Published: November 11, 2014
Last Updated: December 15, 2014

ROMANIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

ROMANIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS. Significant, sustained relations between Romania and Iran belong to the second half of the 20th century. They owed their development at this time primarily to the economic benefits both countries expected to derive from enhanced contacts, but the political consequences of the relationship, though of secondary importance, were by no means negligible in the international atmosphere created by the Cold War. Cultural relations during the period were relatively modest, but interest by Romanian scholars and writers in Persian literature and language grew, as evidenced by the number of translations of classical Persian poetry into Romanian. The discussion that follows is divided into two parts: the first, political and economic and the second, cultural, including translations and collections of Persian manuscripts in Romanian libraries.

Political and economic relations. Before the 20th century political relations between Romanians and Iranians were sporadic, although contacts between their ancestors reach back into antiquity. In the early 6th century BCE the ancestors of the Romanians, the Geto-Dacians, a Thracian people who inhabited the lower Danube basin, and Iranians met in battle when Darius the Great, circa 514-13, invaded Thrace during his campaign against the Scythians, who were threatening the northern frontiers of Persia. His army encountered hostile Geto-Dacian tribes and defeated them, as described by Herodotus (4.93). Centuries later, at the beginning of the 2nd century CE, as the Geto-

Dacians, now organized in a “kingdom,” were defending themselves against a Roman invasion, Decebal, their “king,” sought an alliance with the Arsacid king Pacorus II. Nothing came of Decebal’s initiative, as he was defeated by the Romans in 106 (Vaisman, 1971a, pp. 22-23). Over a millennium later an opportunity arose for cooperation between Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia (1457-1504), and Uzun Ḥasan, the Aq Qoyunlu ruler, against a common enemy, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1451-81). In 1472 an envoy of Uzun Ḥasan, on his way to Poland, Hungary, Venice, and the Papacy seeking aid against the Turks, delivered a letter from his master to Stephen requesting his support for an expedition against Mehmed II (Decei, pp. 164-67). The matter went no further. In later centuries no similar Romanian-Iranian political contacts are recorded, mainly because Moldavia and the neighboring Romanian principality of Wallachia had become vassal states of the Ottoman empire and were forbidden to have direct relations with foreign powers. Only after the principalities achieved union in 1859 and de facto independence in the 1860s did formal diplomatic relations with Iran become possible.

Persia took the initiative in 1875, when its minister to Turkey asked the diplomatic agent of the United Romanian Principalities in Istanbul if his government would agree to the establishment of a Persian consulate general in Bucharest, the capital, “without seeking the approval of the Porte.” The Romanian foreign minister immediately accepted the proposal, but the Persian side took no further action (Vaisman, 1971b, p. 319). Then, Romania’s achievement of full independence as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and the Congress of Berlin in 1878 opened the way for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Persia. In 1880 the Romanian government appointed a member of The Netherlands legation in Tehran, a certain cavalier Keun, to represent its interests in Persia. This action was part of a broader undertaking to obtain recognition of Romania’s independence from as many countries as possible, and, to this end, it empowered Keun to treat with the Persian government in such a way as to foster friendly relations between the two countries. Keun fulfilled his mission admirably and could inform the Romanian government in December 1881 that Persia had recognized the country’s independence. Yet, it was not until July 1902 that regular diplomatic relations were established when a Persian legation opened in Bucharest. From then until 1910 Persian consulates began functioning in Bucharest and Iaşi, the Danube River ports of Galaţi and Brăila, and the Black Sea port of Constanţa. The opening of the last three consulates suggests that Persia’s main interest in Romania was commercial. Persia also

used its legation in Bucharest to extend diplomatic relations to Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, since its minister in Romania was also accredited to these countries. But Romania remained without diplomatic representation in Tehran. Then, in 1929 Persia closed its legation in Bucharest and its consulates, probably because of financial difficulties caused by the world economic crisis of the time. The two countries maintained relations through their diplomatic representatives in other capitals.

