



SADA FESTIVAL

SADA (Arabicized *Sadaq* or *Sadaq*), the most important Iranian winter festival, celebrated by kindling fires. While the other seasonal festivals – Nowruz, Tiragān, and Mehragān – corresponded, at least theoretically, to the three cardinal points of the solar year (spring equinox, summer solstice, and autumn equinox accordingly), Sada fell not on the winter solstice, but forty days after it, namely on the 10th (Ābān) day of the month of Bahman (on or around 30 January in the Gregorian calendar, if calculated from the modern Solar Hejri calendar; see [CALENDARS ii](#)).

No trace of Sada can be found in the Zoroastrian texts, but the Arabicized forms *sadaq* and *saḍaq* reveal the existence of a Middle Persian form of the name (*sadag*). In the *Šāh-nāma*, the kings from mythical Lohrāsp on (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow], VI, p. 9, line 21), but predominantly the Sasanians, are said to establish Sada temples, offer gifts to them, and celebrate the Sada festival (relevant passages are collected in *Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 52-56). The motif of Sada falling into oblivion under the Arab domination appears in the oracles foretelling the decline of the Sasanian Empire (cf. *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow], IX, p. 341, line 369). [Badi'-al-Zamān Hamadāni](#) (968-1008) condemns the celebration of Sada, Nowruz, and Mehragān as idolatry for which the Iranians were punished by the Arab invasion (Hamadāni, p. 4; see also Zand, p. 64; *Jašn-e Sada*, p. 42; Cristoforetti, 2002, pp. 43-44). Yet for Muslim Iranians, who were anxious to retain their cultural identity and historical memory under the Caliphate, these three festivals became a symbol of their glorious past.

The earliest Islamic texts on Sada have been collected and commented upon



most importantly by [Arthur Christensen](#) (1875-1945; see Christensen, I, pp. 164-82), by the authors of the collective work *Jašn-e Sada* published by the Anjoman-e Irānšenāsi in Tehran (1946), by E.É.Bertel's (1890-1957, see [BERTHEL'S](#); 1953), Hašem Raži (1992, pp. 549-633), and recently by Simone Cristoforetti in his extensive study of the Sada (Cristoforetti, 2002). Historical and literary sources, both in Arabic and Persian, confirm the feasting of Sada at Muslim courts from the Samanid and Ziyarid times up to the Saljuqs (10th-12th centuries) in the areas from Bukhara and Ghazni to Isfahan and Baghdad.

Of the Samanid period, only one *beyt* from a *qašida* about the Sada, presented by Abu'l-ʿAbbās Rabenjani (cf. Lazard, I, pp. 26-27) to the Samanid ruler NašrII b. AḥmadII (r. 914-43) in 331/941, has been preserved (Lazard, II, p. 64; cf. Cristoforetti, 2002, pp. 105ff.). The earliest historical records of Sada celebrations are those of the Ziyarid prince Mardāvij in 323/934 at Isfahan, well remembered as a prelude to his assassination (Ebn al-Aṭir, VIII, p. 222-23; *Mojmal al-tawāriḡ wa al-qešaš*, p. 390; Ebn Meskaweyh, V, pp. 412-17; also Abu'l-Fedā', II, p. 87; cf. *Jašn-e Sada*, p. 48) and that of the Ghaznavid ruler Mas'ud (r. 1031-40, see [GHAZNAVIDS](#)) on his way to Marv in 426/1034 (Beyhaqi, II, pp. 666-67). Ebn al-Aṭir (X, p. 134) reports on a celebration of Sada by the Saljuq ruler Malekšāh (r. 1073-92) in Baghdad in 484/1091, and he quotes a *qašida* by Muṭarriz (Cristoforetti, 2002, p. 233). Also from that time comes a note by [Moḥammad Ġazāli](#) (1058-1111; I, p. 407) on the toys (ceramic trumpets, wooden swords and shields) that were sold on the occasion of Sada. Sada *qašidas* (*sadaqiya*) dedicated to Buyid (see [BUYIDS](#)) rulers were, as a rule, written in Arabic, while Persian poems flourished at eastern courts, especially under the Ghaznavids (see texts collected in *Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 56-69, 74-78; Bertel's, pp. 36-41).

