



## MEHRAGĀN

**MEHRAGĀN** (Mehrgān/Mehregān; Ar. Mehrajān; Meherangān among the Parsis), an Iranian festival apparently dedicated to the god Miθra/Mehr (see [MITHRA](#)), occurring also in onomastics and toponymy. By extension this name is used with the generical meaning of autumn and identifies a musical mode. In the Mazdean annual schema of feasts, the festival occurs on the day Mehr of the month Mehr, that is, the 16th day of the 7th month. In some almanacs the occurrence of Mehragān is marked at the 10th of Mehr, after the modern reform (1925 CE) of the Iranian calendar (Ruḥ-al-Amini, p. 83).

The name of the festival is to be found in the Jerusalem Talmud and in that of Babylon (Taqizāda, pp. 192, 214; tr. pp. 158-59, 311; Bokser, pp. 261-62; Neusner, pp. 185-86). According to Masʿudi (*Moruj*, sec. 1287), in the Christian milieu of Syria and Iraq, the word Mehrajān indicated the first day of winter. The Arabic form Mehrajān identifies also a festival widespread outside the Iranian plateau. In a variant of the *Aḥsan al-taqāsim* by Moqaddasi (p. 45, n. d), there is mention of its celebrations in ʿAden, where the author have been visiting around the end of the 9th century (Cristoforetti, pp. 162-63).

On the basis of some Arabic verses of the Sicilian poet ʿAli b. ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Ballanubi, Mehrajān celebrations were observed in Cairo in the 11th-12th centuries (Corrao, p. 56). After its prohibition, at an unknown date, this “Coptic” festival was allowed again by the Fatimid caliph al-Zāher (r. 1021-36; Corrao, p. xxxvii). For Egypt one can envisage a symmetry between Mehrajān and the local festival Nayriz, which clearly derives from Nowruz (see [NOWRUZ iii](#)) and occurs at the 1st of the Coptic month of Tut (September



10-11). We know that in modern times a Mehrajān festival occurs in mid-February in Somalia (Cerulli, p. 162). According to Ebn ‘Edāri (p. 84), in 399/1009 in Andalus Mehrajān occurred at the end of Šawwāl, which corresponds to the last ten days of June.

In Andalus during 10th century, the name ‘Ansara was much more in use than the Persian derived name Mehrajān for the same festival (Lévi-Provénçal, p. 172 n. 1). The coincidence with the St. John festival and its fires (24th of June) makes one think of a symmetrical Andalusī Nayriz festival on the 1st of January, but the general lack of information on the matter does not allow one to say anything conclusive (for Arabic sources about Christian festivals in Andalus, including Mehrajān, see Fernando de la Granja). The relation of symmetry and consequent analogy between Mehrgān and Nowruz is frequently asserted in the extant sources (see below). This is the basis on which one may make inferences about the ancient rites of Mehrgān.

The name of the festival Mehragān is formed of the proper noun Mehr (Old Pers. Miθra/Mithra, a diety) and the suffix *-agān*, which is used in many names of the Mazdean festivals (on this point and for a survey of other possible etymologies, see Calmard, p. 15). Walter Belardi (esp. pp. 61-149) has done a detailed study on the position of Mithra/Mehr in the Iranian calendar. His study is focused on the significant meaning of the name of this Indo-Iranian god, based on the common noun *\*mitrá*, as “pact, contract, covenant,” and on Mithra/Mehr’s function as an arbiter (cf. Boyce, 1975-82, I, pp. 24-31). This function is well testified by his Greek attribute *mesítēs* (according to Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 46) and by the Iranian and para-Iranian sources, in which Mithra/Mehr acts as arbitrator on the cosmological, eschatological, and anthropological levels (Belardi, pp. 32-45).

The Mehragān festival is clearly correlated to the equinox (see Biruni, *Āṭār*, p. 222; tr., p. 208), which is the astronomical phenomenon most easily linked to the concept of equity and equilibrium. But it remains uncertain whether the festival was in honor of Mithra or if the dedication to Mithra was, in Ḥasan Taqizāda’s view, serendipitous. According to Taqizāda (pp. 350-51; tr., p. 145), the reason may as well be a compromise that occurred in the process of adoption of some ancient religious beliefs by Zoroastrians. Hence, the celebration of Baga Mithra in the 7th month of the Achaemenian calendar Bagayadi- (Av. Bāgayāday-) may have been added to the “new-Avestan” calendar in a period (second half of the 5th century BCE) in which the seasonal celebrations for the autumn equinox coincided with the 16th of Mehr. The



name of the festival (*\*bāgayāda?*) had been replaced by the name that this festival features in the “new-Avestan” calendar, that is Mehragān (<*\*miθrakāna*).

