



## ČERĀĠ

---

**ČERĀĠ**, lamps (Man. Mid. Pers. *cr'h*, Man. Parth. *cr'γ*, Pahl. *čirāy*, So. *cr'()*γ, Khot. *cārau*, etc., see Bailey, *Dictionary*, p. 103, as well as the etymological speculations in Bailey, 1959, pp. 120-25; loanword in Aramaic *šrg'*, see Telegdi, p. 255). Various kinds of lamps were used in Persia before the introduction of electric light (see *barq*), some of which are still in use. The simplest and cheapest was the *čerāġ-e mūšī* (lit. “mouse lamp,” so called probably because of its small size and poor light; according to Polak (I, p. 79), castor oil was used in the lamps of the poor, in the Caspian provinces also naphtha, hence the modern appellation *čerāġ-e naftī*, e.g., in Shiraz), which consisted of a tin container with a hole through which a cloth wick was inserted. This lamp was used in public toilets, kitchens, and *āb-anbārs*, but for other purposes usually only by the poor; compare the proverb *čerāġ-e mūšī beh az kāmūšī* “a *čerāġ-e mūšī* is better than darkness” (Šahrī, p. 121; Katīrā'ī, p. 300). Another simple lamp was the *pī(h)sūz*, which had a small oil reservoir of either tin, copper, or pottery and a wick. This lamp burned tallow, although sometimes vegetable oil was also used (Katīrā'ī, pp. 301-04). Elaborate lamps were made of more expensive metals and used different kinds of vegetable oils for fuel. *Čelčerāġs* (< *čehel čerāġ* “forty lamps”?) were expensive lamps, either standing or hanging (Polak, I, pp. 79-80; Pers. tr., p. 65; Katīrā'ī, p. 301, Kaḥḥālzāda, p. 293), sometimes imported crystal chandeliers, which were used at parties and on ceremonial occasions. Two kinds of lanterns (*fānūs*) were used to light places of business, while traveling, or outside in the evening. One had a glass guard and was fueled by naphtha (*fānūs-e baġdādī*; also called *čerāġ-e bādī* or *čerāġ-e baġdādī*) and used to be tied to the end of ropes hanging from the roof of the



*bāzār* in Tehran (Katīrā'ī, p. 300). The other (*fānūs-e šam'ī* or *fanar*) was a cylinder with two round copper plates at the top and bottom; the upper plate had a hole in the middle, large enough for a person to pass his hand through in order to adjust the candle. The two plates were connected by means of a pleated piece of cloth, which served as the surface of the cylinder, and the lamp could be collapsed when not used (Šahrī, p. 120; Āqā Najafī Qūčānī, p. 221; Maḥdawī, pp. 67-68; cf. Polak, I, pp. 78-79; Pers. tr., p. 64). Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow also reported having seen a lighthouse in 'Abbādān (Ābādān) some forty cubits tall, the flame of which was protected against the wind in a glass bulb (Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, pp. 14-15).

Before the use of gas and electricity the streets of Tehran were lit, though poorly, by means of oil lanterns. Originally the local municipality (*baladīya*) used to compel the wealthy to hang oil lanterns over the doors of their houses and keep them burning for three hours into the night; later, the government had oil lanterns placed upon posts in the streets, especially in the European quarter (Sykes, p. 16). The person in charge of the lights was called *čerāġčī*, a term recorded already by Ebn Baṭṭūṭa as *jarāji* in Anatolia about 734/1333 (tr. Gibb, I, pp. 420-21; Pers. tr., I, pp. 316-17).

Lamps have religious connotations and are usually treated with special reverence (cf. Qur'ān 61:9, and see also [candle](#)). Thus, holy shrines were lit by elaborate *qandīls* hung by chains from the ceiling (cf. Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, pp. 30-32), and one of the artisans of the Buyid period by the name of 'Alī b. 'Abd-Allāh Nāšī is reported to have built an especially beautiful *qandīl* for the tomb of the Imam Mūsā b. Ja'far (Faḳīhī, p. 688). Lighting lamps involves solemn rituals. When a lamp is lit, those present salute it by saying *salām bar Šāh-e Čerāġ* (the brother of Imam al-Režā buried in Shiraz), or recite a benediction (*šalawāt*; Massé, pp. 16, 283 n. 2; Borūjerdī, p. 97; Behrūzī, p. 151; Hedāyat, p. 108). When the lamp is lit one should also recite an invocation and look at something green, a mirror, a horse, or a pretty face (Massé, p. 320; Hedāyat, p. 103). Lamps should be lit before the last rays of the sun disappear and not put out before the sun has actually risen, because by doing so one ensures the continuity of light. Compare also the custom of keeping lamps burning uninterruptedly for seven days during the celebration of the new year (Šahrī, pp. 121-22). Every woman should personally light the lamp in her own house apparently whether or not she has servants who can do this for her (Hedāyat, p. 94).