The etymology of the word *sada* is not clear. Islamic authors generally derive it from the numeral *šad* (one hundred). The most common explanation of the term is that within the five-month period of the "Great Winter," counted from the first day of the month of Ābān until the end of Esfand, the festival fell on the 100th day of winter, that is the 10th of Bahman (Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; Rāzi, pp. 37-38). According to another, less convincing explanation, "one hundred" stands for 50 days plus 50 nights that separate Sada from Nowruz (Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; Idem, 1954-56, p. 265; Idem, 1983, p. 257; Gardizi, p. 246). The term is also put in connection with the legend on the children of the first man or of the first couple (Gayumarṭ, Mašya, and



Mašyāna) whose number reached one hundred on that day (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; Idem, 1954-56, p. 265; Idem, 1983, p. 257; Gardizi, p. 246; Qazvini, p. 80), or with the number of men rescued from Žaḥḥāk (Biruni, 1954-56, p. 265).

Early Islamic texts ascribe the establishment of the festival of Sada to the characters connected with the myth of the origins of the humans (Gayumart and the first human couple) and to epic heroes: to Hušang, in commemoration of his discovery of fire when he tried to hit a dragon with a stone (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow], I, pp. 33-34; Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; cf. Cristoforetti, 2002, pp. 280-82); to Feridun, in memory of his victory over the dragon-king Žaḥḥāk, and the salvation of a half of the latter's victims by his cook Armā'il (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 227; Idem, 1954-56, pp. 265-66; Idem, 1983, pp. 257-58; Gardizi, pp. 246-47; Razi, p. 37; *Nowruz-nāma*, p. 10; a different version is given by Ebn al-Faḡih, pp. 329-31, see Cristoforetti, 2002, pp. 292-94); to Zāv, the son of Tahmāsb, in memory of his victory over Afrāsiāb (Noweyri, p. 186). 'Onṣori calls the festival a patrimony of Feridun and Jamšid (p. 14), that of Ḳosrow and Bahman (p. 240), or a tradition of *dehqāns* and *gabrs* (pp. 239-240), while Manučehri (p. 60) attributes it to Kayumart and Esfandiār. Another branch of the tradition ascribes the establishment of the festival to Ardašir Bābakān (r. 224-42, see [ARDAŠIR I](#); Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226), or to his mother (Qazvini, p. 80).

The placing of Sada on the 10 of Bahman, thus 50 days before Nowruz, seems well established in literature. Šahmardān Rāzi (p. 37) speaks clearly of one hundred days counted from the beginning of Ābān to the 10th of Bahman. Zamakšari in his *Moqaddamāt al-adab* (I, p. 11) confirms that *Leylat al-Sadaq* is the fortieth night of the (three-month) winter (which begins on the first day of Dey and ends on the last day of Esfand). Such dating of Sada is supported by testimonies from poetry of the Ghaznavid period. In Farroḳi's *qašida*, personified Sada visits the king on "the 10th of Bahman" (*dahom-e bahman-māh*), in order to announce to him the arrival of Nowruz within 50 days (Farroḳi, p. 354; for Sada in Bahman see also Idem, p. 324; 'Onṣori, pp. 14, 237-40; for Sada at 50 days before Nowruz see Manučehri, pp. 39-41; for Sada as the herald of spring see Farroḳi, pp. 204, 354; Manučehri, pp. 39-41; and 'Am'aq Boḳāri, p. 185). The memory of the 150-day winter divided by Sada in two unequal parts (100 and 50 days) can still be found in popular sayings, such as *šad be Sada, panjāh be Nowruz* (One hundred [days left] to Sada, fifty [more] to Nowruz), or *šad be Sada / si be gala // panjāh be Nowruz / hā bala* (One



