

Festivals from December 25 to Yalda. A Search for Mithra

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A trusted harbinger of the festive December season is the perennial discussion about links between Christmas and Roman Mithraism. In recent years, another element has been added to the discussion – that of the Iranian festival of Yalda celebrated on December 21 (or when the winter solstice is deemed to occur). This article examines the main assertions around December 25 and Yalda – that:

1. When Mithraism (originally from Iran) was imported to Rome, the pre-Christian Romans celebrated the birth of Mithra on December 25, then the date of the winter solstice;
2. There is a relationship between Christmas and the birth of Mithra (called Yalda or Zayesh-e Meher by Iranians) now celebrated around December 21;
3. Yalda is an ancient Iranian festival celebrating the birth of Mithra (Zayesh-e Meher), once worshipped as an Aryan (ancient Iranian) deity but who is for Zoroastrians, a Yazata or Fereshteh (angel).

Part of our examination will be a search for Mithra's (Meher's) role in all three assertions and the results may surprise you. We will start our examination with the pre-Christian Roman festivals said to celebrate the birth of Mithra.

1. Roman Festivals of Saturnalia & Natalis Invicti

By the fourth century CE, Christianity began to establish itself as the dominant religion of Rome under Emperor Constantine (r.306-337 CE). Not long thereafter Romans began to celebrate Christmas, the nativity of Jesus, on December 25.

Two pre-Christian Roman festivals that were celebrated at the same time as Christmas were Saturnalia and Natalis Invicti meaning the 'nativity or birth of the invincible'. Some writers claim the latter festival was a Mithraic festival that celebrated the birth of Mithra. Others deny the claim, raising the question: Who is right?

Our quest for an answer starts with an oft-quoted early Roman record, the *Chronography of 354*. Its calendar has the entries 'Saturnalia' beside December 17 and 'N Invicti' (short for Natalis Invicti) beside December 25.¹

The festival of Saturnalia was dedicated to Saturn, god of the harvest. By all accounts,



Fig. 1. Antoine-François Callet's Saturnalia (1782-3 CE). The revelries culminated in Natalis Invicti. Image credit: Wikipedia.

Saturnalia was a raucous festival. In reality, Rome's festive season started on November 24 with the festival of Bruma. Fifth century CE Byzantium writer Joannes the Lydian states it best – that the cold season in Europe (starting in November) brought a stop to the work of farmers, hunters and soldiers who occupied themselves... well, partying.²

The *Chronography of 354* is bereft of any details on these festivals. Since 'invicti' was a common title afforded to numerous Roman gods and emperors (Commodus onwards), the listing 'N Invicti' – universally recognized as standing for 'Natalis Invicti' meaning 'nativity (of the) invincible' – is not a definitive name in itself. While 'Sol Invictus' was one of the titles that incorporated 'invicti/invicus', there is no record of a festival called 'Natalis Sol Invictus'/'Natalis Solis Invicti'. Given that the author of the *Chronography of 354* calendar was a Christian who lists Jesus' birth date on December 25 in another section, it could even – as some point out – have referred to Jesus' birth. Two early Christian leaders provide further clarification.

2. Christian Accounts of Saturnalia & Natalis Invicti

Early Christian author Tertullian (160-220 CE), warned Christians not to partake in Saturnalia's festivities or to exchange gifts on either New Year's day and Midwinter's day (likely the solstice in the old Roman seasonal system) when "every pomp of the devil is frequented" and "games join their noise or else banquets join their din!" He continued to say that since the heathen did not celebrate either the Lord's Day or Pentecost, Christians should not partake in heathen festivals. (Following his conversion to Christianity, Tertullian had been accused of continuing his worship of Sol and praying facing east.)³

Pope Leo I (c.400-461 CE) in a recorded homily regarding December 25 stated, "Dearly beloved ... simpler souls are misled with the pestilential notion that our solemn feast day seems to derive its honour not so much from the nativity of Christ, as from the rising of the new Sun. Such men's hearts are wrapped in total darkness and have no growing perception of the true light. They are still drawn away by the foolish errors of heathendom. ... Let not Christian souls entertain any such wicked superstition and portentous lie."⁴

[Nowadays the first sunrise following the winter solstice occurs usually (depending on the year) between December 21 to 23 of the Gregorian calendar instituted by Pope Gregory XIII on March 1, 1582. Before that date, Romans used the Julian calendar, which by the 4th to 6th century CE was somewhat out of phase with the actual occurrence of the solstice.]

