

Iranian Festivals and Political Discourse under the Abbasids

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Abstract Celebrations of the two main festivals of the Iranian calendar, *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān*, are part of the general phenomenon of presence of Iranian strands in social and political culture of the Abbasid centuries. Through a critical approach to the sources, the author verifies the assumption that Iranian festivals were a politically relevant element of Abbasid culture and customs. The political relevance of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* is then discussed with regard to its relations with contemporary Islamic political discourse as a whole, in order to verify two recent interpretations of Islamic political theory and practice in the formative centuries. Sources hereby considered lead to the conclusion that *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* are clearly embedded into Abbasid political discourse. Those festivals, in fact, concurred to the construction of a hierarchic legitimacy. At the same time, incompatibility or competition between them and Islamic political theory remained merely exceptional.

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1 Opening Remarks

It is a well documented fact that Iranian festivals were incorporated in the etiquette of the Abbasid courts¹ and that they were celebrated in private circles orbiting caliphal palaces. Moreover, it can be soundly argued that *Nawrūz*² and *Mihraġān* – respectively New-year's day and Autumn day of

1 The definition of courtly social environments for the Early Islamic age is still in development. I will adhere here to the work of El Cheikh (2010) on the court of al-Muqtadir for a first outline of courts and private circles in the Abbasid era.

2 This festival is most commonly called by sources of the centuries hereby considered as *Nayrūz* or *Nawrūz* alternatively. The former is by far more common than the latter and, in my translations, I left the name of the festivals spelt as I found it. In my commentary I followed the customary spelling in scholarly studies, that is *Nawrūz*. The spelling of *Mihraġān* is unequivocal.

the Iranian calendar – were part of Umayyad courtly life as well.³ Nevertheless, mentions of Iranian celebrations abound in Abbasid literature and that is hardly surprising. The revolution which ultimately brought the Abbasid dynasty to caliphal power had its homeland in the eastern lands of the Iranian plateau.⁴ It is also accepted that the Abbasid era saw a revival of Iranian customs at the caliphal court (Yarshater 1991, pp. 54-74) and that the political customs of the long lost Sasanian empire were regarded as the main model for the caliphs who were, in many ways, conceived as their moral heirs.

It should be stressed here that this does not mean that the ancient kings were behavioural models in competition with the Prophetic *sunna*. The distinction between these two figures, Prophet and King, is attested throughout the cultural production of the time. In this regard, al-Azmeh has recently argued that caliphal authority should be considered as the Muslim expression of royal power «in alliance with the sacred» (al-Azmeh 1997, p. 9) and, therefore, not a *sui generis* institution but a set of «specific redactions and inflections of a generality, that of sacral kingship and ecumenical imperialism» (al-Azmeh 1997, p. 15). On this point al-Azmeh disagrees with Crone, who retains the source of the state in Muslim polities of the medieval era to be Islam itself (Crone 2004, p. 8). This debate is tangent to the subject of this article, but we will focus on the significance of Iranian strands in Islamic political and cultural life and their relation to the broader ideological context. The subject has been increasingly studied in the past years, with special regard to pre-islamic Iranian heritage of theorizations about kingship in the Abbasid era. From a general point of view D. Tor (2012) argued that the Abbasids, as well as the dynasties that later inherited the actual government of the empire, found in Iranian kingly traditions a much needed tool for legitimization independent from the Islamic background while not antagonist with the Islamic background of the political thought of the time. How deep their need for legitimization was and, more impor-

3 As noted by al-Azmeh, we can find mention of this practice in a couple of works composed in the Abbasid era (al-'Askarī, *Awā'il*, pp. 34, 38 and 50; Ibn al-Zubayr, *Ḍaḥā'ir*, pp. 4-25). It is anyway beyond reasonable doubt that the custom of gift-giving at *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* was alive under the Umayyads, since the fiscal reform of 'Abd al-Malik (r. 65/685-86/705) included those gifts among the taxes abolished by the decree. As my scope is here limited to the Abbasid centuries, I just wish to point out that these festivals were already politically relevant under the Umayyads and that it can be argued that were part of Umayyad courtly life. The political and economical relevance of gift-giving practices in general is not peculiar to the early Islamic state (Cutler 2001).

4 The nature of this uprising and its original aim has been subject of debate throughout all the history of this field of studies, both in regard to the ethnic composition of Abbasid supporters and to the actual leading role held by the Abbasid branch in its beginnings. Here I will focus on the Abbasid era until the mid-fifth/eleventh century, when the Seljuk Turks closed the formative period of the caliphal institution (Wellhausen 1927; Shaban 1970; Agha 2003; Daniel 2007).

tantly, the causes of such necessity are questions laying beyond the scope of this article. It will suffice here to say that the Abbasid establishment as a whole felt an ideal link with the kingly tradition of ancient Persia. By mean of this connection, Abbasid elites sought both teachings on sound administrative practices (Duri 2011, pp. 124-141) and legitimization of their authority (Tor 2012).

