Zoroastrian Festivals

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Glimpse from a Zoroastrian festival in Iran
Zoroastrianism in Iran and beyond

- From Zoroaster to the present
- From majority to minority religion in Iranian history
- Officially recognized religion in modern constitutional history (from 1906 to the Islamic Republic)
- Zoroastrianism in other parts of the world: Central Asia, India, modern migration
Sources for Zoroastrian festivals

• The Avesta: a collection of ritual texts

• The Middle Persian writings; some mythological, liturgical, and practical references

• Secondary sources:
  - Classical literature
  - Islamic literature (historiography, epic, poetry, etc.)
  - Others (Soghdian, Chinese, Syrian, Armenian, etc.)

  - al-Biruni (973-1048) describes 38 Persian festivals, reporting on practices as well as mythology; according to Biruni the absence of fasting and the holding of fairs are two main characteristics of Persian festivals; special dishes
Ritual dishes
Three main festivals in Classical literature

1. The Magophonia

2. The Sacaea

3. Mithrakana > Mehragan
A Sasanian ryton
Dancing girls on a Sasanian vessel
The calendar(s) (1)

- A month of 30 days
- Each day named (names already attested in Avesta)
- Names representing theological hierarchy, starting with Ahura Mazda (who has 4 days named after him: 1, 8, 15, 23) and the other Beneficent Immortals, Fire, the Waters, the Sun, and Moon, other deities and finishing with Anagra Raocha (The Endless Lights)
- 12 months (only seven names given in Avesta)
- Each month named, different order compared to month (19, 3, 6, 13, 7, 4, 16, 10, 9, 8/15/23, 5)
- Coincidence between name of month/day = festival
  - Mehrgan = VII.16 (autumn when year begins in spring)
The calendar(s) (2)

• $12 \times 30 = 360 + 5$ extra-days
• Various names for the “monthless” days in post-Avestan languages:
  - (days of the) “between time” (Pahlavi)
  - “stolen” (Soghdian/Pahlavi/Arabic); “added” (Armenian); “fortunate” (Persian), “(dedicated to the) spirits of the ancestors”; “the five Gatha days”
• Unclear if and when the 5 “monthless” days were introduced
• The hypothesis that they were added to a previous 12x30 calendar helps to solve a riddle: the duplication of festivals with an interval of 5 days, where the later date was known as the “great” festival (I.1./6.; VII.16./.21)
  - Biruni: Hormizd I. (272-273) connected the “lesser” and “greater” days resulting in prolonged leisure-times
The calendar(s) (3)

- Yazdgirdi era (632 CE) or post-Yazdgirdi (“Magi”) era (652 CE)
- Problem:
  - “Zoroastrian” year around a quarter day shorter than the tropical year
  - “receding” one day every fourth year against the Julian calendar
  - gradual displacement of months against seasons (“ideological dissonance” with regard to “spring”/New Year and “autumn” Mehragan)
- Solution: Intercalation?
  - The program/myth of the Zoroastrian intercalation (Biruni and Denkard): one month every 120 years (maximum 5 months in 600 years)
- Various reforms
  - Moving of New Year festival to a different month
  - Seljuk Jalal ad-Din Malik-Shah introducing “Jalali” calendar in 1079
  - 1925: New State Calendar; partly synchronized with Zoroastrian c.
The calendar(s) (4)

- Result: 3 “New Year” Festivals
  - Spring equinox (Jamshedji NouRuz)
  - I.1. (Panji-i Dadgah (Iranis); Pateti (Parsis))
  - I.6. (Havrozu (Iranis); Khordad-Sal (Parsis))

- 3 calendars in use among the Zoroastrian communities
  - Shehenshai (Parsi), result of one historical intercalation of one month (currently: I.1. = 20.8)
  - Kadmi (Parsi) = Bastan (Irani) (currently: I.1. = 21.7.)
  - Fasli (Parsi) = Jadid (Irani) (I.1. = 21.3.)

- The semi-integrated “seasonal” (“inductive”) time-reckoning with regard to winter and the cycle of the waters and related festivals:
  - Rapithvin as the priestly New Year
  - Sade (see later)
  - The Gahanbars (see later)
A private Mihgran feast in Yazd (1)
A private Mihgran feast in Yazd (2)
Mihrgan at a Mihr-shrine

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The official Mihrgan celebration
The celebratory table (sofreh)
Sāz-o-gešt ("Preparation and procession")
Ritual welcoming
The five official Zoroastrian festivals in Iran

- Zoroaster’s birthday (26.3.)
- Tribute to the Zoroastrian Departed ones and Martyrers (8.4.)
- Mihrgan (2.10.)
- Zoroaster’s anniversary (26.12.)
- Sade (30.1.)

- New Year is also a public holiday in the Islamic Republic of Iran
- The Gahanbars
Zarathustra’s birthday in a village (1)
Zarathustra’s birthday in a village (2)
Zarathustra’s birthday in Teheran
The Zoroastrian “martyrs” (Yazd cemetery)
Bidding farewell to the departed ones
And so they left again ...
The Gahanbar

• 7 (6/5) festivals of obligation
• Unevenly distributed across the calendar
• Names referring to seasonal demarcations and occupations
• Everybody contributing and compulsory attendance
• “Festival of abundance” (Lanternari)
• Changing economic functions and support-structures
Gahanbar in an Iranian village (1)
Gahanbar in an Iranian village (2)
Sade (1)

- Different dates: 100 days after onset of winter, 50 days+nights before New Year, or II.10 (Bahman/Aban)
- One of the winter-festivals: the culmination of winter
- Fire and water
- Identified with milad
- Felicitations and poetry (qasida)
Sade (2)

- Elements of myth
  - Wedding of 100 children of the first couple
  - Victory of King Hoshang against the dragon and the discovery of fire
  - Remembering the fires lighted by the people who were saved by the minister after the victory of Faredun
- Elements of practice
  - Wine, dance, fun, gifts, congratulations
  - Kindling of big fires
  - From ritual support to cultural memory: speeches etc.
- Also Muslim spectators
- Spread around the world
Sade in Kerman (1)
Sade in Kerman (3)
Sade in Kerman (4)
Sade in Kerman (5)
Summary (1)

- Elements/practices:
  - Congratulations, wishes, greetings, welcome-rites
  - Priestly liturgies
  - Animal sacrifice
  - Gifts
  - Food
  - Plants and other “significant” items
  - Wine
  - Dance
  - Music
  - Speeches
  - Theatrical performances
Summary (2)

• Various economic and social “functions”
• Horizontal and vertical solidarity
• Supporting the good work of the divine ones
• “Divine fun”
• Frameworks for/dimensions of changes:
  - political
  - legal
  - economic
  - calendrical
  - liturgical
  - …
Further reading