Given these comments, there is a reasonable chance (but not surety) that the 'Natalis Invicti' celebration on December 25 more completely meant 'Natalis Solis Invicti' meaning 'nativity or birth of the invincible Sun' – celebrated in conjunction with Saturnalia. What we have not been able to find, as so many writers claim, is a similar statement to the two above, in an original source, that December 25 was celebrated in Rome as the nativity of Mithra.

3. Jesus' Birth Date/Christmas

One of the earliest extant records regarding an enquiry and discussion about the date of Jesus' birth is the 2nd century account of Christian theologian, Clement of Alexandria. In all, Clement wrote that various authors placed Jesus' birthday at March 21⁵, April 15, April 19 or 20, May 20, November 18 and January 6.⁶ December 25 was not among the dates listed by Clement.⁷

After a debate within the Christian community, the *Catholic Encyclopedia*⁸ informs us that Pope Julius I (who served between 337 and 352 CE), officially chose and established December 25 of the Julian calendar as the birthday of Jesus.

About a hundred years later, Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, Cyprus, continued to campaign against the choice of December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. He preferred January 6 as the date of Jesus' birth and wrote in his *Panarion*, "Greeks – I mean idolaters – celebrate this day on December 25, which Romans call Saturnalia [December 25, then assigned as the winter solstice, marked the culmination of the Saturnalia celebrations].... For this division between the signs of the zodiac, which is a solstice, comes on December 25, and the day begins to lengthen because light increases."⁹ This is one of the clearest and most emphatic statements that December 25 was the date of a 'heathen' festival and should not be celebrated as the birthday of Jesus. However, the heathen festival mentioned is Saturnalia.

What we read in the numerous sources we have perused, is that December 25, originally celebrated in Rome as Sol's (the Roman Sun god's) nativity or the end of Saturnalia, was later celebrated as Jesus' nativity. In this context, we have not found Mithra's birth mentioned. What we have found instead is a modern equation between Sol and Mithra, i.e., Sol is assumed to be another name for Mithra. As such, in the context of December 25 as a birth date of Sol, we need to determine if we can indeed equate Mithra with Sol.

4. Roman Worship of the Sun, Sol as God

In response to allegations that Christianity had brought about the decline of Rome, Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) wrote a retort in which he notes that the Romans worshipped Sol, the Sun, as a god from time of Titus Tatius, an eight-century BCE Sabine king who battled Romulus the founder of Rome.¹⁰ Other writers also mention the early Roman worship of the Sun god Sol and Sol Indigitis/Indiges (indigenous). For instance, Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) noted that a shrine to Sol stood on the banks of the River Numicius.¹¹ Pliny's contemporary Quintilianus (c.35-c.100 CE) made note of a temple to Sol on Quirinal Hill in Rome.¹² The counterpart to Sol was Janus the Moon.

Helios (the older Titanic Greek personification of the Sun as a god), Apollo (Greek god of Sun & light) and Sol (Roman god of the Sun) were part of the ancient Greco-Roman pantheon of gods that existed before the introduction of Mithra in the West.

In this context, we have found a different Aryan influence in Rome though it is not through Mithra. That discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

5. First Evidence of Mithraism in Roman Europe

Mithraism and Christianity began to get a foothold in Rome around the same time and Mithraic archeological sites abound throughout the Roman Empire's domains in central and southern Europe. The majority of Mithraic sites date to between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE



Fig. 2. Greek Sun god Helios wearing only a chlamys, a Greco-Roman mantle, as he does in several Mithraic motifs, and an important identifier of his 'ethnicity'. Image credit: Wikipedia.

and the earliest Mithraic artifacts discovered have been at sites that date to between 80 and 100 CE.



Fig. 3. Mithraic altar fragments found at Novae near Steklen, Bulgaria. Note 'Persian'/Aryan clothing on Cautopates & Cautes (Mithraic associates) on the left and right resp. Image credit: D. Detschew in 'Antike Denkmaler aus Bulgarien' at *JOAI* (1939).

Among these artifacts are fragments of an altar found in a Roman legionary site at Novae near Steklen in Bulgaria, then part of the lower Danube Roman province of Moesia. In a manner similar to other Mithraic altars dedicated by Roman officials, this altar had been dedicated by Philopalaestrus, a collector of import duties and public taxes.

About three classical Greco-Roman texts written around 100 CE, hint at how Mithraism came to Europe. One persistent theory is that Mithraism arrived in Europe via Syria.

