



HAMMER-PURGSTALL, JOSEPH FREIHERR VON

HAMMER-PURGSTALL, JOSEPH FREIHERR von, prolific Austrian Orientalist, among whose many works is the first ever complete translation of the *Divān* of Ḥāfeẓ into a western language (b. Graz, Austria, 9 June 1774, d. Vienna, 23 November 1856). When in 1791 his father Josef Hammer, a steward of crown domains and subsequently of private landed property, was knighted, “von” was added to the family name. His son Joseph became “Freiherr” in 1836, after his admirer Jane Anne Cranstoun, the widow of the last Count von Purgstall, had bequeathed to him her husband’s title and arms as well as the estate of Hainfeld near Feldbach in the province of Styria. At the age of thirteen he entered the Oriental Academy, where he was trained to become a diplomat in the Ottoman Empire and studied Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Graduating in 1794, he had to wait many years until a post in the East became available. During this interval he translated excerpts from Ḥājji Kalifa’s bibliographical encyclopaedia, thereby producing his first scholarly publication (*Enzyklopädische Übersicht der Wissenschaften des Orients*, Leipzig, 1806). At the same time he made preparations for a journey to Persia, which in the end never took place. In 1799 he was sent to Constantinople as a “Sprachknabe,” or assistant translator, at the Austrian Embassy. In 1800 he was charged with a mission to the Levant and Egypt in order to investigate the behavior of Austrian consuls under the occupation by Napoleon’s army. The political situation forced him to spend more than a year aboard a British warship before he could land in Egypt in March 1801. From October 1802 to July 1806



he was posted again at Constantinople as an embassy secretary, but, after having served as a consul in Jassy (Moldavia), his career as a diplomat came to an end in 1807. Under the reactionary regime of Graf Metternich, Hammer was considered to be too liberal and intellectual to serve in the Austrian diplomatic service. Until his retirement in 1839 he was employed in the bureaucracy of the Imperial court and the state, and never got another chance to travel to the East. The only important function he fulfilled was that of an interpreter, when, in 1819 and 1820, the Persian ambassador Mirzā Abu'l-Ḥasan visited the court of Vienna. As a gift to the Shah, Hammer translated Marcus Aurelius' *Meditationes* into Persian, for which the Shah rewarded him with the Order of the Lion and Sun. Beyond this, his official duties were very few and left him ample opportunity to pursue his wide-ranging research, which resulted in a remarkable number of oriental studies and translations.

When the French occupied Vienna in 1808, and started to plunder its libraries and museums, he made an effort to save a part of the collection of oriental manuscripts in the Hofbibliothek. In 1825 he toured the great libraries of Italy to inspect manuscripts. Although he never was appointed to an academic chair, Hammer soon earned himself the reputation of a pioneer of modern oriental studies. From 1809-18 he published eight installments of the *Fundgruben des Orients* (French title: *Mines de l'Orient*), the first journal of oriental studies published in Europe. After ten years of unrelenting lobbying, finally in 1847 he received Imperial permission to found the Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, of which he became the first president. Both foreign governments and learned institutions bestowed honors on Hammer. However, his works were sometimes also blamed for being inaccurate, superficial and uncritical in their use of sources. One of his fiercest critics was Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, who devoted an entire volume to the exposition of Hammer's alleged fraudulence and ignorance. Hammer married Karoline von Henikstein (d. 1844) in 1815. Before his death in 1856, he already had a gravestone prepared carrying inscriptions in the ten languages that he had mastered (see the description in Solbrig, pp. 84-86).

Hammer's studies were nearly all concerned with literature and history, which he did not regard as distinct fields, because, in his view, the culture, morality, and religion of a nation were most faithfully mirrored in its poetry. His main focus was the Ottoman Empire and its civilization, to which his *magnum opus*, the ten-volume *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches* (Pesth, 1827-35) is devoted. He also translated much Turkish poetry, including a



complete translation of the poems of Bāqī and a four-volume history of Ottoman poetry, which contains an anthology of the works of 2,200 poets. He dealt with Arabic and Persian literature in the same way, by compiling vast anthologies as well as translations of specific works by major poets. His *Der Diwan des Mohammed Schemsed-Din Hafis* (Stuttgart, 1812-13) was the first complete translation of Ḥāfez's *Divān* in any Western language, thus providing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe with the material for his *West-östlicher Divan* (1818), one of the great classical works of German literature (see [HAFEZ viii](#)). Hammer's history of Persian literature (*Geschichte der schönen Redekünste Persiens mit einer Blüthenlese aus zweyhundert persischen Dichtern*) also served as the main source of Goethe's annotations (*Noten und Abhandlungen*) to his own *Divan*. This literary history is largely an anthology of the works of 200 Persian poets, based on the 15th-century *Tadkerat al-šo'arā'* by Dowlatšāh. In the third section of Hammer's introduction, on "Sagen und Bilderlehre der persischen Dichter" (Legends and imagery of the Persian poets), the author expounds his ideas about Persian poetry as a representative phenomenon of the history of Persia. Observing that mythology played only a very minor part in its religion, he characterizes this civilization as a "superior rational culture" (höhere Verstandes-Cultur), such that already two millennia before the coming of Islam a "controlled imagination" (geregelte Einbildungskraft) had developed, purifying the ancient Iranian religion of anthropomorphic representations. This section further contains a detailed description of the conventional imagery recurrent in Arabic and Persian poetry.

Hammer published samples of Persian literature in volumes with florid titles such as *Rosenöl* (Attar of roses; Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1813) and *Duftkörner* (Fragrant grains; Stuttgart, 1836). His *Mörgenländisches Kleeblatt* (Oriental cloverleaf; Vienna, 1819) contains translations of Zoroastrian hymns in addition to examples of Arabic and Turkish poetry. He also published the Persian text of Šabestari's *Golšan-e rāz* together with a German translation. Hammer's *Schirin* (Leipzig, 1809) is an original poem, for which he used both Persian and Turkish sources. Several of his historical works touch upon the history of Persia, especially his history of the Ilkhans.

Joseph von Hammer's contributions to oriental studies were extraordinary, not only through their sheer volume, but also because he was often the first to deal with the subjects on which he wrote so extensively. Although most of his works are outdated now, he played a major role in the development of Western knowledge about the classical civilizations of the Middle East during



the Islamic period.

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