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MANFRED MAYRHOFFER



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26 SEPTEMBER 1926 · 31 OCTOBER 2011

WITH MANFRED MAYRHOFER, Professor Emeritus of General and Indo-European Linguistics at Vienna University, one of the most prolific Indo-European and Indo-Iranian scholars of our time died in Vienna, Austria, on 31 October 2011, at the age of 85. Because of the war, he had to leave high school prematurely to do his military service; after some months as a British prisoner of war, the 19-year-old with an artistic disposition enrolled in the University of Graz in autumn 1945 to study German literature.

Born on 26 September 1926 in Linz, Mayrhofer, the son of an engineer, soon came into contact at the university with historical-comparative linguistics, which at once cast its spell over him. He received his doctorate in 1949, and although he qualified as a lecturer in Indo-Iranian and Indo-European studies, he felt compelled to leave post-war Austria in 1953 to take the position of an assistant lecturer at the University of Würzburg to earn money. There, in the end, he was appointed full professor of comparative philology in 1958, and after a four-year interlude, which began in 1962, at the University of Saarland in Saarbrücken, he returned to his native Austrian skies in 1966 as professor at the venerable Vienna University, where he taught until his retirement in 1988. Soon he was elected a member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and in 1992, he was granted membership to the American Philosophical Society, among the numerous other honors and decorations he received at home and abroad.

Already in his student days, he set the course for the activity that was to play the dominant role in his life for decades. He began gathering material for a succinct etymological dictionary of Old Indo-Aryan, the *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*, which was published from 1953 in fascicles and, after changing its contents and making it more and more detailed, was completed in four volumes only in 1980. It was quite a courageous undertaking because until then, for more than half a century, there had been no useful work of such kind that would actually have filled the gap felt in this field.

Because Mayrhofer himself had recognized, however, that his original plan was not sufficient, he began working on the same topic a second time immediately after having completed the fourth volume. To replace the first parts, which he had already regarded as a kind of youthful folly for a long time and on the basis of the experiences he had made in the meantime, he got down to work anew. And he never stopped saying that the first dictionary and the new *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* have nothing in common other than their author and the subject matter. Without any doubt, this second dictionary, which was published from 1986–2001, is the best and most reliable etymological dictionary of any ancient Indo-European

language. As a far-reaching and verily revolutionary innovation, he made a sharp distinction in this work between the vocabulary attested already in the older literature of the Vedas and that of the younger (post-Vedic) texts (dealt with in volumes I–II and volume III, respectively), because they do not have much in common. For most words of the older vocabulary are inherited from Indo-Iranian and often from the Indo-European protolanguage, whereas most of the words attested only in later times (not earlier than the two great epics) are younger borrowings from the Middle Indo-Aryan vernaculars or even from non-Aryan (Dravidian or Austro-Asiatic) languages. Thus, in these two multi-volume dictionaries and the accompanying study on the oldest attested Rig-Vedic personal names (*Die Personennamen in der Rgveda-Samhitā*, 2003), the gradual development of a scholarly life from the beginnings to full maturity is mirrored.

But apart from this true “life’s work,” he published many other studies and handbooks on various and often problematic topics, and one might suspect that Mayrhofer did have more than only this one life. To the same Indo-Aryan complex of themes belong not only two textbooks on Sanskrit and Pāli, which demonstrate his exciting didactic skill, but also several surveys of the linguistic remains of the early Indo-Aryan attested in the Ancient Near East in the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE in the Mittani Empire. And the study of the various layers of the non-Aryan substratum and their problems in the course of time allowed Mayrhofer to reach a more and more skeptical attitude toward rashly assuming such substratum influences in the ordinary vocabulary, as well as in anthroponomastics.

Aside from his Indological work, one should not forget, however, his fundamental contributions to other linguistic fields. Before turning to the “second” Indo-Aryan dictionary, Mayrhofer presented us with a seminal phonological study of the Indo-European protolanguage, which was to straighten things out for himself in the field of phonological prehistory. That well-balanced presentation of all the phonological problems involved (not least of all subtleties of the laryngeal theory) has been taken up and is continued in a book (published in 2004) that looks back at the main phonological issues discussed during the 20th century and the epoch-making development of the opinions on that matter. To the same context belongs another study titled *Die Fortsetzung der indogermanischen Laryngale im Indo-Iranischen* (2005), which for the first time gives a full systematic account of the relevant data.