The subject of political authority in the Abbasid era has been addressed in recent years also by S. Ali (2008) who, while not dealing with Iranian strands in the political and cultural Islamic milieu, sees two competing models of sacrality in Abbasid society. The first, labelled by Ali as monotheist, is the model of the *mašāyih* and *nussāk*, who recognized power and authority to one absolute deity only. The second, labelled as henotheist, tolerated and even favoured the emergence of secondary authorities structured in a state hierarchy. This second kind of authority would gain strength from open or implicit statements of transgression against its monotheist counterpart. It would also be reminiscent of ancient Near-Eastern traditions. I would not go as far as Ali goes in defining patrons and caliphs as «other deities» (Ali 2008, p. 18) to be supplicated. I believe that his definition concedes too much to the religious aspects of power, somehow disregarding what is eminently political and, by doing so, it posthumously favours the point of view of *mašāyih* and *nussāk*. Nevertheless, in some of the examples I put forward in this article a tension of uncertain intensity emerges in the coexistence of the authority of rulers on one side and of the Islamic law and the *mašāyih* on the other. Ali, in his article, speaks of two competing systems of sacrality operative in Abbasid society. Since these two systems actively managed to construct power, it seems that he is defining as well a couple of voices dealing with the issues of political legitimacy.

These two broad statements on the political life of the Abbasid age, elaborated by Tor and by Ali, are the framework in which I am going to answer to the main questions posed in this paper, that will be centred on the role of Iranian festivals, namely *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* (Cristoforetti 2009, 2013), in the political discourse of the Abbasid era. I will consider this pair because they are the most frequently encountered ones throughout Abbasid literature. In addition, according to sources, they shared with each other most of their peculiar features, for instance gift-giving practices, royal dignity and being date marking the beginning of seasons (pseudo-Ġāḥiẓ, *Tāġ*, p. 149).

Firstly, I aim to verify whether Iranian festivals were a key element in political life of the Abbasid courts in ways similar, for instance, to the adoption of titulature of Sasanian origin (Madelung 1969). Even though the political relevance of the aforementioned revival of ancient Iranian customs, titles and symbols has been studied in several of its particular expressions and, recently, also as a unitary phenomenon in its own right, the role of Iranian festivals at the Abbasid courts still lacks a dedicated study. The political relevance of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* may not be unexpected, but it still

awaits source-based evidence that would allow us to evaluate the scale and nature of their political meaning.

Secondly, I intend to discuss the relation between the celebration of Iranian festivals, that are unequivocally of non-Islamic origin, and Islamic political theory on the basis of available literary sources, in order to assess how the well-attested celebration of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* in the Abbasid milieu operates on two fronts. On one side, the assimilation of Iranian kingship ideals in Islamic polity addressed by Tor and, on the other, the competition between the two different systems of legitimacy of rulers, be they caliphs, *amīr* or high functionaries, and *mašāyih*, as defined by Ali.

From the methodological point of view, I will rely on a variety of literary oeuvres composed in the Abbasid era. I will analyse those passages that seem to show in a straightforward fashion the political weight of these two celebrations, thus including sources drawn from biographical dictionaries, belletrist literature and *madīh* poetry. The unsure truthfulness of the information derived from some of these sources is, of course, problematic and it will be dealt with on a case by case basis. This seems the most suitable approach because the sources we will study are heterogeneous in nature. As a general rule, I will attempt to address the imaginative expression of political thought of the authors considered, assuming them to be representative of wider sections of Abbasid society.

2 *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* Occurrences in Abbasid Literature

As a matter of fact, the celebration of Iranian festivals is well attested throughout the Islamic age in its entirety and mostly in the Abbasid age (Shahbur 2012). But, given the limited scope of the present article, only some texts will be considered. I favoured those texts I believed to be more politically eloquent. Even so, I tried as much as I could to reflect the variety of themes and genres of the general harvest of sources about *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* that I collected during the writing of my doctoral dissertation on *Nawrūz*. These two festivals can be found in most kinds of belletristic production of the Abbasid period. Occurrences are common in poetry, with special regard to *madīh* poems, and in *adab* prose, in which *Nawrūz*, *Mihraġān* and their customs are treated sometimes as topics of their own, and sometimes as the context for courtly anecdotes. A larger portion of these passages revolves around courts of the mid third/ninth century, but later caliphs, such as al-Rāḍī, are nevertheless adequately represented. A few sources describe popular celebrations, but a generalized lack of interest of our authors in the matters of the *ahl al-‘amma* puts a limit to the information on popular celebrations of these two festivals that can be drawn from literary sources. Still, at least in the case of *Nawrūz*, it can be said that it was already present in early Islamic Mesopotamia before the so-called Abbasid revolution.

