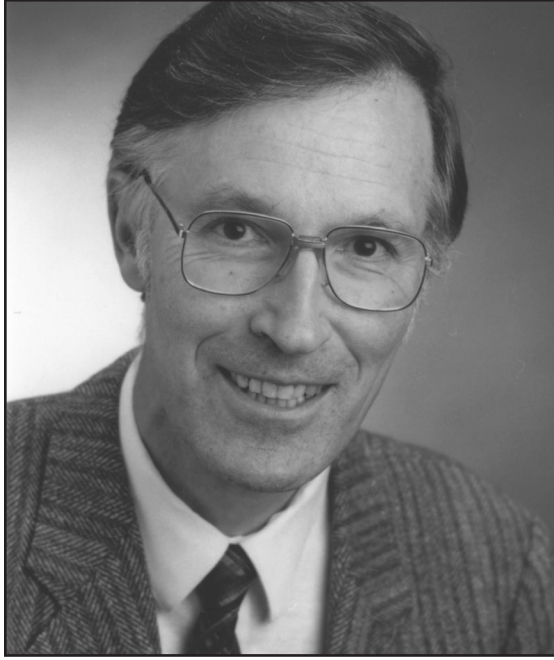

WALTER BURKERT



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“That good-natured chap will no doubt pass me, even if I skip classes the last three weeks of the seminar.” Such were my brother’s words. I had just finished high school in July 1959 and asked him to go hitchhiking with me through Scandinavia. He was weighing the risk of losing his seminar certificate for a whole term of Latin translation. That was the first time I heard of Walter Burkert, *Assistent* at the Institute of Classics at the University of Erlangen. My brother’s calculation proved right: the “good-natured chap” passed him after all. Sometime later, when I saw Walter Burkert at the Institute, I realized that it was probably not his good nature that was responsible for his leniency. More likely, he was not fully aware whether his students conscientiously attended his course. Seeing this tall, slim young man, pacing along the corridor with long strides, wearing shorts, with a pile of books under his arm, suggested that he was pretty much oblivious to his surroundings. Saying “hello” was not one of his habits.

In the summer semester of 1962, a seminar on Plato’s *Sophist* was held jointly by the Erlangen philosophers and classicists. I participated as a student of philosophy (to classics I turned only later). From the classicist side, Walter Burkert and the Latinist Otto Seel attended among others, next to the historian Helmut Berve, the most important of Burkert’s Erlangen teachers. From philosophy, we were joined by Paul Lorenzen, then a star amongst German philosophers, and Wilhelm Kamlah, the latter working at the time on his book *Platons Selbstkritik im Sophistes*. Walter said little, but when he spoke, it was clear to everyone that he had the most thorough knowledge of the text. That he regarded Kamlah’s thesis of Plato’s self-criticism as untenable was not immediately transparent from his skeptical but polite comments.

I did not witness Walter’s inaugural lecture as a *Privatdozent*, nor his first lectures and seminars. I had moved to Tübingen where, greatly impressed by Wolfgang Schadewaldt, I began to study Greek philology. When I returned to Erlangen for two terms, Walter was teaching in his fifth semester as *Privatdozent*. The *Ordinarius* Professor of Greek at the time was Alfred Heubeck, a renowned linguist and Homer scholar. His two-hour lecture on the *Iliad*, which regularly started at 8:00 a.m., was attended by some 80–100 students, packing the room to the last seat. Walter’s lecture on Euripides started after an hour’s break, in a much more spacious room, but of Heubeck’s large audience only five to six male students stayed on. It was not easy to follow the lecture. Intently focused on his manuscript—he hardly ever looked up at the audience—he spoke fast, with a somewhat fuzzy pronunciation, made even harder to follow because of his strong Frankonian accent. Yet, what he had to say was absolutely fascinating. In his interpretation of *Medea*, he addressed all possible ramifications of the myth, adding

relevant readings from the point of view of narratology and the history of religion, and drawing on a vast body of secondary literature. Medea's killing her children was interpreted as "sacrifice"—it was the semester when Walter conceived his later, famous article, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," which already contained the main ideas of his *Homo Necans* (1972).

While Professor Heubeck represented the solid standard of German Greek scholarship of those years, it was the young *Privatdozent* who was beginning to shine. The few students who stayed the course with this difficult scholar had understood that the young Walter Burkert was in a class of his own. In his seminars on Empedocles and Herodotus, again delivered to a small circle of students, he proved an excellent teacher, demanding a great deal from them and criticizing them promptly, though never in an offensive manner.

