

Mehr and Mehregan

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O Mehr!
As we have not been amongst Mehr-Dorujans¹
free us from needs, from all needs.
You have the power to prevail,
fear and worry
over the bodies of the Mehr-Dorujans.
You have the might, when you are angry,
to take away:
their strength of arms
their energy of knees,
their sight of eyes,
and the hearing of their ears (*Mehr-Yasht*, vi, 23).²

Ancient Persians believed happiness to be a grace from Ahura-Mazda and sadness an evil from the Devil. Happiness was so dear to them that the Achaemenian kings saw it in unity with the creation of the heavens and the Earth, as was engraved at the beginning of their tablets:

Ahura-Mazda is the great Lord
who created this Earth
and created that sky
and created the human being
and created happiness for human beings.

The ancient Persians did not even mourn the death of people and considered mourning and grieving a great sin, and struggled for happiness; they used every occasion as an excuse to celebrate.³

The ancient Persians did not observe week days. They had twelve months of 30 days each, in which every day had a name.⁴ They regarded the extra five days at the end of the year as celebration days, called *andargah*. Within the 30 day cycle there were twelve days, each named after the months. When the name of the day coincided with the name of the month, that day was celebrated and special events were organized. The sixteenth day (Mehr-Ruz) of the sixteenth month (Mehr) was celebrated as *Mehregan*.

Mehr

Mehr or *Mitra* - in ancient Persian *Mithra*, in Sanskrit *Mitra*, in Pahlavi *Mithr* and *Mitr*, that is, *Mehr*

¹ Mehr-Doruj has been mentioned many times in the *Mehr-Yasht*. It means lair, and has a concept of breaking promises. Doruj or Dorug is the she-devil of lies and betrayal.

² All the texts of Avesta are quoted from: *Avesta, the oldest Persian hymns and texts* (ed. Jalil Doostkhah), Tehran, 1995.

³ B. Farah-Vashi, "Mehregan", *Amuzesh-Parvareh* 35/5 (1343/1964) (including quotation).

⁴ The 30 days are: 1. Hormozd, 2. Bahman, 3. Ordibehesht, 4. Shahrvivar, 5. Espandarmaz, 6. Khordâd, 7. Amordâd, 8. Dey-be-Azar, 9. Azar, 10. Abân, 11. Khor, 12. Mâh, 13. Tir, 14. Goosh, 15. Dey-be-Mehr, 16. Mehr, 17. Soroush, 18. Rashaan, 19. Farvardin, 20. Bahrâm, 21. Râm, 22. Bâd, 23. Dey-be-Din, 24. Din, 25. Ord, 26. Eshtâd, 27. Âsmân, 28. Zâmyâd, 29. Mehr-Esfand, 30. Anirân (see M. Honari, *Now-Ruz Traditions*, Tehran, 1974).

in modern Persian - is one of the highest eternal divine beings in the Indo-Iranian mythology.⁵ Mehr is the symbol of grace, the patron of promises, guardian of commitments and oaths, and the defender of truthfulness and rightness. Liars to the Mehr (*Mehr-doruj[s]*) were considered as breakers of commitments and oaths.

The ancient Persians recognized Mehr as a bridge between the eternal and created lights, and between the creation and Creator. Mehr was equal to Soroush; the position of which were after the *Amshaspands* (*Amesha-Spentas*, Immortals). Mehr is regarded so highly that it was believed it was created by Ahura Mazda like himself:

Ahura-Mazda told Sepitman Zardosht:
O Sepitman,
Be aware that I have given being to Mehr,
the owner of vast plains,
and created Mehr equal to myself,
worthy of prayer (*Mehr-Yasht*, i, 1).