In many parts of Persia it is believed that one should not put out the light of a



lamp by blowing on it, as such a deed is not only sinful, but will also shorten one's life (Šakūrzāda, p. 179, n. 6; Massé, p. 320; Hedāyat, p. 99; for a folk tale associated with this prohibition, see Wakīlīān, p. 85). It is believed that the lamp will say to such a person, “may the lamp of your life be put out the same way you put me out” (Šakūrzāda, p. 631). The expression *čerāg-e'omr* and related expressions refer to this association of light and lamps with life (cf. Massé, p. 16. Similar beliefs are attested in many cultures; for instance, in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act 1, scene 3), John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, says, “My oil-dried lamp, and time-bewasted light, shall be extinct with age and endless night.” In many Persian rituals lamps symbolize life and renovation. In Khorasan, a short time before the hour of the new year, lamps or candles are lit in all of the rooms of the house in order to partake of the light's *baraka* (Šakūrzāda, p. 98), whereas in Qūčān the moment of the arrival of the new year is signaled and publicly congratulated by the repeated turning on and off of the light switches (Šakerī, p. 264). The custom of placing lamps and candles at the *haft sīn* and wedding rites is also intended to ensure long life (Šakūrzāda, pp. 99, 176; Borūjerdī, pp. 114, 118).

Light and lamps enter into beliefs connected with all the important events of a person's life, such as birth, marriage, business, and death. Fires or lamps are customarily lit in the room in which a woman and her newborn baby are sleeping, and in Khorasan one is not to pass between the light/fire and the newborn for three nights and days (*Šad dar* 16, p. 15; Šakūrzāda, p. 609 n. 1; Katīrā'ī, p. xi, cf. O'Dea, p. 145). A lamp also used to be placed in the room in which a person had died, by a corpse before its interment, or on the grave (Katīrā'ī, p. 242; Šakūrzāda, p. 208; Massé, p. 16). In Khorasan a light surrounded by sweets is burned all night after the removal of a corpse from the house (*sab-e šām-e ġarībān*), in order to prevent the dead person from returning. Lamps play an important role in ceremonies connected with the signing of the marriage contract (*'aqd*, q.v.), because of the association of light with the divine blessings of long life, prosperity, and happiness. The groom provides lights to be placed on the *sofra-ye 'aqd*, the cloth on which the bride sits during the celebration, surrounded by various objects of symbolic import (Šakūrzāda, pp. 176, 181; Borūjerdī, p. 118). In Khorasan they include two lamps or candlesticks flanking a mirror opposite the bride, who sits on a copper basin resting on the floor (Šakūrzāda, p. 176). In Kāšān a large metal basin is turned upside down and positioned on a piece of green pottery, so that air can circulate under it, and a lighted lamp or candle is placed under the basin. A saddletree is set on top of the basin as a kind of throne on which the



bride sits during the ceremony, symbolizing her hope of controlling her husband (Kalāntar Žarrābī, p. 257; Hedāyat, p. 22). In Shiraz a lamp filled with a mixture of honey and oil is lit, in order to ensure that the bride and groom will mingle with equal felicity (see 'aqd). Newly wed women are not supposed to put out the lamps in their nuptial chambers for three days (Šahrī, pp. 121-122).

Customs that imply belief in the magical power of lamps are also found. It is, for instance, usual to swear by the light of the lamp (e.g., *be īn nūr-e čerāġ* or *be sū-ye čerāġ qasam*; cf. Massé, p. 16, who confuses Šāh-e Čerāġ with Imam 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb). Lamps are placed at many *sofras* in order to obtain a wish, for instance those of *bībī ḥūr o bībī nūr*, *āš-e omāj komāj*, and especially *sofra-ye āš-e 'Abbās(-e) 'Alī* in Qūčān (elsewhere called *sofra-ye Abu'l-Faẓl*); this lamp must burn the whole night (Šakūrzāda, pp. 29, 44, 56; Borūjerdī, p. 105). Similarly, the sooner one lights one's lamp on the eve of Friday (*šab-e jom'a*), the more good luck and *baraka* (blessing) one will have (Massé, p. 284). A number of omens are taken from lamps. A moth flying around the lamp is thought to be the spirit of a deceased relative (Šakūrzāda, p. 314), whereas a common house fly or flying ants circling a lamp are signs of approaching poor weather (Šakūrzāda, pp. 336-37). One way to foretell the weather of the next day is to blow on the lamp glass. If a red hue forms, the next day will be sunny, while a white hue foretells rain (Hedāyat, p. 87).

