



GĀHĀNBĀR

GĀHĀNBĀR, Middle Persian name for the feasts held at the end of each of the six seasons of the Zoroastrian year. In the Avesta, seasons and feasts are both called *yāiryā ratavō* (yearly times; *Air Wb.*, cols. 1497-98, s.v. *ratu-*), and the term *rad* was still used in this sense in early Middle Persian, as was *gāh* (q.v.) in its meaning of “(appointed) time” (MacKenzie, 1970, pp. 264-66).

The Young Avestan names of the feasts appear in the following order in Zoroastrian liturgical texts (for example, *Y.* 2.2.; *Visperad* 2.9), where their spirits are invoked. These names with their translations (for which see Roth, pp. 702-6; *Air Wb.*, cols. 160, 838, 1117-19, 1775-76) are adjectives, with *ratu-* understood: 1. *Maiḍyōi.zarəmayā* (midspring; lit: midgreening); 2. *Maiḍyōi.šam* (midsummer); 3. *Paitiš.hahya* (bringing in the corn); 4. *Ayāθrima* (homecoming); 5. *Maiḍyāiryā* (midyear); 6. *Hamaspāθmaēdayā* (for which no generally accepted meaning has been proposed). The fourth festival is thought to celebrate bringing animals to shelter before winter sets in. The first, the third, and the fourth thus celebrate times important for pastoralists and farmers, while the second and fifth mark natural phenomena (the solstices) significant for those who reckoned time chiefly by the sun (Nilsson, pp. 311-17). The fact that the winter solstice is called “midyear” shows that these festivals belonged originally to a calendar in which the year was reckoned from the summer solstice.

These evidently ancient festivals, distributed unevenly through a 360-day year, became, with *Nowrūz*, the holiest days of the Zoroastrian calendar, whose observance alone was obligatory. This holiness was conferred on them



through each being associated with one of Ahura Mazdā's seven creations, in the order in which these were brought into existence (see [COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY i.](#)). Thus the first festival was said to celebrate the creation of the sky, the second of water, the third of earth, the fourth of plants, the fifth of beneficent animals, the sixth of mankind, and the seventh (Nowrūz) of fire. Only this last association appears to have real doctrinal justification, since the "new day" was celebrated at the spring equinox, when the sun, the most powerful representative of the creation of fire, is giving renewed warmth and life to the world; and Nowrūz is the only one of the seven festivals which has liturgical observances to link it with its "creation" (Boyce, 1969, pp. 201-12). It seems highly probable that this feast, with its profound theological and symbolic significance, was established by Zoroaster himself, and that thereafter early leaders of his community, seeking to develop its devotional life and unity, took over popular seasonal feasts and consecrated them to Zoroastrianism by linking them, imitatively, to the other creations (Boyce, 1992, p. 105). Only *Hamaspāθmaēdaya*, originally kept, it seems, on the day before Nowrūz, may have been a new festival, established both to make up the number six and to provide a wholly Zoroastrian counterpart, with its dedication to living humanity, to the age-old feast for the dead (see [FRAWARDĪGĀN](#)), kept during the night before Nowrūz.

Originally all the seven feasts were evidently one-day observances. Difficulties over keeping them arose when under the Achaemenids (see de Blois) a 365-day calendar was created on the Egyptian model, with five epagomena inserted between 30 Spendārmad and Nowrūz. The change caused widespread confusion, with probably the majority of Zoroastrians, anxious to remain faithful in worship, keeping the festivals in the year of change, and thereafter, both on what they saw as their right days according to the old reckoning and then, five days later, on their "new" ones according to the 365-day calendar (Boyce, 1970, pp. 518-25, where the introduction of the epagomena was wrongly attributed to the Sasanian period. This was challenged by Boris Marshak, who rightly upheld the general opinion attributing this to the earlier epoch; see further Boyce, 1992, p. 121 n. 13, p. 122 n. 21). Serious problems arose, however, over *Hamaspāθmaēdaya* and the festival of the dead. The former belonged to the daylight hours of 30 Spendārmad, the latter to its night; and according to tradition the *fravašis* (q.v.), welcomed at sunset, were bidden a ritual farewell at the dawn of Nowrūz. The introduction of the epagomena forced the faithful therefore to think of them as dwelling at their old homes for all the five now intervening days, which came accordingly to be called the



“days of the *fravašis*” (Mid. Pers. *rōzān fravardīgān*; on the extension of the *rōzān fravardīgān* to ten days, as it is still generally observed, see Boyce, 1970, pp. 519-21). The sixth *gāhānbār* was now celebrated according to the new calendar on the last of the *fravaši* days, that is, the fifth epagomenon, but still, according to the old reckoning, on 30 Spendārmad.

The *Āfrīnagān ī Gāhānbār*, an Avestan text put together for recital at the six festivals, names them and allots one day to each according to the 365-day calendar, that is, the second of each of the duplicated feast days. The *Iranian Bundahešn* (Ia.16-22) gives both days, and treats the first as the more important, stating that this celebrated Ohrmazd’s completion of an act of creation, after which He rested for the following five days of *gāhānbār*. The duplicated feast days had thus been joined by the time this part of the *Zand* was composed into single six-day observances. Bīrūnī (*Atār*, p. 224) attributed the similar, and presumably associated, joining of the duplicated feast days of Nowrūz and Mehragān to the Sasanian king Hormizd I, whose high priest was Kerdīr.

