



# Document of the Month 11/25: The Festival of Sada

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## A History of Two Iranian Festivals: Nawrūz and Sada

by Simone Cristoforetti

Ms.Heb.8333.188, housed in the National Library of Israel, is a well-preserved paper bifolio from a codex. It is written in a clear and legible hand, with spacious layout and generous side margins (Figures 1 and 3). The fragment appears to derive from a short history of the world according to the Iranian tradition, that is, a kind of *abregé* of materials similar to those that have fed into Firdawsī's famous epic poem, the *Shāhnāma*. Unlike the *Shāhnāma*, NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 is written in prose. It briefly summarizes the well-known information about the auspicious reign of the mythical Iranian king Jamshīd, who is here called Jam, and depicts it as a period of security, prosperity and happiness.

Some of the main events described in the fragment are Jam's establishing the festival of Nawrūz ("New Year") and his reviving the Sada festival. The connection between the figure of Jam and the institution of Nawrūz in the Iranian tradition is very old and well-known<sup>1</sup>. His link to the festival of Sada is less obvious in the sources.

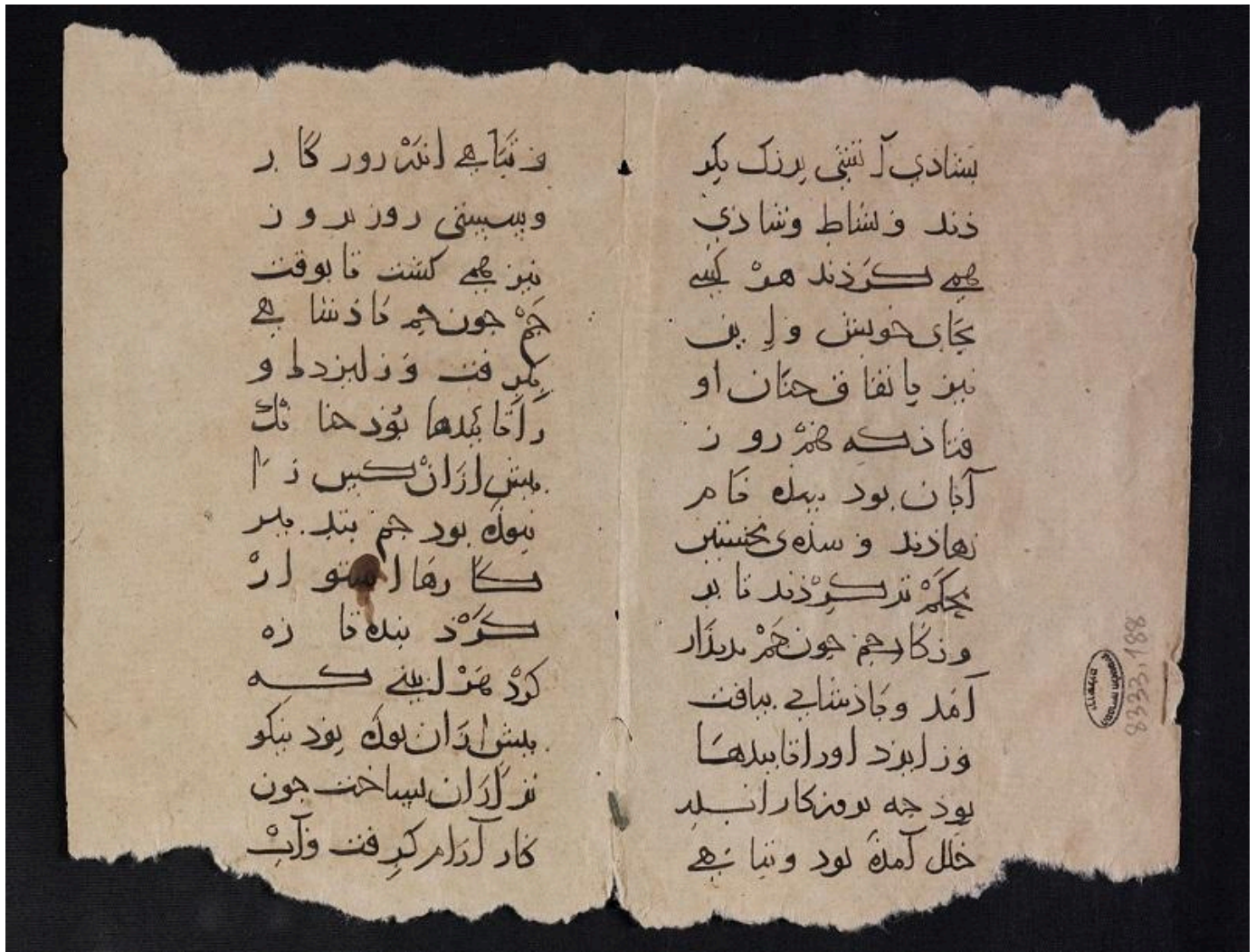


Fig. 1: NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 recto. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project. Full details of the document can be found [in the Invisible East Digital Corpus](#).