6. Roman Mithraism's 'Persian'/Aryan Origins

While Roman Mithraism acquired distinct Greco-Roman anthropomorphic characteristics syncretically blended with local beliefs, several classical Greco-Roman authors state that Roman Mithraism originated in 'Persia'. Late third century CE Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry¹³, a Levantian (from what is today Lebanon & W. Syria), went further and ascribed the concept to Zoroaster. Porphyry stated, "The Persians [Mithraists] call the place [the Mithraeum temple] a cave where they introduce the initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend [to the earthly body] and go back again [to the spiritual realms of the cosmos]. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all. Located in the mountains near Persia, it had flowers and springs."¹⁴

7. Magi & Mithraists

For Greco-Roman writers, the principal sources of information on Zoroastrianism were the Magi. If the Magi were indeed Porphyry's source for the claim that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a cave to Mithra, it is conceivable that the Mithraists of that era considered themselves affiliated to Zoroastrianism in some manner (as also later stated by Biruni – see below). The Porphyry explanation has Mithra taking the place of Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrians know that in mainline Zoroastrianism, Mithra is a Yazata or fereshteh, an angel and guardian of the Sun's light. Zoroastrians also know that the six primordial existential elements were the creation of Ahura Mazda and not Mithra.

8. In Roman Mithraism, Can Mithra Be Equated With Sol?

Roman Mithraic altar scenes usually depict Mithra and Sol (as the personified Sun) separately. Besides being depicted separately as two different entities, in the artistic system

used by Greco-Roman artisans, young Greco-Roman men are shown scantily clad or nude while ‘Persians’/Aryans are usually shown fully clothed from head to foot. In Mithraic iconography, Mithra and his associates are invariably shown fully clothed in the typical ‘Persian’/Aryan style, while Sol is often shown nude or with a chlamys around his neck.¹⁵ While not necessarily an accurate portrayal of regional clothing, this was the system employed by Greco-Roman artists to indicate the difference between Greco-Roman and ‘Persian’ characters – a system that might indicate the ‘ethnicities’ of the deities: Mithra was ‘Persian’ while Sol was Greco-Roman.

Though several Mithraic inscriptions mention Mithra and Sol together as in *Deo Soli invicto Mithrae*¹⁶, the reverse does not hold true. Non-Mithraic inscriptions featuring Sol alone have scant mention of Mithra (see fig. 5 and inscription¹⁷. Also see section 7 above).

To summarize, while Mithraic inscriptions conflate Mithra with Sol, all the extant Mithraic iconography we have seen do not conflate the two. In non-Mithraic inscriptions, iconography and coins, we have not found Mithra mentioned or shown together with Sol. Nor have we found any evidence to suggest that we can automatically conflate Sol with Mithra.



Fig. 4. 2nd-3rd cent. CE Roman Mithraic altar scene. The personified Sun, Sol (almost nude) is at the top-centre with Mithra in the top right-hand corner & Roman goddess Luna at the top-left. Three of the capped figures – Mithra, Cautopates & Cautes (Mithraic associates) are wearing ‘Persian’/Aryan attire. Sol wears only a chlamys, a Greco-Roman mantle often shown on the Greek Sun god Helios. The four male figures hold barsom-like stick bundles. Roman Mithraic scenes show a syncretic blend of beliefs. This panel was discovered near Fiano Romano, near Rome, Italy in 1926 & is currently in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Image credit: Wikipedia.

9. Can The Aryan Mithra Be Equated With the Sun/Khor or Surya?

Turning to Zoroastrian sources, the Khorsheed (radiant Sun) Yasht makes an insightful statement in verse five on the role of Mithra (Meher) as the bond of companionship between the Sun (Khvar i.e. Khor) and the Moon (Mah). The Khorsheed and Meher Yashts are separate chapters indicating the concepts behind them are different. The words used to describe the two entities are also different. James Darmesteter in his translation of the Meher Yasht notes that in the *Avesta*, “Mithra is closely connected with the Sun, but not yet identical with it, as Mithra became in later times.”¹⁸ What we see is that while in early times Mithra was mentioned separately from the Sun, Khvar, by medieval times Mithra was often conflated with the Sun.

If we were to look for signs of a conflation between Mithra and the Sun in ancient Aryan theology, a good place to look would be the oldest sacred Hindu text, the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* mentions Mitra (Mithra) at least 412 times – but only in a couple or so

occasions in the same verse as the Sun, Surya. In a chapter dedicated to the Sun, Surya (chapter 50), we find no mention of Mitra at all. Importantly, the *Rig Veda* states, “Indra raised the Sun on high in heavens that he may see afar”. Similarly, “In the sky’s lap the Sun assumed this form that Varuna and Mitra may behold it (the work of the godhead).”¹⁹

We have found no reference in the *Avesta* or *Rig Veda* that equates Mithra/Mitra with the Sun, Khvar/Surya.

We will now turn our attention to the public face of Roman Mithraism and its supposed role in the December 25 festival of *Natalis Invicti*. A quick review of a Roman sect similar to Roman Mithraism will help us understand if Romans at large practiced Mithraism.

