



MAS'UDI VI. OTHER REFERENCES TO IRANIAN CULTURE

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A. Cosmology and geography. Plato, Themistius, and the Stoics believed that the celestial spheres were composed of fire or of some combination of fire, water, and air, without earth; but Aristotle and certain Persian, Indian, and Chaldean thinkers (*hokamā*) believed that they were composed of a unique fifth element (*Tanbih*, p. 7). A celestial sphere (*falak*) was called *esbehr* in ancient Persian and *hāydān* in modern Persian (*Tanbih*, pp. 33-34).

On ancient Iranian doctrines of light, darkness, and fire, see II.A. above. Mas'udi refers the reader to a discussion, in works now lost, of the concept of "the five originary (principles)" (*al-ḵamsa al-qodamā*): Ormazd "God" (*Allāh*), Ahreman "the evil satan," Kāh "time," Jāy "place," and Hum, "good thing (to eat or smell) and anything brewed or leavened" (*al-ṭayyeba wa'l-ḵamir*). Muslim heresiographers falsely accuse the Zoroastrians of believing that God produced evil by his own thoughts (*tafakkara fa-ḥadaṭa men fekreheh šarr*) and then allowed it to exist, in the form of Satan (*Šayṭān*), for a predetermined time. Mas'udi suggests that some ordinary believers may hold this view, which has been erroneously attributed to all Zoroastrians. He also reports that his other (now lost) works covered what the Zoroastrians believe regarding "the



return of kingship to them and to other ancient nations, the beginning and end of the world, those who believe that it will last forever, and those who believe that it has no beginning or end” (ibid, *Tanbih*, pp. 93-94; *Moruj* II, sec. 1437; on the return of kingship, see further *Tanbih*, pp. 108, 110).

The Persians and Nabateans or Syrians divided the inhabited world into regions. The east was called Khorasan, “place where the sun rises,” derived from *kor* “sun.” The west was called *Qorbarān* “place where the sun sets.” The north was called *Bāktar* and the south *Nimruz* (*Tanbih*, p. 31). The Greek geographers divided the earth into climes corresponding to the planets, for which Mas’udi gives the Persian names: *Kayvān* “Jupiter,” *Urmazd* “Saturn,” *Bahrām* “Mars,” *Qoršād* or *Āftāb* “the sun,” *Anāhid* “Venus,” *Tir* “Mercury,” and *Māh* “the moon.” In Persian, a clime (*eqlim*) is called *kešvar* (*Tanbih*, pp. 33-34).

The fourth clime is called *Bābel*, which some Persians and Nabateans believe is derived from *Bil* or *Bail* “Saturn” in their ancient language. It is the best of all climes. It includes *Irānšahr*, the region ruled by the Persian kings, who would spend the summer in the mountains and the winters in Iraq. The name *Irānšahr* is derived from that of *Iraj* (see II.A. above) or from *ir*, which in ancient Persian is “a term that means both goodness and virtue” (*esm jāme’ le’l-ḳayr wa’l-fāzl*) and appears also in the word *irbad*, “leader of good men” (*ra’is al-ḳiār*), which the Arabs pronounce as *herbed* (see [HĒRBED](#)). According to the Nabateans, the Persians inhabited only *Fars*, *Māhāt*, and “other Pahlavi regions” (*ḡairehā men belād al-Fahlawiyin*); the region was eventually named after them, but its original name was *Aryānšahr* “land of lions” from *aryā* “lion” in Aramaic (*nabaṭiya*), because of their strength and courage (*Tanbih*, pp. 35-38).

The *Sawād* (central Iraq) was once divided into 12 *estāns* or districts (*kuras*) and sixty subdistricts (*ṭassuj*). As the Tigris changed course and southern Mesopotamia turned into swampland, this division broke down. The Persians call Iraq and Syria *Surestān*, “land of the Syrians,” that is, the Chaldeans, who in Arabic are called the *Nabaṭ* (*Tanbih*, pp. 40, 176-77).