The oldest trace of Mehr was discovered in 1906 by H. Winchlar, in Boghaz-Koi, near Ankara in modern Turkey. It is a contract between the Hittites and the Mitanni - an Iranian-speaking tribe of Mesopotamia of about 1400 years BCE. In this contract Mithra is invoked as a god before whom any oath may be sworn.⁶

Some historians consider Mehr and the Sun as one. The geographer Strabo (93-19 CE) observed that "the Persians worship the Sun, namely Mitras. They also worship the moon, Anahita, Fire, Wind, and Water" (*Geograph.*, xi). But it should be clear that according to Iranian mythological and religious texts, Mehr and the Sun are two separate Divine beings, each having their own prayers and songs. Benonist emphasizes this point and suggests that Mehr is not the Sun (= *Khorshid*), but it is the god of eternal lights that rises before the Sun and passes through the sky. As the Avesta says:

We make worship to Mehr,
The First Eternal God,
Who comes before the rise of the eternal swift-horse Sun,
to the height of Alborz-Kuh.⁷
The first who rises - adorned in golden ornaments -
from that gracious mountain.
From there, the strong Mehr
Looks over abodes and homes of Iranians (*Mehr-Yasht*, iv, 13.)

We make worship to Mehr
Who, after the dawn of the Sun,
comes to the vast spread of the Earth.
Who travels this vast spherical Earth,
from one end to another.
And looks at whatever is in between
the Earth and the Sky (xxiv, 95.)

⁵ Farah-Vashi, *loc. cit.*; H. Sadat-Naseri, "Mehregan: a national ceremony", *Armaghan* 32/6-8 (1342/1963).

⁶ R. Warner *et al.*, *Encyclopedia of World Mythology*, London, 1975, s.v.

⁷ It is the highest mountain of the world in the Avesta; the highest in Iran today, 5555 metres. It is frequently mentioned in Persian mythology and in *Shahnameh*, where Zahak, the symbol of all evils, is chained, not destroyed.

The Avesta has allocated its Tenth *Yasht*, a long hymn in 146 segments, to Mehr, indicating that Persians, since the dawn of history, appreciated truth and honesty and respected faithfulness to oath and commitments.

According to *Mehr-Yasht*, Mehr - who was always mentioned with the owners of extensive plains - is a god with one thousand eyes and two thousand ears and ten thousand observers. Each of these eyes and ears are an angel that serve Mehr. Mehr has strong arms that can capture those who deceive Mehr in the East and the West, and at the mouth of the river Arang,⁸ and at the centre of the Earth. He makes home on the mount Harâ,⁹ that is itself as large as the vast Earth, where there is no day and no night, no dark and no cold wind, no disease, no pollution, and such a high point that no fog ever covers its peak. His face shines like the Teshtar,¹⁰ and at the sun-rise - at the moment the body of his face is brightened like a fish - Mehr shows many symbols of the Creation.

Mehr is an experienced champion, strong and brave, unique and affluent, elaborated and eternal, daring and kind; he is infinitely awake. He can hear the shouts of voiceless people, can increase water, can send down rain, can grow vegetation, and can spread justice across the land. He rides on a chariot which never goes on the curb road, the wheel which is turned by Ashi,¹¹ and Damuyesh-Upmana¹² prepares his pathway, a wheel which is pulled by four white horses across the sky. These horses are fed from the *Minuvi* (= Eternal) Fountain. Their front hooves are of gold, and the rear hooves are from silver, all fastened together with nicely formed and highly-priced hooks and clutches, to stand at each others' sides. In his chariot there are one thousand well-made bows, one thousand arrows, one thousand two-headed spears, one thousand two-headed hammers, one thousand daggers, and one thousand throwing clubs, all of which can be thrown at devils with the speed of a phantom. His chariot is filled with shining stones for slings. He has also, in hand, a light hundred-knots throwing club of yellow metal, that frightens Bushâsp, the long-handed Devil and other devils.¹³ He is the companion of *Amshaspand* Shahrivar, and according to the *Bundahishn*, the violet is his special flower.