Once the economic crisis was surmounted, a new period in Romanian-Iranian relations began. Negotiations between the two countries in 1934 and 1935, mainly in Ankara, led to the reopening of the Persian legation in Bucharest in October 1935 and the arrival of the first Romanian diplomatic representative in Tehran in March 1936. The two countries had certain common interests, but their relations down to World War II, while cordial, were not close or compelling. Nor was direct trade between them ever more than modest and irregular. But the transit trade offered promise, as both sides perceived advantages in promoting it. The Persian and Turkish governments had cooperated in building a highway from Tabriz through Erzurum to Trebizond on the Black Sea, which in the later 1930s became a link in the trade between Persia and Europe through Romania. Goods were brought by ship from Trebizond to Constanţa, from where they were taken by river boat up the Danube or by train to markets in Central Europe. The volume of trade was large enough to encourage the establishment of a regular shipping line between Trebizond and Constanţa in 1940. But the involvement of Romania in the World War soon ended the undertaking. Indeed, in 1941 relations between the two countries were interrupted because of the war, in particular Romania's alliance with Nazi Germany.

Diplomatic relations between Romania and Iran were resumed in 1946, but political contacts and economic exchanges remained at a modest level during the first fifteen years of the Romanian People's Republic, which had been proclaimed on 30 December 1947 by the now dominant Romanian Communist Party. The consolidation of the Communist regime in Romania in the 1950s, its subordination to the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the Cold War between East and West impeded the development of Romanian-Iranian relations. Only in the final year (1964-65) of the tenure of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej as head of the Romanian Communist Party did expanded contacts become possible, mainly as a result of a rapprochement between the Soviet Union and Iran. In 1962 the Iranian government had proposed certain

measures to the Soviet government to improve bilateral relations, an initiative that elicited a positive response in Moscow. The Romanian Communist Party watched closely the development of the new relationship, as its own contacts with Iran would largely depend on the course taken by the Soviet Union. From the mid-1960s, during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, dates the remarkable growth of diplomatic and, especially, economic, relations between Romania and Iran. The two countries discerned economic advantages in closer ties, but they could also cooperate in international affairs by pursuing the shared goal of maintaining a certain independence from the dominant superpowers, the Soviet Union for Romania, the United States for Iran (Saikal, pp. 442-48).

The advent of Nicolae Ceauşescu as head of the Romanian Communist Party in March 1965 proved decisive for the Romanian-Iranian relationship. He was eager to expand economic exchanges between the two countries as part of his ambitious project to promote Romania's economic development and thereby hasten her modernization and, in the process, achieve greater flexibility in dealing with the Soviet Union. He wasted little time in making overtures to Iran. In October 1965 he raised Romania's legation in Tehran to the rank of an embassy and had his prime minister engage in preliminary discussions in Tehran about far-reaching commercial agreements. Mohammad Reza Shah was equally interested in opening economic cooperation with Romania as yet another means of expanding exports and obtaining machine goods and technological assistance to spur modernization in Iran. In 1966 he traveled to Bucharest, where he signed the first economic treaties between the two countries, which covered imports of machinery and industrial equipment of all kinds by Iran and crude oil and raw cotton by Romania. The strength of the relationship over the next decade lay in steadily expanding trade and technical cooperation. For his part, Ceauşescu needed increased supplies of crude oil to support Romania's rapidly growing petrochemical industry and refining facilities, from which oil could be exported to the West for the hard currency essential for economic development. Ceauşescu was reluctant to turn to the Soviet Union for energy supplies, since he feared such action would compromise the policy of national autonomy within the Soviet East European bloc that he was promoting. The first shipment of Iranian oil arrived in Romania in 1968.

