Encyclopædia Iranica

MĀDDA TĀRIḴ
Article by **Paul E. Losensky**

Published: November 15, 2006
Last Updated: November 9, 2012

MĀDDA TĀRIḴ

MĀDDA TĀRIḴ (plural *mawādd-e tawāriḵ-*, also known simply as *tāriḵ-* or *tawāriḵ-*), chronogram poem, a poetic genre characterized by the inclusion of the year in which an event occurred. Since the beginning of the classical tradition, Persian poets have used various devices to mark significant dates in their works. The earliest and simplest method was to versify the year in lexical form. Kesāʾi Marvazi , for example, gives the date that "he came into the world" in this way: *be siṣad o čehel o yak rasid nawbat-e sāl / čahār-šanba o seh ruz bāqi az Šawwāl*: žThe turn of the year reached three hundred and forty-one, / Wednesday with three days left in the month of Šawwāl' (= 17 March 953; Emāmi, p. 53). Somewhat later, poets began to utilize the *abjad* system of the alpha-numeric correspondences of Perso-Arabic letters. Initially, the letters were treated like separate number-words, so that Masʿud-e Saʿd-e Salmān (d. 1121) could indicate the year that Maḥmud b. Ebrāhim came to power by saying:"*čo sāl-e hejrat begḏašt te o sin o seh jim*": žwhen the year of the hejra passed *te* (= 400) and *sin* (= 60) and three *jim*s (= 3 x 3)' (= 469/1076-77; p. 333).

Around the turn of the 14th century, two crucial developments helped consolidate the chronogram poem as a distinctive and independent genre. First, the short *qeṭʿa*, the occasional form par excellence, came to serve as the preferred vehicle for presenting dates in verse. In the works of Ebn Yamin (d. 1367), for example, we find some twenty two- and four-verse poems whose sole purpose is to record the year in which a prominent political official died. Ebn Yamin wrote out the years in lexical form, but about this time, poets also began to organize the abjad values of letters into meaningful words and

phrases. Using this device, known as *ḥesāb al-jommal* (reckoning by phrases), the poet invents an apt and memorable motto that has a numerical value corresponding to the year in which an event took place. The use of this device became increasingly popular over the course of the century. The defining features of the emerging genre can be found in the three-verse chronogram poem that ḤOāfeẓ (d. 1392) wrote on the death of Shah Šojāʿ's vizier, Turānšāh (II, p. 1061). The first verse gives the name and rank of the deceased. The second verse indicates the day of the week and month that he died, utilizing abjad letters as independent words: *nāf-e hafta bud o az māh-e Ṣafar kāf' o alef'* (It was the middle of the week and the *kāf* (= 20) and *alef* (= 1) of the month of Ṣafar). In the final verse, ḤOāfeẓ gives the year using ḥesāb al-jommal: *ān ke meyl-aš su-ye ḥaqq-bini o ḥaqq-guyi bud / sāl-e tārik̲–e wafāt-aš ṭalab az žmeyl-e behešt'*: "He whose inclination was to see and speak the truth: / Seek the date of his death from the žinclination to paradise'." The presence of a chronogram is signaled clearly by the instructions to seek the date (*tārik*Ë□), and the phrase *meyl-e behešt* yields the numerical value 787 (80 + 707), resulting in the full date of Monday, 21 Ṣafar 787 / 3 April 1385.

The use of the *qeṭʿa* form, the introduction of the topic or occasion in the opening verses, the clear signal of the presence of a chronogram in the word *tārik̲-*, and the closing motto that gives the year according to phrasal reckoning—while these basic elements will remain unchanged as the genre develops over the next century, the opening introduction will often be extensively elaborated, and the manipulation of ḥesāb al-jommal will become ever more sophisticated. The typical chronogram poem of the Safavid-Mughal period ranges from five to fifteen verses, and the motto, often occupying the entire final half-verse of the poem, becomes increasingly appropriate to the event it memorializes.