Merchants used to light the lamps at their places of business. After carefully cleaning the lamp in the late afternoon they would light it while reciting a benediction (*šalawāt*) with the wick set very low. As the lamp warmed up they would raise the wick by degrees, each time saluting Šāh-e Čerāġ. The prayers were repeated by everybody present (Šahrī, pp. 122; Najmī, p. 395). When a customer entered a store when the lamps were just lit, he would say to the shop owner, *čerāġ-at rowšan* "May your lamp be [ever] lit!" and the owner would answer, *čerāġ-e'omr-at rowšan* "May the lamp of your life be lit!" Money earned at this time was called *pūl-e sar-e čerāġ* or *dašt-e sar-e čerāġ*. As it was believed that the first sale after the lamp was lit would ensure good sales during the rest of the evening, storekeepers generally asked lower prices than usual for their goods at lamp-lighting time. It was also believed, however, that it was in the customer's interest to get the first buy after the lamp was lit, and some storekeepers would therefore raise prices for their goods, or the customers might pay an additional price called *sar-čerāġī*. Discount sales were announced by burning a lamp at the store even during the day (Najmī, p. 395;



Šahrī, p. 123; Massé, p. 16). Businessmen also believed that debts should not be paid at lamp-lighting time (Hedāyat, p. 87).

From Persian folk literature note the following introductory formula collected in Khorasan: *Be čerāg goftam qešša begū; goft čī begam? Goftam haṛčī del-et mīkṽād. Čarḳ-ī zad, nešast o goft: yak-ī bud yak-ī nabūd, ġayr az kodā hīč kas nabūd* “I said to the lamp, tell [me] a tale. It said what? I said, whatever you want. He turned around, sat down, and said, Once upon a time . . .” (Šakūrzāda, p. 404).

Lamps are also used in folk medicine. In Khorasan the treatment of rectal worms in children (*enterobius vermicularis*) involves the use of a lamp or candle (Šakūrzāda, p. 242).

The wick (*fatīla*) was sometimes made of a substance called *ḥajar al-fatīla* imported from Badakšān. According to popular belief this type of wick was the feather of a certain bird which could not be burned by fire. Qazvīnī states that the *ḥajar al-fatīla* is first immersed in oil and then lit. It burns until it runs out of oil; when sediments and dirt cover this wick it may be placed in fire until they are burned off and it returns to its original purity and color (Qazvīnī, p. 306).

As gas lighting became common, urban legends developed around the electric plant (capacity 300 kw) built by [Ḥājj Ḥosayn Amīn-al-Žarb](#) in 1326/1908 in Tehran on the Kīābān-e Čerāg-e Gāz, whose name was changed to Kīābān-e Čerāg-e Barq (Dokā’, p. 378; Šahrī, p. 117; Najmī, p. 333). In one such legend it is told how Ḥājj Ḥosayn went to Russia along with Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (1313-24/1896-1907) and noticed an electric plant, something he had never seen before. The guard saw him staring at the building and asked him if he wanted to buy it. Ḥājj Ḥosayn answered yes; the owner of the factory, who had just arrived and noticed the stranger’s shabby appearance, jokingly demanded only five hundred tomans for the factory. Ḥājj Ḥosayn immediately agreed, bought the plant, and brought it to Persia (Šahrī, pp. 117-18). Crowds of people would gather in front of the factory and recite prayers in amazement, but when a rumor was circulated that the factory was a creation of Satan and a sign of the end of the world or that a factory built by foreigners could not be trusted to last, people in general became less enthusiastic about electric light. To overcome this reluctance, Amīn-al-Žarb adorned all of the main streets of Tehran on the occasion of the celebration of the birth of the Twelfth Imam by means of colorful electric lights (*čerāgāni*). The fears of the people were



allayed, and gradually the use of electric lights became more common (Najmī, pp. 393-94; Šahrī, p. 119).

For the history of lamps in Persia and lamps in Persian art see lamps.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

H. W. Bailey, “Ambages Indo-iranicae,” *AIUON* 1, 1959, pp. 113-46.

M.-J. Behrūzī, *Šahr-e sabz yā šahrestān-e Kāzerūn*, Shiraz, 1346 Š./1967.

