



## RITTER, HELLMUT

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**RITTER, Hellmut** (b. Lichtenau, Kurhessen, Germany, 27 February 1892; d. Oberursel, Hessen, 19 May 1971, [FIGURES 1–2](#)), German scholar of Islamic studies, and particularly of Persian literature and mysticism. He was one of seven children of a Protestant minister. His brother Gerhard (1888-1967) became an influential historian, who held professorships of modern history at the University of Hamburg (1923-25) and the University of Freiburg (1925-1956). His brother Karl Bernhard (1890-1968) was an important Protestant theologian and politician, while his brother Friedbert (1900-81) worked from 1931 until 1961 as a high-ranking executive officer in the chemical industry.

Hellmut Ritter studied in Halle with [Carl Brockelmann](#), in Strasbourg with Theodor Nöldeke and Enno Littmann, and in Hamburg with Carl Heinrich Becker, as his research assistant for Persian. He passed his doctoral examination in 1914, at the age of 22. During World War I he served as an interpreter for Turkish, Persian, and Arabic in the German staff seconded to the Ottoman army, first in Iraq and subsequently in Palestine. In the winter of 1915-16 he was able to visit the Iranian plateau when he accompanied Field-Marshal von der Goltz Pasha on his journey from Baghdad to Kermanshah (Kermānšāh), where the Ottoman army hoped to recruit allies among the Persian tribes. In 1919, at the age of 27, he was appointed to the chair (“Ordinarius”) of Oriental languages at the newly founded University of Hamburg (which had been preceded by the Kolonialinstitut dedicated to the academic training of civil servants for the German colonies). Ritter published,



in 1923, his German translation of Ghazali's (Ġazāli, q.v.) *Kimiā-ye sa'ādat* with additions taken from the *Eḥyā' 'olum al-din*. The choice of the text may have been related to the fact that he had to supervise Julian Obermann's "Habilitation" on *Der philosophische und religiöse Subjektivismus Ghazalis*, which was subsequently published (Vienna and Leipzig 1921). His main connections were, however, with the Warburg Institute in its initial home in Hamburg (it moved to London in 1933), mostly with the eminent art historian Fritz Saxl, rather than with its founder, Aby Warburg himself. The lecture on the Arabic text of the *Picatrix*, delivered in Hamburg in 1922, led him to the study of Hellenistic and medieval magic and brought him together with notable art historians such as Erwin Panofsky.

His career came to an abrupt end when, in 1925, he was charged with and convicted on grounds of homosexuality, and sentenced to prison for a year. He lost his chair as a consequence and was dismissed from the university at the end of March 1926. Ritter had been working at the time on Nezami's (Nezāmi) *Haft paykar*, and it was in prison that he finished his famous *Über die Bildersprache Niẓāmīs* (Berlin and Leipzig 1927), an innovative study of metaphor and *'elm al-bayān* (see [BAYĀN \(1\)](#)) informed by the tradition of German Iranian studies (Rückert, Ethé) and Romantic poetry. At the same time he made his first attempt at translating an Arabic primary source in rhetoric and literary theory, 'Abd-al-Qāher al-Jorjāni's (q.v.) *Asrār al-balaġa*; a task that he finally completed three decades later (Arabic text, 1954; German translation, 1959).

Ritter left Germany in 1926 when he was granted a scholarship to "continue his studies on Persian literature and mysticism." [Ernst Herzfeld](#) had proposed that he should go to Iran, but instead he was sent to Istanbul, probably due to diplomatic reasons, for the cultural as well as the military relations that Germany had fostered with Turkey since the nineteenth-century were much stronger.

