



CHRISTENSEN, ARTHUR EMANUEL

CHRISTENSEN, ARTHUR EMANUEL (b. Copenhagen 9 January 1875, d. Copenhagen 31 March 1945), Danish orientalist and scholar of Iranian philology and folklore. Apart from periods of travel and study abroad he spent his entire life in Copenhagen. He passed his secondary-school examinations (*studentereksamen*) in 1893 and in 1900 received from the University of Copenhagen the master's degree in French, history, and Latin, having also studied Persian and Arabic with A. F. van Mehren, Avestan with Edvard Lehmann, Sanskrit with V. Fausbøll, and Turkish with Johannes Østrup. Even before taking his degree he had published "Rustem, den persiske Nationalhelt" (Rostam, the Persian national hero; *Nord og Syd* 1, 1898, pp. 316-23, 435-42) and "Fortællinger og fabler af persiske Rammeverker" (Stories and tales from Persian framing narratives; *Studier fra Sprog- og Oldtidsforskning* 40, 1899).

In 1903 he received his doctorate; his dissertation, *Omar Khajjâms Rubâijât. En litterærhistorisk Undersøgelse* (The *robâ'iyât* of 'Omar Kayyâm, a literary-historical study of the "wandering quatrains"), which attracted great attention, was published in an enlarged and revised version in French the following year (Heidelberg, 1904). Christensen pursued his studies of 'Omar Kayyâm's works for many years and in 1927 published *Critical Studies in the Rubâ'iyât of 'Umar-i-Khayyâm. A Revised Text with English Translation* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 14/1, Copenhagen, 1927), in which, on the basis of minute examinations of the manuscript



tradition, he identified 121 of about 800 *robāʿīs* in circulation that can with some certainty be taken as genuine. He also took an interest in other aspects of ʿOmar Ḳayyām’s work (“Un traité de métaphysique de ʿOmar Ḥayyām,” *Le Monde Oriental* 1, 1906, pp. 1-16).

In the years after 1903 Christensen made his living as a teacher and journalist (specializing in foreign politics) until 1919, when he became professor extraordinarius of Iranian philology at the University of Copenhagen (though only after some “technical” difficulties, as the Faculty wanted a chair in Iranian philology and folkloric studies combined). He held this post for the rest of his life and died on the very last day of his tenure.

Christensen studied extensively abroad, examining manuscripts in London and Paris and then, under the tutelage of [F. C. Andreas](#), in Berlin in 1902, and subsequently in Göttingen, where the Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen had obtained a professorship for Andreas. The period he spent “at Andreas’s feet” was of decisive importance to him, as that scholar generally shared his enormous knowledge in direct encounters, rather than through publications; the two men formed a firm friendship that lasted without interruption until Andreas’s death in 1930. Indeed it was Christensen who first published a report (in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, 11 June 1905) of Andreas’s discovery that the Manichean Turfan texts are written in two different Iranian languages, Middle Persian and Parthian.

Christensen made three trips to Persia, in 1914, 1929, and 1934, after each of which he reported his impressions of the people, their culture, and the natural setting; *Hinsides det Kaspiske Hav* (Beyond the Caspian Sea; Copenhagen, 1918), in which the author, an advocate of liberal ideas, included an admiring chapter on [Babism](#) and the [Bahai faith](#); *Det gamle og det nye Persien* (The old and the new Persia; Copenhagen, 1930), an enthusiastic homage to Reżā Shah Pahlavī’s zeal for technology and reform; and *Kulturskitser fra Iran* (Cultural sketches from Iran; Copenhagen, 1937), in which he introduced the work of Jamālzāda, a giant of modern Persian prose literature, to the Danish public.

As early as 1907 Christensen produced the first version of what was to be recognized as his magnum opus, a thorough reconstruction of the history, social structure, and administration of Sasanian Iran (*L’empire des Sassanides. Le peuple, l’état, la cour*, Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Skrifter, 7th ser., Historisk og filosofisk afdeling 1/1, Copenhagen, 1909; repr. Copenhagen, 1927), which he subsequently revised and greatly expanded as *L’Iran sous les*



Sassanides (Copenhagen, 1936; Pers. tr. Tehran, 1317 Š./1938; 2nd rev. and expanded ed., Copenhagen, 1944). This work remains a standard work on Sasanian history.