Taqizāda’s hypothesis implies that the name of the Achaemenian month was taken to mean “(the month of) the worship of Baga,” assimilated with Mithra, but this interpretation has been rejected for philological reasons (Boyce, 1981, pp. 66-68; idem, 1982, II, pp. 16-18, esp. p. 24; on the name Baga, see Gignoux, pp. 88-90). In fact, the only possible analogy between the Achaemenian celebration and the posterior Mehragān could be found in the stated celebration for the triumph of justice over usurpation, respectively represented by the victory of Darius I the Great over *Gaumāta* and of the epic hero *Ferēdūn* over Bēvarasp (*Žaḥḥāk*). According to Taqizāda (p. 350; tr., p. 145), the Iranian epic preserved the memory of the coincidence of Mehragān with the day on which the usurper *Gaumāta* was killed by Darius I in 522 BCE. Some of the rites used on Magophonia, that is, the commemoration of the murder of the magi, or “of the magus” *Gaumāta* under Darius I, may have influenced the observance of *\*Mithrakāna* (see Boyce, 1975-82, II, pp. 86-89; Hartner, p. 749; Henning, pp. 133-44; Dandamaev, pp. 138-40; Widengren, pp. 163-66).

It is noteworthy that the report by Ebn al-Balkī (pp. 90-91) about the massacre of the Mazdakites ordered by Kōsrow I Anušīravān (r. 531-79 CE) on the occasion of the great banquet for Mehragān could confirm the analogy, but this passage would also imply that Mehragān was an official occasion in which the king assigned “duties and assignments” (*kārḥā wa šoḡlhā*; cf. Ps.-Jāḥeẓ, *Ketāb al-tāj*, p. 144; tr., p. 164; cf., for Nowruz, *KEL’AT*).

The festival, which was once connected to the solar calendar of the Iranian tradition, evidently suffered all the consequences of the complex evolution of the various forms of that calendar used by the Iranian peoples (see *CALENDARS*). Originally, and probably until the early Sasanian period, Mehragān was a single day (Boyce, 1970, pp. 518-19; idem, 1982, II, p. 34), but it seems to have been duplicated during the Islamic age as a Small or General Mehragān and a Great or Special Mehragān, as is the case of Nowruz and other festivals (Biruni, *Ātār*, pp. 223-24; tr., p. 209). This kind of duplication, producing a distance of five days between these two festivals, is clearly related to the general issue of interventions in the Iranian calendar, on which scholarly opinions differ notably (Bickerman, p. 203; Boyce, 1970, pp. 514-29; Balinski, p. 99; Marshak, pp. 145-52; de Blois, pp. 40-41, 46-49; Scarcia, pp.



133-41; see also [KABISA](#)). The Arabic sources (e.g., Biruni, *Ātār*, pp. 222-23; tr., pp. 207-9; Ta'ālebi, pp. 33-35) testify to attempts, clearly *a posteriori*, to explain those duplications on the basis of two different moments in the epic tradition being referred to; concerning Mehragān, they attribute it to the rebellion of [Kāva](#) and the triumph of Fereydun over Bēvarasp.