German orientalists were already dimly aware of the wealth of the hitherto untapped collections in Istanbul libraries, but when Ritter began to examine them at close quarters he was so overwhelmed by the sheer quantity and high quality of the existing material that he changed the direction of his research. The manuscripts were dispersed in different holdings across the entire city and hitherto only poorly catalogued in incomplete *defters* (*daftar*), replete with errors; while the material preserved in other towns (Konya, Bursa, Ankara, etc.) had not yet been catalogued and publicized at all. Ritter's preliminary aim

was to have the most important manuscripts available in printed editions. In this respect, those written in Persian did not fall into this urgent category, as it was always assumed that older and perhaps better copies might exist in Iran. Manuscripts of classical texts in Arabic, however, abounded. Ritter first sent his notes to [Carl Brockelmann](#) in order to have them included in the *Supplement to the Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (the first volume of which appeared in 1937), but when he saw that many of the editions which had been made on the basis of manuscripts belonging to European libraries had to be re-edited, he concentrated on specific cases. This was the starting-point of his “Philologika,” a series of 16 articles published between 1928 and 1961. The first issue dealt with Ebn al-Nadim’s *Fehrest*, a crucial text that had been published in a careful but incomplete and inadequate way by [Gustav Flügel](#) in 1870. Persian texts did not come in until

Philologika VII (on Arabic and Persian treatises on profane and mystical love), VIII (on Anṣārī Haravi and Sanā’i Ġaznavi), X (on [Farid-al-din ‘Aṭṭār](#)), XI (on Jalāl-al-Din Rumi), and in the end of the series, XIV-XVI (again on ‘Aṭṭār; for details see the bibliography below).

In order to have the hitherto unknown texts published, he established the “Bibliotheca Islamica,” which was funded by the German government under the auspices of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft from 1929 onward, and which functioned even through the worst years of the economic depression. He contributed the first two volumes himself: Aṣṣāri’s *Maqālāt al-eslāmiyin* and Nawbaḳṭi’s *Feraq al-šī’a*, both early works on heresiography which enhanced the understanding of religious developments in the first centuries of Islam to a higher level, not only because of their contents, but also thanks to his meticulous editing. For the *Ketāb feraq al-šī’a* he used, besides a manuscript from a private collection in London, a second copy belonging to the Shi’i scholar Hebat-al-Din Šahrastāni (1884-1967), whom he had met in Iraq during World War I and who had written a pro-German [fatwa](#) concerning jihad against the British which Ritter translated into German (published by Becker in *Die Welt des Islams* 4, 1917, pp. 217-25).

Ritter had always hoped that he would be recalled back to Germany. In February 1933, Carl Heinrich Becker passed away suddenly, and Ritter saw himself for a moment as the obvious successor to his Berlin chair. But instead the opposite happened: the National Socialist government, having come to power shortly before, did not extend his contract, and his future appeared altogether uncertain. It was only thanks to the intervention of Paul Kahle, the



secretary of the German Orientalist Society, that he was allowed to stay on, albeit on a rather low salary, and pursue his research. In the midst of all this turmoil he chose to concentrate on Nezami's *Haft paykar* again. He had collated the manuscripts preserved in Istanbul and had established a stemma, but meanwhile the Czech scholar Jan Rypka at Prague University had also independently embarked on editing the text. They met together in Istanbul in 1933 and agreed to co-edit the poem; the edition came out a year later in Czechoslovakia. But one Turkish manuscript (Fatih 3748) was discovered too late and could only be incorporated as an addendum. The Persian manuscripts had not been consulted at all; they provided the basis for the edition by Wahid Dastgerdi (Tehran 1936).

It seems unlikely that, for the first years after 1926, Ritter visited Iran. But in Istanbul he had access to publications by Iranian scholars, and some of these he reviewed in the first volume (1933) of *Istanbululer Mitteilungen*, the newly founded periodical of the German Archeological Institute in Turkey. Among these books was 'Abbās Eqbāl Āštiāni's study of *Kānadān-e Nowbakhti*, (Tehran 1932), where he found the first reference to Sa'd b. 'Abd-Allāh Qommi's *K. al-Maqālāt wa'l-feraq* (which Eqbāl had thought to be identical with the *Feraq al-šī'a* edited by Ritter).

