook some food, and break their fast in the light of the candle (Katīrā’ī, p. 96). Among the ‘Alī-allāhī sect, during the *jašn-e dāwūdī* (feast of David), when a certain *āš* was prepared, those who had a wish would light a candle, and holding the candle in one hand they would touch the pot of *āš* with the other hand while stating their wish (Dānešvar, II, p. 254). Similarly in Khorasan, when a certain food offering called *āš-e omāj komāj* is prepared, seven candles are lit and placed in a tray at the time the *āš* is served. If the aim of the votive offering (*naḍr*) of food is to obtain a cure for an ailment, a knife is held over the burning candle to collect soot that is used to place certain marks on the bodies of the patient and of the person who is making the offering (Šakūrzāda, pp. 29-31). Sometimes ceremonies associated with other food offerings require that two candles be lit on the lid of the pot in which the



offering of food is being prepared (ibid., pp. 38, 39 n. 1, 45-47). At other votive offerings, such as *sofra-ye Abu'l-Faẓl*, *sofra-ye Bībī Ḥūr o Bībī Nūr*, and *sofra-ye Ḥaẓrat-e Roqya Kātūn*, two candles are usually lit at the time the food is served (ibid., pp. 44, 49, 59-61). It is customary to light 12 candles in the names of the twelve imams around the pot in which a votive offering of *samanū* (a pudding-like dish) is being prepared (ibid., p. 63).

Candles are also used to avert evil and bad magic (ibid., pp. 176, 274), especially in connection with wedding, birth, and death. During the wedding ceremony of the Jews of Hamadān three candles used to be sent to the house of the bridegroom from the bride's house together with some henna powder and some sweets (the existence of candles in the nuptial chamber is also attested in Jewish legends; Dānešvar, II, p. 205; Ginzberg, I, p. 360). In many parts of Persia two candles are lit in the name of the bride and the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony and placed at the wedding spread (*sofra-ye 'aqd*) to be put out by the heel of the bride's shoe at the conclusion of the ceremony. The same two candles are later lit and placed in the nuptial chamber (Hedāyat, 1344, p. 28; Šakūrzāda, pp. 174, 176-77, 184; Pāyanda, pp. 54, 56; Katīrā'ī, pp. 144, 172). Candles are customarily lit for several nights in a newborn's room to keep away the evil spirits, a practice reported also outside of Persia (Hedāyat, 1342, p. 38; cf. *Šad dar-e Bondaheš* 16.1-4; Frachtenberg, p. 410; Brand, II, p. 68; Elworthy, p. 425). Candles are also commonly lit in the room where someone has just died. In Persia traces of this practice are found in Sa'dī's poetry, as well as in Zoroastrian and Jewish sources (Katīrā'ī, p. 242 and n. 1; Hedāyat, 1342, p. 69; Šakūrzāda, p. 208; *Šad dar-e Bondaheš* 40.10, p. 110; Ginzberg, I, p. 289). Putting out a candle or a lamp by blowing on it is often associated with misfortune and short life. The fire will curse whoever puts it out, "May the light of your life go out, just as you put me out." To avoid the curse of the fire candles are either put out by hand or by pressing the wick between the heels of two shoes (Šakūrzāda, pp. 179 n. 4, 631).

During Nowrūz celebrations candles are placed on the *sofra-ye haft-šīn*. In some areas parents place one candle for each member of the family (Hedāyat, 1342, p. 152; Šakūrzāda, pp. 98-99).

Burning candles as part of the rituals associated with healing is common in Persian folk medicine (Hedāyat, 1342, p. 55; Šakūrzāda, pp. 235 n. 6, 274). A special kind of beeswax, bleached by repeated boiling in water and drying in moonlight, called *mūm-e sapīd*, was also said to have medicinal value (Tonokābonī, s.v. *mūm*; cf. Gubernatis, II, p. 219).



Candles in folktales and legends. A number of literary folkloric motifs involve candles, among which the following two may be mentioned (cf. Marzolph, types 217, *425A, *652A, and *1330). “The everburning candle” (D1652.11) is attested in both literature (Fozūnī Astarābādī, pp. 603-04) and folklore. A well-known legend about Shaikh Bahā’ī (*Bahā’-al-Dīn ‘Āmelī*) holds that the sage had built his bath in Isfahan with such skill and magical learning that the entire structure and its water could be heated with no more than a single candle, which the legend says was put out by foreigners trying to study its design (Hedāyat, 1342, p. 159; Rafī’ī, p. 397). Hedāyat uses the motif of the everlasting candle in his short story “Āb-e zendagī” (“The water of life”; Hedāyat, 1344, p. 167; cf. Hazlitt, I, p. 87). “The Cat and the Candle” (Marzolph, type 217, attested worldwide in literature and oral tradition) involves the story of a king who trains cats to hold lit candles on their heads and stand around the table when food is served to prove that training alone determines the behavior. However, the king’s minister, to prove him wrong, orders several mice released in front of the cats who forget all of their training, drop the candles, and begin to chase the mice, proving that nature determines behavior (Amīnī, p. 140; Ebn ‘Abd Rabbeh, I, pp. 311-12; see also Cosquin, pp. 400-96). There are numerous Persian proverbs involving candles (e.g., Dehḵodā, *Amṭāl*, s.v. *šam*).