The chief focus of Christensen's comprehensive research, however, was recovery of two parallel chains of tradition that had extended unbroken from the dawn of history in Iran until the time of Kōsrow II (591-628). The first, the national tradition, is represented by the lost Sasanian court chronicle *Xwadāy-nāmag*, which served as a major source for later historians writing in Persian, Arabic, and, to a lesser extent, Armenian and Syriac and for the poet Ferdowsī. The second was the religious, or priestly, tradition, represented by Middle Persian theological literature based on the Avesta. Inspired by Theodor Nöldeke's studies of the accounts of Persian history preserved in the work of Ṭabarī, Christensen took as his starting point the long and cohesive passages about the usurper Bahrām Čōbīn found in Arabic literature and in the *Šāh-nāma* and tried to reconstruct the original Middle Persian historical novel (*Romanen um Bahrām Tchōbīn*, Studier fra Sprog- og Oldtidsforskning 75, Copenhagen, 1907). He followed with studies on the period of Kavād I (488-96, 498-531) and the "communist" reformer Mazdak (*Le règne du roi Kawādh I et le communisme mazdakite*, Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 9/6, Copenhagen, 1925; and "Two Versions of the History of Mazdak," in *Dr. Modi Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1930, pp. 322-32) and on Bozorgmehr, one of the most mysterious figures in Sasanian tradition ("La légende du sage Buzurjmihr," *Acta Orientalia* 8, 1930, pp. 81-128).

Simultaneously he produced a series of works on the legendary history of the Iranian people, the religious and national legacy to which the Sasanians laid claim. Among his outstanding publications in this vein are "Reste von Manu-Legenden in der iranischen Sagenwelt" (in *Festschrift Friedrich Carl Andreas*, Leipzig, 1916, pp. 63-69), *Le premier homme et le premier roi dans l'histoire légendaire des Iraniens* (I, Stockholm, 1917, II, Leiden, 1934), *Les Kayanides* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 19/2, Copenhagen, 1932), *Les gestes des rois dans les traditions de l'Iran antique* (Conférences Ratanbai Katrak 3, Paris, 1936); and *Smeden Kāvāh og det gamle persiske Rigsbanner* (The smith Kāva and the old Persian royal standard; Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 2/7, Copenhagen, 1919), on the legendary figure whose name resulted from a popular understanding of *derafš-e kāvīān* "royal standard," in which the possessive adjective *kāvīān* "of the Kāvīs" was taken as a patronymic, Kāvāk



(NPers. Kāva).

As for Avestan studies, Christensen's main interest was in the historical circumstances of Zoroaster's life and the chronology of the Gathas and the *yašts*. Having first broached these questions in a number of lectures in Denmark and at the International Congress of Orientalists in Algiers in 1905, he devoted years to systematic research, which resulted in such works as "Quelques notices sur les plus anciennes périodes du Zoroastrisme" (*Acta Orientalia* 4, 1926, pp. 81-115), in which he placed Zoroaster's life and work in eastern Iran no later than about 1000 b.c.e.; *Études sur le Zoroastrisme de la Perse antique* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 15/2, Copenhagen, 1928), in which he demonstrated that in both content and form the oldest portions of the *yašts* predate the reform of Zoroaster; and *Le premier chapitre du Vendidad et l'histoire primitive des tribus iraniennes* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 29/4, 1943), in which he argued that the first chapter of the *Vidēvdād* is a late text composed by Median priests in which a far older metrical text about the movements of the eastern Iranian tribes is embedded. In 1923 he published a selection of Avestan texts in Danish translation (later revised by [Kaj Barr](#)). It was also Christensen's initiative that brought about the monumental facsimile edition of the Avestan and Pahlavi manuscripts in the Royal Library at Copenhagen (*Codices Avestici et Pahlavici Bibliothecae Universitatis Hafniensis*, 12 vols., Copenhagen, 1931-44); he edited the volumes and wrote introductions to the first six (the remaining introductions were written by Barry).