1933 was also the year when Atatürk decided to close down the old Dar-ül-fünun in Istanbul and replace it with a modern university based on Western lines. The project required hiring European specialists for all those disciplines falling outside the boundaries of the traditional curriculum of an Islamic *madrassa*. The vast majority of the specialists employed were German scholars who had lost their posts at home because of the racially discriminating policies of the German authorities. Ritter, who had led a rather solitary life in the course of the preceding years, could now enjoy the company of a growing number of his compatriots, most of them about his own age. He was at first not considered for one of these new positions, but in 1935 he too was offered a lectureship in Arabic and Persian. When, two years later, an Oriental Institute (Şarkiyat Enstitüsü) was established at Istanbul University, he was appointed its first director, with the German title of "Ordinarius." His brief was to help in educating a new generation of Turkish "orientalists" to study their indigenous Islamic tradition using European methods of scholarship. Among his first students were Ahmet Ateş, Tahsin Yazıcı and, later on, Fuat Sezgin.

Ritter had always had a wide-ranging interest in classical Persian literature. Nezami's *Haft paykar* (see above) had first attracted his attention when, in

1924, he was asked to review C. E. Wilson's English translation (*Der Islam* 15, 1926, pp. 111-16). In 1929 he wrote an equally astringent critical review of Arthur Christensen's edition and translation of Omar Khayyam ("Zur Frage der Echtheit der Vierzeiler 'Omar Chajjâms,'" *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* [OLZ] 32, pp. 156-63); but in this case the work on an improved text was taken up by other German scholars: Christian Rempis (1935) and Hans Heinrich Schaeder (1937). In 1932 he translated a few ghazals of [Hafez](#) ("Nachdichtungen persischer Poesie," in *Festschrift Georg Jacob*, Leipzig, 1932, pp. 222-32); like his other poetry translations (from Arabic and Turkish) they exhibit a mastery of the original language coupled with his gift for an inspired rendition into German. In 1935 he turned to scientific and technical prose and, in cooperation with an art historian (Friedrich Sarre) and two historians of science (Julius Ruska and Rudolf Winderlich), dealt with two texts related to the so-called "stone-books," (see Storey, *PL* II/3, (f) Mineralogy, p. 451) a genre which had already attracted his attention while he worked on alchemy and magic during his time at Hamburg: a treatise on the fabrication of tiles composed in [Kashan](#) in the year 700/1300, and another one on lapis lazuli (*lājavard*), describing places where it was to be found as well as its different uses (*Orientalische Steinbücher und persische Fayencetechnik*, *Istanbul Mitteilungen* 3, 1935). When, in 1937, [Fritz Meier](#) who had recently embarked on his dissertation on the text of [Abu Eshâq Kâzaruni's](#) *Ferdaws al-moršediya fî asrâr al-šamadiya* came to Istanbul and wrote an article on local manuscripts containing texts of Persian mysticism (*Der Islam* 24, 1937, pp. 1-39), Ritter added a few remarks on [Najm-al-Din Dāya's](#) *Resālat al-ṭoyur* (pp. 39-42). In 1939 he turned his attention to Jalāl-al-Din Rumi's *Mathnavi*, translating and commenting on its famous proem (*ZDMG* 93, pp. 169-96). He had already reviewed, in 1935, vols. III-VI of Nicholson's edition and translation (*OLZ* 38, pp. 243-44), and later on he extended the boundaries of his research to include Rumi's father [Bahā'-al-Din Moḥammad Walad](#) and his son [Bahā'-al-Din Solṭān Walad](#) ("Maulānā Ğalāluddīn Rūmī und sein Kreis," *Der Islam* 26, 1942, pp. 116-58 and 221-49; partly published already in Turkish: "Mevlānā Celāladdīn Rūmī ve Etrafindakiler," *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 7-8, 1940-42, pp. 1-93). While serving in the army during World War I, he had visited the Mevlevi tekke in Istanbul, and when it was closed by a governmental decree in 1925, he reconstructed the dancing ritual together with its music according to the information given by Rauf Yekta Bey, the old "concert-master" of the tekke ("Der Reigen der 'Tanzenden Derwische'," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* 1, 1933, pp. 28-40). When the ban on the mystical orders was lifted under the Adnan Menderes government after World War II, he



attended the resumption of the ritual during the Mevlana festival at Konya in 1960 and described the event in a deeply moving article (“Die Mevlânafeier in Konya vom 11.-17. Dezember 1960,” *Oriens* 15, 1962, pp. 249-70).

