



ENCYCLOPAEDIA IRANICA

ENCYCLOPÆDIA IRANICA, an alphabetically arranged reference work which seeks to provide scholarly articles relating to “all aspects of Iranian life and culture.”

The *Encyclopædia Iranica* grew out of an idea proposed in 1969 by Ehsan Yarshater, director of the *Bongāh-e tarjoma wa našr-e ketāb* (q.v.; Institute for Translation and Publication of Books), for a Persian translation of the new edition of the *Encyclopædia of Islam*. Since the treatment of various Persian topics in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* was regarded as inadequate, the proposed translation was also to contain supplementary new articles to correct these deficiencies, somewhat on the model of the *Türk İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. Publication of the expanded Encyclopædia, known as the *Dāneš-nāma-ye Īrān wa Eslām* (q.v.) began in 1354 Š./1975 and 10 fascicles were issued before the project was suspended in 1980 as a result of the political upheaval in Persia. Meanwhile, Yarshater, the founder, editor-in-chief and guiding spirit of the project, proposed in 1972 that an English language counterpart to the *Dāneš-nāma* be produced and obtained funding for this purpose. The new work, the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, would be completely differentiated from the *Encyclopædia of Islam* since it would consist entirely of new articles. The 1978-79 Revolution effectively ended the *Dāneš-nāma*, although in 1992 it resumed publication in a radically different form. Yarshater, however, was able to make other arrangements to keep the parallel *Encyclopædia Iranica* project going. The first fascicle appeared in 1982, and the first bound volume in 1985, under the editorship of Yarshater and with the assistance of a



distinguished editorial and advisory board. As of August 2020, 16 bound volumes and almost 9,000 articles have appeared in print and online. The first four volumes were published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. and volumes five, six and seven by Mazda Publishers, volumes eight, nine and ten by Bibliotheca Persica Press, and volumes eleven through sixteen by Encyclopædia Iranica Foundation, Inc. The published volumes have clearly established the *Encyclopædia Iranica* as a reference work of utmost importance on all topics having to do with Persia and Persian culture and the Iranian civilization.

The purpose and principles of the *Encyclopædia Iranica* are succinctly established and stated in the introduction by the editor, Ehsan Yarshater (I, pp. 1-3): “The *Encyclopædia Iranica* is designed as a research tool responding to the needs of scholars, specialists, and students in Iranian studies and related fields. It aims at filling an important gap in the range of available reference sources which deal with the history and culture of the Middle East.” To meet that goal, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* aims to include scholarly articles related to “Iranian culture in a broad context and the reciprocal influences between Persia and its neighbors” during a time period extending “from pre-history to the present.”

Knowledgeable readers will immediately recognize that the “important gap” which the *Encyclopædia Iranica* was intended to fill is the one left open by the venerable *Encyclopædia of Islam*, the reference work to which the *Encyclopædia Iranica* is most directly comparable. It has long been apparent that the *Encyclopædia of Islam*, despite its many merits, does not and perhaps cannot meet the expectations raised by its title: A truly encyclopaedic, comprehensive, scholarly treatment of a subject as vast and complex as “Islam” is inherently as elusive a goal as would be a project of similar high scholarship on all the peoples, lands, and cultures of “Christendom.” The resulting unevenness in its coverage of many areas inspired the production of a number of other reference works to complement, or to compete with, the *Encyclopædia of Islam* by recasting it in one way or another, including not only Turkish, Urdu, and Shi’ite counterparts, but also a new edition of the original *Encyclopædia of Islam* itself. The *Encyclopædia Iranica* is in a sense the most recent and arguably the most successful effort to compensate for some of the perceived inadequacies of the *Encyclopædia of Islam*.

The *Encyclopædia Iranica* and the *Encyclopædia of Islam* overlap to a degree in the topics they cover, and both are similar in their format. They also have both



had to face certain technical difficulties in presentation, such as which system of transliteration to employ, whether to translate or transliterate entry titles, and how to handle cross-referencing. Otherwise, they are markedly different works. The new *Encyclopædia of Islam* was apparently begun without much systematic planning, has been published at a snail's pace for decades, and has changed considerably in its scope and implementation over the years. In contrast, it is clear that a great deal of time was invested in preparing for the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, and that a deliberate effort was made to avoid the problems associated with the *Encyclopædia of Islam*. This seems to have expedited production of the *Encyclopædia Iranica* as actual publication has through its first 30 years were been remarkably rapid, with completion expected early in the 21st century. It also tends to have a much clearer focus and greater overall consistency than the *Encyclopædia of Islam*.

In terms of its contents, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* clearly has done much more than simply compensate for the *Encyclopædia of Islam*'s neglect of pre-Islamic Persia and inadequacies in its coverage of Islamic Persia and Shi'ism. Whereas the *Encyclopædia of Islam* started out with a broad definition of what it should include but implemented it rather narrowly, especially in the early volumes of the new edition, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* took what could have been a very narrow perspective and implemented it quite broadly. It includes not only topics related to the Iranian plateau, but also the much larger area affected by both Turko-Persian and Indo-Persian cultures. The types of articles included are remarkably diverse; many will be of interest to a broad general readership, while others will be of great value to specialists. As with the *Encyclopædia of Islam*, the majority of the articles deal with the biographies of prominent historical figures, geographical descriptions of important places, and socio-political, religious, or other technical concepts. However, a pleasantly surprising number of articles deal with more generalized topics and provide extensive summaries of information that would be difficult to obtain from any other single source; examples to date include fine articles on "Anthropology," "Architecture," "Armor," "Army," "Astrology and Astronomy," "Bathhouses," "Bāzār," "Carpets," "Ceramics," "Children," "Cinema in Iran," "Class System," "Clothing," "Coins and Coinage," and even "Conspiracy Theories." Some multi-section articles are almost book-length in size and represent veritable state of the art treatments of their subjects; notable in this regard are the articles on "Art," "Armenia," "Afghanistan," "Archaeology," "Avicenna," "Azarbaijan," "Baluchistan," and "Central Asia." In addition, one may find numerous shorter articles examining from a Persian perspective