The fact that the epic tradition plays a role also in connection with the Sada festival may be due to the occurrence of the calendrical Mehragān in the traditional seasonal place of the Sada festival during the 6th and 7th centuries CE (Cristoforetti, 2002, p. 295). According to Biruni, the Sasanian king Ohrmazd I (r. 272-73 CE; see [HORMOZD I](#)) joined the Small and the Great Mehragān, thereby turning it into a six-day festival (according to Taqizāda, pp. 351 n. 496, tr. p. 323 n. 496, this enlargement is a phenomenon that had already occurred in a more ancient time). The fact that festivals were extended is supported for the later Sasanian times by a Byzantine document dated 565 CE (Boyce, 1983, pp. 807-8). However, afterwards the kings and the people of Iran celebrated the festival over thirty days, “distributing them over the several classes of the population in the same way as we have heretofore explained regarding Nowruz” (Biruni, *Ātār*, p. 224; tr., p. 209; cf. idem, *Tafhim*, pp. 254-55). Biruni’s note that Nowruz was celebrated for thirty days through the month of Farvardin, if taken at face value, would make it reasonable to assume that the festival of Mehragān also lasted for the same number of days, starting on the day of Mehragān and ending on the 15th of Ābān. It is possible to see a relation between this ambiguous passage by Biruni and the fact that Ferdowsi (I, p. 89, v. 3) talks about a Mehrgān of the 1st of Mehr as in perfect symmetry to the Nowruz of the 1st of Farvardin (cf. Modi, 1922, p. 463). The following sentence attributed to Salmān Fārsi (Biruni, *Ātār*, p. 222; tr., p. 208) clearly reflects such symmetry between the two festivals in a different way: “In Persian times we used to say that God has created an ornament for his slaves, of rubies on Nowruz, of emeralds on Mehrajān. Therefore these two days excel all other days in the same way as these two jewels excel all other jewels” (cf. similar point in Ps-Jāḥeẓ, *Maḥāsen*, p. 361). This close relation of perfect twinship is also reflected by the fact that in Arsacid times “Nō Rōz came to be celebrated at the autumn equinox, and Mihragān at the spring one, the two poles of the religious year thus changing places” (Boyce, 1983, p. 805; cf. idem, 1979, p. 106).

According to Mary Boyce, the original festival may have been renamed under the influence of a Babylonian autumn festival, which was “under the



protection of Shamash, Mithra's Mesopotamian counterpart" (Boyce, 1982, II, p. 35). However, all of our information concerning the Mehragān festival is provided by sources of non-Iranian origin (Rajabi, p. 222). In Greek authors we find only mentions of generic celebrations: "The dominant aspect is that of a royal festival of a new year or renewal, celebrated by festivities, present-giving, animal sacrifices" (Calmaid, p. 16). According to Ctesias, it was the only annual occasion on which it was proper for the king of Persia to get inebriated (cf. Boyce, 1975, I, p. 173, who connects the practice with the use of soma/haoma). Nevertheless, another dominant feature of the festival seems to have been its royal and solar aspect; on the day of Mehragān, the day of the creation of the sun itself, the king would wear a crown engraved with the image of the sun (Biruni, *Āṭār*, p. 222; tr., p. 207).

As regards the [Arsacids](#), a passage in Tā'ālebi (p. 47) referring to an official meeting between Kōsrow son of Firuz (Osroes II? r. ca. 190-95 CE) and the chief of the Zoroastrian priests seems to be the most ancient testimony of customs regarding exchanging of gifts on Mehragān. But both the name of the ruler and the congruity of the two characters recall the well-known topos of wisdom of Kōsrow I Anušīravān and his most wise minister [Bozorgmehr](#).

According to Boyce (1983, p. 808), the major festivals, including Mehragān, "continued to be six-day festivals till some time after the 10th century A.D. (when they too were reduced to five, the sixth day of each being then abandoned)." During the islamization of Iran, we find different attitudes towards traditional Iranian festivals, not only with differences between Muslims and Zoroastrians, but also between the Parsis of India and the Zoroastrians of Iran, who even used different forms of the Iranian calendar (Boyce, 1968, p. 213, n. 86; idem, 1977, pp. 164-67; idem, 1979, p. 221; see [CALENDARS](#) ii, iv). Probably under pressure from their Hindu surroundings, opposing to animal sacrifice which the Parsis of India were still practicing in the 18th century (witnessed by Anquetil-Duperron; cf. Boyce, 1966, p. 107; idem, 1975, p. 106), the festival declined among them during the 19th century, and the celebration is now limited to the 16th of the month of Mehr (Boyce, 1969, p. 32; Dhabhar, p. 343, on the ritual; Modi, 1889; idem, 1922, p. 460). The Iranian Zoroastrians, among whom an important sanctuary was dedicated to Mehr Izad in Kerman, continue to celebrate it by animal sacrifices, including the meat of a typical solar animal symbol such as the cock (Boyce, 1975, pp. 108-9, 117-18; idem, 1977, pp. 54-55, 83-87; Ruḥ-al-Amini, p. 84).