Today, Sada falls forty days after the winter solstice and was traditionally celebrated by kindling fires at sunset. It is the most important winter festival in the Iranian tradition. As we shall see, however, its seasonal association has not always been so precise.

### The Sada festival and the spring

In NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188, the festival of Sada is closely linked to the spring season, falling “after the winters when the snows melted” (verso, left, lines 7–8). This is a typical element of the poetic repertoire of the Ghaznavid era. Indeed, in the *Shāhnāma* we see a repeated association of Sada with the spring festival of Nawrūz (in the *Shāhnāma* the names of the two festivals – at least ten occurrences<sup>2</sup> – are usually found in the same couplet, almost forming a hendiadys). Furthermore, the motif of Sada as the “vanguard” (*ṭālī a*) of Nawrūz is well attested in the poetic literature of the Ghaznavid era. The usual metaphor in these cases imagines the world as a battlefield, prepared for the great clash between the glorious and resplendent army of King Nawrūz (“New Year”) – long absent due to travel – and the cruel and bandit-like Usurper Winter. The latter, taking advantage of the absence of the sunny and legitimate sovereign, has seized the kingdom, stripping it of all the joyous elements of spring that once dwelled within it. In such military metaphors, the role played by the festival of Sada is that of the vanguard of King Nawrūz’s army, sent as a scout into the midst of the lands subjected to Winter’s rule to announce the triumphant return of King Nawrūz and of spring<sup>3</sup>. A fine example of the above is a *nasīb* poem by Manūchihri Dāmghāni (d. ca. 432/1040–41), the first verses of which are as follows:<sup>4</sup>

بر لشگر زمستان نوروز نامدار      کرداست رای تاختن و عزم کارزار  
وینک پیامدهاست پنجاه روز پیش      جشن سده طلایه نوروز و نوبهار  
آری هر آنگهی که سپاهی شود برزم      زاول بچند روز بیاید طلایهدار

The glorious Nawrūz has decided to attack the army of Winter and give it battle.  
 And that is why the festival of Sada has arrived fifty days earlier, as a vanguard of Nawrūz and of spring.  
 Whenever an army goes to battle, the vanguard always sets out a few days earlier.

This echoes numerous paretymologies of the Sada festival, attested especially in lexicographical works, which emphasize its relationship with the festival of Nawrūz. In these traditions, the festival's name is commonly, albeit erroneously traced back to the number 100 (*sada* < Persian *ṣad* "one hundred"), referring to the moment when – according to the Iranian tradition – the children of the first king Gayūmarth numbered one hundred (50 sons and 50 daughters), or to the fifty days between Sada and Nawrūz (understood as 50 days and 50 nights, totalling 100).

NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 verso, left, lines 11–14 includes a sort of prediction about the year's harvest: "They would see the green, beautiful farms, and exclaim, 'How the quality of the produce has improved, and this year's harvest is even better!'" Making such agricultural forecasts part of both the ancient written tradition on Nawrūz<sup>5</sup> and the living popular Iranian tradition about the period between the two Chilla of the winter (more on this below).<sup>6</sup>