Among Christensen's most important contributions to the study of folklore is "Trebrødre-og Tobrødre-Stamsagn" (Legends of two brothers and three brothers; *Danske Studier*, 1916, pp. 45-86), in which he provided a simple and natural psychological explanation of the legends of national ancestors that occur all over the world. Equally noteworthy are *Contes persans en langue populaire* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 1/3, Copenhagen, 1918), "Les sots dans la tradition populaire des Persans" (*Acta Orientalia* 1, 1923, pp. 43-75), "Motif et thème. Plan d'un dictionnaire des motifs de contes populaires, de légendes et de fables" (*Folklore Fellows Communications* [Helsinki] 59, 1925), *Xavāšš-i-āyāt. Notices et extraits d'un manuscrit persan traitant la magie des versets du Coran* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 3/4, Copenhagen, 1920), and especially *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne* (Det Kgl.



Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 27/1, Copenhagen, 1941), in which the author shows how elements of ancient Iranian folk belief have remained alive to the present day within the framework of Islam. Christensen devoted only limited attention to the literary history of Islamic Persia and then almost exclusively in monographs in Danish on Ferdowsī (with translation of long extracts from the *Šāh-nāma*), literature in the period of the Samanids, court poetry, Persian folk tales, ‘Obayd Zākānī (“Remarques sur les facéties de ‘Ubāid-i-Zākānī, avec des extraits de la Risālā-i dilgušā,” *Acta Orientalia* 3, 1924, pp. 1-37), and Qajar comedies (works by Malkom Khan and Ḥasan Moqaddam). His *Études sur le persan contemporain*, with an outline of modern Persian literature and its language, including texts by Moḥammad-‘Alī Jamālzāda, Sa‘īd Nafīsī, Šādeq Hedāyat, Bozorg ‘Alawī, and others (ed. with corrections and additions K. Barr) appeared posthumously in 1970.

Although Christensen was a philologist in the “classical” sense, using language primarily as a tool for understanding history, he took advantage of his travels in Persia to gather material on dialects. The resulting descriptions of the Northwestern Iranian dialects are models of accuracy: *Le dialecte de Sāmnān. Essai d’une grammaire sāmnānīe avec un vocabulaire et quelques textes, suivie d’une notice sur les patois de Sāngsar et de Lāsگرد* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Skrifter, 7th ser., Historisk og filosofisk afdeling, 2/4, Copenhagen, 1915, pp. 225-300); *Contributions à la dialectologie iranienne* [I.] *Dialecte guilākī de Recht, dialectes de Fārīzānd, de Yaran et de Natanz, avec un supplément contenant quelques texts dans le persan vulgaire de Téhéran* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 17/2, Copenhagen, 1930); and *Contributions à la dialectologie iranienne* II. *Dialectes de la région de Sāmnān, Sourkhēī, Lāsgerdī, Sāngesārī et Chāmerzādī* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 21/3, Copenhagen, 1935). His treatment of materials gathered by others was equally methodical. For example, he published two works based on data collected by the Danish traveler Åge Meyer Benedictsen in Persian Kurdistan (*Les dialectes d’Awromān et de Pāwā. Textes recueillis par Åge Meyer Benedictsen*, Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 6/2, Copenhagen, 1921; and “Some New Awromānī Material Prepared from the Collections of Åge Meyer Benedictsen,” *BSOS* 8, 1935-37, pp. 467-76) and also edited, with the collaboration of Barr and W. B. Henning, some of the Sīvandi, Yazdi, and Sōi material from Andreas’s notes (*Iranische Dialektaufzeichnungen aus dem Nachlass von F. C. Andreas*, Abh. der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften



zu Göttingen, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 3rd ser., 11, Berlin, 1939). His *Textes ossètes* (Det Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser 6/1, Copenhagen, 1921) was based on material that he collected among former Ossetic prisoners of war in Germany who had escaped to Denmark during World War I.

Aside from history, language, folklore, and religion, Christensen also wrote on Iranian medicine (e.g., *Om Lægekunst hos Perserne* [Medical science among the Persians], Medicinsk-Historiske Smaaskrifter 18, Copenhagen, 1917), law (e.g., “Introduction bibliographique à l’histoire du droit de l’Iran ancien,” *Archives d’histoire du droit oriental* (Brussels), 2, 1938, pp. 245-57), and music (e.g., “Some Notes on Persian Melody-Names of the Sasanian Period,” in *Dastur Hoshang Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1909, pp. 368-77; “Orientalsk musikkultur,” *Ord och Bild* (Stockholm), 1910, pp. 463-74; “La vie musicale dans la civilisation des Sassanides,” *Bulletin de l’Association française des amis de l’Orient* 20-21, April-October 1936, pp. 24-45), and so on.

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