Muslim sovereigns and other rulers celebrated Mehragān as a purely secular

festival. The term “gifts of Nowruz and Mehrajān” attested since the early Islamic period should mean a kind of tax apart from those under Sharia law, and it was in fact abolished several times (Qomi, pp. 411-12; Ps.-Jāḥeẓ, *Ketāb al-tāj*, pp. 146-47; tr., pp. 165-66; cf. Lambton, 1948, pp. 595-96; Rajabi, p. 228). However, no specific study has yet been done on the fiscal aspect of these gifts (see Lambton, 1994, pp. 145-47). Mehragān is mentioned in a poem by Maḥmud b. Ḥosayn Košājem, an Arab poet of the 4th/10th century (Sharlet, pp. 266-67), one of many general references made in poetry during the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, which was established in the former Sasanian territory in southern Iraq, where socio-cultural life was well influenced by Iranian tradition. The great enjoyment of the festival, with its clamor, lights, banquets, music, and games is celebrated in both Arabic (see for example Ps.-Jāḥeẓ, *Maḥāsen*, p. 374) and Persian poetry (see Dehḵodā, *Loḡat-nāma*, s.v.; Calmard, p. 18). Mas‘udi mentions a poetic fragment attributed to the caliph al-Ma’mun (r. 813-17), in which Mehragān is called a royal festival (*‘id kosravāni*), the occasion when he would drink wine. Mas‘udi also mentions a report to the caliph al-Rāzi (r. 934-40) of an elaborate celebration of Mehragān on the Tigris at the home of the Turk general Bajkam, the like of which in excitement, amusements, play, pleasure, and merriments had not been seen (Mas‘udi, *Moruj*, secs. 3502-503). Mention of Mehragān is also made in a *qaṣida* by Abu’l-Moqātel Naṣr b. Noṣayr praising the victory of Moḥammad b. Zayd ‘Alawi, popularly known as al-Dā’i al-Kabir (the Great Missionary), who conquered Māzandarān in 250/864:

Announce not only one but two pieces of good news,  
The glory of the Dā’i and the day of Mehragān.  
It is a nomadic (*badawī*) moment in the time,  
But the son of Zayd is the master of time’s servitude  
(Mas‘udi, *Moruj*, sec. 2518).

The Arabic *divān* by the panegyrist of Persian origin Mehyār Deylami (worked in Baghdad in the first half of the 11th century) contains sixty-nine *qaṣidas* celebrating Mehragān, in some of which it is indicated as a culminating moment in the year (Mehyār Deylami, II, pp. 253-56; IV, pp. 60-62). Indeed, Mehragān is regarded as a sign of resurrection and the end of the world, for everything which grows then reaches its perfection (Biruni, *Āṭār*, p. 223; tr., p. 208). The custom of a sovereign changing his clothing at this time is reported by Biruni (p. 223, tr. p. 209), who relates that the sultans of Khorasan arranged for the distribution of autumn and winter clothes to their soldiers at Mehragān. His statement is corroborated by Ps.-Jāḥeẓ (*Ketāb al-tāj*, p. 150; tr.,





p. 169), who mentions the distribution of clothes at Nowruz and Mehragān by the Taherid amir ‘Abd-Allāh b. Ṭāher (cf. KĒL‘AT). This custom, implying the renewal of personal belongings, is probably the only one of the Mehragān observances that has a minimal echo in contemporary Iran, outside of Zoroastrian circles; that is the custom of carpet washing (*qālī-šuyān*) found in Mašhad-e Ardahāl, near Kashan (see Āl-e Aḥmad, pp. 200-205; cf. Ruḥ-al-Amini, p. 85; on this festival and its customs, see ‘Aẓimā). A modern renewal of the Mehragān tradition may be noticed in the inauguration of the academic year at the University of Tehran, occurring sometimes on the 10th, some other times on the 16th of the month of Mehr.

Outside Iran itself, but still in an Iranian milieu, we can find traces of Mehragān in the memoirs of the Tajik modern writer Šadr-al-Din ‘Ayni (q.v.). In connection with his native city of [Gijduvan](#) (Bukhara province, Uzbekistan), he describes entertainments such as para-military performances, fireworks, races, and animal fights (see Ruḥ-al-Amini, p. 85).

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