10. Roman sect of Jupiter Dolichenus

Another deity called Jupiter Dolichenus in Rome (Zeus Dolichenus in Greek) was worshipped in Rome around the same time as Mithra (the names Jupiter and Zeus only signify that the deity was the head god in the aboriginal pantheon from which it was borrowed). Since Jupiter Dolichenus was originally a god worshipped in eastern, i.e., Syriac lands, some authors call Jupiter Dolichenus (and Mithra) an ‘oriental’ god.

Further, as with Roman Mithraism, the motifs depicting Jupiter Dolichenus (see fig. 5) depict the Greco-Roman deities Sol and Luna as well.

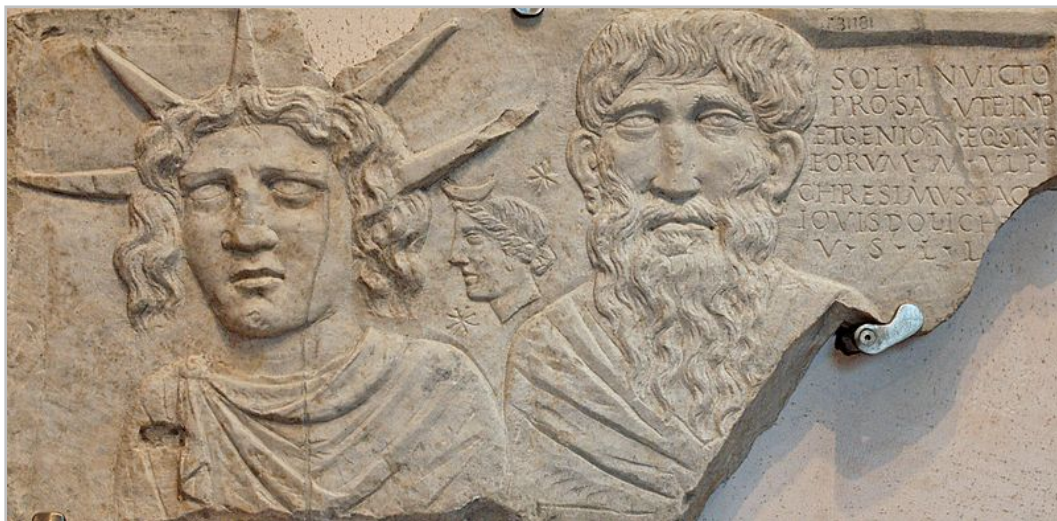


Fig. 5. Dedication slab with Sol the Sun god wearing a chlamys and emanating solar rays. Luna, the Moon goddess is in the background with a crescent resting on her had. The bearded male is likely Jupiter Dolichenus who is invoked with Sol in the inscription beside him. The slab – which does not depict or mention Mithra – was discovered at the barracks of the *Equites Singulares*, via Tasso, Rome and is dated to between 150 and 200 CE. Image credit: Wikipedia.

About thirty Mithraea – the temples of Roman Mithraists – and twenty Dolichenus temples have been found in Rome, giving us an idea about the proportions of their membership.

Since the iconography of the mystery religions of Mithra and Dolichenus feature the Roman deities Sol and Luna, both were likely syncretic religions – a blend of eastern and

western traditions. It is also likely that they were subsets of the native Roman traditions where the worship of Sol was itself a subset – in much the same way that Hindu sects, which give prominence to the worship of an individual deity, remain subsets of Hinduism. We read that that were at least four such sub-sects in Rome around the same time.

This is also yet another instance where Sol is not the preserve of Mithraism.

A. Doliche, Turkey (Syriac) Sites

The name ‘Dolichenus’ is derived from one of the more prominent temples found on a hill near Doliche in south-central Turkey – not far from the Syrian border. In Roman times, this area was considered to be part of Syria.

Two underground Mithraea have also been discovered in Doliche side-by-side in an abandoned quarry. The existence of two Mithraea next to one-another rather than one large Mithraeum may speak to the limitations on the size of membership in each Mithraeum. The dating of when the Mithraea were established is disputed with some arguing for a date as early as the first century BCE (during the early Parthian era in Aryana and from about the time of the founding of the Roman Empire). Others prefer a dating of around the first century CE. The earlier date would make them two of the earliest Mithraea discovered so far and part of the discussion on the roots of Roman Mithraism.²⁰