In the *Sad dar-e Bondaheš* (I.3-9) it is said instead that it was during the *gāhānbārs* that Ohrmazd accomplished His works; and there the feasts are given as lasting only five days, each having lost its first one. A late passage of the *Iranian Bundahešn* (25.3-6) agrees with this, which establishes that this change had taken place before the 10th century C.E. (de Blois, p. 44 and n. 65). In fact it most probably came about through a Sasanian calendar reform of about 500 C.E., when Nowrūz was moved from 1 Fravardīn to 1 Ādar in order that it should coincide once more with the spring equinox. The *gāhānbārs* were also moved, to keep their proper places in relation to it, and the epagomena were transferred to between 30 Ābān and 1 Ādar. This meant that Hamaspaθmaēdaya was cut off from its traditional day, 30 Spendārmad, and it was probably then that it became wholly identified with the five “days of the *fravašis*,” that is, the epagomena. (In living Iranian usage it is called simply the *ga’ambar-e panjīvak* “the *gāhānbār* of the pentad.”)

The epagomena had evidently been regarded at their introduction with general distrust, as “stolen” days—stolen, that is, somehow and mysteriously, from the old reckoning; and it was probably now (since the usage is not found in other Middle Iranian descendants of the Achaemenid calendar) that the Persian priests sought to sanctify these days by linking them with Zoroaster’s five Gathas. Thus it is said: “The names of those five stolen days—some call them the ‘five gathic times,’ some the ‘good pentad’—are in the Religion



Ahunavait gāh, Uštavait gāh, Spentamāt [sic] gāh, and Vahištōišť gāh” (*nām ī ān panj rōz ī truftag — ast kē panj gāh ī gāhānīg, ast kē panjag ī weh gōwēd — pad dīn īn ast...*, *Iranian Būdahešn*, Ia.22). This link was then made also with the sixth *gāhānbār*, since this was now kept on exactly these days. The *Āfrīnagān ī Gāthābyō* was created to be recited during its five days, with invocation of (the Spirits of) the Gathas by name, forming thus an addition to the *Sīrōza* (Darmesteter, II, pp. 726-27). It is enjoined as highly meritorious to recite the five Gathas on these five days; and it seems very probable that the name *gāhānbār*, in the sense of “time of the Gathas” and thus a variant of *gāh ī gāhānīg*, was coined at this period for this particular festival, and then extended to the other five as a distinctive name in place of *gāh* or *rad*, each of which had a variety of meanings. Usage with regard to the sixth festival was naturally influential, since this was regarded as the most important of the chain, being the last and celebrating Ohrmazd’s creation of mankind.

In the early Sasanian period Kerdīr claimed (KZ 1.15) to have had performed in one year, at his own expense, at *ātaš bahrāms* (q.v.) which he had founded, 6798 *radpassāg*, that is, religious services for the *gāhānbārs*, still called by him *rad* (MacKenzie, 1970, pp. 264-66; on yet higher figures for the number of ceremonies in Kertīr’s other inscriptions, see MacKenzie, 1989, pp. 65-66, 71). This large number would accord with the *gāhānbārs* having become under his authority six-day observances, and if this was an innovation of his, this might be reason for his making this precise record. The chief temple service remains today the *Visperad*, an extension of the *Yasna* probably evolved primarily for these feasts. It is enjoined in the *Āfrīnagān ī Gāhānbār* (vv. 3-6) that all have the duty to take part in *gāhānbārs* by bringing some offering, from cattle for sacrifice down to a stick of dry wood, or, if anyone is destitute, a prayer in honor of Ahura Mazdā (q.v.). The *gāhānbār* days were holidays, and after the religious services they were celebrated by communal banquets at which the consecrated food was shared, with drinking of wine and much merrymaking. These banquets brought rich and poor together, and in general the *gāhānbārs* were times for renewal of fellowship, with forgiveness of wrongs and charity to the poor. The Sasanian kings are known from one story to have given lavish banquets for their subjects (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, pp. 436-39; tr. Dhabhar, p. 325). In Islamic times, down to the 20th century, the Persian Zoroastrians have regularly endowed *gāhānbārs*, and in some villages not one of the 30 days lacks its religious services and feasts. The sixth *gāhānbār* is marked by special observances (Boyce, *Stronghold*, pp. 32-33, 215-24). Among the Parsis also the festivals were devoutly kept down to the mid-20th century,



although there only men attended the communal observances. These were the only Zoroastrian holy days brought to the attention of Henry Lord (pp. 41-42); and John Ovington (p. 218) noted of them that “at their solemn festivals, whither a hundred or two sometimes resort, each man according to his fancy and ability brings with him his victuals, which is equally distributed, and eat in common by all those present.” In Bombay the *gāhānbār* feasts had gradually degenerated, however, into little more than social occasions when a government economy measure during the 1939-45 war banned all public banquets. Since the 1970s Parsis have been reviving *gāhānbārs* locally as religious observances, with full participation by women. The tradition has never been interrupted among Persian Zoroastrians and in 1996 a *gāhānbār* was endowed by a Persian settled among co-religionists in the United States.

The Sogdians and K̅vārazmians are not known to have evolved any distinctive name for the six early feasts, but there are indications in Bīrūnī’s account of their festivals (*Ātār*, pp. 233-38) that these were kept by them.

See also [CALENDAR i](#); [FESTIVALS i](#).

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