



DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, JACQUES

DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, JACQUES (b. Jupille, a suburb of Liège, 21 April 1910; d. Liège, 8 February 2012), distinguished scholar of classical philology, especially concerning ancient Indo-Iranian studies ([PLATE I](#)).

Duchesne-Guillemin was attracted by the study of languages when he was still very young. At high school, he learned the usual modern languages as well as Latin and Greek. He studied classical languages and Indo-European comparative linguistics at the University of Louvain in Belgium and received his doctorate in 1931. As a young scholar, he received a scholarship that enabled him to go to Paris, where he stayed for two years attending the lectures of [Antoine Meillet](#), the eminent scholar in Indo-European studies, and acquiring a deep knowledge of Sanskrit thanks to Sylvain Lévy and Louis Renou at the Sorbonne. He also studied Armenian and soon graduated with a field of specialization in that language.

From that time on, he devoted a special attention to Iranian studies. He was deeply impressed by [Émile Benveniste](#), who was teaching Iranian languages at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. His lectures were mainly devoted to the explanation of the [Avesta](#) and its grammar. He also taught Old Persian, Middle Persian, Sogdian, etc. Duchesne-Guillemin's thesis, *Les composés de l'Avesta*, a significant study of Avestan philology that is still a quite valuable contribution, was soon published (1936) and reprinted many times.



Duchesne-Guillemin returned to his country and, as a fellow researcher in the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique, entered the University of Liège, the only place in Belgium where Iranian languages were taught. Under the guidance of Auguste Bricteux (1873-1937), he learned Persian and Middle Persian, and he acquired a firm knowledge of Arabic. After the unexpected death of his master, he started teaching as a lecturer in 1937 and became a full professor in 1943. He taught Avestan, Old Persian, Vedic, Persian, and Middle Persian. He was also responsible for a course on Islamic art. He travelled around the world and lectured at several universities, including Columbia University in New York, the University of Chicago, the University of California in Los Angeles, etc. Most significant was his fruitful discussions with [Walter B. Henning](#) in London, who at the time was deeply engaged in the study of the Manichaean documents of Central Asia.

Duchesne-Guillemin's major publications were devoted to various Indo-European languages, including Tokharian, Hittite, Greek, etc. He proposed original etymologies for Avestan words and various explanations of texts (e.g., see "Les citations avestiques" 1936; "Aw. *Θraētaona*," 1936; "Etymologies avestiques," 1941; "Miettes iraniennes," 1960, etc.). He also published a number of articles on Old Persian, one of his favorite fields (e.g., "v.p. *θarmiš* 'comble,'" 1954; "Old Persian *artācā brazmaniy*," 1962; "Old Persian *yāumaniš*," 1969).

Without neglecting linguistics and philology, he evolved very soon as a historian of Iranian religion. He was soon recognized as a great specialist and gained an international reputation. He published his major work, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, in 1962, a work that, despite the recent developments in the knowledge of the Zoroastrian religion, is still considered a masterpiece and the best scholarly introduction to Zoroastrianism.

At the end of the World War II, he became enthusiastic about the research of [Georges Dumézil](#), who, in his book *Naissance d'archanges*, gave a new interpretation of the [Aməša Spənta](#) ("Holy Immortals"), created by [Zoroaster](#) on the model of the Indo-European tri-functional ideology. Duchesne-Guillemin wrote a favorable review in the *Revue d'histoire des religions* (1946). He also contributed to the theory (see especially the chapter on these entities in his book *The Western Response to Zoroaster*, and his article "The Six Original Creations," 1967, where he explains the six elements in the cosmology of the [Bundahišn](#)).



In 1948 Duchesne-Guillemin published his *Zoroastre*, which was considered at the time as the most faithful translation of the [Gathas](#). It was commended by Walter B. Henning, the eminent scholar of Iranian studies, and translated into English by Mrs. Henning, as *The Hymns of Zarathustra* (1952). Throughout his life Duchesne-Guillemin continued the study of these obscure texts. He examined Yasna 45 in relation to the Zoroastrian calendar (*BSOAS* 13, 1950), proposed also a study in the order of the Gathas (*La nouvelle clío* 4, 1953), and gave an interesting exegesis of the prayer [Ahuna Vairya](#) (*IJ* 2, 1958). In an important article, “Les hymnes de Zarathuštra” (1961), he published a very helpful summary of the Gathas, actually a sort of guide to the labyrinth of these difficult poems. The title of the article takes also a stand on the nature of the Gathas: they are indeed hymns or prayers, comparable to what is found in the Rig-Veda, and not litanies proposing a dogmatic view. In his article “On the Complaint of the Ox-Soul” (1973), he showed, contrary to the theory of [Herman Lommel](#), that the ox was addressing [Vohu Manah](#), the “Good Thought,” [Mithra](#)’s substitute, according to the theory of [Dumézil](#).