Praying for Mehr, according to *Mehr-Yasht*, involved especial ceremonies. Supplicants should wash their bodies before praying; they should hold fresh twigs, drink milk with the holy water called *Zowr*, as well as the juice of *Haoma*, the holy plant, and eat the holy bread of *Dar-own* during prayers.¹⁴

⁸Arang is the name of one of two rivers in Iranovich, mentioned in the Persian mythology. The land and the source of this river - created by Ahura-Mazda - is the Sixteenth section of the world. Many researchers have tried to locate this river, but most believe it must be a mythological one. The Late Mehrdâd Bahâr believed that during the Sasanian period it was recognized as Arvand Rud (=Tigris). It was, however, mentioned many times in the New Avesta, and many events happened around this river.

⁹Harâ (or Harit, or Harâ-Bereziti in Avestan, and Harbarz in Pahlavi) is the name of Alborz-Kuh (mountain). It is considered in the Avestan and other texts a mythological mount, and yet should be taken as the modern Mt. Aborz in northern Iran. The name (and respect for it) comes up in the Avesta many times. In *Zâmyâd-Yasht*, i, Harâ surrounds all lands in the East and West. In *Rashn-Yasht* xxv, stars, moon and sun circle around the summit of Mount Harâ.

¹⁰Teshtar, or Teshtarya in the Avesta, Tishtar in Pahlavi, was the god of Rain in Persian mythology. Cf. J.R. Hinnells, *Persian Mythology*, London, 1985, s.v. It is also a white and shining and strong star that is water in essence. And it is also known as Sirius. Teshtar has eternal conflict, in the forms of a man, or horse, or bull, with drought and rainlessness.

¹¹Ashi is the goddess of wealth and rewards, and Treasurer of Ahura-Mazda. She is the daughter of Ahura-Mazda and sister of the *Amshaspand*.

¹²Damuyesh-Upamana is one of the companions of Mehr. He is the God of the curse of righteous people. He is mentioned as victorious and brave. He is shown as an angry boar, as quick, with sharp nails and freckles on his face.

¹³Also Bushap or Bushâb; the she-devil of sleep and laziness, often mentioned as (having) a Long Hand, and sometimes as yellow. It has been mentioned in the *Vendidâd* that "in the morning, when the rooster sings to wake up people and prepare them for Good Deeds and Good Words and Good Thoughts, it is Bushap that sends them back to a heavy sleep!"

¹⁴*Zowr* or *Zohr* is holy water, *Hoama* a sacred (not easy to identify) plant, and *dar-own* or *darun* a small, white yeast-free bread. All these being used in religious ceremonies in the Zoroastrian temples. *Dar-own* was a symbol of all non-fluid (or *may-zad*) presents, such as meat and fruit, offered in ceremonies.

Mithraism

Although after Zoroaster and the monotheism he initiated, it was only Ahura-Mazda which became prominent as deity, yet Mehr remained next to Ahura-Mazda as an important angel. According to Avestan and Achaemenian tablets - where Mehr is mentioned six times and his help is requested - and also according to Greek, Roman and Armenian historians, Persians had a special regard for Mehr, with soldiers considering him as their support in the fighting arena, and requesting him to give them victory. As narrated by Quintus Curtius Rufus, the Roman historian: "The Shah of Iran, before any war, walked in a circle around his troops with his commanders and prayed for the support of the Sun, Mehr, and the sacred eternal fire" (*Hist. Alex.*, IV).

As a result of this special reliance on Mehr by the Shah and the Achaemenian soldiers, the quest for his blessing in victories, praise and prayers dedicated to him spread throughout Iran; and then from Iran to the Babylon, Assyria and Asia Minor. In these regions he became associated with their deities of the Sun, and attracted rituals from them. The cult of Mehr/Mithra was later spread by Roman soldiers throughout Europe, as far as Britain; and to Africa even into the Sahara; Mithraism temporarily conquered the world as a religion. Ernest Renan (1823-1892) the French scholar writes: "If Christianity had been stopped in Europe, the world would have belonged to Mithraism".¹⁵

Many of the rituals in Christianity including baptism, ringing the churches bell, organs, Sunday mass, Sunday as the holy day, and celebration of 25th of December - Mithra's birthday - as Christ's birthday, all have their roots or complementary manifestations in Mithraism. The appearance of Mithra in many paintings in the Vatican also signals the recognized spread of Mithra worship.