hundred [days left] to Sada, thirty to the herds, fifty to Nowruz, oh, yes), and the like (Hedāyat, p. 146; *Jašn-e Sada*, p. 35; Mirniā, pp. 226-27; Raži, pp. 604-5). Yet, the authors, who reported on the fire festivals celebrated by the Ziyarids, Buyids, and Saljuqs, call them *Leylat al-Sadaq/Sadaq*, *Leylat al-woqud* (the night of burning [fires]), and *Leylat al-milād* (the night of Nativity) interchangeably, thus identifying Sada with the Christian holiday of the Christmas which approximately falls on the winter solstice (Hamadāni, p. 4; Ebn Meskawayh, V, p. 310; Ebn al-Aṭir, VIII, p. 222, X, p. 69). Cristoforetti argues (Cristoforetti, 2002, p. 351) that “all dates relative to Sada celebrations that actually took place in the Islamic setting, extrapolated from the most reliable sources, cover the period end of December–the first half of January.” Thus, he thinks, the winter solstice might have been the original term of the festival which then, as a result of consecutive calendar reforms (a Buyid reform of 1006 and the Jalāli reform under Malekšāh in 1079) shifted to the end of January (see also Bertel’s, p. 35). Cristoforetti (2002, p. 352) observes the existence of two different traditions with regard to the date of Sada: a western tradition which identifies Sada with the *Leylat al-milād*, celebrated as a fire festival on 6 January (Epiphany), and an eastern (Ghaznavid) tradition which puts Sada on the day of Ābān (the 10th day) of the month of Bahman.

In fact, the traces of a solar festival held around the winter solstice are to be found in both Middle Persian texts and texts of the Islamic period. Biruni mentions an *Āḍar-jašn* (Fire-festival) celebrated on the 9th (Āḍar) day of the month of Āḍar, the last autumn month (Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, p. 225; Bundahišn, tr. Anklesaria, XXV.13-14, pp. 106-7), which was probably identical with the fire festival called Šahrivaragān or Āḍar-jašn on the 4th (Šahrivar) day of Šahrivar, being the beginning of winter in ʾTokārestān (Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, pp. 221-22). On the first day of Dey (winter solstice and the first day of the “Small Winter” of three months), there was a festival called Korram-ruz (joyful day), K̄var-ruz (Sun-day), or Navad-ruz (ninety days [left to Nowruz]; see Biruni, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, pp. 225-26; Idem, 1954-56, p. 264; Gardizi, p. 245). In Islamic Persia, the night of the winter solstice (the last night of autumn) was known under its Syriac name of *Šab-e Yaldā* (the night of nativity), or as *Šab-e Čella* (the night opening the initial forty-day period of the three-month winter; see ČELLA). Being the longest and the darkest night of the year, additionally connected with Christianity, *Šab-e Yaldā* usually has negative connotations in Persian poetry (for example, see Manučehri, p. 25; ‘Onṣori, p. 301; Nāṣer-e K̄osrow, p. 6; K̄āqāni, p. 25; Sa’di, p. 723; cf. Krasnowolska, 1999, p. 60). Yet, traces of some ritual importance of the winter solstice night have survived in



popular beliefs and practices (Enjavi-Širāzi, I, pp. 18-29, 108-10, 124-31 and II, pp. 28-49, 152-64, 182-85; Šakurzāda, pp. 194-96). Mary Boyce (1968, pp. 213-15; Idem, 1977, pp. 176-85; Idem, 1983, pp. 800-1) mentions a fire festival still observed by Iranian Zoroastrians, which falls on the 26th day (Astād) of the month of Ādar, (mid-December), that is one hundred days before Nowruz. This festival is named Sada in Kermān and Hiromba in Yazd, and Boyce considers it to be more ancient than the Sada of the month of Bahman.

There were also some minor festivals on the dates close to Sada. The second (Bahman) day of the month of Bahman, that is Bahmanagān or *Bahmanjana*, was a festival dedicated to Bahman (Vohu Manah), the patron of livestock (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; Idem, 1983, p. 257; Idem, 1954-56, p. 265; see Dehḡodā, s. v.; Šafā', p. 499). The festival of Bahmanjana was confused with Sada in the Ghaznavid times already (‘Am‘aq Boḡāri, p. 185; Šād, I, p. 816), and this mistake was repeated by Berthel's (p. 41). A festival called *Now-Sada* (New Sada) or *Bar-Sada* (Upper Sada) was celebrated five days before the Sada proper, probably as a result of an intercalation (*kabisa*, see Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 213; a passage missing in Sachau's text was supplemented by Khalidov, p. 162; and in Biruni, *Pamyatniki*, 1957, pp. 242-43; Gardizi, p. 246). In Qazvini's *‘Ajā‘eb al-maḡluḡāt* (p. 80), Sada falls on the 15th day of Bahman, which seems to show a situation when the five intercalary days (*andargāh* or *andarjāh*) fell between Ābān and Ādar.

