

## A Record of Persian History and Civilization

*Erhsan Yarshater*

*Emeritus Professor, Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University,  
Editor, Encyclopaedia Iranica*

In 1904 Geiger and Kuhn, two scholars of Iranian studies, produced, with the help of a number of outstanding German Iranologists, a comprehensive account of the languages, literatures and history of the Iranian peoples in two volumes. But much water has flown under the bridge in nearly a century that has passed since the publication of this compendium. Iranian studies have been considerably expanded: archaeological excavations have revealed many fresh data, new manuscripts have been discovered and published, and social sciences have drawn attention to many aspects of Persian life and culture ignored by erstwhile philologists. Among these aspects are those to do with archaeology, art history, anthropology, sociology, music, science, medicine, flora and fauna, folklore and the media. The need was urgently felt to incorporate all relevant information about the Persian past and present it in a systematic, well-documented and reliable work that could be easily used by students, scholars, and other interested readers.

The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* has been conceived with this objective in mind. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, which treats also of Persia in Islamic times, lacks by its definition, a large part of Persian history that has to do with Persia in ancient and early mediaeval times. Even the treatment of Persian topics in the Islamic period is hardly adequate, since it is written mostly from the point of view of Arabic; in fact the titles of its articles are generally chosen from that language. In short, a notable gap existed for the treatment of Iranian civilization as a whole and of its history as a continuous one. *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is to answer this need and to fill this gap.

Obviously such an undertaking cannot be carried out by a single person or even several people. Such an enormous enterprise needs to draw on the expertise of all scholars in Iranian studies, irrespective of their nationality, language, or location. Therefore, when I had an opportunity at the Centre for Iranian Studies of Columbia University to initiate this venture, first I invited a small group of international advisors in order to assist me in formulation of editorial policy and deciding on a number of important issues, such as the language of the Encyclopaedia, its length, the system of transcription, and so on. My next step was to invite a number of established scholars in various disciplines to advise me on the choice of titles in their discipline, the length of each article, and the best scholar available internationally to write the articles. The number of these Consultant Editors is now 36. They include scholars from all countries where Iranian studies flourish (Canada, France, Germany, India, Japan, Persia, Russia, United States, and others). More than six years was spent on preliminaries, setting up standards and procedures, and on inviting and collecting articles for the first volume.

Initially the Center was assisted in terms of finances by the Plan Organization of Persia through the Persian Institute for Publication and Translation in Tehran (*Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab*). When the revolution occurred, all assistance abruptly stopped, while we were faced with considerable financial and moral obligations. Assistance was sought from the National Endowment for the Humanities, an American federal agency, whose purpose is to encourage and support research and education in the humanities. Fortunately our application was approved. For the past sixteen years the project, which is termed a "major project", has been supported chiefly by the Endowment. I say chiefly, because the National Endowment for the Humanities makes its assistance conditional on our acquiring a third or more of our annual budget from other sources. In other words,

the Endowment, if and when approves our the budget (every two or three years in the case of our projects), pays about one third of the budget outright, and another third only if the remaining portion is obtained from interested individuals or institutions. If we fail to do so, we suffer a double loss.

A very detailed and comprehensive reference work, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* would be about three times the length of *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, even though its field is more limited. The editorial policy of the encyclopaedia calls for precision and objectivity. All articles are richly documented and each is followed by an extensive bibliography. One of the major aims of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is its absolute reliability. Fortunately in this respect we have not been without success. The reviews, which have appeared in a variety of learned journals, have all, without exception, acclaimed the encyclopaedia's comprehensiveness, the thoroughness of research embodied in its articles, its care for accuracy, and the lucid style of its exposition.

We owe a debt of gratitude for this moment of our history and culture to the scholars of Iranian studies worldwide, who have enriched the encyclopaedia by their arduous research and exemplary scholarship.

Now the encyclopaedia is in its seventh volume. The National Endowment has agreed to assist us, funds permitting and if no change of government policy occurs, for no more than fourteen volumes of the envisioned twenty. Therefore, we need to raise funds for more than what is needed for our annual budget, in order to put some in reserve for the time that we shall have no support from the Endowment. To this end we have started an Endowment Fund. We are dependent on the financial assistance and the generosity of those compatriots who value our national heritage and appreciate the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* as a record of that heritage.