Mehregan

It was mentioned that the ancient Persians celebrated the sixteenth day of the month (*Mâh* = moon = month) of Mehr - in which the month-name and day-name would align - as *Mehregan*, the time of celebration second only to Now-Ruz. Jahez Basri, the Persian historian (d. 869 CE) mentions that Salman Parsi considered Now-Ruz and Mehregan on a par. He wrote that "the Almighty God created ruby on Now-Ruz, and chrysolite on Mehregan. The preference of Now-Ruz and Mehregan to other days is like the preference of these two gems to other stones".¹⁶ Persians had special respect for Mehregan. The Zoroastrian theologians believed that at the sun-rise of Mehregan, at the the summit of Mount Shahin, a light shines that can be seen even on cloudy and dark days.

What of statement's about the festival's initiation? Abu-Jafar Mohamad Jarir Tabari (838-923 CE) wrote concerning Mehregan in his *History of Nations and Kings* that the great monarch "Afridun¹⁷ gained victory over Zahâk¹⁸ and killed him, and was crowned, and ruled over the world. That was on Mehr-Ruz (Mehr's day) in the Mehr-Mâh, and it was named Mehregan, when Afridun sat on the throne".¹⁹ Asadi Tusi the poet, in his *Garshasb-Nâmeh* (ca. 1060 CE), celebrates the festival's origins in evocative lines.

That year, the fortune of Zahak
darkened, and he became one thousand years old.
Freydun came to the throne,

¹⁵ See Sadat-Naseri, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Farash-Vashi, *loc. cit.*; H. Borzogh-Zad, *National and Religious Ceremonies in Iran before Islam*, Isfahan, 1971.

¹⁷ Freydun (Afridun or Afrîdun) is the greatest Persian king and champion after Jamshid. The *Vendîdâd* knows him as the first physician and healer on the land. He is the destroyer of Zahâk the devil. He, after this victory, made *Bâj* (or reciting by rote) a custom.

¹⁸ Zahâk or Azidahâk, according to ancient narratives is the name of a very strong devil with three snouts and six eyes. All Persian narratives know him as non-Iranian, and he is metamorphosed into a Tâzi (= Arab.). In the Avesta he is a dreadful monster with three heads, and three snouts and six eyes and a thousand agiliities. In *Shâhnâmeh* he is a man from Arabia, who is also named *Bivar-asb*, because he is the owner of ten thousand horses (= *Asb*). In a sequence of events two snakes grow from his shoulders, and he then transforms to have three heads, three snouts and six eyes.

¹⁹ F. Safa, "Mehregan", *Amuzesh-Parvareh* 35/4 (1344/1965).

and emptied the world from that snake-like one.
 Broke his skull with the royal club
 Chained him, took him to Damavand Kuh.²⁰
 When Mehr went from the Shahin [constellation] to the Khusheh [constellation]
 Freyduñ sat on the Throne in the Month of Mehr,
 He adorned the celebration of Mehregan,
 Rose his head beyond the Sky, of being a king.²¹

Others followed similar lines in their own special ways. Daqiqi Tusi²² (d. ca 975 CE) wrote that

Mehregan arrived, the celebration of Afridun,
 the one who was bred by Barmayun - the Cow.²³