B. Calendar and festivals. The Persian calendar consists of twelve months of thirty days each. Mas’udi lists the names of the months, which appear to differ only slightly, or not at all, from those used today. Each day of the month also has a name; Mas’udi lists them all. He also cites a poem suggesting that Arabic speakers considered *Rām*, the twenty-first day of the month, a good day to



drink wine (Mas'udi, 1894, *Moruj* II, secs. 1281, 1298-300; *Tanbih*, pp. 215). Mas'udi occasionally dates events by the Persian calendar (e.g., *Tanbih*, pp. 48-49, 401).

The sixteenth day of the seventh month (Mehr) is the festival of Mehragān (*Moruj* II, sec. 1298). The Persians explain that the festival commemorates the death of an oppressive king called Mehr; the name *Mehr jān* means “the spirit of Mehr is gone.” Mas'udi, who appears to accept this folk etymology at face value, cites the phrase as evidence that the Pahlavi language (*al-Fahlawiyah*, *wa hya al-fāresiya al-ula*), unlike Arabic, places the subject before the verb. People of standing (*ahl al-morowwāt*) in Iraq celebrate the holiday by replacing their old furniture and buying new clothes (*Moruj* II, sec. 1287).

A tutor of the caliph al-Rāzi (r. 322-29/934-40) describes the celebration of Mehrajān along the banks of the Tigris as a day of “uproariousness, music, games, joy, and delight, unlike anything I had ever seen before.” To distract the caliph, who had political worries on his mind, the tutor regaled him with tales of the caliphs and the Persian kings. He eventually persuaded him to drink by citing a poem by the caliph al-Ma'mun in praise of drinking wine on Mehragān (*Moruj* V, secs. 2502-503).

The eighth month (Ābān) brings the festival of Ābānruz or Ābāngāh. At the end of the month come the five days required to complete the year. Each of these days has a name in Persian and Arabic. Every 120 years, the Persians would intercalate an entire month. They could have achieved the same result by inserting one day every four years, but chose not to because doing so would cause auspicious and inauspicious days to change places, or because the days were named after their angels (*malā'eka*) and they did not want to add days that did not belong. When their empire collapsed, the intercalation was neglected, with the result that their festivals began to move around the calendar. In 282/895-86, the caliph al-Mo'tamed moved Nowruz back two months to June 11, to correct the problem for tax purposes (*Moruj* II, secs. 1298-301; *Tanbih*, pp. 215-16).

In Iraq and Fars, the first day of the ninth month (Āḍar) brings festivities intended to ward off the cold. A buffoon (*kawsaj*) rides out on a mule and eats walnuts, garlic, fatty meats, and other foods and drinks classified as hot. Thus fortified, he submits to having cold water poured over him and professes to feel no discomfort. He cries out *garmā garmā* “heat, heat” (*ḥarr*). This is a time of great joy (*sorur*) and excitement (*ṭarab*). Similar festivals occur at other



times of the year (*Moruj* II, secs. 1298-99; see also [CALENDARS, FESTIVALS](#)).

C. Temples.

1. Astral temples. The world contains seven great temples originally dedicated to one of the heavenly bodies. Four of these temples are associated with Iran:

a. Mārbin, on a mountain near Isfahan, originally a pagan sanctuary but consecrated to fire by Bostāsaf or Yostāsaf. It was still being used in Mas'udi's time.

b. Nowbahār, built in Balkh by Manušahr, originally dedicated to the moon. Its guardians, who were persons of great power, were called Barmaks; the Barmaki family of viziers was descended from one of them. The building was famous for its solid construction. It reportedly bore an inscription in Persian: "Said Budasf: '[Entering] the gates of kings requires self-restraint, patience, and money'" (*aql o šabr o māl*).

c. Kāvusān, in Farḡāna, built by Kāvus in honor of the sun, and destroyed by the caliph al-Mo'taşem (r. 218-27/833-42).

d. Ġomdān, at Şan'ā' in Yemen, reportedly built by Żaḥḥāk to honor Venus. It was razed by Oṭmān b. 'Affān (*Moruj* II, secs. 1370-81, IV, sec. 2618).