## Traditions on the Sada festival

NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 establishes a connection between the rule of Jamshīd and the Sada festival. Jamshīd is said to have rejuvenated Sada celebrations (*sada tāza kard*; recto, left, lines 10–11), and the same theme repeats at the end of the fragment (recto, right, lines 8–14). This is unusual. The oldest surviving source on the Sada festival – some verses by a certain Aḥmad b. Bashshār quoted by Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī in his *Kitāb al-Buldān*<sup>7</sup> – does not mention Jamshīd, who is generally known as the founder of Nawrūz. Instead, it refers to Sada as the hundredth night of winter. This testifies to the importance and antiquity of the popular Iranian calendrical computation systems with their typical division of the winter season into two main segments – the "Great Chilla", lasting from 1 Dey to 10 Bahman (around 22 December–31 January), and the "Small Chilla", from 11–30 Bahman (around 1–20 February). In this tradition, the Sada festival on the 10th of Bahman marks the transition between the first and the second part of the winter.<sup>8</sup> Other traditions – such as that preserved in some variants of the *Shāhnāma*<sup>9</sup> – trace the institution of the Sada festival to the discovery of fire by the mythical king Hūshang (Jamshīd's grandfather), as a consequence of his victorious battle against a large black serpent, a symbol of the forces of Evil (Figure 2). In this context, it is interesting that lines 8–10 on NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188, recto, right read: "They fostered the original *sada* until Jam's time...". This seems to imply some form of consolidation or development of the Sada festival that took place during the reign of Jamshīd. Still other traditions link the festival to Firaydūn's victory over the tyrant Dhaḥḥāk.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 2: "The Feast of Sada", from the Shāhnāma of Shāh Ṭahmāsp, folio 22v. Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1525. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Arthur A. Houghton Jr., 1970 (1970.301.2). <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/140009486>. Public domain.

## The Sada festival in Persian poetic literature

However, in poetic compositions from the Ghaznavid period, as well as in many later dictionaries, we find generic references to the fact that the festival of Sada was instituted by ancient kings, including Jamshīd. For example, a verse by ‘Unṣurī Balkhī reads:<sup>11</sup>

سده جشن ملوک نامدار است      ز فریدون و از جم یادگار است

Sada is the festival of famous kings, it brings to mind Firaydūn and Jam.

And a verse from Manūchihri reads:<sup>12</sup>

جشن سده امیرا رسم کبار باشد      این آیین کیومرث و اسفندیار باشد

O prince, the festival of Sada is a custom of the greats, it is the ritual of Gayūmarth and Isfandiyār.

These verses, despite their generality, indicate that there were several different traditions regarding the institution of the festival of Sada. This can also be found in other surviving traditions, such as for instance the one mentioned above that refers to Gayūmarth and the birth of his hundredth son.

## The historical dimension of the Sada festival

The earliest known historical mentions of the Sada festival date back to the so-called “Iranian Renaissance” period and are linked to the courts of the Samanid and Ziyarid governors. A Sada celebration is first mentioned in relation to the assassination of Mardāwīj ibn Ziyār (d. 323/935) of the Ziyarid dynasty, followed by records from the reign of the Samanid Amīr Naṣr b. Aḥmad (r. 914–943), on the occasion of his thirty-first and last Sada.<sup>13</sup> Several later testimonies, mainly derived from poetic literature, date to the Buyid era (10th–11th centuries) and especially to the Ghaznavid era (end of 10th–12th centuries). These characterise Sada as the *coldest* time of winter.<sup>14</sup>

Following the Ghaznavid period, the observance of Sada seems to have declined within Iranian courtly circles, surviving at a popular level among agricultural and pastoral communities (but not in the cities) and at a scholarly level as a calendrical reference in astronomical and lexicographical works.