3 Competitive Celebrations in the *K. Murūġ al-Dahab*

First, let us consider an anecdote from the *K. Murūġ al-Dahab* by the fourth/tenth century⁵ historian and literate al-Mas'ūdī (al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūġ*, vol. 8, pp. 341-342). Speaking of the days of al-Rāḍī's caliphate (r. 322/934-329/940), he relates a tale heard from Abū al-Ḥasan al-'Arūḍī, who narrates of a *Mihraġān* that started out in quite a disappointing way for the caliph. According to this report, al-Rāḍī was laying in his halls alone, while the *amīr al-umarā'* Abū al-Ḥusayn Baġkam⁶ was loudly celebrating his *Mihraġān* in his house nearby the Tigris. The caliph, concerned with the increasing ambitions of Baġkam, to prove the reality of those dangerous intentions to his *mu'addib*, showed him a newly minted *dirham*,⁷ saying «Know that the only power belongs to the great prince and lord of the people Baġkam». Then, al-'Arūḍī managed to comfort al-Rāḍī by recalling histories of the caliphs of the past and of the kings of Persia, though he wisely avoids ill words against Baġkam. In the end, the caliph accepted his suggestion to re-establish his caliphal prestige when he heard of the example of al-Ma'mūn:

«Oh Prince of the Believers, is there any reason why you should not do what al-Ma'mūn said on this very day in these verses?

Let us offer to the boon-companions, reunited around venerable people,
A *ḥusrawānī* wine, for this is a *ḥusrawānī* festival ('īd)!

5 According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. «al-Rāḍī bi-l-lāh», the only surviving version of *K. al-murūġ al-dahab* was completed in the year 332/943, thus making it an almost contemporary source to the caliphate of al-Rāḍī (Pellat 2012). In any case al-Mas'ūdī was born between 280/893 and 283/896 and died in 345/956, hence he was alive and working during the caliphate of al-Rāḍī.

6 Abū al-Ḥusayn Baġkam is a Turkic *amīr al-umarā'* appointed by al-Rāḍī himself in 326/938. He maintained the office for almost three years until Raġab 329/April 941, but his career started at a very young age as a *ġūlām in service* firstly of Mākān and later of Mardāwīġ (Canard 2014). *Mihraġān* was not the only Iranian festival celebrated by Baġkam, as we have testimony also of his celebrations, complete with gift-giving, of *Nawrūz* and even *Sadaq*, a winter festival that appears to be less commonly referred to in Arabic sources (Cristoforetti 2003, pp. 126-127).

7 The source seems to suggest that this coin was minted on that very day. The author of *K. al-tāġ* openly states that new coin minting was among the features that made *Nawrūz* more important than *Mihraġān*, along with the opening of the fiscal year, lightening of bonfires and water spilling, the assignment of prerogatives, the start of new buildings and a sort of sacrifices (pseudo-Ġāḥiẓ, *Tāġ*, p. 149). Yet, it may be possible that celebratory minting activity took place on the day of *Mihraġān* as well. Since the celebrations and customs of *Mihraġān* in the centuries of Early Islam are even more neglected by scholars than those related to *Nawrūz*, it does not seem possible to say anything conclusive on the matter for the time being.

Send away those who drink *zabīb* – their taste is different from ours
indeed!
What I drink, I know it to be *ḥaram* and I beg forgiveness to God,
to whom belongs all gratitude.
What they drink, they think it *ḥalāl*! And so they regrettably commit
two faults. »

This tale amused the caliph and made him happy again. Then he said «You spoke the truth! To give up on pleasures on this day would be [an act of] weakness». He then called for his boon-companions and sat in the hall of the throne, by the river. It was the merriest celebration I ever witnessed. All those taking part in it, boon-companions, singers and buffoons received *dīnār* and *dirham*, robes, perfumes and other good things. Lastly, the gifts from Baġkam arrived, in the form of rarities from the land of the *‘aġam*, and that was a happy day.