Ġ. Borūjerdī, *Tārīk-e Borūjerd*, Tehran, [1353 Š./1974?].

Y. Dōkā’, *Tārīkča-ye sāktmānhā-ye Arg-e Salṭanatī-e Tehrān wa rāhnemā-ye Kāk-e Golestān*, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970.

Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, Pers. tr. M.-‘A. Mowaḥḥed, *Safar-nāma-ye Ebn BatĀṭūṭa*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

M.-Ḥ. E’temād al-Salṭana, *Tārīk-emontazam-e nāṣerī*, ed. M.-E. Rezwānī, III, Tehran, 1367 Š./1988.

‘A.-A. Faqīhī, *Āl-e Būya wa awzā’-e zamān-e īšān*, Tehran, 1357 Š./1978.

Ş. Hedāyat, *Neyrangestān*, Tehran, 1342 Š./1963.

E. Joseph, “Andar talāš-e sawād-āmūzī wa yād-ī az maktab-ḵānahā-ye qadīm,” *Rahāvard* 4/16-17, 1366 Š./1988, pp. 174-87, esp. p. 181.

A. Kaḥḥālzāda, *Dīdahā wa šanīdahā*, ed. M. Kāmram, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984.

‘A.-R. Kalāntar Żarrābī, *Tārīk-e Kāšān*, ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1341 Š./1963.

M. Katīrā’ī, *Az kešt tā kešt*, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

M. Leach, ed., *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, 2 vols., New York, 1949.



H. Maḥbūbī Ardakānī, *Tārīk-emo'assasāt-e tamaddonī-e jadīd dar Īrān* III, ed. K. Eṣfahānīān and J. Qājārīya, Tehran, 1368 Š./1989.

M. Mahdawī, *Dāstānhā-ye panjāh sāl*, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

Massé, *Croyances*. Sayyed Moḥammad-Ḥasan (Āqā) Najafī Qūčānī, *Sīāḥat-e Šarq*, ed. R. Šākerī, Tehran, 1362 Š./1983.

N. Najmī, *Īrān-e qadīm wa Tehrān-e qadīm*, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984.

Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, *Safar-nāma*, ed. N. Wazīnpūr, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975.

W. T. O'Dea, *The Social History of Lighting*, London, 1958.

J. E. Polak, *Persien. Das Land and seine Bewohner, Ethnographische Schilderungen*, 2 vols. in 1, Leipzig, 1865; Pers. tr. K. Jahāndārī, *Safar-nāma-ye Pūlāk*, Tehran, 1361 Š./1982.

Zakarīyā' b. Moḥammad b. Maḥmūd Qazvīnī, *Ātāral-belād wa akbār al-'ebād*, Beirut, 1380/1960.

F. W. Robins, *The Story of the Lamp*, London, 1939.

*Šad dar-e naṭr o šad dar-e Bondāheš*, ed. B. N. Dhabhar, Bombay, 1909.

J. Šahrī, *Gūša-ī az tārīk-e ejtemā'ī-e Tehrān-e qadīm*, Tehran, 1357 Š./1978.

R. Šākerī, *Atrak-nāma. Tārīk-e jāme'a-ye Qūčān*, Tehran, 1365 Š./1986.

E. Šakūrzāda, *'Aqāyed o rosūm-e mardom-e Ḳorāsān*, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984.

E. C. Sykes, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, Philadelphia, 1898.

Tāj-al-Salṭana (daughter of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah), *Ḳāṭerāt-e Tāj-al-Salṭana*, ed. M. Etteḥādīya and S. Sa'dvandīān, Tehran, 1361 Š./1982 (esp. pp. 53ff. on the *bāzī-e čerāg-ḳāmūškonī* "game of switching off the light").

Zs. Telegdi, "Essai sur la phonétique des emprunts iraniens en araméen talmudique," *JA*, 1935, pp. 177-256.

L. Thwing, *Flickering Flames. A History of Domestic Lighting Through the Ages*, Rutland, Vermont, 1958.



A. Wakīlīān, *Tamṭīl o maṭal*, Tehran, 1366 Š./1987.

Žozef, “Andar talāš-e sawād-āmūzī wa yād-ī ‘alāmāt-e zohūr maktab-kānahā-ye qadīm,” *Rahāvard* 16-17, 1366 Š./1987-88, p. 181.

(Mahmoud Omidšalar)