topics such as flora and fauna, ethnography, the arts, sciences, technology, or popular culture. Many of these articles are quite unique, having no counterpart in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* or other reference works; especially interesting examples include articles on “Anglo-Iranian Relations,” “Byzantine-Iranian Relations,” “Chinese-Iranian Relations,” “Botanical Studies,” “Boundaries,” “Constitutional Revolution,” and “Courts and Courtiers.” Another feature that will be useful for specialists in their research activities is the *Encyclopædia Iranica*’s inclusion of articles on individual texts, ranging from ancient writings, such as the *Avesta* or *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, to the modern novel *Būf-e kūr*; biographies of prominent Iranologists and analysis of their works; and specialized reference articles, such as the ones on “Bibliographies and Catalogues” or “Calendars.” In terms of its coverage, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* may thus be described as truly encyclopaedic; in some ways it might more aptly be compared with a work such as the *Great Soviet Encyclopædia* than with the *Encyclopædia of Islam*.

In addition to the remarkable breadth and balance of its topical and chronological coverage, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* has also been extremely successful in maintaining the highest scholarly standards, with many articles being the most comprehensive and authoritative treatment of their subjects currently available, while at the same time making the articles accessible, unimposing, comprehensible, and relevant for non-specialists. Moreover, it has also been commendably international in the authorship of its articles and includes many entries by prominent Iranian scholars, even though this requires translating their contributions into English.

The *Encyclopædia Iranica* is not only informative and authoritative; it is generally a pleasure to use. Given the alphabetical arrangement of the articles, even non-specialists should be able to handle it easily. However, there are several points which should be kept in mind when consulting it. First of all, it is necessary to be familiar with the system of transliteration it employs. That system is substantially different from that used by the *Encyclopædia of Islam* and many other periodicals and reference works. The transliteration scheme is described in detail at the beginning of the *Encyclopædia* and is employed quite consistently. As explained in the editorial notes, however, it was slightly modified beginning with the letter B. One also encounters a few surprises along the way such as the use of “ə” in certain Pashto words; no explanation is given of this in the introduction. What appears to be an arbitrary listing of rubrics, sometimes under an English equivalent and sometimes in



transliteration, is, in fact, based on the organizing principle that whichever of the two occurs first in the alphabet receives the entry, and, as a rule, reference is made to it from the other.

There are, for example, entries for “Abrīšam” (silk), “Adas” (lentils), “Angūr” (grapes), “Bādām” (almonds), “Bāmīa” (okra), “Bāqelā” (broadbeans), “Beh” (quince), “Berenj” (rice), or “Čāy” (tea), but conversely “Cotton” (*panba*), “Barley” (*jow*), “Beans” (*lūbīā*), “Bread” (*nān*), “Beet” (*čoḡondar*), “Cabbage” (*kalam*), “Coconut” (*nārgīl*), or “Coffee” (*qahwa*). “Asb” is used for horse, but “Bats,” “Beaver,” “Boar,” “Camel,” and “Cat” all appear under the English names; other oddities include “Agriculture” but “Ābyārī” (irrigation) and “Dāmdārī” (animal husbandry); “Amāma” (turbans) but “Belts”; or “Administration” but “Barnāma-rīzī” (planning). Ample cross-references help to compensate for this, but it may ultimately be desirable to have a comprehensive index to facilitate locating specific information. Readers should also pay close attention to the usage of the terms Iran/Iranian and Persia/Persian in the *Encyclopædia*. Beginning more or less with the fourth volume, Persia and Persian tend to be used in a narrow sense for the country and culture of what is often referred to as “Iran,” while Iran and Iranian tend to be used when the broader geographical and cultural context is meant. This somewhat confusing and controversial change in policy is explained in the editorial notes and more fully in a communication from the editor, Ehsan Yarshater, in the journal *Iranian Studies* (22, 1989, pp. 62-65). Finally, some readers may be disappointed by the editorial decision not to include biographies of living persons in the *Encyclopædia*. Although the omission of certain manifestly important living individuals would indeed be regrettable, the editor plans supplementary volumes(s) in which articles on such figures can be included as it becomes appropriate.

Encyclopædia Iranica was supported in the first four preparatory years by the Plan Organization (Sāzmān-e barnāma wa būdja) through a grant to the Institute for Translations and Publications (Bongāh-e tarjoma wa našr-e ketāb). Since the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978 until 2016, the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent American federal agency, provided financial support. Since its inception in 1990, the *Encyclopædia Iranica* Foundation has covered the largest portion of the *Encyclopædia*’s operating cost through funds raised from Iranians in diaspora, other private donors, and foundations.

Critical reaction to the *Encyclopædia Iranica* has been extremely positive (a



partial listing of reviews may be found in the bibliography). There has been particular praise for the variety of topics included; the balanced treatment of the ancient, medieval, and modern periods; the quality of the individual articles; and the rigorous editing and extensive documentation reflected in the articles. Criticism has focused primarily on the inevitable omissions and minor errors which occur in such a vast reference work. Virtually all reviewers agree that the *Encyclopædia Iranica* has succeeded in defining its own distinct identity and is now the most authoritative and absolutely indispensable reference work in its field.

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