Ceauşescu visited Tehran in 1967, where he concluded agreements providing for collaboration between tractor factories in Braşov and Tabriz and the

organization of cotton farms in northern Iran. Such arrangements proved lucrative for Romania, as the balance of trade between the two countries continued to be much in her favor. Nevertheless, in 1969 the shah and Ceauşescu reached agreement on a complex economic and technological treaty, by which Romania accorded Iran 100 million dollars in credits for the purchase of Romanian industrial equipment and, in return, Iran allowed Romania to buy crude oil and cotton at preferential prices. But negotiations in Bucharest in 1970 between the two sides did not go as Ceauşescu had wished, since the shah, eager to foster the oil refining capacity of his own country, limited the export of crude oil, while still offering Romania a discount. The shah also urged his partner to import more processed cotton goods and less raw cotton in order strengthen the Iranian textile industry. Moreover, in the 1970s Romania was importing the buses and minibuses manufactured by Iran National Company. Despite occasional disagreements, trade between the two countries grew steadily in the 1970s, and by the middle of the decade Romania's imports from Iran reached 300 million dollars, almost 90 percent of which was crude oil.

The political turmoil and the Islamic Revolution in 1978 and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in February 1979 led to an interruption in the mutually advantageous economic relationship between the two countries (Kelner, p. 494). As a result, Romania experienced serious shortages of oil and was obliged to turn to other sources, notably Iraq and the Soviet Union. Yet, for Iran the sale of oil to Romania was good business, and, consequently, Iran resumed exports of crude oil in April 1979. A new contract stipulated that Iran would provide 2.5 million tons of crude oil worth some 370 million dollars, in the coming period, and that, in return, Romania would send large quantities of foodstuffs and a variety of items needed to revitalize Iranian industry. The outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq in 1980 (see IRAQ vii. IRAN-IRAQ WAR) was a new complication in Romanian-Iranian relations, and Ceauşescu maneuvered with great care between the belligerents because he needed to draw on the oil resources of both.

What is striking in the relations between Romania and Iran over several decades is the continuity of the dialogue, which underwent no significant change after the Islamic Revolution. The official joint public statements by Ceauşescu and the Ayatollah Ruḥ-Allāh Khomeini and later the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei down to the collapse of the Romanian Communist regime in December 1989 did not differ in essentials from those of Ceauşescu and the

shah. Throughout the 1980s Ceauşescu gave high priority to continued trade with Iran, especially as a source of oil, since Romania's own production could not meet the growing demands of industry, and as a market for Romanian technology and manufactured goods. So important was the relationship with Iran that Ceauşescu undertook a trip to Tehran on 18 December 1989 even as the unrest that was to topple his regime within less than a week intensified. After 1989, relations with Iran under democratic Romanian governments, while normal, lost much of their economic intensity, as Romania drew closer to the European Union and the United States and increased her involvement in international financial and economic organizations.

Cultural relations. The study of the Persian language and literature in Romania was left largely to the initiative of individuals until the middle of the 20th century, when these subjects became a permanent part of the University of Bucharest curriculum. Until that time Persian had been included among the "Oriental languages" that were studied as the need arose, but it was always secondary to Turkish, which owed its standing to the long political and commercial connections between the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia and the Ottoman empire, and to Arabic. Information about the early study of Persian is sparse. The first mention of Oriental languages as a subject of study dates from the mid-17th century when, it seems, they, at least Arabic, were being taught at the Monastery of the Three Hierarchs in Iaşi, Moldavia (Matei, p. 3). Then, in the first half of the 18th century, Oriental languages were introduced at the princely academies in Iaşi and Bucharest, the highest institutions of learning in the principalities. Formal instruction at universities in modern Romania progressed slowly. Attempts were made in 1907 and 1926 to establish a chair of Oriental languages (Turkish, Arabic, and Persian) at the University of Bucharest, but funds and the will were lacking. Only in 1956 were regular courses in the subject, including Persian, introduced, and then, in 1974 Persian language and literature became a separate section in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Bucharest, a status which allowed students to earn a bachelor's degree (*licenţă*) in the specialty. Interest in Iranian cultural and spiritual life was by no means limited to writers and scholars in the interwar period. Queen Marie of Romania (1875-1938; r. 1914-27) embodied the willingness of elites to test new ways of thinking about the world when she embraced Bahai teachings in 1926-27 (Marcus).