2. Pre-Zoroastrian fire temples (*boyut al-nirān*).

a. One in Ṭus, built by Afridun (see II.C. above).

b. Barazesavaza, in Bukhara, also built by Afridun (see II.C. above).

c. Karkukān, in Sejestān, built by Bahman b. Esfandiār.

d. A temple in "the land of al-Şiz wa'l-Rān." According to one report it was originally built for idols but appropriated by Anušervān. Another report claims that Anušervān found fire already there.

e. K*ws*ja or K*visah, built by Kay Ḳosrow.

f. J*riš, in Qumes, left unmolested by Alexander.

g. Kanjara, built by Siāvakš.

h. A temple in Arrajān built by Bostāsf or Qobād.



i. The Palace of Candles in Fostat (*Meşr al-qadima*), built by Lohrāsf, now a mosque.

j. A temple in Fars, built by Lohrāsf (*Moruj* II, secs. 1400-401).

3. Zoroastrian fire temples. There are fire temples in Iraq, Fars, Kerman, Sejestān, Khorasan, Ṭabarestān, Jebāl, Azarbaijan, Rān, Sind, India, and China. The most famous are:

a. A temple in Nisābur founded by Zoroaster.

b. A temple in Nasā wa'l-Bayzā', also founded by Zoroaster.

c. A temple in Dārābjerd, in Fars, containing a particularly precious flame brought from K̄'ārazm (Chorasmia) by Yustasf at the behest of Zoroaster. In Mas'udi's time the sanctuary was called Ādorjuy "River Fire." It is apparently the same as the temple in Kāriān reportedly founded by Anušervān. When Islam appeared, the Zoroastrians, fearing that the invaders would extinguish the flame, used it to kindle a new one in Nasā wa'l-Bayzā' (see VI.C.3.b. above).

d. A temple one parsang from Eşṭakr. Originally a sanctuary for idols, it was dedicated as a fire temple by Ḥomāy, who later removed the fire and let the building fall into ruin. Mas'udi visited the site, seeing there "a great structure, with stone columns topped with unusual stone figures of horses and other animals, of enormous proportions; surrounded by a vast enclosure and a protective wall of stone, on which were skillful depictions of figures." The site, which is evidently Persepolis, was called the mosque of Solomon, who is said to have imprisoned the wind there.

e. A temple in Madinat Sābur ([Bišāpur](#)), in Fars, built by Dārā b. Dārā.

f. A temple one hour outside Jur (present-dy Firuzābād), a town in Fars famous for its rose water. It was built by Ardašir over a spring. It is a place for excursions and has a festival. The town of itself contains Ṭerbāl, a great building venerated by the Persians but razed by the Muslims. There are many tales about the region, which includes Shiraz, the capital of Fars; these tales have been written down by the Persians (*qad dawwanathā al-Fors*; *Moruj* II, secs. 1402-404).

g. Bārnāvā, built by Ardašir two days after his accession.



h. A temple built on the Sea of Marmara by the Byzantines at the request of Sābur I.

i. A temple in Astiniyā, near Baghdad, built by Burān, the daughter of Abarviz (*Moruj* II, secs. 1402-406, 1412).

D. Reliefs and paintings. Mas'udi was impressed by the reliefs at Persepolis (*Moruj* II, sec. 1403; see VI. B.3.d., above), and by the representations of the heavens, the earth, plants, animals, and the like left by the Ašgāniyun (Parthians) in their summer residences in Azarbaijan (*Tanbih*, p. 95; see II.B. above).

