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 Mihrāgan, 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 Mihrāgan 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 Mihrāgan 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.


Keywords Abbasid. Festival. Nawrūz. Politics.

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 Nawrūz² and Mihrāgan – 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 Mihrāgan 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 \textit{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 \textit{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-ʿAskarī, \textit{Awāʾil}, pp. 34, 38 and 50; Ibn al-Zubayr, \textit{Ḍaḥāʾīr}, pp. 4-25). It is anyway beyond reasonable doubt that the custom of gift-giving at \textit{Nawrūz} and \textit{Mihraḡān} was alive under the Umayyads, since the fiscal reform of ʿAbd 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 for 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 mašāyiḥ 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 mašāyiḥ 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 mašāyiḥ 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 Mihraḡān (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-Ǧāḥiẓ, Tāḡ, 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 Mihraḡān 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 Mihrāgan 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 mašāyiḥ, as defined by Ali.

From the methodological point of view, I will rely on a variety of literary œuvres 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 madīḥ 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 Mihrāgan 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 Mihrāgan 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 madīḥ poems, and in adab prose, in which Nawrūz, Mihrāgan 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-ʿāmma 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. Murūǧ al-Ḏahab*

First, let us consider an anecdote from the *K. Murūǧ al-Ḏahab* by the fourth/tenth century historian and literate al-Masʿūdī (al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ*, 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-ʿArūḍī, who narrates of a Miḥraḡān 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-umarāʾ* Abū al-Ḥusayn Baǧkam was loudly celebrating his Miḥraḡān in his house nearby the Tigris. The caliph, concerned with the increasing ambitions of Baǧkam, to prove the reality of those dangerous intentions to his *muʿaddib*, showed him a newly minted *dirham*, saying «Know that the only power belongs to the great prince and lord of the people Baǧkam». Then, al-ʿArūḍi 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 Baǧkam. In the end, the caliph accepted his suggestion to re-establish his caliphal prestige when he heard of the example of al-Maʾmūn:

«Oh Prince of the Believers, is there any reason why you should not do what al-Maʾmūn 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 (*ʿīd*)!

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5 According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. «al-Rāḍī bi-l-lāh», the only surviving version of *K. al-murūǧ al-ḏahab* 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-Masʿūdī 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 Baǧkam is a Turkic *amīr al-umarāʾ* appointed by al-Rāḍī himself in 326/938. He maintained the office for almost three years until Raḡab 329/April 941, but his career started at a very young age as a *ḡūlām in service* firstly of Mākān and later of Mardāwīǧ (Canard 2014). Miḥraḡān was not the only Iranian festival celebrated by Baǧkam, as we have testimony also of his celebrations, complete with gift-giving, of Nawrūz and even *Ṣaḏaq*, 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-tāǧ* openly states that new coin minting was among the features that made Nawrūz more important than Miḥraḡān, 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-Ǧāḥiẓ, *Tāǧ*, p. 149). Yet, it may be possible that celebratory minting activity took place on the day of Miḥraḡān as well. Since the celebrations and customs of Miḥraḡān 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 halāl! 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 dinār and dirham, robes, perfumes and other good things. Lastly, the gifts from Baḡkam arrived, in the form of rarities from the land of the ‘aḡam, 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 Baḡkam 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 Mardāwīǧ 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 Miḥraḡān hosted by Baḡkam was not ignored neither by al-Rāḍī nor by his old mentor. It is noteworthy that we can find further proof of al-Rāḍī’s sensitivity towards Iranians festivals in the K. aḥbār al-Rāḍī. Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṣūlī writes that, on Nawrūz day 323 hiǧrī, corresponding to 28th March 954 CE, he exacted an oath from his brother al-ʿAbbās. The oath was immediately ratified and handwritten by the qāḍī Abū al-Qāsim at the presence of the wazīr and of al-Ṣūlī himself (al-Ṣūlī, Aḥbār al- Raḍī, p. 66). The fact that al-Rāḍī chose Nawrūz day to exact his brother’s oath of allegiance is hardly insignificant. Al-Rāḍī’s understanding of the political implications of the Miḥraḡān of Baḡkam 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-Maʾmūn (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 claimed as part of the Abbasid heritage, passed on by the caliphal family from al-Maʾmūn to.
al-Rāḍī. By following those illustrious examples, the caliph re-established himself as the apex of the hierarchical chain. The plan achieved clear success with the delivery of precious gifts from Baḡkam. It is to be noted here that al-Rāḍī 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 Kaʿba 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-Maʾmūn was not any form of hidden Zoroastrianism, but rather the sinful custom of wine-drinking. In other words, we could say that celebrating Miḥraḡān and Nawrūz could make of you a sinner, but it still did not make you zīndīq. This opinion was not unanimously accepted, and some pious ʿulamāʾ 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-Maʾmūn 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 Miḥraḡān 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 Miḥraḡān established by legendary deeds of the two main kingly figures of Iranian mythology, Ġamšīd 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-Maḥāsin wa al-Addād reserves to gifts of Nawrūz received by al-Mutawakkil (232/847-247/861)