11. Roman Mithraism – Public Religion or Masonry-like Private Society?

Modern authors call Mithraism and the Jupiter Dolichenus sect, mystery sects – because entry into their temples was restricted to followers who had undergone initiation rites. As a result, the public at large did not know much about the sects’ beliefs – they were a mystery to the general public and thus not ‘popular’ sects. Mithraism was more like a secret society somewhat akin to the Masons of today. Some Masonic websites state that Masonry and Roman Mithraism had common rites such as rites of initiation, and that Masonry may have descended from Roman Mithraism.²¹

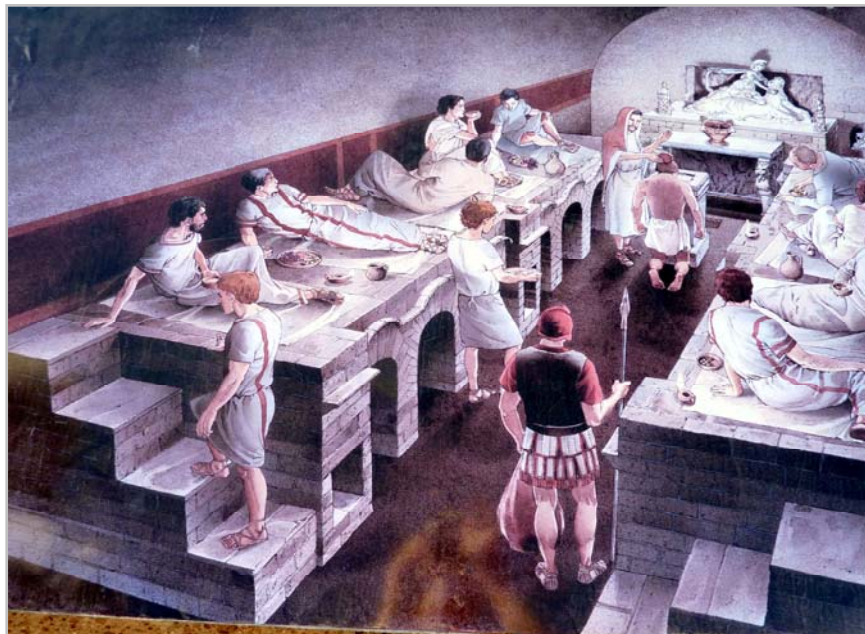


Fig. 6. Artist's concept of a 14-person Mithraeum scene.

Mithraea were usually around 10-12m long and 4-6m wide. Most were located in secluded and dark places – even underground. The open floor space was fairly restricted and narrow with barely enough room for twenty to fifty people.

Given that Roman Mithraism operated more like a private and secret society, it is highly unlikely that Roman Mithraism was a religion followed by a substantial part of the Roman population, or that it ever posed a serious competitive threat to membership in native religions or for that matter, Christianity. While claimed by several authors, we have not been able to find direct evidence that Mithraism was a widely practiced public or imperial religion. It is also unlikely that Roman Mithraists instituted large public festivals such as the *Natalis Invicti* on December 25.

In summation, we have found nothing in original Latin sources that suggests we can automatically equate the various references about the celebration of *Saturnalia* and the worship of *Sol* on December 25 – as well as the appearance of *Sol* on coins (that feature several local deities of which *Sol* is but one) – with the worship of *Mithra*.

While the development of Roman Mithraism is certainly an example of the influence ancient ‘Persians’ i.e. Iranians had on Greco-Roman culture, there were other modes of Aryan influence that in aggregate had a stronger impact than Mithraism. That exposition must await another forum.

12. Roman Mithraic Bull-Slaying, the Tauroctony, & Zoroastrianism

There have been various attempts to connect Roman Mithraism to mainline Zoroastrianism. Franz Cumont (1868-1947), a noted though controversial Belgian researcher on Mithraism sought to draw a connection²² between the slaying of the bull (the tauroctony) by *Mithra* and the Middle Persian Zoroastrian *Bundahishns*’ account of the death of the primordial *Gav* before the onslaught of *Ahriman*.²³ Prof. John Hinnells of Liverpool Hope University emphatically refutes the assertion as mere speculation. He also states, “In no known Iranian text [either Zoroastrian or otherwise] does *Mithra* slay a bull.” Hinnells decries the method of speculative scholars whose work he says is “so weak and ambiguous that this is merely adding theory to theory without any secure evidential basis. ...Indeed, one can go further



Fig. 8. *Mithra* in ‘Persian’/Aryan garb & the tauroctony scene. Roman deities *Sol*, the Sun god and *Luna*, the Moon goddess are in the top left and right corners respectively. This scene is on the obverse of the 2nd-3rd cent. CE two-sided altar slab shown previously. Greco-Roman deities *Sol* and the *Luna* are in the top corners. Image credit: Wikipedia.

and say that the portrayal of Cumont is not merely unsupported by Iranian texts but it is actually in serious conflict with known Iranian theology.”²⁴

The most recent attempt to connect Roman Mithraism to mainline Zoroastrianism is via various accounts describing the festival of Yalda.