The value of Iranian festivals for political legitimacy can be felt in several aspects of this passage, so it may be worthy to lay them out. First of all, the fact that Baġkam celebrated Iranian festivals is coherent with the political aims attributed to him by the text. His ambitions are clearly embodied by the newly minted *dirham*. His upbringing at the daylamite courts of Mākān and Mardāwīġ allows us to take for granted that he was well aware of the customs of Persian nobility. Of course, it would be naive to assume this source to reflect a historically true event in its details, but what concerns us here is to prove that the significance of Iranian festivals was part of a shared ideal horizon in which the political struggle took place. The politically competitive goal of the *Mihraġān* hosted by Baġkam was not ignored neither by al-Rāḏī nor by his old mentor. It is noteworthy that we can find further proof of al-Rāḏī's sensitivity towards Iranians festivals in the *K. aḥbār al-Rāḏī*. Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṣūlī writes that, on *Nawrūz* day 323 *hiġrī*, corresponding to 28th March 954 CE, he exacted an oath from his brother al-‘Abbās. The oath was immediately ratified and handwritten by the *qādī* Abū al-Qāsim at the presence of the *wazīr* and of al-Ṣūlī himself (al-Ṣūlī, *Aḥbār al-Rāḏī*, p. 66). The fact that al-Rāḏī chose *Nawrūz* day to exact his brother's oath of allegiance is hardly insignificant. Al-Rāḏī's understanding of the political implications of the *Mihraġān* of Baġkam is made clear by the fact that we find the caliph already embittered by the loudness of the party and rightly worried about his growing ambitions. The caliph accepted the advice to look to his ancestor, the much more powerful caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 196/812-218/833), but it is noteworthy that he was ultimately referred to the older example of the kings of Persia. This shows us how the customs of the ancient kings, as they were conceived at the time of the Abbasids, could be reclaimed as part of the Abbasid heritage, passed on by the caliphal family from al-Ma'mūn to

al-Rāḏī. By following those illustrious examples, the caliph re-established himself as the apex of the hierarchical chain. The plan achieved clear success with the delivering of precious gifts from Baḡkam. It is to be noted here that al-Rāḏī did not reciprocate the gifts, but, rather, distributed their wealth among his own companions. This confirms that the meaning of the gifts sent from Baḡkam, be they historically real or not, is the recognition of the authority held by the caliph.

Another aspect I wish to point out is the denomination *ḥusrawānī*, derived from the word *ḥusraw* which comes «directly from Persian, referred to the greatest of the *akāsira* [ancient Great Kings of Persia] and meant a kind of drink or a very fine, royal silk used for clothing and used to cover the Ka'ba in the late first-seventh century» (Morony 2012). It seems clear that these celebrations are unequivocally defined on the regal and cultural level rather than on the religious one. The text says that the only religious concern that those festivals could arise in the eyes of al-Ma'mūn was not any form of hidden Zoroastrianism, but rather the sinful custom of wine-drinking. In other words, we could say that celebrating *Mihraġān* and *Nawrūz* could make of you a sinner, but it still did not make you *zindīq*. This opinion was not unanimously accepted, and some pious '*ulamā*' saw in those celebrations elements of open rejection of the Muslim faith, as we will see below. Anyway, the merits of those festivals, in the eyes of Abbasid high society, were derived from their being royal, ancient and Persian. Even when al-Ma'mūn sang with satisfaction of *ḥaram* aspects of these celebrations, possible connections to Zoroastrian religion seem to remain far from the mind of our author. The fact that *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* did not share an only vague link with pre-Islamic Persia, but a more precise integration to the kingly ideals, embodied by the Great Kings in traditional history of ancient Iran, inherited and developed by early Islamic culture (Yarshater 2012), lays also in several accounts on the origins of such festivals, that, almost invariably, have *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* established by legendary deeds of the two main kingly figures of Iranian mythology, Ğamšid or Afrīdūn.⁸

4 Gifts and Celebrations: Political and Religious Issues

The idea that Iranian festivals were linked to confirmation or, in other cases, correction of state and courtly hierarchy was common in the cultural milieu of the time. This is the mindset that underlies one of several anecdotes that the section on gifts from the *K. al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Aḏḏād* reserves to gifts of *Nawrūz* received by al-Mutawakkil (232/847-247/861)

⁸ Abbasid narratives on the subject are not scarce. For instance, see al-Bīrūnī, *Āṭār*, pp. 215-216; Ṭabarī, *Ṭarīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 179; pseudo-Ġāḥiz, *Maḥāsīn*, pp. 359-365; al-Rāġib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, vol. 4, p. 567; Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Kāmil*, vol. 1, p. 76; al-Hamaḍānī, *Muḥtaṣar*, p. 278.

(Pseudo-Ġāhiz, *Maḥāsin*, p. 372). In these pages, we are told that the caliph received several gifts from his functionaries, but here we will focus on his reaction towards a colourful dress and a golden brooch, received from al-Ḥālid al-Muhallabī. The caliph, appreciating the gift, tried it out and said:

«Muhallabī, I wore this [gift of yours] to make you happy and you said “Commander of the faithful, if I would be your assistant when you are in need of valiant men, I would show you my value. How grand a Commander of the Faithful you are”, but, even better than any other [saying], I recall the words of ‘Abdallāh al-‘Abbāsī: “On this day we give lords and great people. [Therefore] I must donate all that I can to my Lord”». Having said that he asked for ten thousands *dirhām* to be brought to him and divided them for the people of Mecca and Medina. This was one of his best deeds.