(Pseudo-Ğāḥīz, 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 broach, 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 ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAbbāsī: “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-Maṣʿūdī 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 Miḥraḡān, according to a source drawn from K. al-aḡānī. The protagonists involved in this anecdote (al-Īsfahānī, Aghānī, vol. 23, pp. 211-213) are the caliph, the poet Ṭāhirī b. al-Ǧahm, his life-long rival Marwān Abū Simṭ b. al-Ǧanūb b. Abī Ḥafṣa and ʿAlī Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir. The two main protagonists are ʿAlī and Marwān and this clash between the two poets is part of the extensive story of their rivalry, that usually saw ʿAlī on the defending side, making the expenses of Marwān’s satirical genius. ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm was the descendant of an

9 Arab poet whose father came to Baghdad from Khorasan during the caliphate of al-Maʾmūn. 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-Aṣġar and he came from a family of courtly poets and excelled in the genre of hijāʾ (Bencheikh 2012).

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

ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm told a qaṣīda in honor of al-Mutawakkil: «Let the time renew itself and make the Mihraḡān a most happy ʿīd!». This verse was then repeated by Abū Simṭ b. Abī Ḥafṣa [in front of al-Mutawakkil] and the caliph summoned ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm. Al-Mutawakkil said: «ʿAlī, explain to me your words ‘and make the Mihraḡān a most happy ʿīd’. Is it the Mihraḡān a festival (yawm ʿīd) or a day of amusement (yawm lahw)? Indeed festivals are those God imposed on man, as is the case of al-Fiṭr or al-Aḍḥā, or Friday or the days of Tašrīq. On the contrary, Mihraḡān and Nayrūz are festivals (aʿyād) of the Maḡūs. 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 Mihraḡān a ʿīd».

ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm 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-Ǧahm replied:] «No! I swear it by God, Commander of the faithful». [The caliph] then turned towards ʿAlī Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh 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 ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm? 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-Ǧahm 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-Ǧahm to celebrate Mihraḡān 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 (ʿAthamina 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-maḥāsin wa al-aḍdād, further proof can be found in the K. al-diyyārāt. 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 samāġa for al-Mutawakkil. The samağa 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 samağa 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 samāğa 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 ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm’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 ʿalīm, such as Ibn al-Ǧahm 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-Ǧahm 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 that an attempt to leave a field where Ibn al-Ǧahm did not have many chances to defend himself. While he can not be considered among the finest jurists of his time, Ibn al-Ǧahm 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-Ǧazālī, 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-Ǧazālī, 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 ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm and the Abbasid family shared both the Arab origin and the provenance from Khorasan. ʿAlī b. al-Ǧahm to claim a ḥurāsānī identity appears coherent with the statement by al-Bīrūnī that the Abbasids were a ḥurāsānī dynasty (al-Bīrūnī, Kitāb al-Āṯār, p. 213).
b. ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir. 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 Mihraḥān, 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. Ali.

For the moment, let us focus again on the quarrel between Ibn al-Ǧahm 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-Ǧahm as valid and moved to find a way to undermine it. I suggest that the issue with «telling the caliph […] to make of the Mihraḥān a ‘īd» is problematic in relation to the status held by the speaker. It may be here that, with his unfortunate verse, Ibn al-Ǧahm 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-Ǧahm supported the Abbasid cause in its very first days, ‘Alī b. al-Ǧahm 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 šāhib al-šurṭa in the years 253-255/867-869 and 266-271/879-884 (Bosworth 1996, p. 168).
status. In this frame the distinction between *yawm ʿīd* 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-Baḡdādī, resolved to «Fasting on the day of Nawrūz, staying in the main mosque and repeating “This is the ʿīd of mušrikīn”. They did so in order to differentiate themselves from the *mušrikīn*» (al-Ḥatīb al-Baḡdādī, *Baḡdād*, vol. 8, p. 476). Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī 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 *Mihraḡān* 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 *Mihraḡān* 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 ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā, while checking the personal and professional expense record of Aḥmad Ḫaṣībī (Ibn Miskawayh, *Taḡārub*, vol. 1, p. 156). When the audit began, ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā 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 Ḫaṣībī. He went through his personal income and expense record. At the end of the audit Aḥmad Ḫaṣībī confirmed the numbers provided by Ibn ʿĪsā, 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-Ṭābarī attributes it to the teachings of Qarmaṭ (al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ*, 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 Mihrāḡān] to the Caliph, the two princes (his sons) Abū al-ʿAbbās 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.\textsuperscript{16}