A comparison of the place of mādda tārik̲- in the works of two poets indicates the growing popularity of the genre in the 15th and 16th centuries. ḤOāfeẓ's collected works contain eleven chronogram poems, all written for funerary purposes and none more than four verses in length. A century and a half later, Moḥtašam of Kāšān (d. 1588) devotes an entire section of his *divān* to mādda tārik̲-, which contains no less than 233 poems. This quantitative increase is accompanied by greater thematic variety. Although over half of Moḥtašam's chronogram poems are still dedicated to the recently deceased, a wide range of other events are now also memorialized. Most significant are chronogram poems marking the construction of buildings, both private residences and

public works. As Thomas Bauer has suggested with regard to Arabic chronograms of the Ottoman period (p. 514), the prevalence of these two themes is probably related to the commercial demand for inscriptions for tombstones and foundation plaques. Two other important occasions for chronogram poems are the birth of a child and the appointment to public office, including the enthronement of a new ruler. Other *mawādd-e tawāriḵ-* give the dates not only for major public events—a victory in battle or the reception of foreign dignitaries—but also for more personal circumstances such as a safe return from a journey or recovery from a serious illness. But as Moḥtašam's chronogram poem on a weight lifter's show of strength indicates (II, p. 1609), almost any event might be memorialized in this fashion.

Although Moḥtašam was an unusually prolific poet and took great care to preserve his poetic works, he was by no means alone in his cultivation of mādda tāriḵ-. The genre is well-represented in the works of poets throughout the Persianate world from the 16th century until modern times. The collected works of poets such as ʿAli-Naqi of Kamara (d. ca. 1621), Wāʿeẓ of Qazvin (d. 1678), and Najib of Kāšān (d. 1711) each contain more than seventy chronogram poems, marking occasions of private and public significance throughout the period of Safavid rule. So prevalent was the genre in Iran during this time that the great chronicler of Safavid literary life, Ṭāher of Naṣrābād, devoted a chapter of his *Taḏkera-ye Naṣrābādi* to *tawāriḵ-* (II, p. 681-708). The genre was equally prevalent in the courts of Mughal India; Kalim of Kāšān (d. 1651), for example, composed chronogram poems on the birth and marriage of Šāh Jahān's sons, on the death of many of his most important ministers and of his wife Momtāz Maḥall, and on his many building projects. In Central Asia, the proliferation of mādda tāriḵ- gave Mir Sayyed Šarif Rāqem of Samarqand the material to compose a historical compendium (*Tāriḵ–e Rāqem*, completed ca. 1713) based almost entirely on chronogram poems and the events that inspired them. Over half the examples contained in ḤOājj Ḥosayn Naḵ-javāni's massive collection of chronogram poems, *Mawādd al-tawāriḵ-*, come from Qajar Iran, and such poems also graced the pages of literary journals such as *Yaḡmā* and *Armaḡān* well into the 20th century (see Dānešpažuh, pp. 143-53), testifying to the longevity and vitality of this genre up until recent years.

As mādda tāriḵ- proliferated, poets became increasingly adept at manipulating its basic elements. Greater attention was given to the opening verses that served to contextualize the final chronogram-motto. These introductions were

seldom less than five verses long and often reached five or six times that length. Funerary chronograms, for example, sometimes evolved into extended eulogies on the deceased, and architectural topics often entailed detailed descriptions of the building and praises for its patron. However, the most distinctive feature of the genre is the use of ḥesāb al-jommal, and great creative ingenuity went into finding phrases that conveyed the value of year succinctly, aptly, and memorably. Qāsem Kāhi of Kabul (d. 1588) gives the year of the death of the Mughal emperor Homāyun in a laconic statement of the accident that caused it: *Homāyun pādšāh az bām oftād* (112 + 313 + 8 + 43 + 486 = 962/1555; "King Homāyun fell off the roof"; Rāqem, p. 129). Moḥtašam integrates both praise and condemnation of the deceased into his mottoes. Each half of the final verse of his māddatārikË on the death of a judge, for example, contains a chronogram identifying his profession and celebrating his abilities: *āh az ān ʿālem-e asrār-e qadar/ vāy az ān mofti-e aḥkām-e Rasul* (6 + 8 + 51 + 141 + 462 + 304 = 17 + 8 + 51 + 530 + 70 + 296 = 972/1564-65; "Alas for that scholar of the secrets of destiny / and woe for that judge of the Prophet's decrees"; II, p. 1494). On the other hand, his mādda tāriḵ- on the murder of a rival poet closes with a motto that attributes his killing to the guilt that he felt over the wrongs he had done to Moḥtašam: *Enteqām-e bāṭeni didi be-jān-e u če kard?* (592 + 72 + 28 + 56 + 7 + 8 + 244 = 987/1579; "Did you see what the hidden vengeance did to his life?"; II, p. 1531). The most memorable architectural chronogram-mottoes often point to the function of the building. ʿAli-Naqi, for instance, sums up his dedication of a garden pavilion built by Shah ʿAbbās in a single word, *ʿešratgāh-i* (= 1005/1595-97; "a pleasure spot"; p. 395). Wāʾeẓ wittily melds the functions of two public institutions in giving the year of the construction of a *madrasa*: *dard-e jahl-rā dār-al-šefā* (208 + 239 + 617 = 1064/1654; ža clinic for the pain of ignorance"; p. 576).