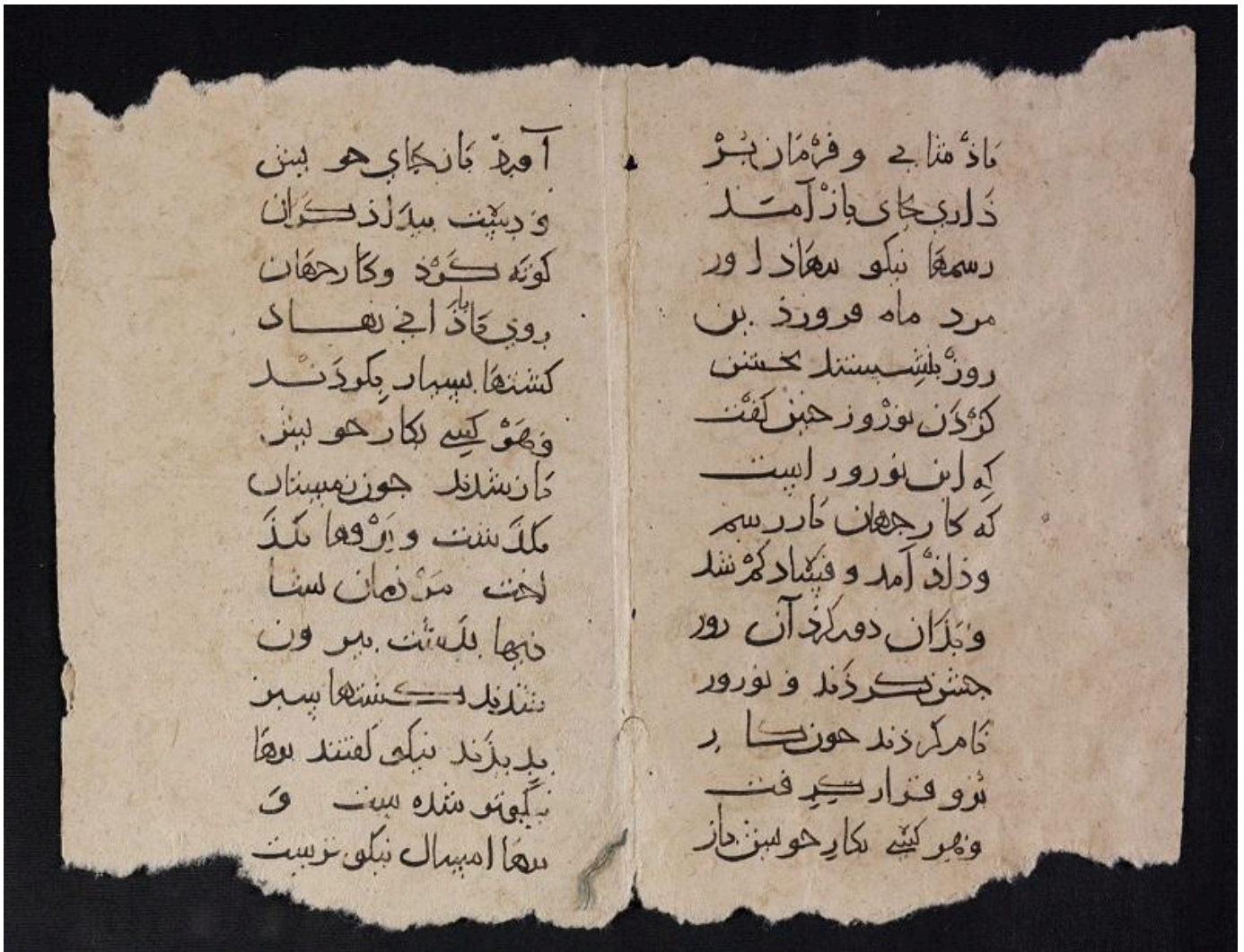


Fig. 3: NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 verso. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Israel. "Ktiv" Project. Full details of the document can be found [in the Invisible East Digital Corpus](#).

### NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 in light of the calendrical dimension of the Sada festival

NLI, Ms.Heb.8333.188 places Sada on the 10th day of the month [Bahman] (recto, right, lines 6–7). The definition of Sada as the festival falling on the 10th day of the month Bahman is a typical piece of information about Sada from the Ghaznavid era onwards. Today, the 10th of Bahman in the Persian solar calendar converts to the 30th or 31st of January. This correspondence has held true since the early years of the 11th century (1006), when the beginning of the year (Nawrūz) of the Iranian vague solar calendar – usually labelled as ‘Yazdegardi’ or ‘Zoroastrian’ calendar – returned to coincide with the vernal equinox, i.e. the position that, according to the Iranian tradition, it occupied at the time of its institution.<sup>15</sup> Seventy years later Nawrūz was fixed to coincide permanently with the vernal equinox, and it was maintained in that position through a calendar reform of the Seljuk ruler Malikshāh, carried out in 1076–79 to ensure that Nawrūz did not drift away from the equinox. However, in previous times, due to the paradoxical effect of the backward movement typical of vague solar calendars like the Iranian traditional one,<sup>16</sup> the 10th of Bahman occurred *later* in the season. For instance, at the beginning of the 10th century (years 900–903) it coincided with 18 February, and at the beginning of the 9th century (years 800–803) with 15 March. In this last case, it coincided approximately with the spring equinox, which fell on 17 March during the 9th century. In even earlier times, that is, in the middle of the 8th century (years 752–755), the 10th of Bahman fell on 27 March, ten days after the spring equinox on 17 March. Such an ancient calendrical situation fits very well with the information contained in our document, which places Sada in late winter or early spring (“After the winters, when the snows melted...”, verso, left, lines 7–8). However, such a seasonal position of the Sada festival openly contradicts numerous other sources, that characterise Sada as the *coldest* time of winter. How then should we interpret what our document tells us?