Boyce (1968, pp. 201-12; Idem, 1983, pp. 800-1) relates the Sada festival to the cult of a Zoroastrian deity named Rapiṡwin, the lord of Summer and Noon, who was believed to rule over the warm part of the year (that is, the seven summer months) and then descend under the ground on the last day of the month of Mehr in order to reappear on the first day of Farvardin. The ceremonies of his farewell and welcome were observed by the Zoroastrians, and the festival of his return was identical with Nowruz. Rapiṡwin was believed to make the plants grow and the fruit ripen, and, while underground, he heated the roots and the underground waters from beneath, thus protecting the plants from cold (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, XXV.11-17, pp. 207-9; *Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, VI.79, p. 488 and II.7-14). According to Boyce, the festival of Sada should help Rapiṡwin to heat the plants during the most severe freezes. That is why modern Zoroastrians would light their Sada and Hiromba fires near running water or over an underground canal (*qanāt*). The practice is confirmed by Beyhaḡi (II, p. 666), by the texts on Mardāvij's Sada (Ebn Meskawayh, V, p. 412; Ebn al-‘Atir, VIII, p. 222), and by some of the Sada



qaşidas in which a description of fire reflected in water became a part of the literary pattern, as can be seen in the poems by Manşuri-Samarqandi (*Jaşn-e Sada*, pp. 58-59), Ebn Ḥajjāj (Homā'i, pp. 377-78), and Sallāmi (*Jaşn-e Sada*, p. 75).

The Sada night was considered the coldest night of the year. It was believed that on that night the winter came out from the hell (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, p. 226; Qazvini, p. 80) and, according to Biruni, in Karaj it was called *şab-e gazina* (the biting night). After Sada, the weather was supposed to be getting warmer. Popular concepts about water becoming warm on the 10th of Bahman, about the earth becoming warm from inside while the air is still cold, or about the earth taking her secret breath (*nafas-e dozda*) on that day seem to go back to the beliefs in a divinity staying under the ground in winter (Asadiān-Ḳorramābādi et. al., pp. 213-14; Enjavi-Şirāzi, I, pp. 1, 8-9, 102 and II, pp. 8, 16, 18-20, 139, 142-46, 150, 196; see also Krasnowolska, 1998, pp. 210-11). To the Sada poems the festival furnished an opportunity for an exquisite description of fire, which was frequently compared to a plant, a flower, a fruit tree, a stack of corn, or a garden blossoming in a winter landscape (Onşori, p. 14; Farroki, pp. 48-49; Manučehri, p. 30; Asjadi, in *Jaşn-e Sada*, p. 57). This imagery seems to go back to old mythological concepts connecting the vegetable life with fire. Calendric notions are sometimes personified in such poems. Manučehri, in his Sada *qaşida* which starts with *Bar laşkar-e zemestān nowruz-e nāmdār* (Manučehri, pp. 39-41), makes use of the folkloric motif of Winter-and-Spring combat, and of the return of an exiled deity, common in folklore. Cristoforetti (1995) stresses the dragon-killing motif of the Sada mythology and its broadly understood "ambrosian" aspects as conceived by G.Dumézil in his early works (1926, 1929).

Muslim rulers celebrated Sada by kindling enormous bonfires, drinking wine, and feasting around them. Also a puzzling custom of setting birds and wild animals on fire was reported by a number of authors. According to Biruni, "it has become one of the customs of the kings to light fires on this night and to make them blaze, to drive wild beasts into them and to send the birds flying through the flames, and to drink and amuse themselves round the fires" (Biruni, *Ātār*, tr. Sachau, 213; cf. Idem, 1983, p. 257; Qazvini, p. 80). Biruni's statement is corroborated by historical reports on the Sada celebrations of Mardāvij and Mas'ud Ġaznavi (Beyhaqi, II, p. 667; Ebn al-Aṭir, VIII, p. 94; Ebn Meskawayh, V, p. 311; Demaşqi, p. 406). Biruni condemned this practice as cruel and, one may guess, contradictory to Islam. Contemporary Iranian



scholars, on their part, consider it incompatible with Zoroastrian ethics, and thus view it as a degenerate corrupt, Islamic form of an old, respectable tradition (Pur-e Dāvud, p. 75; *Jašn-e Sada*, p. 16; Raži, pp. 353-56). However, the custom might have been not only pre-Islamic but also non-Zoroastrian, with its magic purpose fallen into oblivion (for similar practices in Europe on the first Sunday of Lent or on St. John's night see Frazer, I, pp. 109, 142 and II, pp. 32-33, 38-44; van Gennepe, 1/IV/2, pp. 1029-33; cf. Christensen, I, pp. 172-73).