Poets also elaborated on the basic components of the genre by including multiple chronograms in a single poem or by manipulating the rules of ḥesāb al-jommal. Moḥtašam was particularly fond of including multiple mottoes in his chronogram poems. An ode on the enthronement of Esmāʿil II is made up entirely of chronograms; each of the poem's thirty-two verses consists of two chronograms, each occupying a full half-verse, yielding a total of sixty-four chronograms for the date 984/1576 (II, pp. 1552-54). This tour de force is by no means unique; Moṭašam repeated it several times, and examples by other poets can be found into the 19th century (see Ṣadri, pp. 144-89). It is also possible to compound the number of chronograms within a single motto. Wahši of Bāfq (d. 1583) wrote a chronogram poem to commemorate the

completion of his narrative work *Nāẓer wa Manẓur*, in which the motto yields the year 966/1549 four times as a result of adding the values of the dotted, the un-dotted, the connected, and the un-connected letters separately; the last three verses of the poem helpfully supply the rules for deriving each of these products (Waḥši, p. 490).

Various other devices were developed to indicate the addition or subtraction of the values of letters and phrases in the chronogram-motto. In the final verse of an inscription for the mansion of a high government official in Qazvin, ʿAli-Naqi writes, "*Ṯāni-e rawża o čun rawża nadārad ṯāni / ʿaql tāriḵ–aš az ān rawża-ye bi ṯāni kard*" (The second of paradise, but since paradise has no second, / reason made its date *rowża* without the second); the verse instructs the reader to deduct the value of the second letter (*vāv* = 6) from the value of the word *rowża* (= 1011), resulting in the year 1005/1596-97 (ʿAli-Naqi, p. 396). A similar technique is used twice in a single poem by Najib of Kāšān to mark the year of the death of Shah Solaymʹān. The first motto reads, *faryād ba yak martaba az taḵ-t čo barḵ-āst* (When all at once a cry arose from the throne); the verb *barḵ-āst*, "arose," indicates that the value of *faryād* (= 295) should be subtracted from that of *taḵ-t* (= 1400) to arrive at 1105. The second, closing motto follows the same procedure: *barḵ-āsta az taḵ-t Solaymān-e zamāna* (The Solomon of the age arose from the throne); the final phrase has a numerical value of 294 (191 + 103), which is again "raised" from 1400, now giving the year 1106. (pp. 624-25). The one year difference between the two sums is itself significant and indicates that Solaymān died in the final month of the year 1105 and that the forty-day period of mourning continued into 1106 (July and August of 1694). However obscure such devices appear at first glance, they are usually clearly marked in the text of the poem itself, and modern readers can find further assistance in a dictionary of such devices recently compiled by Mahdi Ṣadri (pp. 209-398).