Sa'alebi (or Thalibi) Neyshaburi (ca. 961-1038 CE) says in his own *Shâhnâme* about Mehregan that "it is the day when Fridun made a victory against Zahak, and imprisoned him. It was on the day of Mehr from the month of Mehr, named Mehregan. People celebrated and respected that day".²⁴ In *Zeynul Akhbâr*, Gardizi (mid-eleventh century CE) makes the relevant allusion: "...and being said by some Magis that this victory of Faridun over Beyvar-asb was on the Râm-Ruz (21st day of each month) of the Mehr-Mah. Zardosht, who is known by Magis as their Messenger, told them to respect this day and also respect Now-Ruz".²⁵ Ferdowsi in his *Shâhnâme* (completed after some 40 years in 1010 CE) says:

Fridun, when he became victorious over the world,
 Did not know any other king but himself,
 By the royal ritual of kings - crown and throne -
 He arranged all with the royal palace.
 On such a cheerful day, the first of Mehr-Mâh,
 He put the royal crown on his head.
 Time became without sadness of evils;
 Everyone took the divine pathway,
 Freed their own hearts from judgements,
 Arranged celebrations following rituals.
 He ordered to light the Fire,
 Burning Amber and Zafron.
 Worshipping of Mehregan is his faith,
 Leisure and feasting is his custom.
 Now, commemoration of Mehr is from him,
 Do not give in to sufferings and pains.²⁶

Abu-Reyhan Biruni (early eleventh century) in his masterpiece *At-Taḥḥim* and Hamdulah Mostowfi

²⁰ The highest summit of the Mts. Alborz, located at the north of modern Tehran.

²¹ Asadi Tusi, *Garshâsb-Nâme* [ca. 1060 CE] (ed. Habib Yaghmaii), Tehran, 1936.

²² The poet who first attempted the versification of Persian Epics before Ferdowsi. He was, like Ferdowsi, from Tus. Ferdowsi incorporated 988 of Asadi's poems in his *Shâhnâme*.

²³ *Barmâyun* or *Pormâyeh* is a mythical cow that rears Feridun after his birth and feeds him from her milk (cf. *Shâhnâme* of Ferdowsi [using Jibi edn., Tehran, 1966]).

²⁴ See Farah-Vashi, *loc. cit.*; Sadat-Naseri, *loc. cit.*

²⁵ See edn. by Abdul-Hay Habibi, Tehran, 1347/1968.

²⁶ Using Jibi edn., Tehran, 1966.

(flor. CE 1340 CE) in his great history *Târikh-e Gozideh* add to their authority. The former wrote that "...In this day Afridun made victory over Bivar-asb the Devil, known as Zahâk, and imprisoned him in Damâvand-Kuh (Mount); and the days after Mehregan are all celebration, after Now-Ruz; and the sixth day is the Greater Mehregan, and it is the Râm day, as it is known".²⁷ As the latter put it, "Faridun, with the help of Kâveh the Blacksmith and eminent people of Iran, revolted against Zahâk, and captured him and imprisoned him in Mount Damâvand; and that day was named Mehregan".²⁸

In addition to these attributions, the ancient Iranians believed that God breathed soul into the body of Mashye and Mashyâne²⁹ on this day, and also gave the gift of life to animals. Abu-Reyhan Biruni affirms that "on this day God extended the Earth, and created bodies as abodes for soul". He also says: "And it is said that God granted the Moon with light, when before it was a dark and lightless globe".³⁰ These narratives indicate the importance of Mehregan for the ancient Persians, the celebrations of which were extended beyond one day. They celebrated Mehregan from the sixteenth to the twenty-first of Mehr. The first day of celebration was called the Little Mehregan, and the last day was named Special Mehregan or Greater Mehregan. Abu-Reyhan Biruni says in his *Asarul Baqiah* that Mehregan was from the sixteenth of Mehr for 30 days. He says that this 30-day festival period was divided into six five-day celebrations, each of which belonged to a social stratum of society. The first five days belonged to kings, the second to noble people, the third to servants of the court, the fourth to companions of the court, the fifth to the public, and the last to shepherds. Jahez also confirms this narrative.³¹

Mehregan during the Achaemenian Period (546-323 BCE)

Under the Achaemenian dynasty Mehregan was observed as a great ceremony and was now similar to Now-Ruz. Jahez wrote of the two occasions virtually under the one title, although undoubtedly these two festivals varied in form and tradition during this time.

