



HOMMAIRE DE HELL, IGNACE XAVIER MORAND

HOMMAIRE de HELL, IGNACE XAVIER MORAND, French engineer, geographer, traveler (b. Altkirch, Haut-Rhin, 24 November 1812; d. Isfahan, 29 August 1848). Despite his short life and constant ill health, he carried out pioneering scientific research in the Ottoman empire, southern Russia, and Persia. He graduated as an engineer at the École des Mines de Saint-Étienne, where, in 1833, he married Jeanne Louise Adélaïde Hériot (1819-83). She accompanied him on some of his travels and helped him with his work. In October 1835 he left France for Turkey, narrowly escaping shipwreck on the way. He oversaw the construction of a suspension bridge in Constantinople and a lighthouse on the Black Sea coast, and extensively surveyed the surrounding region before settling with his family in southern Russia in 1838. Besides ethnographical and commercial research, he carried out many geographical, industrial, and mining surveys for Czar Nicholas I, who honored him with the Cross of St. Vladimir. He then supervised mining and road building projects for the prince of Moldavia, before illness forced him to return to France in 1842. In 1843 he became a member of the Société de Géographie and the Société de Géologie and started to publish scientific papers. In collaboration with his wife, to whom he attributes all the finer touches in his writings, he published *Les steppes de la mer Caspienne* (1844-47). In 1844 he was awarded the Prize of the Société de Géographie, and, in 1845, the Légion d'Honneur. He was then granted 3,000 Francs per year by the Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture to support a scientific mission to the



Orient.

He set off on 20 February 1845 with his wife and a young painter called Jules Laurens, traveling via Italy, where he was awarded the first gold medal for French scholars abroad by King Charles-Albert of Piedmont-Sardinia. Having been commissioned by several government ministries and by the Museum of Natural History and the Navy, once he reached Turkey he began to write up reports, particularly on commerce in the Bosphorus and the Black Sea. He also set up French consulates at Varna and Samsun, and did some work for the Turkish government.

Once he felt well enough to travel, he decided to leave for Persia. Anticipating a difficult journey, he sent his wife back to France, and left with Jules Laurens on 28 June 1847, heading first by boat to Trabzon. He entered Persia via Diyarbakir and Lake Van on 3 November 1847. Suffering from cholera and the bitter cold, he stopped at Tabriz to rest and write up his notes. With his face frozen and afflicted with ophthalmia, on 9 February 1848 he eventually reached Tehran. Here he soon became acquainted with General Barthélemy Semino, who had spent over twenty years in Persia. General Semino shared with him the many geographical and scientific notes that he had accumulated, despite the ban imposed by the Russian ambassador, Count Semyonich. The French ambassador, Count de Sartiges, introduced him to Moḥammad Shah Qājār, who authorized him to study the feasibility of a canal to bring the Šahrud waters to the Sāvojbolāq plain. Hommaire de Hell left with an official escort for Mazandarān on 17 May and spent a month engaged in surveys and archeological observations, culminating in a study of the Varāmin mosque. He put in order all of his research notes on arriving back in Tehran, then set off for Isfahan, where he arrived extremely ill, and died within two weeks, on 29 August 1848. He was buried in the cemetery of Jolfā, where a tombstone was later erected by General Semino. Laurens managed to send Hommaire de Hell's effects to his wife in Paris. With financial support from the French government, she wrote up the story of his travels on the basis of his surviving notes (1856-60).

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