The most striking lacuna in Ritter’s Persian agenda was Ferdawsi’s *Šāh-nāma*, which in the 19th century had become part of the German cultural memory. He treated this work only briefly in an article for *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (IV, pp. 643-49 s.v. *Firdevsī*). But in reviewing Yaḥyā Qarib’s edition of ‘Onṣori’s *Divān* (Tehran 1945) Ritter noticed at once that, in the verses which were left over from the romance of *Wāmeq o ‘Aḍrā*, numerous proper names pointed to a direct “Vorlage” in Greek, that is, a Hellenistic love romance (*Oriens* 1, 1948, pp. 134-39); only Moḥammad- ‘Ali Tarbiyat (“*Wāmeq o ‘Aḍrā*,” *Armaḡān*, 12/8, 1931, pp. 519-31) had anticipated him in this respect (without, however, trying to decipher the original names from their deformed rendering in the Arabic script; for the *status quaestionis* cf. now Tomas Hägg and Bo Utas, *The Virgin and her Lover*, Leiden, 2003, pp. 12-13 and 153 ff.).

The main focus of his research, however, gradually shifted from Nezami to ‘Aṭṭār. In “Philologika X” (finished in June 1937) he had tried to establish a chronology of ‘Aṭṭār’s works and to eliminate the pseudepigrapha on the basis of ‘Aṭṭār’s biography and spiritual development. When he edited the *Elāhi-nāma* in 1940 (Bibliotheca Islamica 12), he chose a text which was undoubtedly authentic. But his evolutionary hypothesis lost much of its credibility when, in 1942, Sa‘id Nafisi published his *Jostoju dar aḡwāl o āṭār-e Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār-e Nišāpuri*. Ritter still insisted on his old approach in the entry on ‘Aṭṭār in the *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (II, pp. 6, published before 1949), and he based on it his conclusion that ‘Aṭṭār’s *Jawhar al-dāt* (which he still thought to be authentic) might have been the source of the proem to Rumi’s *Mathnavi* (ZDMG 1939, see above). But in the introduction to his *Das Meer der Seele* (p. 1, n. 1) he revoked his hypothesis referring to an article written by his pupil Ahmet Ateş.

Ritter’s edition of *Elāhi-nāma* remained unchallenged for 20 years, until 1960, when Fu‘ād Ruḡāni brought out a new edition based on manuscripts in Tehran which had been inaccessible to Ritter. Ritter never commented upon Ruḡāni’s text, but shortly before his death he was asked by UNESCO to revise John Andrew Boyle’s English translation (later published as *The Ilahi-nama*, Manchester 1976), which had been made on the basis of the Ruḡāni edition. Together with three other epics (*Manṭeq al-ṭayr*, *Moşibat-nāma*, and *Asrār-nāma*), the *Elāhi-nāma* furnished not only the main material but also the title of his magnum opus: *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt und Gott in den*

*Geschichten des Farīduddīn ‘Aṭṭār* (Leiden 1955), an encyclopedic manual which guides the reader through the psychology of Islamic mysticism. Ritter uses a structure similar to the old hierarchy of *maqamat* applied by Qoṣayri and others in order to categorize ‘Aṭṭār’s stories and bring them into a systematic order. The book is the best introduction to date into Sufi thought, full of original ideas and a document of immense erudition.