13. Yalda & Mehergan

The Iranian festival celebrating the passing of the winter solstice is now widely known as Yalda. An alternative name being offered is ‘Zayesh-e Meher’ meaning ‘Birth of Mithra’.

There is a traditional Zoroastrian festival dedicated to Mithra called Mehergan. This festival is a name-day feast that falls on Meher day on Meher month. The orthodox Zoroastrian calendar based on the *Bundahishn* and *Dinkard*²⁵ via the Fasli calendar synchronized with the Gregorian calendar (adopted and called the Bastani calendar by Kai Khosrow Shahrokh of Iran)²⁶, places Mehergan on October 2.

Biruni (973-1048 CE), an eastern Iranian historian from Khwarezm (Uzbekistan today) who wrote in Arabic, provides us with some useful insights in understanding Zoroastrian-Persian festivals as they were celebrated during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE – about the same time that Ferdowsi lived. Sachau’s translation of Biruni’s book *Athar* (in a chapter titled ‘On the Festivals in the Months of the Persians’) has, “Mihr is the name of the Sun who is said to have appeared to the world on this day. Therefore this day was called Mihr.” Biruni continues, “On the same day, God is said to have illuminated [the Moon] with light, for previously God had created the Moon as a black ball without any light. Therefore, they say on Mihragan, the Moon stands higher than the Sun... Eranshahri says: God made a treaty between light and darkness on Nowruz and Mihragan.”²⁷ Further on, Biruni adds that Persians (Zoroastrians) detest the Full Moon because it draws on the light of the Sun leaving them spiritually vulnerable.²⁸

Biruni adds a kicker when he states, “This [Mihragan] used in former times to coincide with the beginning of winter. Afterwards it advanced when people began to neglect intercalation.” Biruni then states that in ancient times, Nowruz, the start of the New Year, was celebrated on the summer solstice (presently around June 21) while Mehergan fell on the winter solstice (presently around December 21).

If we were to give credence to this assertion, it would demolish the body of symbolism constructed around Nowruz and spring. In addition, what is being promoted now as Yalda was according to Biruni, the original Mehergan. To add to our woes, according to Prof. Boyce, in 150 BCE, the Parthians promulgated that Mehergan (then celebrated at the autumnal equinox) be the start of the New Year.²⁹

[There is an additional problem. The Zoroastrian religious calendar employs 30-day months. As such, after Nowruz, the months of the religious calendar step out of phase with a strictly solar calendar. In a strictly solar calendar, the first month of each solar quarter would start on an equinox or solstice, shifting Mehergan to the first day of Meher month. The religious calendar employs instead, name day celebrations and Mehergan is celebrated on Meher day, the 16th day, of Meher month. This results in a difference of nearly ten days

between the autumnal equinox (say September 22) and Mehregan according to the Fasli/Bastani religious calendar.]

Other than his deductions, Biruni does not mention any celebration held during his time that marked the passage of the winter solstice either in his chapter on Persian (Zoroastrian) festivals or in his chapters on the festivals of (Zoroastrian) Sogdians (Bukhara-Sugd) and (Zoroastrian) Khwarezmians. However, we do find mention of the marking of the winter solstice in his chapter ‘On the Days of the Greek Calendar’.³⁰

14. Assyrian Christian Worship during the Winter Solstice

Biruni’s chapter ‘On the Days of the Greek Calendar’ notes that the Greeks call the winter solstice the “Great Birth”. Contrary to the early admonitions of Pope Leo I (c.400-461 CE), Biruni notes that a (Nestorian?) Christian writer from Anbar (previously Assyria, present-day Iraq?) stated that the rising-place of the Sun at the time of the winter solstice is the true east and the very midst of paradise. Further, (religious) ‘law’ ordered (Syrian Orthodox/Nestorian?) Christians to turn in praying towards the east (i.e. the rising place of the Sun). It would seem these eastern Christians were under a religious edit to conduct a special worship on the winter solstice. Given that this practice had earlier been particularly condemned by Pope Leo I, one possibility is that these eastern/Syriac Christians were originally Sun-worshippers (but not necessarily Mithraists).