When Walter went to Washington, DC, with his family for a year to work at the Center of Hellenic Studies, I returned once more to Tübingen where, to my great surprise, I received a letter from him offering me the position of *Assistent* to the Chair he was about to accept at the Technische Universität Berlin. He knew full well that I had not yet sat the *Staatsexamen*. To offer a student a position before his final exam was a rather unconventional move. When Schadewaldt invited me to a similar position after I had passed the exam in Tübingen, I fulfilled my promise to work with Walter. Only later did I realize that I had chosen between the two foremost German Greek scholars of the 20th century.

At the new Institute in Berlin, the task was to speedily create a seminar library within the humanities, which the Senate of (West) Berlin wanted to establish as an alternative to the humanities at the Free University that had increasingly become dominated by extreme, left ideologues. Funding was no problem; the problem was that there were no students. Nonetheless, Walter offered his lectures, sometimes before an audience of no more than two or three students.

My time was divided between work for the library, writing my doctoral dissertation, and participating in the innumerable political events of the 1968 student movement. My early sympathies for the movement—sympathies that evaporated when the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact in August 1968 elicited no more than mild criticism from its leaders—were no secret to Walter. After all, I did not hide my views. But he refrained from making any critical remarks. Anyone who knew him, though, was well aware of his position. Even demonstrations against the Vietnam War seemed to him unjustified. Forty years later, our political views were to be reversed. At the time, Walter and I had no time to talk about my doctoral dissertation.

Only once did we find two hours to discuss certain textual problems of my edition of the *Categories* of the Neopythagorean *Archytas*. The remainder of my work, well over 90 percent, remained unknown to my *Doktorvater* when I submitted it to the Faculty.

In the spring of 1969 Walter moved to the University of Zurich as successor of Fritz Wehrli. Again he offered me the post of *Assistent*, an offer he was by no means obliged to make (there were other well-qualified candidates both in Berlin and in Zurich). In Zurich, Walter, for the first time, enjoyed a somewhat larger audience. His lecturing style changed, he began to speak more slowly, and poured fewer of his inexhaustible scholarly treasures over his students. How important teaching was to him became evident only years later when he was invited to join the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. His privately expressed response was that he would not like to spend the last 15 years before retirement without contact with the younger generation.

At least some of his Swiss students would have been astonished by this answer. Precisely at that time—I had just been elected *Vertrauensdozent*—a few among them complained to me about a certain personal coldness in the great scholar, whom they continued to regard as a German foreigner. But what Walter wanted to convey was not his personal humanity, but the stimulation of new insights. In this he was uniquely successful. Complaints came also from young female classicists. It was well known that Walter felt that academic career and family life were incompatible for a woman. Even for himself he saw a problem here, certainly in his early years. When I once asked him during our Berlin time whether he always worked at night, he answered with a painful expression on his face: “That’s impossible once you have children.” His wife Maria no doubt shouldered by far the greater part of the family burden all her life.

In spite of a lack of time for evening work, his knowledge of Greek philology, the history of religions, anthropology, and oriental studies increased year by year at an unimaginable pace. One precondition for this was his unique powers of focus. When in 1971–1972 Geoffrey Kirk spent a few months in Zurich as visiting staff from Yale, the Institute assigned him an office that was accessible only through another room. One afternoon Walter and I worked in the anteroom at desks opposite each other, in complete silence, as usual. After about an hour Geoffrey left his room and passed by our desks with a friendly “goodbye.” I responded in kind, while Walter did not even look up from his reading. An hour later, Walter had finally found what he was looking for. He got up and asked, “Where is Kirk?” I told him that he had left an hour ago. “That’s terrible,” Walter exclaimed. “I wanted to

talk to him urgently. I have important things to tell him.” I couldn’t but envy his extraordinary powers of concentration.

I was grateful that Walter had no inclination to interfere with my work. We never discussed my *Habilitationsschrift* on the metaphysics of Plotinus, although we regularly met in the Institute two to three times a week to raise all kinds of topics, from Homer to Lucian and Plutarch. When he realized well before my Habilitation that I had sided with the “Tübingen School” of Plato interpretation in my articles and reviews, he warned me that this decision might very well jeopardize my career. That I was not so much interested in a career as in a methodologically tenable Plato interpretation was an answer that was clearly not to his taste. As for himself, he told me much later that he had postponed the publication of the rather unconventional perspectives of his *Homo Necans*, conceived early in his career, for tactical reasons until he had secured his second chair.