If we believe the document's assertion that Sada fell in late winter or early spring, we must assume that the information contained in it dates to a rather early period, roughly corresponding to the late 8th and early 9th centuries. This would imply that, at that time, Sada was *already* being celebrated on the 10th of Bahman in the Iranian vague solar calendar, and consequently our document would constitute the oldest evidence of the use of this calendar to fix the Sada festival. However, this contradicts what can be deduced from the oldest historical testimonies on the subject, dating to the first half of the 10th century. Indeed, chronological data in the oldest historical testimonies available to us, relating to the age of the Buyids and the Samanids, indicate that Sada fell in the first half of January, if not even at the end of December, that is, in a time of extremely intense cold. Moreover, prior to the Ghaznavid and Seljuk periods (11th and 12th centuries), the available sources never provide dates for Sada according to the Iranian vague solar calendar but refer only to the Hijra calendar or the Christian calendar. As already mentioned above, the characterization of Sada as "Ābān (= 10th) day of the month Bahman" came into use only in the Ghaznavid period, becoming the classical definition of Sada in calendrical terms.

This allows us to hypothesize that the document was composed on the basis of older materials at a time when the custom of celebrating Sada had already fallen into disuse in elite circles, probably in the late Ghaznavid era or later (the late 12th or the 13th century). This could explain a certain inaccuracy by the author in reporting information regarding seasonal customs, due to his combining the definition of Sada as a festival falling on the 10th of Bahman, its close connection with the arrival of Nawrūz and the spring – the moment of mythical triumph of Jamshīd's kingship – and, perhaps, information on popular practices of forecasting the agricultural year during Sada.

## Nationalism and cultural heritage

Although the festival of Sada is currently considered by Zoroastrians in Iran to be a celebration of their religious tradition, historical sources and ethno-anthropological accounts indicate that it is a festival of rural populations engaged in agriculture and pastoralism, regardless of their religious affiliation. Sada is also known to the Turkmen populations of the Anatolian area, who traditionally celebrate it on the 6th of January of the Julian calendar, under the name *Saya*.<sup>17</sup>

The process of appropriation of this festival by Zoroastrians in Iran spread to the public after 1946, when the first volume dedicated to the collection of traditions on the Sada festival was published in Tehran by Anjuman-i Īrānshināsī.<sup>18</sup> For the sake of accuracy and to avoid falling into unwarranted neo-Zoroastrian nationalism, I would suggest not calling Sada "Zoroastrian", especially since in the *Shāhnāma* and in the works of lexicographers it is simply considered the Persian fire festival. Sada is not the only practice pertaining to the broader Iranian culture that has been labelled as Zoroastrian since the rise of Iranian nationalism in the last centuries. Another well-known case is, for instance, the *Haft Sīn* of Nawrūz – i.e. the "seven items beginning with the letter *sīn* (S)", one of the rituals of the New Year's Day festival – which is most certainly not of Zoroastrian origin despite popular belief.

## Conclusion

The importance of this document lies in demonstrating the fluidity in historical times of the connections between practices and mythological personages and events found in Persian written sources. Such associations might seem unambiguous, if not fossilized, if we look only at the Arabic sources of the first centuries of Islam, which are the oldest available to us that describe those same matters.

## Notes

1 Skjærvø 2012.

2 For a broader discussion of these points see Cristoforetti 2002:179–82.

3 Cristoforetti 2002:168–74.

4 Manūchihri, *Dīwān*, ed. Dabīr Siyāqī 1326 Sh/1948:29–30, no. 17.

5 We find valuable evidence of Nawrūz as a suitable time to make a forecast for the agricultural year in a mid-9th century Arabic *adab* work of uncertain attribution (Pseudo-Jāhīz) entitled *The Book of Beauties and Antitheses* (*Kitāb al-musammā bi-l-maḥāsīn wa-l-aḍḍād*). There, a substantial passage on Nawrūz is attributed to an unspecified al-Kisrawī, whom K.A. Inostrancev (1909:86–87) proposed to identify with Mūsā ibn ʿIsā al-Kisrawī, an author active during the first half of the 9th century; on this identification see also Hāmeen-Anttila 2018:88.