Anna Krasnowolska in her *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article ‘Sada Festival’ notes, “In Islamic Persia, the night of the winter solstice (the last night of autumn) was known under its Syriac name of Shab-e Yalda (the night of nativity), or as Shab-e Chella (the night opening the initial forty-day period of the three-month winter).” Massoume Price in an article at CAIS also states, “Yalda is a Syriac word meaning birth.... It is not clear when and how the word ‘Yalda’ entered to the Persian language.” She further states that the Christians who settled in Iran during the Sasanid era “reintroduced” the festival. Krasnowolska continues, “Being the longest and the darkest night of the year, additionally connected with Christianity, Shab-e Yalda usually has negative connotations in Persian poetry.”

We can understand the negative connotations since in Zoroastrianism, it would be an anathema to celebrate the longest night. Rather it is its passing, i.e. the next morning – the first or ‘new’ morning after the longest night – that would be the occasion for celebration.

15. The Shamsi – People of the Sun. Zoroastrian Sect?

Biruni provides us with a possible clue on another Syriac connection in his chapter titled ‘On the Feasts of The Ancient Magians and on the Fast and Feast Days of the Sabians’. He opens the chapter with a statement all Magi practiced the religion of Zoroaster and that “they belong now either to the Zoroastrian or to the Shamsiyya sect. Still, they have some ancient traditions and institutes, which they trace back to their original [pre-Zoroastrian] creed; but in reality those things have been derived from the laws of the Sun-worshippers and the ancient people of Harran [in northern Syria].”³¹ One possibility is that the Harran year began with the winter solstice (or the day after).

Biruni implies that the Zoroastrians (Magians) of his day belonged to two sects, mainline Zoroastrians and the Shamsiyya. ‘Shamsiyya’ is an Arabic word for ‘People of the Sun’. Further, the Magi officiated over both sects. The Shamsiyya lived in the same northern

Tigris-Euphrates region as Yazidis and Kurds and there are various reports of celebrations of the Sun involving the Yazidis and Kurds as well. Researcher R. Donef states that the Shamsiyya “seemed to have been absorbed by the Syriac [Christian] Orthodox Assyrians in Mardin [now in southern Turkey].”³² This is one possible way that a sect (or sub-sect) of Syrian Christians adopted the practice of celebrating the winter solstice. Biruni also informs us that while the branch of the Magi who were the priests of the Shamsi claimed ancient roots for this practice, the Sun-focused worship practices had in fact “been derived from the laws of the Sun-worshippers and the ancient people of Harran [in northern Syria]” who it seems were not Zoroastrians. This passage invites all manner of arguments prone to the bias or proclivity of the writer.

From the preceding paragraphs, we can see the possibility of a non-Zoroastrian, Syriac-Christian, source of the festival called ‘Yalda’. However, if we go back far enough – before the advent of Christianity – there are all manner of possibilities that would be difficult, if impossible, to prove with the information we currently possess (or lack thereof).

16. Modern Iranian Reports on Yalda

Turning to present-day reports, the unreferenced claim made online at Farsinet & at Pars Times is that on the night of Jashne Yalda/Zayesh-e Meher, ancient Aryans would gather in Alborz mountain caves. These celebrants called ‘*yar-e ghar*’, meaning friends of the cave, gathered and maintained a vigil to bear witness to the first rays of the rising Sun at daybreak the next morning (the start of the Zoroastrian Havan Gah). We also read that during the previous night, communal fires were kept burning throughout the night. Unfortunately, neither publication cites a source for their information.

Despite our best efforts, other than these obscure observations, we have not been able to find mention of an old traditional mainline Zoroastrian festival named ‘Yalda’ or ‘Zayesh-e Mehr’ that marked the passing of the winter solstice.

17. The Conundrum & a Suggestion

While we have not been able to find mention of a Zoroastrian festival celebrating the passing of the winter solstice in Zoroastrian or Middle Persian texts, we can understand the desire amongst some Zoroastrian families to have a celebration of their own at a time when families of other traditions are joyously celebrating the season.

In doing so, we need to take care that we do not inadvertently undermine fundamental Zoroastrian values. Unintended as it might be, naming the event as a celebration of the ‘birth of Mithra’ (Zayesh-e Meher) may infer an association between the festival and Mithraism with its attendant belief in the birth of an anthropomorphic god from a rock – a belief antithetical to orthodox Zoroastrianism.

Our suggestion is that the name be simply ‘Jashne Meher’. Rather than celebrating the birth of a ‘god’, it can celebrate the triumph of light over darkness and a renewed avowal to abide by the values of which Meher Izad is a guardian – values of true friendship and being Meheraban: kindness, love, peace, the keeping of one’s word and honesty.