The Greek historian Xenophon (fourth century BCE) remarked in his *Cyropaedia* that the ancient Persians had so much respect for Mehr that they swore by his name. Ernest Herzfeld found that "the Achaemenian kings" could "not get drunk unless on the day they were worshipping Mehr. On the day the King of Kings wore a red cloth and drank wine..." It has also been narrated that the Achaemenian kings danced in the Mehregan celebrations.³² Within Mehregan governors and smaller kings sent presents to the King of Kings. The guards gave permission for them to go before the great monarch and present their gifts. The geographer Strabo³³ noted that the Governor of the Province of Armenia sent one thousand young horses for the occasion of Mehregan. And amongst the presents for the king was a herb called *vandishman*, possibly this being 'susan-amber' or 'sisan'-amber (wild thyme), which, according to the *Bundahishn*, is a holy herb belonging to the angel Bahrâm.³⁴

²⁷ Abu-Reyhan Biruni, *At-Tafhim* (ed. Jalal Homaei), Tehran, 1352/1973.

²⁸ Hamdulah Mostowfi, *Tarikh-e Gozideh* (ed. Abdul-Hosein Navaei), Tehran, 1339/1960.

²⁹ Mashye and Mashyâne are the first man and woman in Persian mythology, who, from Gyumarth the first human being on Earth, grew on two branches of rhubarb, and then transformed into human beings; with all human beings in the world descending from them. Cf. M.J. Yahaqi, *Dictionary of Persian Mythology*, Tehran, 1369/1990, s.v.

³⁰ Homâei edn., *op. cit.*

³¹ Biruni, *Atharul Baghiah* (ed. E. Sachau), Leipzig, 1878.

³² Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaed.*, VIII,iii,11ff. See E. Herzfel, *Iran in the Ancient East*, Oxford, 1941, cf. *idem*, *Archaeological History of Iran*, Oxford, 1935.

³³ *Geograph.*, xi.

³⁴ Sadat-Naseri, *loc. cit.*

Parthian Period (250 BCE - 226 CE)

After the domination of Greeks over Persians through Alexander's conquests, the Avestan calendar fell abandoned, and so did the Persian celebrations. With the rise of Parthians, however, Mehregan re-gained its prominence. Sa'alebi (Thalibi) Neyshaburi says in his *News of the Persian Kings and their Behaviour* that Khosrow the son of Firuz allowed the public to go before him, and present him with gifts at this time of the year.³⁵

The Avestan Calendar, signs of the Persian national celebrations, and also the names and symbols of the moon and months were stamped on coins and official documents. The Parthian king Belâsh (Volgases) (d. 77 CE) collected Avestan materials, and Sa'alebi gives a full account of the ceremonies, including Mehregan, during the Parthian dynasty.

Mehregan during the Sasanian Period (226-651 CE)

Mehregan became very important during the Sasanian dynasty. As the Zoroastrian religion was the main base of Sasanian power, ancient traditions and ceremonies gained prominence, and the details of rituals were taken to the extreme. It was during Now-Ruz and Mehregan that Sasani kings granted audience to the public.