A sustained attraction to Persian literature by Romanian scholars and writers

seems to have had its beginnings between the two World Wars. It was then that polished translations of certain classical Persian poets were made and original literary essays published. But it is hard to think of these efforts as more than discrete individual undertakings.

The first commentary on a Persian writer by a Romanian was made by Dimitrie Cantemir, Prince of Moldavia (1710-11) and a famous orientalist of the time. He admired the poet Saʿdi and, praising his wisdom, cited verses from *Golestān* in his own works, *Divan* (Iaşi, 1698) and *Kniga sistima ili sostoianie mukhammedanskia religii* (St. Petersburg, 1722). He read Saʿdi in the original, and thus he represents the first known direct contact between a Romanian and Persian literature without the intermediary of a translation (Cândea, pp. 5-9).

Cantemir had no true successors until after World War I in the sense that no one could match his erudition about the East. Before the war, in 1905, a translation of Saʿdi's *Golestān* appeared in book form, and a number of individual poems by Saʿdi, Ḥāfeẓ, and Ferdowsi along with a few folktales and proverbs were published in Romanian translations in various periodicals ("Literatura persană," 1985, pp. 158-61). Except for several brief discussions of Persian literature in periodicals, no serious critical work was undertaken.

The two decades between the World Wars, by contrast, witnessed a flourishing of interest in Persian literature. Periodicals published original critical articles by younger intellectuals, notably Mircea Eliade (1907-86), a specialist in Eastern religions who would later become a renowned scholar of the comparative study of religions. He stands out in the later 1920s and 1930s as an enthusiastic advocate of the study of Persian literature. He discovered Edward G. Browne's *A Literary History of Persia* and was much taken by the translation by Constantin Georgian, the founder of Romanian Indology, of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, and he was inspired to study Persian by himself, using Italo Pizzi's *Manuale della lingua persiana* (Leipzig, 1883), in order to have access to the original texts of his favorite classical poets (Eliade and Wikander, pp. 48-49). He was attracted especially to the poetry of Ḥāfeẓ, praising his "genius and sense of mystery." Eliade wrote three short, solid articles on Ḥāfeẓ in 1929, in which he drew attention to the poet's *ḡazal*s and translated some of them himself ("Literatura persană," 2008, p. 229). During the 1930s he urged upon his fellow intellectuals the importance of Iranian studies for a full understanding of the spiritual life and folk literature of the Romanians. His own later researches in comparative religions made valuable contributions to

the study of ancient Iranian religions, especially Zoroaster, Ahura Mazdā, Zurvanism, and Mithra (see Eliade, I, pp. 302-33, II, pp. 306-29).

Eliade's work was the sign of a growing, if still modest, interest in Persian literature among Romanian intellectuals since the interwar period. A number of translations appeared, notably a volume of quatrains of Omar Khayyam by the well-known poet Alexandru T. Stamatiad (*Catrenele lui Omar Khayyam*, Bucharest, 1932), which was highly praised by leading Romanian literary critics of the time. Of great value are the volumes of translations, some of them bilingual Persian and Romanian editions with introductions and explanatory notes by Otto Starck; these include *500 de catrene de Omar Khayyam* (bilingual edition, n.p., 1993), *Meditaţii şi parabole din Masnavi-e Ma'navi* (bilingual edition of Rumi's *Maṯnawi*, Bucharest, 2002), and *Poeme persane: Baba Taher, Omar Khayyam, Saadi, Rumi, Şabestari, Hafez* (Bucharest, 2012). A few monographs on Persian literature, displaying both erudition and sensitivity (Olaru), reveal the emergence of a small but dedicated corps of Persianists.

