



# HUNGARY II. IRANIAN AND PERSIAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

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### ii. Iranian and Persian Studies in Hungary

Iranian and Persian studies may be said to have had their beginnings in Hungary in the second half of the 18th century with the literary studies and translations of Count Károly Reviczky (1736-1793) and the poet Mihály Vitéz Csokonai (1773-1805). Reviczky, who mastered a number of languages, among them Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, served in the [Austrian](#) diplomatic service in various posts, including Constantinople. Much taken by Persian poetry, he, in effect, introduced [Hafez](#) to the European intellectual world through his book, *Specimen poeseos Persicae*, which he published in Vienna in 1771 (Szinnyei). It is composed of translations into Latin of sixteen *ġazals* accompanied by a literary and philological commentary that revealed Reviczky to have been a keen student of Classical Persian poetry. His work attracted the attention of scholars, notably [William Jones](#), the famous English orientalist, whom Reviczky had served as a tutor while in London on a diplomatic mission, and was translated into English in 1774 and German in 1783.



Perhaps most importantly, a copy of *Specimen* was sought by Csokonai, the greatest Hungarian poet of the Enlightenment and a pre-Romantic, who was deeply interested in Eastern poetical themes and forms. He revealed such an attachment himself in his article, “Az ázsiai poézisről” (On Asian poetry), only a part of which was published. He was thus caught up in the burgeoning currents of European Orientalism coming to Hungary mainly from Germany (Staud, pp. 148-53). He was determined to understand the techniques of Persian prosody for his own projected translations, and for this purpose especially he sought a copy of Reviczky’s work. He wrote to friends and tried to find it at booksellers and libraries in Vienna and Budapest, but without success (Csokonai, pp. 244, 789 [ letter to Ferenc Kazinczy, 28 February/1 March 1803]). He was a devoted admirer of Hafez and dedicated a poem to him, “Hafiz sírhalma” (The tomb of Hafez). He was well acquainted with Jones’s great work, *Poëseos Asiaticae Commentariorum* (London, 1777), and was much influenced by his translations into Latin (Képes, pp. 400-405).

The first professional advocate, in his own way, of Persian studies in Hungary may have been Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913). A polyglot and an inveterate traveler to exotic lands (for Europeans of that time), notably Central Asia and Persia (Vámbéry, 1865, 1867), he cultivated enduring contacts in Persia (Sárközy, 2013). Especially concerned with illuminating the origins and early history of the Hungarians (Magyars) and the nature of the Hungarian language (its Turkish and Finno-Ugrian roots), he drew on his knowledge of the Turkish languages, but also sought clues in borrowings in the Hungarian language from Persian (Vámbéry, 1882, pp. 405-09). Vámbéry was the first to teach Persian language and literature in Hungary, beginning as a lecturer at the University of Budapest in 1865, even before Iranian studies became a formal subject of study in 1868, when the Department of Oriental Philology was established. Although doubts have been raised about his mastery of the Persian language, he was an engaging teacher, who inspired numerous students to pursue studies of Classical Persian literature (Jeremiás, 2010, p. 15). Among them was Vilmos (Wilhelm) [Bacher](#) (1850-1913), who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the life and work of Neẓāmi (Bacher, 1871), and who later became a prominent scholar of Hebrew studies and wrote valuable essays on [Judeo-Persian languages](#) and [literature](#). (Netzer, 1988, p. 339). Another of Vámbéry’s students, Béla Harrach Erődi (1846-1936), wrote his dissertation on Turkish-Persian poetry and became a well-known translator of Persian poetry, notably the songs of Hafez (1872) and [Sa’di’s Golestān](#) (1889).



The most distinguished of Vámbéry's students was undoubtedly [Sándor Kégl](#) (1862-1920) (Sárközy, 2012, 2013). He obtained his doctorate in 1889 with a dissertation on Moḥammad Damiri's *Ḥayāt al-ḥaywān* and went on to become the leading scholar of Persian literature in Hungary for some two decades until his death. He began his academic career with an appointment as an instructor in Persian language and literature at the University of Budapest in 1893, and he rose in rank until he became full professor in 1914, following the death of Vámbéry. He devoted his scholarly research and writing mainly to Persian literature, especially poetry in the Classical and post-Classical period. At the beginning of his career, he published a number of articles in Hungarian and German on Persian poetry during the Qajar period in the 19th century, notably on Šaybāni (1892; in Kégl, 2012, pp. 549-58), and then later he turned to religious poets, writing longer, original analyses of the work of [Sanā'i](#) (Kégl, 2012, pp. 263-436) and [Rumi](#) (1907; in Kégl, 2012, pp. 437-506). His extended account of modern Persian literature was by far the most significant study of the subject in Hungarian up to that time (1892; in Kégl, 2012, pp. 31-216). Of particular interest, too, is his essay on the Persian folk poetry of Tehran, based on his own collection of folk songs made during his stay in the city in 1889-90 (1899; in Kégl, 2012, pp. 217-62). In his later years he expanded his researches to include Indo-Persian literature, for which he drew on his knowledge of Sanskrit and Hindustani. Notable is his essay on [Amir Ƙosrow Dehlavi](#) (1911; in Kégl, 2012, pp. 507-48). From the very beginning of his career he was an avid collector of books on his specialties and of Oriental manuscripts. Of the 120 Classical Persian manuscripts housed in Hungarian institutions, 59 are donations from his collection.