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ii. Imagery in Poetry

The candle is a standard image in Persian poetry. The candle traditionally visualized was tall and white (*kāfūr*) and made of wax (*mūm*), sometimes mixed with fragrant ambergris (*'anbarlagan*, a word that now means large metal pots; in modern Persian a candlestick is called *šam'dān*). The cotton wick (*rešta*) could be lit only after the top of the candle had been cut off. In constructing their metaphors poets drew on all these features, as well as on properties of the flame (*šo'la*, *zabāna*), which is fatal to insects but vulnerable to wind, produces molten wax and smoke, and lights up the night.

To the Arabic *moḥdaṭūn* poets of the 2nd-5th/8th-11th centuries the candle was a favorite subject of descriptive poems, which often have the form of riddles (see Wagner, pp. 134-351; Smoor, pp. 292, 299-301). Candle imagery also occurs in most basic genres of Persian poetry, though often only incidentally. The light and the flame may represent religious, especially mystical, experience. The most popular setting for such imagery is, however, the evening party, the essentials of which are a beautiful youth, a candle, and music (*šāhed o šam' o samā'* candlesticks, Plate c).

The light of the candle is symbolic of physical beauty and, on another level, of spiritual radiance. When Ferēdūn demanded the three daughters of the king of Yemen for his sons, the king described the princesses as “three candles more shining than the light of the eyes” (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 96 v. 105b), referring not only to their beauty but also to the comfort and joy their



presence brought to him. A religious poet might call his heart a “candle of God” (Nāṣer-e Kosrow, p. 416). In expressions like “candle of the world” (*šam‘-e jahān*), “candle of the heavens” (*šam‘-e āsmān*), and “candle in the golden candlestick” (*šam‘-e zarrīn-lagan*) the object is a trope for the sun, but at times it also stands for the moon and other heavenly bodies. On the other hand, the weak light of the candle provided a contrast to the brightness of the sun (‘Onsorī, p. 78). Because of the shape of its flame, like a tongue or pen, the candle is a “teller of secrets.”

The burning of the candle gave rise to more dramatic imagery. Drops of liquid wax are the tears of the suffering lover, the smoke his sighs, and the flame itself his passion. But, when the candle represents the beloved, then the lover is the moth (*parvāna*), which cannot resist the light and is drawn into the flame and consumed. The candle is also a source of paradox: It comes to life only after its head is cut off, destroys itself by living, weeps (molten wax) while laughing (a reference to the flickering flame), and wears a shirt (the wick) within its body (Manūčehrī, pp. 70-72).

Of more elaborately developed candle imagery only a few examples can be mentioned. Manūčehrī (loc. cit.) described the candle in the form of a riddle (*loḡaz*) to introduce a panegyric on his fellow poet ‘Onsorī. The motif of the candle and the moth was adapted by Aḥmad Ġazālī (pp. 59-60) to illustrate the consuming force of love and by Sa’dī to conclude his chapter on love in *Būstān* (pp. 124-27). ‘Aṭṭār included a short tale on the same subject in *Manteq al-ṭayr* (pp. 222-23) which was taken from the Arabic *Ṭawāsīn* of the Persian mystic Ḥallāj (pp. 16-17; cf. Ritter, p. 587, and Schimmel, p. 70). In the *dīvān* of Ḥāfeẓ both the candle and the moth are mentioned quite frequently (cf. Correale, nos. 4752, 5915); in one of his *ḡazals* (ed. Kānlarī, no. 289), with the *radīf* rhyme *čū šam‘* “like the candle,” several aspects of the candle imagery are assembled. In Ahlī Šīrāzī’s (894/1488-89) *maṭnawī-e Šam‘ o parvāna* it forms the basis of an allegorical love story (similar works are mentioned by Monzawī, *Nosḡahā* IV, pp. 2969-71). The poets of the Indian style (*sabk-e hendī* parvāna and *šam‘*). Among modern Persian poets mention should be made of Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Šahrīār, who revived the ancient theme of the candle and the moth in a short *maṭnawī* fragment (*Kollīyāt*, pp. 612-15).

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