

THE LIFE OF THE TEXT AND THE FATE OF TRADITION. III: INTERPRETATION OF PRE-ISLAMIC CALENDAR FESTIVALS IN CLASSICAL PERSIAN POETRY OF THE 10TH—12TH CENTURIES (BY THE EXAMPLE OF NAWRŪZ)

A special part in the study of any literary tradition plays the investigation of its formation process and the factors, which affected this process. The development of the New Persian language poetry in the 9th—10th centuries is a specific continuation of the pre-Islamic literary tradition which was affected by the Arabic conquest, without being interrupted. Adopted poetic forms, first of all *qaṣīda*, which came to Persian literature from the Arabic, took its roots in the local literary soil and enriched themselves with thematic elements of old Persian calendar songs. Performing these songs must have been an integral part of the ritual of the two great season festivals — *Nawrūz* and *Mihrgān*. The beginning of the first was on the day of vernal equinox, the latter starts on the autumnal equinox. Numerous historical and literary sources of the Islamic epoch in the Arabic and Persian languages are evidence of a special popularity of calendar songs, their authors and performers in the time of the Iranian Sāsānid dynasty (224—651). Many of these songs are known by their names which are mentioned in the works of poets of the classical epoch (10th—15th c.).

In the present article we decided to limit ourselves to spring calendar poetry, which in the classification of genres is referred to as *nawrūziyya* (literary, New Year) or *bahāriyya* (literary, spring). This choice can be explained not only with the extreme popularity of the spring theme and figurativeness in the classical Persian poetry, not only with an amazing stability of the season festival which lies in its basis, but also with the principal importance of the concept of spring awakening of nature in the literary, musical and graphic layers of the medieval Iranian culture.

However, let us get back to the names of the spring songs of the Sāsānid time which are mentioned in the 10th—12th century poetry. In the *qaṣīdas* of a famous court poet Manūchīhrī (1000—1040) several names of old melodies can be found which contain words *Nawrūz* and “spring”, for example: *Nawrūz*, “Big *Nawrūz*”, “Spring's Crown”, “Spring's Green” etc. Two other categories of names contain names of birds and plants. Their belonging to spring calendar songs can be reconstructed through poetic contexts in which they are mentioned in Persian classical lyrics. Let us give a characteristic example from Manūchīhrī poems:

The cold went away and, like a peacock, spring came.
Everyone who had been locked up broke out into the garden...

A turtle-dove sings a melody called “A Slim Cypress”
sitting on a slim cypress,

A nightingale sings a melody called “Kalusī” sitting on a
rose bush...

When a mountain grouse whistles the song of the
“Mountain Grouse”,

A stork replies from a merlon of a fortress wall with the
“Bell” song [1].

The specifics of the poetic context which mentions the melodies “Slim Cypress” and “Mountain Grouse” point to the fact that they could be performed when celebrating *Nawrūz*. The number of such names can be extended with the following ones: “Lark”, “Green Expanses” (literary, green in the green), “A Rose's Song”, “Cane in Spring”, “Cane near Plane” etc.

In the period when the basic thematic fund of the classical Persian lyrics was formed, the mention of flowers and plants as well as birds becomes an integral part of the spring calendar lyrics canon. Calendar introductions to panegyrics in the early Persian *qaṣīdas* in the quantitative ratio can compete with the love ones. Extreme popularity of formal *qaṣīdas* with calendar introductions prove to the fact that in the epoch of spreading of Islam in Iran early seasonal festivals were celebrated at the courts of local rulers with the same splendour and pomp as in the Sāsānid times. Although the rituals typical of these celebrations lost their immediate religious meaning, connected with Zoroastrism, they took roots in the court etiquette. On the receptions at Iranian courts in the 10th—11th centuries, the performance of pre-Islamic calendar songs which were part of the so-called “King's motets” (*sorūd-i khosrowānī*) must have co-existed with the new poetic practice which gradually replaced the old singing tradition. Court poetry which took the role of accompanying seasonal celebrations which before that belonged to calendar songs, inherited from them not only a number of standard introductions and a set of season words, but also vivid connections with the old ritual-mythological beliefs of the Iranians.