



EILERS, WILHELM

EILERS, WILHELM (b. 27 September 1906 in Leipzig; d. 3 July 1989 in Würzburg), German scholar of oriental studies, particularly of Iranian onomastics, lexicography, and dialects ([Plate I](#)).

Life. The son of a grammar school headmaster, Eilers received a classical education, then studied law at the universities of Freiburg im Breisgau, Munich, and Leipzig, where he received his doctorate in 1931. He then continued work in oriental studies at Leipzig with Hans Heinrich Schaeder, an authority on pre-Islamic Iranian languages and religions. He followed Schaeder to Berlin in 1931, where he received the *habilitation* (accreditation as university lecturer) in 1936. His other teachers included Paul Koschaker, an historian of ancient law, who drew Eilers's interest to cuneiform law; the Assyriologists Benno Landsberger, F. H. Weissbach, Johannes Friedrich, Heinrich Zimmern, and Paul Schwarz, an authority on Arab geographers. Thus Eilers' field of research extended over the whole of the Middle East and from the oldest written sources in Sumerian to present Oriental studies. For some time Eilers was Schaeder's assistant in Berlin. He participated in the excavations in Uruk/Warka in 1932-33. In 1936 he became the head of the new Persian base of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut at Isfahan. When the Allies occupied Persia in September 1941, he was interned in Persia and then for five years in Australia. In 1947 he was able to resume his career, as a lecturer in Hebrew and Old Testament studies at the University of Sydney. After refusing a professorship in Colombo, Ceylon, he returned to Germany in 1952 and served as an expert in Oriental studies at the Westdeutsche



Bibliothek in Marburg, a post-war provisional successor to the former Prussian State Library in Berlin. He also lectured at the university in Marburg.

In 1958 Eilers was appointed to the professorship in Oriental philology at the University of Würzburg. Although he was offered in 1962 the professorship in ancient Near Eastern studies at the University of Vienna, he stayed in Würzburg and taught there until his retirement in 1974. That year he received an honorary doctorate from Tehran University. Eilers was an ordinary member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (1973), an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Cordoba (1963), and one of the initial consulting editors of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

Works. Eilers was one of the most versatile Orientalists of the recent past, doing research in Semitic and cuneiform as well as in Old and New Iranian studies. He himself listed his specialties as legal history and cuneiform law, epigraphy, dialects, folklore, folk poetry, noun-formation, lexicography and onomastics, etymology, comparative semantics, and general grammar (*Acta Iranica* 20, 1979, p. 149). He could have added archaeology, history of religion, Semitic roots, and several other fields. Eilers, whose first academic training was in law, did his earliest research on the cuneiform sources of legal history. He wrote a thesis in 1931 on Old Babylonian law (*Gesellschaftsformen im alt-babylonischen Recht*, Leipzig, 1931) and an annotated German translation of the Code of Hammurabi (*Die Gesetzesstele Chammurabis. Gesetze um die Wende des dritten vorchristlichen Jahrtausends*, Leipzig, 1932), works which employed a primarily philological approach. He then turned to onomastics, writing an important book and several articles on Iranian personal names and official titles as attested in late Babylonian documents (“Eine mittelpersische Wortform aus frühachämenidischer Zeit?” *ZDMG* 90, 1936, pp. 160-200; *Iranische Beamtennamen in der keilschriftlichen Überlieferung*, *AKM* 25/5, Leipzig, 1940, of which only this first part was published; “Kleinasiatisches,” *ZDMG* 94, 1940, pp. 189-233).

Eilers’ onomastic interests eventually centered on the geographical names of Persia and adjacent countries, his major works on this subject being *Der Name Demawend* (Hildesheim, 1988, originally published beginning in 1954), *Geographische Namen-gebung in und um Iran* (Munich, 1982), and *Iranische Ortsnamenstudien* (Vienna, 1987). Able to work with the sources of five millennia, Eilers attempted to study each name in its proper context and to analyze systematically categories of names of places, rivers, mountains, or peoples. Believing that it was natural, for example, for a village to be named



after a river, or a town after a region, he tried to formulate the principles of such toponymic transfers (“Einige Prinzipien toponymischer Übertragung,” *Onoma* 21, 1977, pp. 277-317). Eilers tried to consult all the sources available of whatever age or language and to take into account the actual topography. He also took into account the semantic parallels from other cultural areas made available to him through his linguistic skills and his knowledge even of quite distant languages and European and Middle Eastern classical writers. He applied the same methods to elucidate the common nouns of Iranian and Semitic languages (*Die vergleichend-semasiologische Methode in der Orientalistik*, Mainz and Wiesbaden, 1974). Using such material as star and planet names, he made clear that such “synnoematic” studies are essential in understanding problematic words and names (“Stern-Planet-Regenbogen. Zur Nomenklatur der orientalischen Himmelskunde,” in *Der Orient in der Forschung. Festschrift für Otto Spies*, Wiesbaden, 1967, pp. 92-146; *Sinn und Herkunft der Planetennamen*, Munich, 1976).

During his years in Isfahan Eilers extensively recorded spoken dialects and carried out studies in folklore. His material on northwestern Iranian dialects, the modern offspring of ancient Median, was published in the bulky volumes of *Westiranische Mundarten aus der Sammlung Wilhelm Eilers* (3 vols. in 4, Wiesbaden, 1976-79; Stuttgart, 1988). These accounts of the vernaculars of K̄vānsār, Gaz (near Isfahan), and Sīvand (see CENTRAL DIALECTS) also contain numerous stories and other texts, as well as an extraordinary collection of material for the study of the ethnology, folklore, history, and civilization of this region.

Another project, which he began planning in 1935 and which occupied much of his time thereafter, is the *Deutsch-Persisches Wörterbuch* (2 vols., Wiesbaden, 1967-83). In this dictionary, which reached only the word *feucht*, Eilers tried to record words in their syntactic and idiomatic contexts. Eilers’ unpublished notes for further volumes are now at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.



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