In Eṣṭakr, he was shown a book (see I.B.5. above) containing the history of the Sasanian dynasty containing vividly colored portraits of the dynasty's twenty-five emperors and two empresses. Each had been painted on the day the sovereign died and stored in the treasury "so the living would not forget the image of the dead." Ardašir I was depicted "standing with a spear in his hand, dressed in a red tabby (*modannar*) mantle, sky-blue trousers, and a green and gold crown." Yazdajerd III was depicted "in a figured green mantle, figured sky-blue trousers, and a crimson crown, holding a lance and leaning on a sword." The colors used in the paintings included solutions of gold, silver, and copper, all of a kind no longer extant in Mas'udi's time. The sheets were of a violet (*ferfiri*) hue, and so expertly crafted that he could not tell if they were paper or parchment (*Tanbih*, pp. 106-7).

E. Literature. Mas'udi mentions tales about the Isfahan region put into writing by the Persians (*Moruj* II, secs. 1402-404) and Persian poems about Zaranrud (Zāyandarud), the river of Isfahan (*Tanbih*, p. 74). He also provides evidence for the written and oral transmission of Persian historical narratives in Arabic. He reports that the caliph al-Hešām (r. 105-25/724-43) had a work of Sasanian history translated for him into Arabic (*Tanbih*, pp. 106-7; see also above, I.B.5. and below, VI.D.). The caliph al-Marwān II (r. 127-32/744-50) was an avid reader of royal biographies from the Persian and other traditions (*Moruj* IV, sec. 2288). The boon companion Abu Bakr Hoḍali described Anušervān's campaigns in the east for the caliph al-Saffāḥ (*Moruj* IV, sec. 2335).

In addition to religious and historical works (see I.A., B., and C. above), Mas'udi knew of tales and fables translated from Persian and other languages. In a discussion of the history of Damascus, he compares the legends invented by



storytellers to “the stories transmitted to us, or translated, from Persian, Sanskrit, and Byzantine Greek.” These include *Hazār afsāna*, which means “A thousand tales” (*alf korāfa*), also known as “A thousand and one nights” (*Alf layla wa layla*) which is the story of “the king, the vizier, his daughter, and her maidservant, these last being Širāzād and Dināzād.” There are also *Ketāb Farza wa Simās* (The Book of Farza and Simas), which contains tales about the kings and viziers of India; *Ketāb al-Sendbād*; and “other books of this kind” (*Moruj* II, secs. 1415-16).

F. Music. In a discussion of music held at the behest of the caliph al-Mo‘tamed (r. 256-79/870-92), Ebn Khorradāqbeh declared that the Persians were the first to pair the *nāy* (a rim-blown flute or a double-reed woodwind) with the lute (*‘ud*); the *zonāmi* (a reed-pipe of uncertain type) with the pandore (*ṭonbur*); the shawm (*sornāi*) with the drum (*ṭabl*); and the *mostaj* (the Chinese sheng, a mouth-blown free reed instrument) with the harp (*ṣanj*). The people of Fars accompanied song (*ḡenā*) with lutes (*‘idān*) and harps (or cymbals, *ṣonuj*), which they invented (*wa hia lahom*). The people of Ray, Ṭabarestān, and Daylam also favored the pandore, while the people of Khorasan and the surrounding regions sang to the accompaniment of the *wanaj* or *zanaj*, a seven-stringed lyre. Iranian kings (*moluk al-a‘ajem*) insisted on being sung to sleep (3213-5; 130 = *Moruj* V, secs. 3213-15, 3222).

Persian music has distinctive *nagham* (melodies?), *iqā‘āt* (rhythms), *maqate‘* (sections?), and *ṭoruq moloukiya* (royal modes?). Mas‘udi’s report, which has clearly been garbled in transmission, here diverges from the account that Ebn Khorradāqbeh himself gives in *al-Lahw wa al-malāhi*, where eight modes are listed; Mas‘udi’s report says there are seven modes but lists only six. Moreover, the names of the modes do not coincide. Those given by Mas‘udi alone are *s*kāf*; *‘*m*r*s*h*; *dārus*nān*; *sāy*kād*, *sāy*kāh*, or *sāb*kād*; *šis*m*; and *jub**rān*, *ḥub*rān*, or *juy‘rān* (*Moruj* V, sec. 3214). A more complete recension of Ebn Khorradāqbeh’s brief comments on each mode except for the first may be found in the published edition of his *al-Lahw wa al-malāhi* (Ebn Khorradāqbeh, pp. 15-19). His further remarks on musicianship, audition, rhythm, melody, and related technical matters (*Moruj* V, secs. 3223-26) mention a style called *mākuri*, the ‘bordello’ style, associated with [Ebrāhim b. Maymun Mawṣeli](#), identified as a Persian (*men abnā’ Fāres*).