After rubbing their bodies with special ointments, the Sasani kings put on fur cloth, and wore a crown with a symbol of the Sun to commemorate the creation of light in Mehregan. According to Ibn-Moqaffa (d. 760 CE) in *Boluqul Adab*, and Jâhez in *Mahâsval Âzdâd*, when the Shah sat on the throne in Mehregan, someone cheerful and good-omened and well spoken came before him. And the Shah would ask him: "Who are you? Where are you coming from? What is your name? With whom you have come? And what have you brought with yourself?" The chosen man would reply: "I am the strength of victory. I am coming from two luckier ones, and want to go to two luckier ones, and my name is Fortunate. I have brought a happy year. I have the news of happiness and health".³⁶ This man was followed by another, with a silver tray on which were breads baked with many grains, such as wheat, barley, millet, peas, lentils, rice, sesame, and beans. These trays also held seven grains, shoots of seven grains, wild rue, and sugar. The bringer of these would pray for health and well-being. At the centre of these trays, there were twigs of willow, olive, quince and pomegranate, and looking at these was considered lucky. On those twigs there were written the names of cities, and such nice words as 'increase', 'grace', 'nutrition', and so on.

There were also gifts for the king, decorated on silver or gold plates, white sugar, and nuts. He would start with fresh milk, that had dates soaked in it. Presents also included souvenirs from each region; from India, gifts included peacocks, elephants, parrots and skins, and Indian swords. Border guards presented arrows and swords. Tax collectors brought taxes wrapped in Chinese silk.

Gifts generally consisted of specialities of crafts people and whatever was special to various groups of people. Gifts of various groups included:

- . Ministers and secretaries: gold cups and gems.
- . Nobles and eminent people; especial clothing, hawks, greyhounds and jewellery.
- . Philosophers: advice; poets: poems; and speech makers: Speeches.
- . Companions: new crafts.
- . Horse trainers: horses.
- . People of good taste: special silk bags filled with rose water.
- . Soldiers: arrows, and bows, and spears.
- . Blacksmiths: swords and armour.
- . Clothmakers: coats made of fur and silk.
- . Jewellers: Jewellery and gems.
- . Ordinary people: coins and Dinar, apple and quince and citron.

Wives of the king: gems, jewellery, expensive rings, and rare stones

³⁵ *Ibid.*; Farah-Vashi, *loc. cit.*

³⁶ Sadat-Naseri, *loc. cit.*; Safa, *loc. cit.*

Another speciality of Mehregan was new songs and melodies, and rhymes. There has been mention of Mehregani anthems, and The Great Mehregan Song, and The Little Mehregan Rhyme.³⁷

Mehregan during the Islamic Era (651 CE to the Present)

Although many Persian traditions and rituals were abandoned after Islam, some survived, Now-Ruz and Mehregan included. They were respected even by Arabs. *Now-Ruz* and *Mehregan* and *Sadeh* Arabicized into *Ney-Riz* and *Mehrejan* and *Sedaq*. Persians presented gifts to the Arab Caliphs, as a tradition of Now-Ruz and Mehregan. Tabari wrote about the events of 120 H (740 CE) that “when Asad Ibn-Abdollah was in Balkh on Mehregan Day of the year 120 Hejri, Dehqâns and prominent people of Balkh, as it was the tradition, presented him with gifts, and the Dehqân of Harât personally brought to him an exuberant gift”.³⁸

According to many historians the Abbasid Caliphs had a special regard for Now-Ruz and Mehregan. Khalid Mahlabi presented to Caliph Motavakel a gold cup in which were found one thousand *mesqâl*³⁹ of *ambergis*, with poems written around it. Writing greeting cards and letters was a custom. A poet wrote these words for the occasion of Mehregan to the same Caliph Motavakel:

Mehregan, for us is the day of joy,
The day the eminent people and Persians all agree upon.
And you are like a full moon,
That sheds light in the sky.⁴⁰

Another Arabic poem about Mehregan expresses this relief:

I love Mehregan, because on this day
There is joy of kings and their queens.
And bad omens, till the gates of the sky
are open - remain far from us.⁴¹

Mehregan was respected after Islam came, then, in the royal courts. The best description of the characteristic situation under Islam is provided by Abol-Fazl Beyhaqi (d. 1077 CE).⁴² He wrote about Mehregan in the year 427 H/1050 CE:

Saturday the 23rd of Zel-Qadah was Mehregan. The king sat on his throne. The nobles came forward and presented gifts. They sat in the great hall on the right and on the left according to their positions. The king went and changed cloths and went to the winter house. There was a huge oven there. They put fire in it and there were chickens and lambs on the fire. Then all guests came, and eating and drinking began, and there were many barrels of wine. And singers and musicians played and sang. The king was there until the time of prayer. Then he went to the ceremony of commanders which is not far from the palace. There were other royal celebrations. He was there until another prayer time. Then he returned.