Since the source of this text may not be as reliable as al-Mas‘ūdī is when he writes about his contemporary caliph, we must limit ourselves to underline the binary role of *Nawrūz* gift-giving in courtly life. The dialogue describes it with a briefness betraying its didactic intention. On one side, the appreciation displayed by the caliph grants al-Muhallabī a chance to make his request: the final goal of his precious gift is to advance in rank, by virtue of a closer association with al-Mutawakkil. On the other side, the reply of the caliph openly states the core concept of the main courtly custom of *Nawrūz*, that is gift-giving. Through it, each member of the elite re-enacted recognition of the authority held by his superior.

One reason to be wary of historical truthfulness of this anecdote is the fact that al-Mutawakkil himself expressed much less enthusiasm for the celebration of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān*, according to a source drawn from *K. al-aġānī*. The protagonists involved in this anecdote (al-İşfahānī, *Aghānī*, vol. 23, pp. 211-213) are the caliph, the poet ‘Alī b. al-Ġahm,⁹ his life-long rival Marwān Abū Simṭ b. al-Ġanūb b. Abī Ḥafṣa¹⁰ and ‘Alī Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir.¹¹ The two main protagonists are ‘Alī and Marwān and this clash between the two poets is part of the extensive story of their rivalry, that usually saw ‘Alī on the defending side, making the expenses of Marwān’s satirical genius. ‘Alī b. al-Ġahm was the descendant of an

9 Arab poet whose father came to Baghdad from Khorasan during the caliphate of al-Ma’mūn. He met his luck as a court poet only during the reign of al-Mutawakkil and this may be due to his *ḥanbālī* sympathies, but, even under al-Mutawakkil, he struggled with more than one enemy at court, ultimately falling in disgrace (Gibb 2012).

10 He was known also as Marwān al-Aşġar and he came from a family of courtly poets and excelled in the genre of *hijā*’ (Bencheikh 2012).

11 Exponent of the Iraġī line of the Ṭāhirid family, *şāḥib al-shurṭa* from 237/851 until 255/869 (Bosworth 1996, p. 168).

Arab tribe originally from Bahrain, whose father moved from Khorasan to Baghdad to be appointed as state official starting under the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn. The passage from *K. al-aġānī* goes as follows:

'Alī b. al-Ġahm told a *qaṣīda* in honor of al-Mutawakkil: «Let the time renew itself and make the *Mihraġān* a most happy 'īd!».

This verse was then repeated by Abū Simṭ b. Abī Ḥafṣa [in front of al-Mutawakkil] and the caliph summoned 'Alī b. al-Ġahm. Al-Mutawakkil said: «'Alī, explain to me your words 'and make the *Mihraġān* a most happy 'īd'. Is it the *Mihraġān* a festival (*yawm 'īd*) or a day of amusement (*yawm lahw*)? Indeed festivals are those God imposed on man, as is the case of *al-Fiṭr* or *al-Aḏḥā*, or Friday or the days of *Tašrīq*. On the contrary, *Mihraġān* and *Nayrūz* are festivals (*a'yād*) of the *Maġūs*. Therefore, it is not appropriate to tell the caliph of God in his adoration and the caliph of the envoy of God in his community: «make the *Mihraġān* a 'īd».

'Alī b. al-Ġahm did not listen, but, when [those] words were reported to him, he replied:

«We are your supporters from the family of Khorasan! First to fight
and brave men!
We are the sons of this black flag¹² and the people of the praised
party.»

Then Marwān said: «If it is true that you had a seat in the praised assembly, how comes that Qaḥṭaba killed your grandfather and crucified him among the enemies of the Abbasids?». Al-Mutawakkil asked «Did really Qaḥṭaba kill your grandfather?» ['Alī b. al-Ġahm replied:] «No! I swear it by God, Commander of the faithful». [The caliph] then turned towards 'Alī Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir and said: «Is what Marwān said true?». Muḥammad answered: «Well, even if it had been as he said, what guilt would be upon 'Alī b. al-Ġahm? God already killed all your enemies and preserved your allies». al-Mutawakkil laughed and said «You testified, God did so indeed.»