Walter received repeated offers to move to German universities (which I only knew about through my wife, who was a close friend of Maria Burkert). Yet he preferred to stay in his Swiss “exile,” even if his relationship with the country of his choice remained ironically distanced. What attracted him to the Zurich region was the proximity of the Alps, where he liked to hike. When I asked him whether he did not suffer from vertigo, his answer had a tone of indignation that made me believe that he regarded a lack of such preconditions as reprehensible. In retrospect, after many years, I read his answer as a metaphor: in his scholarly work he had undertaken tours to such giddy heights where methodological, multidisciplinary surefootedness and freedom from intellectual vertigo in the face of daunting chasms and daring syntheses are indispensable preconditions.

Elected 1987

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I met Walter Burkert in 1985 when he had already written his most important works and was a famous scholar. *Lore and Science* (1962 in German; 1972 in English) was for a long time (and still is) the “Bible” of Pythagorean studies. *Homo Necans* (1972 in German) had become a best seller in its English translation (1983). *Greek Religion* (1977 in German) had been published in English (1985) as well as Italian (1984), and *The Orientalizing Revolution* (1984 in German) had been published as well.

I wrote to Walter asking if he would accept me as a Ph.D. student. I had received my master’s degree at Genoa in Italy and spent some years as a high school teacher in the Italian part of Switzerland without ever stopping my research into early Greek “philosophy.” When I stepped into the old-style building of the former Seminar für Klassische Philologie at the University of Zurich, I was feeling anxious at the prospect of meeting such a famous scholar. But as soon as I entered the small room, too small for the tall professor I encountered, all my fears vanished. In front of me stood the friendliest human being. I was impressed by his huge hands, which almost completely swallowed the small pencil he used for writing, and especially by his vivid, transparent, piercing eyes. As I also noticed later, he had a particular body language for communicating to students or colleagues his interest in what they were saying. He would lean forward, his face would light up, his eyes would become more piercing, and he would start nodding, “Yes, yes, yes.” It was quite clear that, already from the first sentence, he had caught all the implications of what was being said.

He was interested in my project on the language of Empedocles, but also asked very directly why I wanted to write a dissertation. “Because I love doing research” was my answer. This love had a price, though, as all his pupils knew very well, because he expected from them a total commitment to their research. “Do what you are interested in, but do it thoroughly” was the advice he gave graduate students in a later interview (Cape and Burkert 1988).

The meeting with Walter changed my life. His lectures, together with the countless talks and intense discussions with him over the following years, were an unforgettable experience. Ancient Greeks were raised from their “slumber” and began acting and speaking in real life. He would start from a very concrete, seemingly insignificant detail which would have gone unnoticed by anybody else and build on it to create a whole picture. He let himself be carried along by his love of searching and his excitement at discovering “shells,” the remains of ancient life, as he so effectively describes in his final comments at the end of his volume *Ansichten griechischer Rituale*, edited by F. Graf (2007, 443). He didn’t like starting from “theories”: “theories, for the

most part, erect barriers . . .” He was curious, wanted to look beyond: “I wouldn’t like to see this freedom limited by theories” (Barbu and Burkert 2007).

I received my Ph.D. in 1988. Walter had urged me to finish it by the summer semester because in the fall he would be leaving for the United States. In the meantime, he had been Dean of the Faculty for two years (a very demanding task) and had published the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1982 as *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987). Unlike many other historians of religion, he was ready to take seriously the “experiences” of the mysteries described in the ancient texts: “Being ignorant of the ritual and unable to reproduce it, we cannot recreate this experience, but we may acknowledge that it was there,” he says (114), in commenting on a passage from Proclus (*In Remp.* II.108.17–30 Kroll) about the different reactions of different souls to the mystery rituals.

Much has also been written and said about his commitment to biology and his search for “wild origins” in *Homo Necans* and related publications. Historians of religion have reproached him for being too heavily influenced by authorities such as Karl Meuli and Konrad Lorenz. Even if such criticism is partly justified, the basic principle guiding his research still remains valid: the more disturbing aspects of humanity—the body with its basic needs and animal impulses, sheer violence, and the struggle for survival—need to be included because they form the basis of “civilized” life. As he openly declared at the end of his introduction to the book, “The aspects of Greek religion and of humanity that emerge in this study are not those which are particularly edifying, not the ideal or the most likable traits of Greek culture. Yet we can invoke the Delphic god’s injunction that mankind should see itself with absolute clarity, no illusions: *Gnôthi sauton.*” In a sense his words were prophetic because these same aspects are dramatically emerging nowadays in our “good ordered world,” where rituals that have become far too raw for our tastes have been banished but sheer violence lurks under the surface of all our efficiency and political correctness.