On the Monday, in which three days remained of the month of Ramazan, the king sat for the celebration. So many gifts were presented that were beyond imagination. Suri the

³⁷ Bozorg-Zad, *op. cit.*; Farah-Vashi, *loc. cit.*; Sadat-Naseri, *loc. cit.*

³⁸ Safa, *loc. cit.*

³⁹ Mesqâl is a unit of weight about 5 grams.

⁴⁰ In Bozorg-Zad, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ In *ibid.*

⁴² Abol Fazl Beyhaqi, *Tarikh Beyhaqi* (ed. A.A. Feyyaz), Mashad, 1350/1971.

Minister, the Governor of Kharazm; the Amirs of Choqân, Gorgân, Mâzandarân, Qosdar, Mokran and other provinces brought so many gifts, and a great day passed. Wednesday was announced as the day of celebration. It was celebrated by the king like the Late King - his father - when the ambassador of Iraq and Turkestan were also present. The king came to the hall from the palace; there was an elaborate festivity. He sat there, and nobles and commanders and eminent people sat there as well. Poets came forward and recited poems, and musicians performed songs; and wine was served at this feast and the other, where troop commanders were. The king drank a few and returned to the great throne. The Minister and Treasurer and other companions were present. Such happiness was there that no sorrow was left. The king gave Onsori and other poets one thousand Dinars, and musicians and jokers thirty thousand Dinars. The poems recited, are all written in their books. If I write all that was said about these ceremonies in detail, it would be too long; as many poems have been written about this.

Abol Fazi Bayhaqi also wrote about Mehregan in the following year.

It was on Sunday the fourth of Zel-Hajjah of the year 428 Hejri, that was Mehregan; many presents were brought from throughout the country. Nobles also presented many gifts, and poets recited many poems. The king went to drinking after poetry, and a happy day ended.

Beyhaqi mentions that if the religious days corresponded with Iranian celebration days, there was no wine or dine or music; but the presenting of gifts was observed. "On Wednesday ninth of Zel-Hajjah Amir Masood sat for the occasion of Mehregan. It was the day of Arafah. The king was fasting. Gifts were presented, but there was no celebration".

Mehregan in Recent Times

Although Mehregan was played down after the Mongol occupation of Iran, it was never forgotten. The Zoroastrians of Kerman and Yazd celebrate Mehregan with special ceremonies. They wear new clothing, and celebrate in happiness. They spread a special table-cloth and decorate it with Avesta, a mirror, eye make-up (*sormeh*),⁴³ sharbat, sweets, vegetables; fruits like pomegranate and apple; flowers, almonds, coins, candles, light, and the holy water of the Avishan plant. At midday, they sit around the table-cloth, look in to the mirror, recite prayers, and put make up on their eyes, drink sharbat, throw Avishan and sweets over each other's head, and wish each other a happy time. They give newly-weds presents, and give new-borns such names as Mehrâd, Mehrbânu, Gol-Mehr, Mehrabân, Mehrân, Mehrâneh or Mehrak; and celebrate Mehregan with great enthusiasm.

Texts not Cited in the Footnotes.

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⁴³ Or *collyrium*, a black powder made of the soot of burnt shelled almond. It is used for eye make-up, kept in a special little container, with a bodkin made of ivory. It is a common eye make-up in Iran, and is also used to brighten vision.



Takht-e Soleimân ('The Throne of Solomon'):
an ancient lake-side site



Bearing Gifts to the Great King, Persepolis