



BURNOUF, EUGÈNE

BURNOUF, EUGÈNE (1801-52), virtually the founder of Iranian linguistics, as well as of the study of the history of Buddhism in France. He was born in Paris the son of a Hellenist and studied Sanskrit with de Chézy at the Collège de France; in 1829 he began to teach comparative grammar at the École Normale Supérieure, and in 1832 he replaced Chézy at the Collège de France. Although he continued to teach Sanskrit, he pursued his Indian and Iranian studies throughout his life.

Of Burnouf's works in the field of Iranian linguistics, his most important publication is the *Commentaire sur le Yaçna* (1833), in which he established the basis for understanding Avestan and for Iranian linguistics as a whole. The documents then at his disposal consisted only of four manuscripts of the Avesta, A. H. Anquetil-Duperron's translation of the Pahlavi commentary (1771), and the 15th-century Sanskrit translation by the Parsi Neriosengh of this same commentary. Burnouf's aim was to test these different translations and to understand the Avestan text. To do so, he relied on Neriosengh's text and above all on his own knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian, and comparative grammar. His constant reference to Vedic Sanskrit inspired Burnouf with the intuition of what would later be labeled the "Indo-Iranian" branch of the Indo-European languages. He recognized concomitantly that, "in its present state, [Avestan] is a mixture of forms of varying age" (1833, p. 15). *Commentaire sur le Yaçna* is at once a dictionary, a grammar of Avestan, and a commentary on the text of the *Yasna*. Burnouf succeeded in furnishing an improved though not yet definitive version of the Avestan alphabet; elucidating much of the



vocabulary in the opening portion of the *Yasna*; and explaining a great many grammatical forms, as well as some of the contracted forms, of Avestan writing. In this process he established the place of Old Iranian within comparative grammar. Nevertheless, *Commentaire sur le Yaçna* cannot be read in isolation from the context in which Burnouf was working. He relied heavily on the work of Vedic scholars, especially Rasmus Rask (1826) and Franz Bopp (1816).

Burnouf made important contributions to the study of Old Persian, which he realized was closely related to Avestan.

Burnouf's letters reveal a most engaging personality: warm, loyal, extremely modest, and gifted with a sense of humor. His health was always poor, and, having worked himself to the point of exhaustion, he died quite young, just after being elected Permanent Secretary to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.

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