Another subject that occupied him a great deal was the question of contacts between Greece and the Near East. After *The Orientalizing Revolution* he deepened his knowledge of the oriental world by learning to read cuneiform at the Theological Faculty in Zurich together with a group of students and professors. He attended these lectures regularly almost until his death. The second volume of his *Kleine Schriften: Orientalia* (2003) and *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis* (2004), the first edition of which was published in Italian (*Da Omero ai Magi*, 1999) from lectures he had given at the University of Venice (German expanded version: *Die Griechen und der Orient*, 2003),

testify to this enthusiasm and offer careful readers an enormous amount of useful suggestions and materials.

Although religion and oriental studies occupied him the most, his interest in early Greek philosophy continued to find expression in his lectures and publications. Paradigmatic in this regard was his ongoing study of the Derveni papyrus which reflected all these interests. Less well known is the impulse he gave his students to read the Hippocratic writings. Several Ph.D.s in the nineties revolved around this subject; to me, personally, it opened the way for a deeper understanding of the Presocratics.

In 1990 I was employed as assistant and my first task was to translate into Italian the speech he would be giving at Rome, in German, on receiving the prestigious Balzan Prize. He wanted an Italian version for the organization's archive. He mentioned the prize only in passing, as he was to do on many other occasions when receiving his many honorary degrees.

During the same year we had moved out of the old building at the present location of the Seminar, the wonderful 19th-century Villa Tanneck in central Rämistrasse. Eventually Walter got a more spacious room whose doorway he could enter without being forced to bend his head. This door was always open to students, collaborators, and foreign scholars who came for advice. He managed to create a friendly atmosphere just by being there. When he spoke about his research, or was simply in a good mood, he released an enormous, contagious energy. Even his notorious state of "distraction," due mostly to his total absorption in his studies, was something special. Once the Italian lady responsible for cleaning the Seminar rooms complained to me because often he didn't greet her when meeting her on the stairs in the morning. Was he angry with her for some reason? In fact she was bumping into him before his lectures when he used to rush downstairs to the library with a tiny piece of paper in his hands to check some quotation. At times like those, he noticed nobody.

In 1990 I began working on my *Habilitationsschrift* (*Democrito e l'Accademia*, 2007). Walter had suggested the subject himself because in his opinion there was still much to do in this field. As for the rumors about his attitude toward women's academic careers, perhaps he had changed his mind over time because I didn't notice any discrimination whatsoever. He gave both Eveline Krummen and me the warmest support when we were writing our *Habilitationsschrift* and, from the eighties onward, almost half of his Ph.D. students were women. He was equally supportive when I gave birth to my daughter in 1992, and told me to take care because I was not *furchtbar jung* [terribly young]; but a



FIGURE 1. Walter Burkert at the feast for his 75th birthday organized by Christoph Riedweg at the Swiss Institute of Rome on February 2, 2006. Courtesy of Christoph Riedweg.

few weeks after the birth he was already urging me to get back to work on my *Habilitationsschrift*.

From 1993 until his retirement in 1996 I worked with him as a research assistant collecting fragments and testimonia of the early Greek Atomists. The planned edition never saw the light of day because after his retirement he was absorbed by other more urgent tasks and had neither the energy nor the time for such a demanding project. He could well have retired two years later; when I asked why he didn't I was told one has to retire at the right time, and that was all.

After my Habilitation in 1996 I stayed on in Zurich, sharing the same office with him. Often he would return with news of his many lectures and conferences all over the world, recounting the most knowledgeable anecdotes about scholars both living and dead. But oriental studies and religion were the subjects he enjoyed speaking about most. It was also his way of communicating on a human level. He didn't say too much about his personal successes or tragedies. Even the death of his wife, which affected him so deeply for the rest of his life, was only mentioned very occasionally in conversation although it was clearly an open wound.

Despite his wide-ranging interests he remained an outstanding philologist who never, until he died, gave up working intensely on textual problems (Figure 1). One day he walked into the office excitedly holding the text of the Getty magical tablet, and showed me a

controversial passage in the first few lines: he had come up with a brilliant conjecture, which he published as “Genagelter Zauber. Zu den ‘Ephesia Grammata’” in the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (2012). In December 2014, a few weeks before the accident that led to his death, he told me he had just sent off to *Gnomon* his review of *The Getty Hexameters* (Faraone and Obbink 2014). He regretted that his conjecture was not mentioned in the book: possibly it had not been accessible to the contributors. This review, published in *Gnomon* in 2015, was to be his last publication.

Elected 1987

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