The disappearance of Sada was never complete, and some traces of a winter fire festival celebrated on the 10th day of Bahman, or around that date, survived until the 20th century. While the custom of lighting fires on the Sada night is unknown to the Zoroastrians in India, their co-religionists in Iran are still practicing it as a part of their religious observances. The authors of *Jašn-e Sada* give a description of the festival with some photographs from Kerman (pp. 17-18; see also Boyce, 1968, p. 213, for the Zoroastrian quarter in Kerman; Idem, 1977, pp. 176-82, for the feast of Sada on the Aštād day of Ādar-māh in Yazd; Raži, pp. 601-3, for Kerman). According to Hāšem Raži (pp. 603-4), the Zoroastrians of Tehran keep their Sada celebrations since 1317Š./1938, and since recently these have been taking place in Kušk-e Varjāvand, in the western part of the city.

The traces of Sada have survived among non-Zoroastrian population of many regions as well. As Taqizāda states (1978, p. 155), the celebration of the first night of *Čella-ye kuček* (10-11 Bahman) or of the last night of *Čella-ye bozorg* (9-10 Bahman; see ČELLA) is nothing else but a continuation of the Sada festival. The custom of kindling Sada fires by non-Zoroastrians was reported for the Ravānduz region in Iraqi Kurdistan and for Šabestar in Azarbaijan (*Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 32-33), as well as for Kurdish tribes of Mahābād, Kermānšāh, and Qašr-e Širin, whose festival of Vehār-i Kurdi (Kurdish Spring) falls on the 45th day of winter (Ayyubiān, pp. 183, 206). A Kurdish fire festival called Tolidān, including some elements of the cult of the prophet Kežr, was celebrated in mid-February by the Kurds of Turkey, Armenia, and Iraq, and it coincided with the Christian Armenian festival of Derendez (*Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 89-90; cf. Enjavi-Širāzi, II, pp. 120-24). Sada fires were reported for the cities of Nišāpur, Ferdows, Sabzavār, and Torbat-e Heydariya in Khorasan (Mirniā, pp. 226-27; Raži, pp. 604-8), for the city of Qur in Kavir (*Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 32-35), and for Lālazār in the province of Kermān, where two different dates of the festival (pastoral and agrarian) were fixed according to the stars (Šan'ati, pp. 296-97; cf. Cristoforetti, 2002, pp. 143ff.). According to Enjavi-Širāzi (I, pp.



54-57), until modern times a fire festival called Jeljelāni had been held in the city of Naṭanz in west-central Iran on the 17-19 days of Dey, that is some two-three weeks prior to the traditional Sada date, but with many of its characteristics.

In modern Iran, the *Čahāršanba Suri* (the last Wednesday of the solar year, see [ČAHĀRŠANBA-SURI](#)) became the chief and most important fire festival, with its many rites and beliefs, most importantly jumping over the fire. At the same time, for rural communities of Iran, the 10th of Bahman has kept its importance as a turning point of the winter, dividing it into two *čella* periods of forty days each (*Čella-ye bozorg*, from 1 Day until 10 Bahman, and *Čella-ye kuček*, from 11 Bahman to the end of Esfand), when agricultural and pastoral fertility magic was performed: the pastoral Kusa rites in western and central Persia (Enjavi-Širāzi, I, pp. 67-85 and II, pp. 92-115, 170-81; cf. Krasnowolska, 1998, pp. 161-80), orchard magic, fumigation of the fruit trees, hanging stones on their branches, etc. (Enjavi-Širāzi, I, pp. 4, 54-57; Asadiān-Ḳorramābādi et al., p. 214). Many calendar legends are related to that date.

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