Listing Mayrhofer’s Indo-European studies would not be complete without quoting some of his contributions to the history of the discipline in the 19th and 20th centuries, for which he showed a lively

interest. Quite impressive is the discussion of the development of research during the 19th century, which is outwardly characterized by a notation of the reconstructed Indo-European phonemes receding from Sanskrit and getting closer and closer to the systems of Greek and other ancient European languages. He explained the history of Indo-European studies as a gradual turning away from Sanskrit and an overcoming of the initial Sanskritocentrism of people such as Sir William Jones. Another book discussed the ideas and theories of the young Ferdinand de Saussure concerning the Indo-European protolanguage and their reception by the present generations of scholars.

Because the closest relative to the Indo-Aryan languages is the family of the Iranian languages, it is a small wonder that Mayrhofer made his mark in the field of the Old Iranian languages, too. His first publication of that kind is the etymological glossary, which he contributed to the two editions of the Old Persian manual that his teacher Wilhelm Brandenstein, who was ill, could not write himself in time (*Antiquo Persa*, 1958; in expanded form *Handbuch des Altpersischen*, 1964). That glossary is a milestone in Old Persian studies because for the first time, it included the Old Persian lexical stock attested in the so-called collateral tradition of Elamite, Aramaic, Babylonian, and other sources. Owing to the limited number of authentic Old Persian texts, personal names are rather important for Old Iranian and, in particular, Old Persian lexicology and etymology, and because the indirect “collateral” tradition consists mainly in such names, they are a great help for dealing with questions of etymology and linguistic history in general and increasing lexical data beyond the texts of the Avestan corpus and the Old Persian royal inscriptions.

As he involved himself more and more in such anthroponomastic studies, Mayrhofer became firmly convinced that personal names play a central role in Old Iranian linguistic studies, and that for this very reason, it would be necessary to replace Ferdinand Justi’s *Iranisches Namenbuch* of 1895, which had become outdated in the meantime by the innumerable names attested in the various textual sources discovered in Iran and Central Asia at the beginning of the 20th century and later. To prepare a full collection of the anthroponomastic material of Iranian origin, he therefore initiated in 1969 a large-scale project of the Austrian Academy of Sciences under the title *Iranisches Personen-namenbuch* (of which at present, 14 parts are available). Mayrhofer himself prepared the first volume, in which he dealt with the names attested in the Avestan and Old Persian languages.

Before he set about that volume, he turned to the mostly Old Iranian personal names of the Elamite tablets of the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury archives, which just at that time (1969) had

become accessible for the general public, owing to the edition of Richard T. Hallock. In his *Onomastica Persepolitana* (1973), Mayrhofer presented an interim collection and a thorough analysis of those personal names and, by that, delivered a matter-of-fact interim balance based on a systematic study of the graphic correspondences between the Elamite writing and the Old Iranian form of the names. The careful judgment of former proposals concerning the etymological interpretation of the names reminded fellow scholars in particular of the requirement that any interpretation must be compatible with the Old Indo-Aryan personal names as to morphology and semasiology. Thus, this book (Mayrhofer's major contribution to Old Iranian anthroponomastics) also belongs to the *Personennamenbuch* project, even if it did not result immediately in a volume of that collection itself.

Only in his last years did Mayrhofer return to Iranian studies. In a small booklet published in 2006, he dealt with the meager remnants of the Scythian language, confining himself more or less to the words and names attested in Herodotus and paying special attention to dialectological features. In 2009, he got down to work on an etymological dictionary of Old Persian, which regrettably, he was not able to bring to completion because illness barred him from making the necessary bibliographical investigations in the specialist libraries.

Mayrhofer was a dedicated and an exceptionally stimulating teacher who was able to present even the most complicated thoughts and theories in a clear and easily understood manner; this is presumably the consequence of the fact that he saw himself, with regard to Indo-European studies, as an autodidact in many respects. On the other hand, in an autobiographical sketch, he characterized himself as "begeisterter Handbuch-Schreiber," who distinguished himself, as may be added, by an unsurpassed didactic skill combined with an unerring judgment.

A complete bibliography of Mayrhofer's publications may be found in the current author's book *Manfred Mayrhofer: Leben und Werk* (2012).

Elected 1992

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