The anecdote closes with a handful of verses in which Marwān insists on accusing Ibn al-Ġahm of having falsified the history of his family and suggesting his own ancestors as true old friends of the Abbasids. We can not be sure if the willingness of Ibn al-Ġahm to celebrate *Mihraġān* predated his lucky days at court, or if he just found it convenient to embrace

12 The Abbasids standards were, as it is well known, the black banners and the colour itself became the official symbol of their regime ('Athamina 1989, p. 307).

a custom that we know from other sources to have been al-Mutawakkil's as well. In addition to the words from *K. al-maḥāsīn wa al-aḍḍād*, further proof can be found in the *K. al-diyārāt*. In this case our interest lies in a very vivid description of the celebration of a *Nawrūz*. Specifically, al-Šābuštī describes with some detail the performance of *samāḡa* for al-Mutawakkil. The *samaḡa* was a sort of lively and even grotesque mimic show that took place around a central figure, while the latter spilled money on the participants, who were probably masked and performed some kind of grotesque comedy, the nature of which remains unclear. Al-Šābuštī relates of a *samaḡa* that grew intense to the point of having people actually touching al-Mutawakkil, under the eyes of his guards. That negligence for the personal safety of the caliph, scolded him both for the waste of money and the disregard of his own safety. Amidst his anger, the general left the hall and his friends run after him, worried that his usual strictness may, on that day, cost him dearly. Eventually, the general returned to the main hall, though he was not entirely placated, only after the caliph managed to find a more secure way to enjoy the *samāḡa* from a distance (al-Šābuštī, *al-Diyārāt*, pp. 39-40; Ahsan 1979, pp. 270-271).

We are still left in doubt whether to consider sincere 'Alī b. al-Ġahm's sympathy for *Mihraḡān*, but it still may be considered a clue, suggesting that the lines of disagreement over the Islamic acceptability of these celebrations did not run along those of juridical factions. Otherwise, one would expect a proto-*ḥanbalī* 'alīm, such as Ibn al-Ġahm used to be, not to exhort the caliph to celebrate *Mihraḡān*. As a matter of fact, we should at least take it as a possibility that the verse is a later attribution. Even so, it is striking that Ibn al-Ġahm reacted by defending himself with a proud reclaim of his *ḥurāsānī* roots and of his family's early support to the Abbasid cause,¹³ while having been accused on the basis of a *fiqh* argument. It does not seem convincing to say that it constituted nothing more than an attempt to leave a field where Ibn al-Ġahm did not have many chances to defend himself. While he can not be considered among the finest jurists of his time, Ibn al-Ġahm was not at all lacking in *fiqh* competence nor it was impossible to defend those celebrations on a sharaitic level.

On the *sunnī* side the final words will be, centuries later, those of al-Ġazālī, who declared the lawfulness of extra-islamic celebrations, provided that the Muslim who performs them is sure in his heart that he does not mean any revival of Zoroastrianism (al-Ġazālī, *Kimiyā*, p. 407). In years closer to al-Mutawakkil's caliphate, a similar reasoning can be found in a *madīḥ* composed by Ibn al-Rūmī for his main patron 'Ubaydallāh

13 The family of 'Alī b. al-Ġahm and the Abbasid family shared both the Arab origin and the provenance from Khorasan. 'Alī b. al-Ġahm to claim a *ḥurāsānī* identity appears coherent with the statement by al-Birūnī that the Abbasids were a *ḥurāsānī* dynasty (al-Birūnī, *Kitāb al-Āṭār*, p. 213).

b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir.¹⁴ The prominent poet Ibn al-Rūmī composed several poems praising him and his celebrations of Iranian festivals. Ibn al-Rūmī’s poem (Ibn al-Rūmī, *Dīwān*, vol. 6, p. 1818) is particularly interesting due to the logical and dialectical style of his poetry (McKinney 2004, p. 78), that lays out for us the arguments elaborated in order to defend and praise Iranian festivals as hosted by his long-time patron:

I offer as gift my celebration to the *Nayrūz* and *Mihraġān*, as they
visit you,
 To fully thank you, because you exalted them without leaning on the
border [of sin].
 While honouring them you did not pass through the religious door,
but through the mundane door!
 By how are they celebrated they seem like the two [Islamic] festivals
[‘īdān],
 And they are not festivals of prayer, but an occasion for your
generosity and your gifts.

I will later discuss these verses, proving that at least some people needed to justify these celebrations, while dealing with the second question posed in this paper, that is the application of the model theorized by S. Alī.