As a kind of finger-exercises to his magnum opus of almost 800 pages, Ritter wrote a few minor studies to which he occasionally refers in *Das Meer der Seele*: a short essay on Bāyazīd Bestāmī and his *Šaḥīyāt* (“Die Aussprüche des Bāyezid Bisṭāmī: Eine vorläufige Skizze,” in *Festschrift R. Tschudi*, ed. F. Meier, Wiesbaden 1954, pp. 231-43), an article on *Muslim Mystics’ Strife with God* (*Oriens* 5, 1952, pp. 1-15; originally read as a paper at Oxford and Cambridge in 1950), and another one on the beginnings of the Ḥorufiyya [[Horoufism](#)] (*Oriens* 7, 1954, pp. 1-54; Persian tr. Ḥ. Mo’ayyad, *FIZ* 10, 1962, pp. 319-93), published as the second volume in his series *Studien zur islamischen Frömmigkeit* which he had started in 1933 with an attempt at collecting and interpreting the sayings of Ḥasan al-Baṣri (*Der Islam* 21, pp. 1-83). Concerning the chapters on love, mystical and profane, which form the center of his book he translated from Russian an article by I. Krachkovsky on the story of Laylā and Majnun (*Oriens* 8, 1955, pp. 1-50). But ‘Aṭṭār remained his favorite topic. In the last issues of his “Philologika” he returned to Sa’id Nafisi’s hypotheses which he partly rejected (especially with regard to his assumption of three different authors by the name of ‘Aṭṭār; *Oriens* 11, 1958, pp. 1-76) and dealt very extensively with ‘Aṭṭār’s *Divān* (ed. S. Nafisi, Tehran 1941), comparing parallel verses by Sanā’i and Hafez (*Oriens* 12, 1959, pp. 1-88), with the *Moḳtār-nāma* (which contains ‘Aṭṭār’s *Robā’iyyat*) and the *Pand-nāma* a short moral treatise which was very popular among the Turks (*Oriens* 13-14, 1961, pp. 195-239).

The *Meer der Seele* had a long gestation period and was finished only after Ritter’s return to Germany. Since, like all German emigrants in Turkey, he had only a temporary teaching contract, he was dismissed from his professorship when, according to a more democratic university law, Istanbul university became autonomous in 1948. In 1949 he was fortunate enough to get a position as “Extraordinarius” at Frankfurt University where he was promoted to “Ordinarius” in 1953. However, because of personal reasons and concurrent university troubles, he left Frankfurt again in 1956, shortly before his official retirement and only one year after his magnum opus had come out, and returned to Istanbul; this is why his last studies on ‘Aṭṭār are again directly



based on manuscripts.

Upon his return to Istanbul, he took part, along with Herbert Wilhelm Duda and Ahmet Ateş, in a UNESCO initiated project to catalogue the manuscripts of Persian poets preserved in the libraries situated all over the town, and he also resumed teaching again at the university. But the material he collected was, apart from “Philologika” XIV-XVI, published only posthumously (Benedikt Reinert in *Oriens* 29-30, 1986, pp. 110-258), for he put it aside unfinished when, during a stay in Beirut as visiting professor at the American University in 1960, he discovered a community of Monophysite Christians from Tur ‘Abdin (in Turkey) who had lived in Lebanon as refugees since 1915 and who still spoke their native Aramaic (Western Syriac) language. Their dialect had been studied around 1880 by Eugen Prym and Albert Socin, but Ritter collected new texts and started preparing a grammar and a dictionary. He was hampered in his work by increasing illness, and of the five volumes he had planned only three appeared during his lifetime. He died in 1971 at the age of 79.

One cannot, strictly speaking, describe Ritter as an Iranian specialist. He was the last German orientalist of encyclopedic outlook, before the age of specialization. He published with equal vigor in the field of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and with his Turoyo studies he abandoned the world of Islam completely. He dealt with poetry and prose alike; the only field that he scarcely touched was Islamic jurisprudence. His approach was philological, but his aesthetic sense was highly developed. He was not particularly interested in methodology (except for *Editionskritik*), but his intuitive feeling for the nuances of individual expressions helped him to become a master of interpretation and translation. He combined the capacities of a scholar with those of an artist. A practicing musician, he was also a disciplined researcher, and though not particularly religious himself, he showed much empathy towards expressions of religious sentiments, rational or irrational. He could be moody at times and suffered from occasional depressions. He enjoyed a higher reputation abroad than in Germany; he had been elected a corresponding member of the Arab Academy of Damascus, as well as a member of the British Academy, and was awarded an honorary degree by Istanbul University. Among his generation of German scholars, he was the person who had the closest contacts with Near Eastern colleagues, and was accepted by them without any anti-“orientalist” bias. In the cemetery of the former German embassy in Tarabya at the shore of the Bosphorus a stele was erected in his honor (cf. Gudrun Schubert, “A Ritter Memorial in Istanbul,” *Manuscripts of*

*the Middle East* 4, 1989, pp. 138-43). Another memorial exists in Nishapur on the grounds of 'Aṭṭār's mausoleum.

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