A Famous Persian Scholar

FRANCE HAS LOST a distinguished savant, and Iran philology one of its most famous scholars, in the death, announced in last week's Critic, of James Darmesteter, Professor of the Persian Language and Literature at the Collège de France. He died on Friday, Oct. 19, at his country residence, Pavillon du Nord, Maisonneuve, near Paris, in the forty-sixth year of his age. His name is destined in the future for a place beside Anquetil du Perron and Eugene Burnouf in the temple of fame reared to Arabian Scholarship in France; and in life, Darmesteter studied and worked with the great German scholar, Goldsmidt of Berlin, the honor of being tied most eminent student recently at work in the field of Zoroastrianism.

James Darmesteter was born in Meurthe, France, on March 28, 1819, of Jewish parents; and he received his education at the Lycee Bonaparte, in Paris. At the age of seventeen he had won honors in university competition, and in 1868 graduated with the degree.

He studied law, but did not practice that profession, as he was attracted to Oriental philology, which he began to study in 1872, with Michel Bréal and Abel Bergaigne as his teachers. In 1877, he was appointed to give instruction in the Avesta, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, and in 1881 he was honored with the Secretarieship of the Société Asiatique de Paris. Four years later he was called to the Chair of Persian Language and Literature, which he occupied at the time of his death. Among the distinctions which were bestowed upon him for his services to learning was a membership in the Legion of Honor, given him in 1888; and only a year ago, his last great work, the translation of the Zend-Avesta, which appeared in three volumes (Paris, 1893-94), was crowned with the Volney Prize of 20,000 francs, as the most important production of French scholarship within the past decade. Some idea of the facility of his genius and the readiness of his gifted pen may be gathered from a list of his principal works. His first memoir, "Haurvatat et Amurat," an essay on the mythology of the Avesta, was judged worthy of a diploma of merit at the Institute of France in 1875.

The field of Islamism then for a brief period attracted his attention, and in 1885 he wrote a brochure, entitled "Le Mahdi, cespis les Origines de l'Islam jusqu'a Nos Jours," which appeared contemporaneously in English as "The Mahdi Past and Present."

In 1886 he was sent by the French Government on a philological mission to the East, and visited Afghanistan and India. Among other fruits of his year's residence in the Orient was a work on the "Chants Populaires des Alghans." (1888-90), which gave to the world a valuable collection of the folklore of that people. His next work was of a different character, "Les Prophetes d'Israel", which came out in 1892, and it attracted especial attention from the theologians, as did also, the introductory essay to the third volume of his recent French translation of the Avesta (published in the Musée Guimet series in 1893), in which he attempts to show the presence of Neo-Platonic ideas in certain parts of the Gathas or oldest Zoroastrianism.

Beside his professional duties as a teacher, Darmesteter found time to serve as co-editor of one of the literary reviews of France—"Oriental and Growth of Religion." James Darmesteter was a scholar of the first rank, imagination which carried him, however, sometimes further than other scholars in the field were willing to follow him; the wide breach of his learning was acknowledged on every side; he was characterized, furthermore, by a mental activity and productiveness which were as remarkable as they were indefatigable, and by a brain which was as vigorous and active as his body was frail. Gentle, modest, shy and retiring, his humanity would not be forgotten by one who had ever had the fortune to know him, either at his home in Paris, or at the sylvan retreat of his little château at Maisonneuve, whither he withdrew during vacations with his wife, the charming English poet, Mary Robinson. Like his distinguished brother, Ariste Darmesteter, who became famous in Romance philology, although he was called away by death before he had reached the age of forty, James Darmesteter, of cherished memory in Faramen philology, died too soon.

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