His article “Le *xvarənah*” (1963), a brilliant study of this important solar concept, symbol of holiness and royalty (see [FARR\[AH\]](#)), is of special significance. It is a concept created in Iran, since the word is not found in Indian sources. Duchesne-Guillemin opposes the interpretation given by Harold Bailey, who considered the *xvarənah* as “The Good Things of Life” without any etymological relation with the sun (Bailey, p. 51). He would return to this issue in several articles (e.g., “La royauté iranienne et le *xwarənah*” 1979, and “Sonnenkönigtum und Mazdareligion,” 1983).

It was not the only debate, always courteous though, where he objected to his colleagues. He repeatedly took a firm stand against the theories of Marijan Molé in his *Culte, mythe et cosmologie ...* and firmly held in several reviews (*RHR*, 169, 1966; *Oriens*, 18-19, 1966) that Mazdean eschatology developed at a comparatively late period. He also crossed swords with [Robert C. Zaehner](#) in his review of Zaehner’s *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (*IJ* 7, 1964, about [Zurvanism](#)) and often returned to that issue (*JNES*, 1956).

The controversial question of a supposed Zoroastrianism held by the Achaemenids also attracted the attention of Duchesne-Guillemin. His positions have, by his own admission, varied, which reflects a man totally opposed to doctrinaire attitudes. He accurately presented the problem that, on the one hand, no archeological data, Achaemenid inscriptions, and Greek authors give any trace of Zarathushtra’s teachings, and, on the other hand, no



Avestan documents, while difficult to place in time and space, make any reference to Persia or Media (see, e.g., *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, p. 165; "Religion et politique de Cyrus à Xerxès," 1969; "Le dieu de Cyrus," 1975).

Duchesne-Guillemain also focused attention on the peripheral religions of Zoroastrianism and on the mutual influences of the beliefs in that region.

Regarding [Mithraism](#), he showed that the tauroctonous Mithra could be related to Ahriman ("Aiōn et le léontocéphale: Mithras et Ahriman," 1960). He has also taken a position in favor of Michael Speidel, who explained the Roman god Mithra as an amalgam of the Iranian god Mithra and the Greek hero Orion (*Numen* 29, 1982).

The relationship between Iran and Greece also raised his curiosity. He highlighted ideas about the relationship of the human body and parts of the universe, thereby connecting Iranian cosmogony with the philosophers of Ionia ("Persische Weisheit ..." 1956; "D'Anaximandre à Empédocle," 1966). He also found an analogy between the Heraclitus' Logos and the concept of *arta* ("Fire in Greece and Iran," 1962; "Heraclitus and Iran," 1963). The small kingdom of [Commagene](#) in the southeast of Asia Minor between Greece and Iran also aroused his curiosity ("Iran and Greece in Commagene," 1978).

He was also interested in Iranian influences on the Jewish world. He explained the names of Ahasuerus's (Xerxes) eunuchs in the [Book of Esther](#) ("Les noms des eunuques d'Assuérus," 1953). He saw Iranian influence in the Essenian *Manual of Discipline*, where predestination plays an important role in the distinction between the Spirit of Good and the Evil Spirit and is reminiscent of the theory of [Zurvan](#), transcending [Ohrmazd](#) and [Ahriman](#) ("Le zervanisme et les manuscrits ...," 1957). Regardless of Iran, Duchesne-Guillemain focused on biblical exegesis. He shows that in this passage ("Genèse I, 2c, ...," 1982) Elohim (God), having created the heavens and the earth, hovers over the waters, when it had not been created. In fact, the Hebrew word should be translated "flapped its wings" and, according to the Egyptian parallel (Isis, in the form of a falcon, flapping to revive Osiris) and Ugaritic myth, it is indeed a creative act.

It is a well-recognized fact that Avestan sources are also at the origin of certain features of the Muslim religion. Having shown that, in the Avesta, Yima ([Jamšid](#)) gathered herds and men with a horn (Avestan *suβra* and not a sting, as it was previously believed), Duchesne-Guillemain suggested that the Iranian word is the origin of the Arabic *ṣur*, the instrument that Israfil (Esrāfil) uses to



announce the final judgment (“Cor de Yima et trompette d’Isrāfil ...,” 1979).

The legend of the three [Magi](#) was also the object of his attention from an eschatological perspective. He shows that the Magi are a representation of three ages, namely youth, middle age, and old age. However, in the Hellenistic period, January 6th, which is the date of the feast of the Magi, was the anniversary of Aiôn, the Greek interpretation of Iranian Zurvan (“Aiôn et le léontocéphale ...,” 1960). In his research, Duchesne-Guillemin used a profusion of Christian iconographic data and thus provided important contributions to history and philology (cf. “Die drei Weisen ...,” 1965; “Jesus’ trimorphism ...,” 1973).