Several collections of Persian manuscripts housed in Romanian libraries bear witness to the interest that Romanian intellectuals and social elites have had for Persian literature and culture. Although these collections are small, they cover the most prominent of the classical poets and contain other works of value. The two main collections of Persian manuscripts are those in the Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest and in its branch in Cluj. The first collection consists of some 70 manuscripts on history, philosophy, the natural sciences, and mathematics, besides volumes of classical poetry, all dating between the 15th and 18th centuries. Among the important volumes are Ḥāfeẓ's *Divān*, copied in 1499, and Saʿdi's *Golestān* and *Bustān*, dating from the 16th century. Noteworthy in the second collection of perhaps 15 manuscripts is Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, in two volumes from the 16th-17th centuries (Beldescu, pp. 27, 35, 44).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arta iraniană în colecţiile din Republica Socialistă România (Iranian art in the

collections of the Romanian Socialist Republic), Bucharest, 1971.

Alexandra Beldescu, *Manuscrise persane în colecţii din România* (Persian manuscripts in collections in Romania), Bucharest, 1987.

Ovidiu Bozgan, "Relaţiile României cu Iranul Imperial, 1965-1968, I" (The relations of Romania with Imperial Iran), *Arhivele Totalitarismului* 1-2, 2013, pp. 119-33.

Virgil Cândea, "Sa'di din Shiraz ca izvor de înţelepciune pentru Dimitrie Cantemir. Primul transfer direct între literaturile persană şi română" (Saʿdi of Shiraz as a source of wisdom for Dimitrie Cantemir. The first direct transfer between Persian and Romanian literature), in *Seminarul Limbii şi Literaturii Persane*, Bucharest, 1998, pp. 1-9.

Aurel Decei, "Din trecutul comun româno-iranian" (On the common Romanian-Iranian past), in idem, *Relaţii româno-orientale*, Bucharest, 1978, pp. 156-68.

Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, 2 vols., Chicago, 1978-82.

Idem and Stig Wikander, *Întotdeauna Orientul: Corespondenţă Mircea Eliade-Stig Wikander (1948-1977)* (Always the Orient: The Correspondence between Mircea Eliade and Stig Wikander), Iaşi, 2005, pp. 32-57.

M. Guboglu, "Manuscrisele şi tipăriturile orientale din fondul 'T. Cipariu' al Bibliotecii filialei din Cluj a Academiei R. P. R." (Oriental manuscripts and printed works in the T. Cipariu collection of the Library of the Academy of the R.P.R. in Cluj), *Limbă şi Literatură* 3, 1957, pp. 147-66.

Sielke Beata Kelner, "Dagli archivi di Bucarest: La reazione del Partito Comunista Romeno all'istituzione della Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran," *Nuova Rivista Storica* 97/2, 2013, pp. 477-502.

"Literatura persană," in *Bibliografia relaţiilor literaturii române cu literaturile străine în periodice* III (1859-1918), Bucharest, 1985, pp. 158-61; IX (1919-1944), Bucharest, 2008, pp. 228-36.

Della L. Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith*, Oxford, 2000.

Ion Matei, "Notes concernant l'enseignement des langues orientales dans les

Pays Roumains," *Studia et Acta Orientalia* 5-6, 1967, pp. 93-116.

Viorel Olaru, *Sufism şi poezie mistică în Persia* (Sufism and mystical poetry in Persia), Bucharest, 2013.

Paul Brusanowski, *Istorie şi civilizaţie iraniană până la cucerirea arabă* (Iranian history and civilization up to the Arab conquest), Cluj-Napoca, 2008.

Amin Saikal, "Iranian Foreign Policy, 1921-1979," in Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville, eds., *The Cambridge History of Iran* VII, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 426-56.

Arthur Vaisman, "Anciennes relations roumano-iraniennes," *Studia et Acta Orientalia* 8, 1971a, pp. 21-24.

Idem, "Teheran," in *Reprezentanţele diplomatice ale României* (The diplomatic posts of Romania) II, Bucharest, 1971b, pp. 314-29.