For the moment, let us focus again on the quarrel between Ibn al-Ġahm and Marwān because, if we have ground to say that he deliberately preferred to move the dispute on the field of familiar rank, we also need to take into account the fact that his first accuser followed him on the same debate. Indeed, Marwān left the legal dispute and embarked in a difficult and unfruitful attempt to discredit his adversary’s genealogical claim. In other words, Marwān clearly saw the rebuttal of Ibn al-Ġahm as valid and moved to find a way to undermine it. I suggest that the issue with «telling the caliph [...] to make of the *Mihraġān* a ‘īd» is problematic in relation to the status held by the speaker. It may be here that, with his unfortunate verse, Ibn al-Ġahm was behaving as a member of al-Mutawakkil’s closest entourage at a moment when he did not enjoy such position. So, this could be the reason why it made sense for him to claim a right to social proximity by virtue of his familiar history. ‘Alī’s claim raised a valid point, one that Marwān had to confute at its very basis. In short, if the grandfather of Ibn al-Ġahm supported the Abbasid cause in its very first days, ‘Alī b. al-Ġahm should have been allowed a position among the closest companions of the caliph, and, consequently, a right and duty to participate in those celebrations. Conversely, to claim such right is an unwanted attempt to grab such

14 He is another ‘*irāqī* exponent of the Ṭāhirids, who held the title of *ṣāhib al-ṣurṭa* in the years 253-255/867-869 and 266-271/879-884 (Bosworth 1996, p. 168).

status. In this frame the distinction between *yawm 'īd* and *yawm lahw* may well mean the distinction between exclusive and politically relevant celebrations and merely recreational ones.

As we have seen, some sort of opposition to the celebrations of Iranian festivals was present in Abbasid society. In this last anecdote, it is little more than a dialectical trick to cover an attack on the personal level. In other cases a similar idea seems to be more substantial. A rare, unequivocal case can be found in the report of the protest staged by three pious men, who, according to al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, resolved to «Fasting on the day of *Nawrūz*, staying in the main mosque and repeating “This is the *'īd* of *mušrikīn*”. They did so in order to differentiate themselves from the *mušrikīn*» (al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *Baġdād*, vol. 8, p. 476). Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī had to explain the initiative of these three pious men and this is hardly surprising: similar behaviour is only rarely found in Abbasid narratives.¹⁵ On the contrary, sources are ripe with recordings of poetical greeting, accounts of celebrations held by a variety of men of high status in the Abbasid state, and gifts, received by people of high rank and then shared among their companions.

5 A Clue of the Financial Relevance of the Iranian Festivals

Mentions of gifts of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* are very common in *adab* passages dealing with those two festivals, and they appear as the main tool for recognition of authority on these two days. Moreover, it seems that money spent in gifts of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* for the caliph was an important investment. Let us consider, for instance, the numbers laid out in the severe audit carried out by Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. 'Īsā, while checking the personal and professional expense record of Aḥmad 'Ubaydallāh Ḥaṣībī (Ibn Miskawayh, *Taġārub*, vol. 1, p. 156). When the audit began, 'Alī b. 'Īsā had just managed, for the second time in his life, to hold the vizirate, under caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295/908-320/932). One among his first acts was to summon his predecessor, Aḥmad Ḥaṣībī. He went through his personal income and expense record. At the end of the audit Aḥmad Ḥaṣībī confirmed the numbers provided by Ibn 'Īsā, but they still may be over-exaggerated. Even so, at least the proportion between the several categories of expenditure must have been credible in the eyes of the author and the reader and maybe that also it was realistic as well in fourth/ninth century, when the dialogue took place according to Miskawayh. The balance provided is as follows:

¹⁵ Fasting on the day of *Nawrūz* could be a practice not far from outright heresy. Al-Ṭabarī attributes it to the teachings of Qarmaṭ (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḥ*, vol. 13, p. 2129). Of course, this can be an accuse intended to depict his followers as dangerous innovators keen to subvert natural and social order. Anyway, it is symptomatic of a suspicious attitude towards fasting practices on extra-Islamic festivals.

He had disbursed each month in permanent expenses 2500 dinars, total for fourteen months 35,000 dinars. For occasional expenses, presents, maintenance of establishment with cost of perfume and wearing apparel 20,000 dinars. Cost of ground added to his dwelling and of building thereon 40,000 dinars. Presents for the Persian New Year's day and Autumn [i.e. *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān*] to the Caliph, the two princes (his sons) Abū al-'Abbās and Hārūn, the Queen mother, her sister, Zaydān and Muflīḥ, 35,000 dinars. Cost of mules, horses, camels, eunuchs and slaves, 10,000 dinars. Money spent on officers of the vizier's palace, such as deputy-chamberlains, doorkeepers, messengers, and presents to mounted men and infantry, 20,000 dinars.¹⁶

As we can see from these words, gifts of *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* were relevant enough to make a separate category of expenditure, to that they could be presented as the second biggest expense per year. It should also be noted that the gifts that appear in this list are mainly those reserved for the caliphal family. That is because, to quote the words of *K. al-Tāġ*, «It is the right of the king to receive gifts at *Nayrūz* and *Mihraġān*» (Pseudo-Ġāḥiẓ, *Tāġ*, p. 149). A concept that was so essential to these festivities that is stated twice in the book, at the opening of the chapter on the Iranian festivals.