6 See, for instance, Injawī Shīrāzī 1379 Sh<sup>2</sup>/2000–1:l, 24–7, who focuses on popular customs of the western part of Iran. Beliefs in the possibility of predicting the agricultural year during this period are also common among the Sulaymānī, a semi-nomadic population of the Kerman region (Iran), as I personally experienced during a visit to the villages of Mount Lālazār during the Sada festival in January 2005; on this matter see Cristoforetti 2007a.

7 Ed. De Goeje 1885:233.

8 Krasnowolska 2009; Omidshah 1990.

9 Ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988:30, note 12.

10 For instance, Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Āthār al-bāqiyā ʿan al-qurūn al-khāliya*, ed. Sachau 1923:226–27.

11 ʿUnṣurī Balkhī, *Dīwān*, ed. Dabīr Siyāqī 1363 Sh/1984–1985:21, no. 8.

12 Manūchihri, *Dīwān*, ed. Dabīr Siyāqī 1326 Sh/1948:20–21, no. 12.

13 Cristoforetti 2002:105–16.

14 For a detailed discussion of the sources about the Sada festival, see Cristoforetti 2002:105–34.

15 In vague solar calendars all years are fixed at 365 days, without leap years, which causes dates and festivals to drift through the seasons, moving backwards one day every four years. It takes such calendars 1460 years to return to their original alignment. The vague solar calendar of the Iranian tradition had 12 months of 30 days each (12 x 30 = 360 days) plus 5 epagomenal days (Andargāh), which were positioned since the late Sasanid age between the 8th and 9th month (i.e. between Ābān and Ādhar). Unlike in other vague solar calendars, the great backwards cycle of Nawrūz lasted only 1440 years due to the internal displacement of Andargāh in this calendar, and it ended in 1006, when the Andargāh was finally moved to the end of the year, after the 12th month (Esfandārmadh). For a synthetic explanation of the mechanism of periodic shifting of the Andargāh (usually referred to in Islamic sources with the ambiguous – if not slightly misleading – term *kaḥḥā*, i.e. "intercalation"), see Cristoforetti 2007b:45–54 and Cristoforetti 2009.

16 See previous footnote.

17 Boratav 1971:30. For linguistic reasons, the derivation of the Turkish term (Saya) from a Persian original (Sadag/Sadhag) proposed by this scholar must have occurred by the 10th century.

18 *Jashn-i Sada*, ed. by A. Afshār-Shīrāzī, E. Pūr-e Dāvūd, O. Ḥaqq-Naẓariyān, M. Dabīrsiyāqī, M. Sutūda, Dh. Şafā, H. Corbin, M. Kayvānpūr-Mukrī, M.-J. Maskūr, M. Muʿīn, and M. Muqarrabī, Tehran, 1324 Sh/1946.

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## Transcription

National Library of Israel, Ms.Heb.8333.188. P. Firoozbakhsh, A. Azad, N. Saqee and M. Arghandehpour, unpublished transcription and translation available online through the Invisible East programme.

Recto, left

1. و تَبَاهِي اندَزُ روزگار
2. و پَسپَتِي روزبروز
3. نيز همي كشت تا بوقت
4. جَم. جون جم باندشايي
5. بَكِرْفَت وَر ايزد او
6. رَا تَايِيدِهَا بُوَد جنانك
7. بيش ازان كپس را
8. نَبودَه بود جم بتد بير
9. گارها استوار
10. گَرُذ سده (؟) تازه
11. گَرُذ. هَرُ اييني كه
12. بيش ازان بوَدَه بود نيكو
13. تر ازان بساخت. جون
14. كار آرام كِرْفَت و آب

Verso, right

1. بَادُشاهي و فَرْمَان بُر
2. دَارِي بجای باز آمد
3. رسمها نيكو بنهاند. اور
4. مزد ماه فروردين
5. روز بيشپسند جشن
6. كَرْدَن نوروژ. جنين كُفَت
7. كه اين نوروژ اِپست
8. كه كار جهان باز رسم
9. و ذاذ آمد و فِپسَاد كَم شد

10. و بَدَان دور كَرْد. آن روز

11. جشن كَرْدَنْد و نوروز

12. نام كَرْدَنْد. جون كار

13. برو قرار كِرْفَت

14. و هر كسي بكار خويش باز

Verso, left

1. آورْدُ باز جاي خويش

2. و دست بيدانگزان

3. كوته گزْد و كار جهان

4. روي بآباداني نهاد.