From Persian, the genre of mādda tāriḵ- and the techniques of ḥesāb al-jommal passed into Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Urdu literatures, where they were adapted to the particular linguistic and social demands of each tradition. Such poems, however, pose a challenge to modern, Western sensibilities. In part, this is due to the limitations of the Latin alphabet; though examples of chronograms can be found in late Latin literature, only seven letters carry numeric values, compared to the twenty-eight of Arabic alphabet (Browne, II, pp. 76-77), and the restrictions on word choice prohibit a broad application of the device. More importantly, however, the chronogram seems to flout the

modern need for purposive, unambiguous, and direct communication. It openly plays with the multiple significance of letters and words that are doubly encoded; seemingly disparate registers of meaning are yoked together as passing circumstances demand. Chronograms certainly revel in playfulness, wit, and ingenuity, but as the prevalence of funerary poems suggests, this is play with serious purposes. Chronograms obviously serve as a social *aide de memoire* and record dates more securely than mere numbers can; not surprisingly, mādda tāriḵ- appear frequently in historical texts. More profoundly, they inscribe meaning on events and on the seemingly arbitrary succession of calendar years, striving to take control of time itself. The contingent, but transformative events in the life of the individual and society—birth, death, career advancement, changes in political power, and alterations in the built environment—are commemorated, fixed in time, and given meaning by their integration into the symbolic system of the literary tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For further discussion of the history of mādda tāriḵ- and additional examples of ḥesāb al-jommal, q.v., see CHRONOGRAMS.

Human ʿAbbāspur, “Mādda tāriḵ-,” in *Dāneš-nāma-ye adabiyāt-e fārsi*, ed. ḤOasan Anuša, Tehran, 1997, II, pp. 1217-19.

ʿAli-Naqi Kamraʾi, *Divān*, ed. Abu’l-Qāsem Sari, in *Mirāṯ-e eslāmi-e Irān*, ed. Rasul Jaʿfariān, VII, Qom, 1998.

Thomas Bauer, “Vom Sinn der Zeit: aus der Geschichte des arabischen Chronogramms,” *Arabica* 50, 2003, pp. 501-31.

Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* II, pp. 76-77.

G. S. Colin, “ḤOisāb al-Djummal,” in *EI2*. Manučehr Dānešpažuh, *Tafannon-e adabi dar šeʿr-e fārsi*, Tehran, 2001, pp. 119-69.

Naṣr-Allāh Emāmi, *Kesāʾi Marvazi*, Tehran, 1995.

ḤOāfeẓ Širāzi, *Divān*, ed. Parviz Nātel Ḵānlari, 2 vols., Tehran, 1980.

Masʿud-e Saʿd-e Salmān, *Divān*, ed. Rašid Yāsami, Tehran, 1960.

Moḥtašam Kāšāni, *Haft divān-e Moḥtašam Kāšāni*, ed. ʿAbd-al-ḤOosayn Navāʾi and Mahdi Ṣadri, 2 vols. Tehran, 2001.

Najib Kāšāni, *Kolliyāt*, ed. Aṣḡar Dādbeh and Mahdi Ṣadri, Tehran, 2003.

ḤOājj ḤOosayn Naḵ-javāni, *Mawādd al-tawāriḵ-*, Tehran, 1964.

Moḥammad-Ṭāher Naṣrābādi, *Taḏkera-ye Naṣrābādi*, ed. Moḥsen Nāji Naṣrābādi, 2 vols., Tehran, 1999.

Mir Sayyed Šarif Rāqem Samarqandi, *Tāriḵ–e Rāqem*, ed. Manučehr Sotuda, Tehran, 2001.

Mahdi Ṣadri, *ḤOesāb-e jommal dar šeʿr-e fārsi, wa farhang-e taʿbirāt-e ramzi*, Tehran, 1999.

Ṣafā, *Tāriḵ–e adabiyāt* III/1, pp. 340-43; V/1, pp. 626-31.

Moḥammad Moḥiṭ Ṭabāṭabāʾi, “Tāriḵ–e mādda tāriḵ-,” *Yaḡmā* 15, 1962-63, pp. 56-61.

Mollā Moḥammad-Rafiʿ Wāʿeẓ Qazvini, *Divān*, ed. Sayyed ḤOosayn Sādāt Nāṣeri, Tehran, 1980.

Waḥši Bāfqi, *Divān*, ed. ḤOosayn Naḵ-aʿi, Tehran, 1960

(Paul Losensky)

December 5, 2006