6 Al-Muhtadī's Rejection of *Mihraġān*

Because of this tight connection with kingly authority, it is interesting to consider the only case known to us of a caliph who decided to refuse those gifts. It happened under the short caliphate of al-Muhtadī (255/869-256/870), whose «austerities and devotion to business are well known [...] less well known is his endeavour to re-establish the religious policy of his father, al-Wāṭiq» and, more precisely he actively managed «to promote a non-traditionalist Ḥanafism» (Melchert 1996, p. 337). At some point during his brief caliphate al-Muhtadī refused even to accept gifts for the Iranian festivals and we find proof of that in a poem by al-Buḥturī (206/821-284/897), in which he praises harsh policy of al-Muhtadī. As a side note, the very same poet praised the celebrations of those festivals under a few of al-Muhtadī's predecessors. Here are the verses (al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, vol. 2, p. 677):¹⁷

16 This translation is taken from *The eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* (Amedroz, Margoliouth 1921, p. 175).

17 First of all I would spend some words on the dating of the poem. The curator says in a note that it should be in 256/869-70, but it is noteworthy that, just one year earlier the days of Pilgrimage fell between 21st and 25th November 869, very close to the *Mihraġān*,

noted that Ali, in his paper, bases his theorization mainly on the analysis of *madīh* poetry and architectural elements, leaving aside the ancient Iranian cultural elements that pervaded Abbasid royal courts. He set out to look for texts and architectural elements that present the authority of caliphs and important elements of Early Islamic elites as conflicting with God's authority. On a theoretical level this appears contradictory with the idea, expressed by Tor, that the adoption of ancient Iranian symbols did not actually conflict with «Islamic legitimacy», but rather was a useful addition to the set of political tools of the Islamic rulers of those centuries.

7 Concluding Remarks

On the basis of the sources above analysed we can clearly identify two cases of raw opposition to the celebrations of Iranian festivals in the cited passage from *K. ta'rīh Baǧdād* and in the verses by al-Buḥtūrī dealing with al-Muhtadī's refusal of the gifts of *Mihraǧān*. Both of them originate from the idea that these two festivals are inherently incompatible with sharaitic orthopraxis and they constitute a valid example of the «pious», «monotheistic» voice analysed by Ali, exclusive towards the idea of authorities other than God's. Actually, this voice managed at some point to take control of the court and this suggests us that the quite rigid division between courtly vision of religion and that of pious *mašāyih* does not take into account the productive interaction between different milieus.

The model needs more complexity if we consider the rest of our sources, which describe courtly gift-giving and celebrations. The verses attributed to al-Ma'mūn by al-Arūḏī may, to some extent, provide new ground to Ali's theory of a mundane authority competitive with *šarī'a* and asserted through explicit violation of sharaitic prohibitions. Yet, this would leave unexplained why al-Ma'mūn would feel the need to ask in advance for divine forgiveness and why he attributes an even double infraction to the drinkers of *zabīb*. If 'henotheist' authority is asserted through illicit action would not the Caliph claim to be the first in this field? The two speeches attributed to al-Mutawakkil and the verses by Ibn al-Rūmī in praise of 'Ubaydallāh make it clear that at least a third voice is speaking, and quite loudly, in the sources. In these three cases the effort of the author aims, with different strategies, to merge extra-Islamic celebrations and divine authority. In the *K. al-aǧānī* this is achieved through a speculative distinction between religious days of *'īd* and mundane days of *lahw*. The course of the debate at the presence of al-Mutawakkil suggests that that distinction had also a practical meaning, in distinguishing celebrations of the inner circle of the caliph's powerful entourage from parties of purely recreational nature. The second speech attributed to al-Mutawakkil openly connects the authority of the great men and its hierarchy with the Only God, from

whom it descend. No conflict, competition or tension exists in the eyes of the anonymous author when he shows a paradigmatic example of the flow of authority, from God on High to the Caliph and from him to his courtesan, through the performance of a *ḥusrawānī* custom.

Lastly, in the case of the *ṭahirid* 'Ubadyallāh, we see him praised precisely for having removed from *Nawrūz* and *Mihraġān* those elements that, according to the 'henotheist voice' should constitute the basis for the construction of his sacral authority. Instead, Ibn al-Rūmī praises the efforts made by his patron to harmonize the customs of Iranian festivals to the precepts of divine authority. In conclusion, while the pious voice is heard in our sources, the henoteistic side seems to hush and can instead be heard the voice of those who eased the inclusion of ancient Persian ideals of rulership (Tor 2012, p. 146) into Islamic political thought and practice.

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