As we can see from these words, gifts of Nawrūz and Mihrāḡān 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-Tāḡ, «It is the right of the king to receive gifts at Nayrūz and Mihrāḡān» (Pseudo-Ǧāḥiẓ, Tāḡ, 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 Mihrāḡān

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):\textsuperscript{17}

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

\textsuperscript{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 Mihrāḡān,
You refused the gifts of Mihrāḡān and not in order to have many people renounce their profit. You are an enemy to the festivals of the lost ones and if you did not choose the right guide (hudā) you would not have been an enemy to them.

The road of the Pilgrimage welcomed the troops who followed it, those that are close and those that are far away. The duty of the Pilgrimage was light and sweet, when they accomplished it after the ḡiḥād.

It is striking that the poet needed to explain the refusal and the reasoning behind it. Since he felt such a need, one may say that al-Muhtadī’s innovative position on the matter could be misunderstood quite easily. The arguing in favour of al-Muhtadī’s refusal of the gifts of Mihrāḡān seems in-line with his religious policy. Al-Muhtadī supported only ḥanafī scholars and this attachment to a single maḏhab is peculiar. For instance, al-Mutawakkil favoured a broader approach, appointing or confirming in their positions scholars of various schools, as he tried to reconcile those factions under his authority rather than to impose his own view as common denominato. Al-Mutawakkil’s policy may be further confirmed by the previous passage from K. al-Aghānī. Al-Muhtadī, instead, almost invariably appointed ḥanafī ʿulamāʾ (Melchert 1996, pp. 334-338). The opposition of the latter to extra-islamic courtly celebrations is understandable in the light of the political value of Iranian festivals and ancient Iranian kingly tradition as a whole, because, as a way to provide the caliph with further legitimacy not rooted in sharaitic orthopraxy, it constituted an actual bypassing of their cultural sphere of influence and expertise. It is not unexpected that those belonging to more influential schools wished to see the Caliph rely on a purely sharaitic legitimacy even more than other ʿulamā’. As Tor puts it, «this formative time witnessed the transfer of the religious authority of the caliphate to the nascent Sunni clerics – the ʿulamā’» and Iranian festivals acceptance or refusal was part of this wide, long-term process. It is in those centuries that, according to Ali, occurred the interaction, «far from being ill or dysfunctional», between the two voices of mašāyiḥ culture and courtly life. Since the second voice is, in Ali’s view, mainly devoted to construct for powerful figures, first of them all the caliph, an authority valid enough to coexist with the one of the only God, it appears a legitimate application of his model to study how Nawrūz and Mihrāḡān fit this scheme, as means of construction of political authority. It has to be falling on the 20 ḍū al-qaʿda/30 October. I am not expecting to say anything conclusive on this matter, but, since the poem itself speaks of a very recent Pilgrimage and the Arabic edition does not explain the reasons for choosing 256/869-70 over 255/868-69, I think that its dating may need to be revised.
noted that Ali, in his paper, bases his theorization mainly on the analysis of *madīḥ* 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. taʾrīḫ Baġdād* and in the verses by al-Buḥtūrī dealing with al-Muhtadi’s refusal of the gifts of Miḥraḏān. 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 *mašāyiḥ* 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-Maʾmūn by al-Arūḍī may, to some extent, provide new ground to Ali’s theory of a mundane authority competitive with šariʿa and asserted through explicit violation of sharaitic prohibitions. Yet, this would leave unexplained why al-Maʾmūn 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 ʿUbaydallāh 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-agānī* this is achieved through a speculative distinction between religious days of ʿīd and mundane days of lahwr. 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 ẓahirid ʿUbadyallāh, we see him praised precisely for having removed from Nawrūz and Miḥraḡān 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 henotheistic 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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