



CHRONOGRAMS

CHRONOGRAMS, Pers. *mādda(-ye) tāriḳ*, dates incorporated into Persian texts in disguised form, especially those in which the letters of the alphabet have numerical value. The indication of dates in this way can be found in Persian poetry from the very beginning. Only in the 9th/15th century did the construction of chronograms become a very popular genre, however, cultivated both for practical purposes (especially in epigraphy) and as an exercise of poetic skills. The attention paid to chronograms in rhetorical theory is also comparatively recent. The most extensive treatment of the subject was by Qabūl Moḥammad (tr. pp. 223-68), whose classification into four types will be followed here. The first type, *tāriḳ-e šūrī* (explicit dating), includes the direct mention of dates, whether in *hejrī* or other years. Early *maṭnawīs* were often dated in this manner, for instance, by Abū Šakūr and Ḥakīm Meysarī (Lazard, I, pp. 28, 37). The variants given in the *Šāh-nāma* (Moscow, IX, p. 382, vv. 861-62; cf. Rypka, *Hist. Iran. Lit.*, pp. 155-56) and the epilogue of Sanā'ī's *Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa*, p. 747; cf. de Bruijn, pp. 129-31) are traces of variant versions of these poems, which were put into circulation at different times. The use of a date as part of a pseudo-epigraphic puzzle has also been attested (Utas, 1973, p. 125; idem, 1978, p. 9). A combination of the names of months or seasonal festivals derived from different calendars, but without a year, provides an approximate date, as in Nīsān/Ramāzān and Nowrūz/Rajab in *qašīdas* by Mas'ūd-e Sa'd-e Salmān (*Dīvān*, pp. 312-14) and Sanā'ī (*Dīvān*, p. 71; cf. de Bruijn p. 44).

More characteristic of the genre, however, is the *tāriḳ-e ma'nawī* (meaningful



date), in which the date must be calculated from a word or a phrase with the help of the numerical values of the Arabic letters (see [abjad](#)). Chronograms of this kind take the form of short phrases or single words like *lawd* (refuge), which dates the death of the last Il-khanid, Abū Saʿīd, to 736/1335 (Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* III, p. 58); in poetry they usually occur in the final half-verse of a poem and are preceded by a clue to the presence of a hidden date. Both the clue and the chronogram should also carry verbal meanings fitting the occasion commemorated: A quatrain inscribed on the tomb of Ḥāfeẓ invites the reader to seek the date of his death from *kāk-e Moṣallā* (= 791/1389), the place where the poet found his resting place (Browne, *op. cit.*, III, p. 283). Quatrains and *qeṭʿas* were particularly suitable forms for this purpose. They might record dates of birth or death; of the accession (*jolūs*) of a ruler; of the completion of buildings like mosques, *madrasas*, and palaces; or of any other memorable event. Sometimes titles of books are to contain indications of the dates of their completion. Kāqānī (d. 595/1199) dated his travels by means of letters (e.g., *tā-nūn-alef* = 551/1156; cf. *Dīvān*, p. xviii). According to O. L. Vilʹchevskii, this poet made extensive and ingenious use of chronograms; he is even supposed to have concealed in his poems dates that can be read by both the Julian and *hejrī* calendars (cf. Rypka, *His. Iran. Lit.*, pp. 572-73).

After having defined a third type, consisting of combinations of direct and *abjad* dates, Qabūl Moḥammad described the fourth type, *tārīk-e taʾmīa*, a chronogram in the form of a riddle (*moʾammā*). To this type were applied the intricate rules for riddles that became prominent in Persian poetry during the Timurid period (cf. Subtelny, pp. 72ff.). Arithmetical operations played an important role, for instance, in a chronogram on the death of the Prophet in 11/643: *Az Moḥammad zamāna kālī mānd* “Time remained empty of Mohammad,” which is solved by subtracting the numerical value of the word *Moḥammad* (= 92) from that of *zamāna* “time” (= 103). One of the chronograms for the death of the poet Jāmī, *dūd az Korāsān bar āmad* (smoke came up from Khorasan) requires the subtraction of *dūd* from *Korāsān* (Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* III, p. 512). The letters used in the chronogram could also be indicated allusively; for example, to find the date on which Imam Ḥosayn was killed (in 60/679) in the sentence *Sar-e dīn-rā borīd bīdīn-ī* “An unbeliever cut off the head of the religion,” the letters *yā* (= 10) and *nūn* (= 50) of the word *dīn* “religion” are added together. Other devices included taking only dotted or only undotted letters into account and the use of acrostics. Some poets demonstrated their virtuosity by combining as many chronograms as possible



in one poem. How far this process could go was demonstrated by Moḥtašam Kāšānī in six quatrains that he wrote upon the accession of the Safavid shah Esmā'īl II to the throne in 984/1576: He incorporated no fewer than 1,128 different chronograms. Not only was each hemistich composed so that it would yield the intended date, but also the undotted and the dotted letters separately always equaled 492, that is, half of the same date. It was thus possible to combine each hemistich with any of the following ones in four different ways: by taking into account only undotted letters, only dotted letters, the undotted letters of one half-verse and the dotted letters of another, or the reverse. These devices accounted for 1,104 different combinations, in addition to the twenty-four chronograms concealed in each hemistich taken as a whole (Naṣrābādī, pp. 473-74; cf. *Armaḡān* 11, 1312 Š./1933, pp. 271-72; for a lengthy commentary on these six *robā'īs*, see Šīrāzī; for other examples, see Qabūl Moḡammad, tr. pp. 234ff.).

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