



BENGAL II. ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL

The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (originally known as The Asiatick Society, after 1851 as the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and since 1950 simply as The Asiatic Society), is the second oldest society of orientalists in the world and a major center of Persian studies. It was founded on 15 January 1784 under the leadership of William Jones (1746-94, q.v.), with the fundamental aim of inquiring into the history and antiquities, arts, sciences, and literatures of Asia. Jones became the first president of the Society and remained the moving spirit behind its activities until his untimely death. His contribution to Oriental research is widely recognized: he knew Persian well, learned Sanskrit, and helped to develop the field of comparative philosophy. He was succeeded as president by Charles Wilkins (1750-1836), one of the Society's founders, who was later appointed the first keeper of the India Office Library in London, now part of the British Library.

In order to pursue its stated objectives, the Society held weekly meetings at which learned papers on Oriental topics were presented. It provided a valuable forum for both Indian and European scholars in a broad range of Persian studies: language, literature, history, geography, linguistics, numismatics, topography, material culture, and so on. Many of the fruits of these researches, as well as reports of new archeological discoveries, explorations, and travels in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, were published in the various learned journals sponsored by the Society.



In 1788 the Society began publication of *Asiatick Researches*, of which twenty volumes appeared before it was suspended in 1839. This journal was in great demand, and French, German, and British scholars published translations from it. The *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, which began publication independently in 1832, came under the aegis of the Society in 1843, and is still published as *Journal of The Asiatic Society* (Simmonds and Digby, p. 15).

Among those who guided the Society's affairs after Jones and Wilkins were Sir John Shore, Sir Robert Chambers, C. E. Carrington, William Hunter, and Henry Thomas Colebrook. Colebrook served as president from 1806 to 1815 and obtained for the Society the spacious lot on which its headquarters still stand, at 1 Park Street, Calcutta. He was subsequently instrumental in founding the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which was officially inaugurated on 15 March 1823 in London, with King George IV as patron and R. C. Wellesley and Warren Hastings as vice-patrons. Both the latter had also served as president of the Asiatick Society. Several members of the British society had also worked for the British government of India and were acquainted with the workings of the Society, with which close ties were maintained. In other countries, too, societies were founded on the model of The Asiatick Society. In 1822 French orientalist established the Société Asiatique, which in the same year began publication of its *Journal*. Edward Elbridge Salisbury, professor of Arabic at Yale University, founded the American Oriental Society in 1842; the first fascicle of its *Journal* appeared in 1843. The Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft was founded on a similar pattern in 1845; it has published its *Zeitschrift* since 1847.

Apart from its scholarly journals, The Asiatic Society has contributed to Persian studies through publication of critical editions of important manuscripts in Persian; paramount among them were the first critical editions of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*: a portion edited under the direction of M. Lumsden, which appeared in 1811, and the complete text prepared by Turner Macan and published in four volumes in 1829. Both men were members of the Society. Among other important Persian sources for the history of India and the Iranian world edited and translated as part of the Society's Bibliotheca Indica, the following may be mentioned: 'Abd-al-Bāqī Nehāvandī, *Ma'āter-e raḥīmī*, ed. M. Hedāyat Ḥosayn, 3 vols. in 4, 1910-31. 'Abd-al-Ḥamīd Lāhūrī, *Pādšāh-nāma* (or *Bādšāh-nāma*), ed. K. Aḥmad, 'Abd-al-Raḥīm, and W. N. Lees, 2 vols. plus index, 1866-72. 'Abd-Allāh b. Nūr-al-Dīn Šūštārī, *Taḍkera-ye Šūštārī*, ed. K. B. Mawlābaḳš, 1914; rev. ed. Mawlābaḳš and M. Hedāyat Ḥosayn, 1924. 'Abd-al-



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Some of the English translations mentioned have become standard, in particular Blochmann's rendering of *Ā'in-e akbarī*. Of the many Iranian scholars who worked on these text editions Āgā Aḥmad 'Alī (d. 1873), a literary rival of the great Indo-Persian poet Asad-Allāh Khan Ġāleb (d. 1869), was particularly prominent. He edited or collaborated on editing a number of works for the Society.

The Asiatic Society has a very rich collection of Persian manuscripts, which was catalogued by the Russian orientalist W. Ivanow, *Concise Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the Collection of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1924). In 1926 Ivanow published *Concise Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the Curzon Collection*; the latter collection was also under the care of the Society.

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