5. كشتهها بپسپار بكَرْدَنْد

6. و هَرُ كسي بكار خويش

7. باز شدند. جون زمستان

8. بكَدَشْت و بَرْفها بكَدُ

9. اَخت مَرُذمان بشا

10. ذبها بَدَشْت بيرون

11. شدند. كشتهها پسبز

12. بديَنْد نيكو كفتند برها

13. نيكوتر شدهست و

14. برها امپال نيكوترپست

Recto, right

1. بشاذي آتشي بزرک بکر

2. دند و نشاط و شاذي

3. همي گرنند هر كسي

4. بجای خویش. و این
5. نیز باتفاق جنان او
6. فتاد که هم روز
7. آبان بود. پندۀ نام
8. نهادند و سدهی نخستین
9. محکم تر کردند تا بر
10. وزگار جم. چون جم پدیدار
11. آمد و بادشایی بیافت
12. و از ایزد او را تاییدها
13. بود چه بر روزگار اندر
14. خلل آمدۀ بود و تباہی

## Translation

National Library of Israel, Ms.Heb.8333.188. P. Firoozbakhsh, A. Azad, N. Saqee and M. Arghandehpour, unpublished transcription and translation available online through the Invisible East programme.

Recto, left

1. The corruption of the time and
2. impotence that abounded
3. continued until the era of
4. Jam. After Jam assumed the kingship,
- 5.-6. with the support of God at
7. hitherto unseen levels,
8. he took care of
9. matters with wisdom.
10. He reformed the *sada* (?)
11. [festival]. He improved all customs
12. that had pre-existed.
13. When

14. the situation became stable and the [good] reputation of

Verso, right

1. the monarchy and rule
2. had been restored,
3. he put in place sound customs.
4. On the day of *Ūrmazd* (i.e. the 1st day) of month of *farvardīn*,
5. they would gather to celebrate
6. the new year (*nawrūz*). He spoke thus,
7. "Today is the new day
8. because order to the world
9. and justice have come, and depravity vanished
10. and the villains have been kept at bay!" That day
11. they held a celebration and called it
- 12.-13. *nawrūz* ("new day"). After assuming power,
14. he reinstated everyone in their

Verso, left

1. original posts,
2. and disempowered the oppressors.
3. The affairs of the world
4. began to flourish.
5. They farmed a lot,
6. and everyone returned to
7. work. After the winters
8. when the snows melted,

9. the people would
10. go out into the meadows filled with joy.
11. They would see the green,
12. beautiful farms, and exclaim,
13. "How the quality of the produce has improved,
14. and this year's harvest is even better!"

Recto, right

1. With great joy, they built large fires,
- 2.-3. drank and made merry; everyone in
4. their own place. And this
5. [event] happened to fall
- 6.-7. on the tenth day of the month (of *bahman*), and it was named sada.
8. They fostered the original *sada*
9. until
10. Jam's time. When Jam appeared [on the scene]
11. and assumed the kingship –
12. with much support from God [and]
- 13.-14. because of the chaos and corruption that abounded –

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## About the author

Dr. Simone Cristoforetti is an Associate Professor at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice (Italy), where he teaches Iranian and Central Asian History in the Department of Asian and North African Studies. He conducts research on the relationships between culture, humanity, and the environment from the Mediterranean to Central Asia. He is the author of multiple essays and scholarly articles on the phenomena of entanglement and mutual influence between the Iranian world, Islam, and Christianity and on the history of the calendar and festivals in the Iranian world. He has dedicated his 2002 book *Il Natale della Luce* (*The Christmas of Light*) to the Iranian fire festival of Sada.

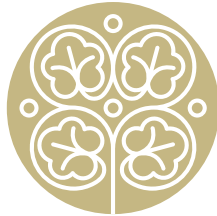
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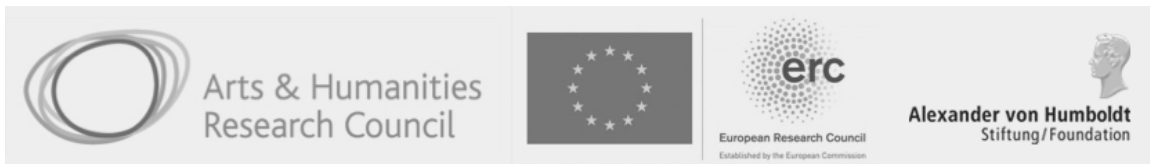
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