G. Food and drink. A well-known wit named Šorā‘a b. Zandabuq advised the caliph al-Walid II (r. 125-26/743-44) to drink wine made of grapes rather than dates or raisins. On one occasion, al-Walid II exclaimed *la-aṣṭabeḥanna haft*



hafta, a mix of Arabic and Persian meaning ‘I will drink every morning for seven weeks’ (*Moruj IV*, secs. 2240, 2247).

A courtier advised the caliph al-Wāteq (r. 227-32/842-47) to eat *košknānj mosayyar*, perhaps a snack prepared from dry bread, as an accompaniment to wine (*Moruj IV*, sec.2854).

The caliph al-Mostakfi (r. 333-34/944-46) once asked his companions to recite poems describing various dishes. Among the items described are several with Persian names or otherwise associated with Iran. These include:

1. *bādenjān Burān*: “Buran’s eggplant,” a dish named after the wife of the caliph al-Ma’mun (Firuzābādi, s.v. *bur*).

2. *dastija*: unknown; described only as being cooked.

3. *harisa*, which according to the anonymous poet was a Sasanian invention and a particular favorite of Anušervān. It contains poultry, lamb, sheep’s tail, white wheat [?], bitter vetch, almonds, and galingale.

4. *jardaqa*: a loaf of bread; used in the preparation of *wasat* or *wasṭ* (see below).

5. *juḍābā*: a dish of rice, saffron, sugar, and meat or fat. Poets describe it as yellow, reddish, or orange in color, and as jiggling or forming circles when blown on (because it is gelatinous). A version made with chicken is used in *wasat* or *wasṭ* (see below).

6. *lowzinaj* or *lowzinaja* (also described in verse in *Moruj V*, sec. 3389): a sweet containing almonds, sugar, and syrup.

7. *marzanjuš*: marjoram, used as the basis of a condiment (*kāmek*).

8. *saljam*: turnips, eaten pickled.

9. *sanbusaj*, for which Eshāq b. Ebrāhim Mawṣeli gives a recipe in verse. A mixture of meat, onions, cabbage, rue, cinnamon, coriander, cloves, ginger, pepper, cumin, salt, and *morri* (a fermented condiment) is pounded together, boiled until dry, wrapped in a thin flat loaf, fried, and served with spicy mustard.

10. *sakārej*: plates, in this case for serving condiments (*kawāmek*).



11. *ṭayhuj*: see-see (a bird of the pheasant family), eaten fried or stewed.
12. *wasat* or *wasṭ*, for which Ebn al-Rumi (d. 283/896?) gives a hard-to-follow recipe in verse, involving two loaves (*jardaqa*) of semolina bread, portions of two chicken *judābas* (see above), almonds, walnuts, cheese, olives, mint, tarragon, boiled eggs, and salt (*Moruj* V, secs. 3553-66).
- H. Games. Ardašir was reportedly the first to play backgammon (*nard*). He set the number of points (*boyut*) at twelve, corresponding to the months, and the number of checkers (*kelāb*) at 30, corresponding to the days in each month. The dice symbolize the arbitrary character of prosperity and the abrupt reversal of fortune. Mas'udi notes that although different styles of play have developed, the number of points has remained constant. He adds that although the action of the dice is arbitrary, there is nevertheless room for skill and strategy. He cites three Arabic poems about backgammon and cites a claim that chess must have been invented by a believer in free will and backgammon by a determinist (*Moruj* I, sec. 161, V, secs. 3477-81).

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