The history of art played a major role in the scientific life of Duchesne-Guillemin. Far from Iran, he became interested in the names of his hometown (“Des villes et des rivières”, *CEBEDEAU*, Liège, 1957) and he recognized the spires of St. Cross and Saint-Pierre represented on the Merode triptych, which is kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (“On the Cityscape ...,” 1976). It should also be noted that he devoted three articles to the sculptor Brâncuși.

Iranian art occupies an important place in his works. He gave a tri-functional interpretation of dicephalus figures shown on the seals of [Persepolis](#) and on [Kushan coins](#) (“De la dicéphalie dans l’iconographie mazdéenne,” 1960). In other studies, he shows that [Sasanian art](#) was inspired by politics and kingship, before being a religious art, as it was previously in [Achaemenid art](#) (“Art et religion sous les Sassanides,” 1970; “Art and Religion under the Sassanians,” 1974).

Middle Iranian is represented in his works by a brief but penetrating study of a Pahlavi text (“Le texte pahlavi Xosrow et son page ...,” 1975). He also devoted several studies to Persian (e.g., “Persan dōšizā,” 1946; “Sur la construction adnominale ...,” 1973). He was also a great admirer and connoisseur of metrics in the poetry of [Hafez](#) and published some articles devoted to the poet (e.g., “Pour l’étude de Hafiz,” 1981).

Because of his reputation as a fine scholar, he was invited to give his contributions to general works such as *Forschungsbericht on Avestan* (L’étude de l’iranien ...,” 1962 ; “Cinquant’anni di ricerca ...,” 1962), as well as in special collections, for instance, *L’âme de l’Iran*, 1951; *Les religions de l’Orient Ancien*, 1957; *Histoire des religions*; *Camb. Hist. of Iran*, 1983; etc.) or in an



encyclopedia (*Religionswissenschaftliches Wörterbuch*, 1956; *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*; *Der Kleine Pauly*; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, etc.).

Duchesne-Guillemin was affiliated with several scholarly associations. He was a member of the Royal Academy of Denmark and the foreign correspondent of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris. When he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Tehran, he had the opportunity to start the series *Acta Iranica*, more than fifty volumes of which have been published so far. In 1970, he was also a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Iranian Studies.

Beyond Iranian studies, he was passionately interested in literature and music. He became interested in Saint Francis of Assisi (e.g., see “L’univers de Saint François d’Assise ...,” 1959; “Il cantico del sole ... d’Assisi,” 1959). His natural inclination to the study of difficult texts like the Gathas was probably the factor that led him to the interpretation of difficult poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé (“Au sujet du « divin cygne » ... ,” 1948; etc.). He also published various articles on André Gide and Alain Chartier, Alessandro Manzoni, Marcel Proust, etc.. But it is mainly the works of Paul Valéry, another difficult author, which occupied him for a very long time. He published four volumes on Paul Valéry’s poetry: *Introduction à “L’âme et la danse” de ...*, 1946; two studies on *La jeune Parque* and on *Charmes*; and *Études pour un Paul Valéry*, 1964. Between 1946 and 1973, he published more than fifteen articles on the poet.

Among all his activities, music had a seemingly modest, but exciting, role. Since his youth he played the flute, an instrument that he never abandoned. Without being a great virtuoso, he held a very respectable position in the small orchestra of the University of Liège under the guidance of master Julien Ghyoros. Some people fondly remember his interpretation of the two flute concertos by Mozart.

Socially he was very affable and courteous. Those who worked with him were struck by his incisive wit and ability to tackle a problem with a critical approach, which sternly but with no malignancy eliminated adventurous theories sustained by some of his colleagues. In his activities as a scholar, as in ordinary life, he never departed from a sort of irony that always remained within the limits of his great benevolence.

To celebrate his centenary in 2010, a symposium on the Gathas was held at the



University of Liège. The acts were published in *Acta Iranica* volume 54 together with other contributions that were included in his honor.

His wife, [Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin](#) (1907-97) was a musicologist who specialized in ancient Near Eastern music. She discovered a particular musical theory inscribed on a Babylonian tablet in the Museum of Philadelphia. She also interpreted a Hurrian text that contains probably the oldest musical notation ("A Hurrian Musical Score from Ugarit: The Discovery of Mesopotamian Music," 1984). On the Iranian side, she published a study on the Iranian harp with plectrum ("La harpe à plectre iranienne," 1969), one on the musical instrument in the Sasanian period (*Les instruments de musique dans l'art sassanide*, Leiden, 1993), and another one on an equestrian statue of Mithras ("Une statuette équestre de Mithra," 1978), preserved in the Paul Getty Museum. A volume of the *Acta Iranica* series (34) was devoted to a collection of her articles, titled *Monumentum Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin* (Leuven, 1999).

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