References & Notes:

- ¹ *Chronography/Calendar of 354* produced for Roman Senator Valentinus (354 being the Christian year CE otherwise AD). The calendar's notation for December 25 is "*N invicti cm XXX*" i.e., "Nativity (birthday) of the unconquered, games ordered, thirty *circenses missus* (races)". In another section, the calendar notes that December 25 is "*VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae*", i.e., "8th (day before the) kalends of January (December 25), Birth of Christ in Bethlehem Judea." Elsewhere beside 1 AD it notes, "*dominus Iesus Christus natus est VIII kal. Ian*" i.e., "Lord Jesus Christ is born December 25."
- ² Joannes the Lydian in *De Mensibus* at 4.158.
- ³ Tertullian in *On Baptism* at 19, *On Idolatry* at 10-14, *Apology* at 16.9ff & *To the Nations* at 1.13.
- ⁴ Pope Leo I in *Sermon 27 On the Feast of the Nativity* at 7.4 tr. to English from Latin by C. L. Feltoe in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* Vol. 12 (Buffalo, 1895) tr. edited slightly by this author for syntax.
- ⁵ For us, the date March 21 (Egyptian Phamenoth 25) stands out, as it is the date of the spring equinox in the Gregorian calendar.
- ⁶ Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromota* at 1.3.
- ⁷ For a discussion on the internal biblical evidence on when Jesus was born, see 'Rav Sha'ul's Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Christmas)' at <http://www.sabbathcovenant.com/christianitythegreatdeception/Christmas.htm>.
- ⁸ *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1917).
- ⁹ Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, in *Panarion, A Refutation of All the Heresies* (late 300s CE) at 4.22.5-6 & 4.24.1.
- ¹⁰ Augustine of Hippo's *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos* (The City of God against the Pagans) 4.23.
- ¹¹ Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* 3.56.
- ¹² Quintilianus 1.7.12.
- ¹³ Porphyry lived c.234 to c.305 CE.
- ¹⁴ Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* 6 tr. J. M. Duffy in *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (Buffalo, 1969). (q.v. Homer's *Odyssey* at 13.103-12.)
- ¹⁵ Also see 'Clues Through Attire' at <http://zoroastrianheritage.blogspot.ca/2015/07/halicarnassus-mausoleum-pt-2-ethnicity.html> and Herodotus on Persian Attire at <http://zoroastrianheritage.blogspot.ca/2015/04/herodotus-on-persian-attire-perseus.html>
- ¹⁶ CIMRM 248 at M. J. Vermaseren's *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (CIMRM) (Hague, 1956/Springer, 2012) p. 436.
- ¹⁷ CIMRM 373 Inscription: "*Soli Invicto pro salute Imp(eratorum) et Genio n(umeri) eq(uitum) sing(ularium) eorum M. Ulp(ius) Chresimus sace[rd(os)] Iovis Dolich[eni] [dedicavit]*" meaning "[Dedicated to] Sol Invictus for the emperors' health and to the numerous genius of their singular horses, M. Ulpus Chresimus, priest of Jupiter Dolichenus."
- ¹⁸ J. Darmesteter in SBE's *The Zend-Avesta* Pt. II (Oxford, 1883) p. 122.
- ¹⁹ *Rig Veda* at 1.7.3 and 1.115.5 respectively.
- ²⁰ A. Schütte-Maischatz and E. Winter in *Doliche* (Bonn, 2004) pp. 79-195.
- ²¹ See 'Mithraism: Freemasonry and the Ancient Mysteries' by Bro. Haywood at www.mastermason.com. "mithraism masonry" had nearly 10,000 results on Google.
- ²² Franz Cumont in *Mysteries of Mithra* tr. by T. J. McCormack (Chicago, 1903) p. 7.
- ²³ *Lesser Bundabishn* at 3.18; *Greater Bundabishn* at 4.20.
- ²⁴ John Hinnells in 'Reflections on the bull-slaying scene' at *Mithraic Studies* II (Manchester, 1975) p. 291-2.
- ²⁵ *Greater Bundabishn* at 25 and *Dinkard* at 3.419.
- ²⁶ See <http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/calendar/index.htm#differences>.
- ²⁷ Biruni's *Athar-ul-Bakija* tr. by E. Sachau in *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (London, 1879) pp. 207-9 (adapted for spelling and syntax).
- ²⁸ *ibid.* p. 219
- ²⁹ Mary Boyce in 'Mihragan among the Irani Zoroastrians' at *Mithraic Studies* ed. John Hinnells (Manchester, 1975) p. 107 citing G. Le Rider's *Susse sous les Selencides* etc. (Paris, 1962) pp. 3 ff.
- ³⁰ Biruni tr. Sachau (as above) p. 238.
- ³¹ *ibid.* p. 314.
- ³² R. Donef in *The Shensi and the Assyrians* (Sydney, 2010).