In the two decades after Kégl's death, Iranian studies in Hungary lacked a scholar of his depth and range of interests. But a number of academics carried on his work and, in a sense, prepared the way for the flourishing of Iranian studies after World War II. Of the specialists of the interwar period, László Gaál (1891-1964) is perhaps representative (Sárközy, 2015). He is known especially for his public lectures popularizing Classical Persian literature and for his translations into Hungarian of selected passages from, among others, [Ferdowsi's \*Shahnama\*](#), the verses of Hafez, and Sa'di's *Golestān*. He taught the [Avesta](#) and Old Persian at the University of Budapest between 1948 and 1956.

Another Hungarian scholar of the interwar period, Bertalan Csillik (1889-1978), a literary historian and librarian, made an important



contribution to the study of the life and work of [Omar Khayyam](#). Besides researches on the life and works of Ferdowsi and Hafez, he analyzed for the first time a number of manuscripts of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Among them is the oldest known manuscript, except for one, and it predates by 12 years the manuscript held in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, which [Edward Fitzgerald](#) used for his celebrated translation (Csillik, p. ii). Of the 17 manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Csillik published those of less than 100 quatrains, which he designated *manuscripta minora*, and provided a detailed analysis of each as well as a survey of significant scholarly questions related to the *Robā'iyāt* and the life of Omar Khayyam (Csillik, pp. 7-69).

It may be argued that the beginnings of systematic scholarly Iranian studies in Hungary date from the post World War II period. This development is associated in particular with two eminent philologists, János Harmatta (1917-2004) and Zsigmond Telegdi (1909-94). Harmatta specialized in the pre-Islamic languages, cultures, and history of the Iranian peoples of [Central Asia](#). Noteworthy were the chapters he wrote on the religions, languages, and literature of the [Kushan](#) Empire, which were included in the second volume of the *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, which he edited (Harmatta, 1994a and 1994b), and his analysis of inscriptions on Kushan sanctuaries and coins (Harmatta, 1960). He also studied the so-called Sogdian “[Ancient Letters](#),” discovered by [Aurel Stein](#) in 1907 (Harmatta, 1979), which offer valuable information on the pre-Islamic history of Central Asia and on the ancient Silk Road. He has also exhaustively analyzed inscriptions in [Bactria](#), which provide important details on the Kushan Empire (Harmatta, 1965) and raise questions about the history of the Tochi Valley and the eastern boundaries of the Iranian language area (Harmatta, 1969).

Zsigmond Telegdi taught Persian language and literature at the University of Budapest between 1952 and 1994 (Telegdi, 2006, I, pp. ix-xxiii). His research after World War II focused mainly on language, and his publications on Iranian linguistics offered new approaches to the general history and theory of language (“Beiträge zur historischen Grammatik der Neupersischen,” 1955, reprinted in Telegdi, 2006, I, pp. 145-263; “Über einen Fall von struktureller Homonymie im Persischen,” 1964, reprinted in Telegdi, 2006, I, pp. 350-75.). In Persian literature he was much attracted to *Kalila wa demna* and to his favorite poets, [Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār](#) and Sa’di. He published little on these subjects, but his essay on Sa’di’s *Golestān* is a sensitive introduction for the



non-specialist (“Szaadí és a Gulisztán,” 1958, reprinted in Telegdi, 2006, II, pp. 120-30).

The students of Harmatta and Telegdi formed the second generation of post-World War II Iranists. Among them are Éva Jeremiás, István Nyitrai, and Miklós Sárközy, who have made notable contributions to the study of literature, language, and history. Éva Jeremiás has devoted her research and writing mainly to the Persian language and Iranian linguistics (Jeremiás, 2007), but she has also written perceptive short pieces on modern Persian literature (Jeremiás, 2010). István Nyitrai has investigated the Persian sources on the early history of the Hungarians before their settlement in Central Europe at the end of the 9th century. He examines the texts of a number of geographies written in Arabic by Persians. He gives particular attention to *Hodud al-Ālam*, Biruni, Gardizi, Marvazi, and ‘Awfi and provides translations into Hungarian of those passages dealing with the Hungarians (Nyitrai, 1996). He notes the importance of the work of the three generations of the Jayhāni family of the 10th century as a source of information for later geographers and historians. Of interest also is his essay on the significance of the different forms of “Magyar” (Hungarian) in Persian sources (Nyitrai, 1997). The most thorough analysis now of the long Jayhāni tradition as it relates to the early history of the Hungarians is by István Zimonyi (Zimonyi, 2016). In his wide-ranging study he establishes clearly the numerous connections between the Jayhāni text and the works of later authors, and he is thus able to place the Hungarians fully in the nomadic society of the Central Asian steppe and north of the Pontic region. Miklós Sárközy has been especially interested in the ancient history of Iran and the continuity of pre-Islamic traditions. In his doctoral dissertation (Sárközy, 2008) he explored how these traditions were absorbed into local Islamic institutions. He has also focused his attention on Shi’i Islam, writing on the Isma‘ilis of northern Iran, particularly in the Nezāri Isma‘ili state founded at the end of the 11th century (Sárközy, 2015).

There is a long tradition in Hungary of translating Persian poetry going back to the second half of the 18th century. We have noted the important translations by Reviczky, Csokonai, and Gaál, by no means an exhaustive list. In the 20th century, among the distinguished translators are Géza Képes and Lőrinc Szabó. Képes (1909-89) was a poet himself and a literary entrepreneur who founded the well-regarded publishing house Magvető. He was noted especially for his translations of parts of the *Robā‘iyāt* of Omar Khayyam and of the *Divān* of Hafez. He showed much skill in preserving the meter, rhythm,



and rhyme of the original Persian texts (Bodrogligeti). The modernist poet Lőrinc Szabó (1900-57), a great admirer of Omar Khayyam (Szabó), made beautiful translations of the *Robā'iyāt*, which made him the best-known Persian poet in Hungary in the middle of the 20th century.

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