



## HUMBACH, HELMUT

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**HUMBACH**, Helmut (b. Munich, 4 December 1921; d. Mainz, 3 April 2017; [Figure 1](#)), German scholar of comparative Indo-European linguistics and Iranian studies.

After having finished his secondary education and completed his military service during World War II, Helmut Humbach was able to take up his studies of Indo-European linguistics (with Ferdinand Sommer) at the University of Munich in the summer of 1946. In 1951, he received his doctorate degree (with an [unpublished] thesis on the PIE feminine forms in *\*-os* and *\*-ā*). At the suggestion of [Karl Hoffmann](#) (q.v.), Humbach then specialized in the [Avestan language](#) (q.v.) and prepared a new edition of the Zoroastrian Gathas (q.v.) for his habilitation in 1954. In 1956, he was appointed full professor of Comparative Linguistics and, from 1958, Oriental Studies at Saarland University in Saarbrücken. From 1961 to his retirement in 1990, he held the chair of Indo-European Philology at the University of Mainz (*Répertoires*, p. 263). There for some time Jean Kellens and Prods Oktor Skjærvø worked with him as assistant lecturers.

Whereas in his courses he lectured on ancient European languages, too, Humbach's own research centered on the pre-Islamic languages and history of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, especially on Avestan and Zoroastrian studies as well as Sasanian and Bactrian epigraphy. Up to old age, Humbach continued to publish major and minor studies on all these subjects, which often served as preliminaries to his books. For the Avestan studies in particular, he applied the method introduced and approved by his



teacher Hoffmann, which is characterized by examining each single word both philologically and linguistically in every detail of its phonology, morphology, syntactical use, semantics, and etymology. This is plainly seen in all his seminal editions of Avestan texts, as well as in the multitude of circumstantial papers. In this way he combined not only philology and linguistics, but also epigraphy.

The first highlight of Humbach's Avestan studies was the edition of *Die Gathas des Zarathustra* (2 vols., 1959) with German translation and commentary. Here he did not content himself with a strict linguistic analysis of the single forms, but he applied for the first time a systematic internal comparison within the Old and Young Avestan texts (in order to make out ambiguities, associations, diverging relations, and the like), as well as a careful and detailed comparison with the grammatical data and the lexical evidence of the Vedic language and in particular of the *Rigveda*, a path followed a century earlier by [Martin Haug](#) (q.v.). The reason for that strongly linguistic attitude was that, on the whole, the Middle Persian (and even more the Sanskrit) translation was not especially helpful for an appropriate understanding of the Gathas, which owing to linguistic developments were not sufficiently understood in the late Sasanian period.

Further characteristics of Humbach's work are the following: He used the methods and principles of textual criticism, as they were already customary in Classics for a long time but not yet applied in Old Iranian studies. In his translation, he attempts to render what is denoted in the text by the linguistic features and not what is meant, and this in spite of the fact that at times the translation becomes somewhat obscure or not entirely clear.

In the detailed introduction are treated, inter alia, the orthoepic and orthographic editorial alterations of the text over the course of time by, for example, modernizing or normalizing divergent forms. Nonetheless, the transmission of the Gathas in Humbach's eyes is much more reliable than what former scholars (like [Christian Bartholomae](#) [q.v.]) had thought. In great detail, the stylistic figures, such as paraphrases, metonymies, etc., are collected, and in particular the fixed formulas, stylistic devices, and compositional principles used by [Zoroaster](#) (q.v.), which can be traced back up to the Proto-Aryan period. All these are carefully analyzed in the commentary, which on the other hand does not strive at all for a factual or material explanation. Altogether, Humbach is firmly convinced that the Gathas are not didactic or even dogmatic verse sermons (*Verspredigten*, as Bartholomae had



called them), but religious hymns performed at the sacrifice for invoking and glorifying *Ahura Mazdā* (q.v.), who therefore is addressed by name in a considerable number of the hymns.

After 1959, as Humbach continued with his Avestan studies, in addition to various other works (see below), his opinions on the Gathas changed in many ways. These changes formed the background for later publications of updated (English) translations of that Old Avestan core text of Zoroastrianism. In the meantime, after having summarized his methodical principles and his views on Zoroaster in a series of lectures (see Humbach, 1984), in 1991 he published, together with Josef Elfenbein and Prods Oktor Skjærvø, a thoroughly revised English edition, which included also the other Old Avestan texts like the great prayers and the *Yasna Haptanhāiti*. The substantial introduction outlines the whole spectrum of questions concerning Zoroaster, his date, homeland and work, including of course the history of the text, dialectal influences on it and the role of the oral and written tradition, which had not always been judged correctly in the past. Again, the figures of speech and Zoroaster's rather elaborated and sometimes cryptic poetical technique are illustrated by several examples. Also the commentary itself has been expanded considerably.

This 1991 revision is remarkable in that Humbach points out in greater detail that more essential linguistic information for the elucidation of Avestan can be drawn from the other Old Iranian sources — the Young Avestan and the Old Persian inscriptions — rather than the interpretations to be found in the Pahlavi literature. In addition, consulting the large corpus of Old Indian Vedic texts, and the *Rigveda* in particular, is absolutely essential for the study of the Gathas, because both Old Avestan and Vedic have a common linguistic and cultural source, Proto-Aryan. Particularly for non-experts, he attempts to clarify his philological method by asking two different questions: First, what did Zoroaster say “literally” (i.e., according to the grammatical rules, on all levels from phonology up to syntax, lexicon, phraseology and word order), and second, “what did the prophet mean by what he said?” (Humbach, 1991, I, p. 74).

The new approach of studying and translating the Gathas, characterized by the rigorous methods of modern philology, made it necessary to disregard entirely the inadequate Pahlavi tradition. Therefore, Humbach presented, with the help of Pallan Ichaporia, a readable and readily available translation (Humbach, 1994) in order to facilitate access to the Gathas as an important poetic as well as religious document for all people interested in



Zoroastrianism (and expressly not for scholars). Because of that he confined the commentary to a rather short (six-page) introduction and only a few notes.

Almost the reverse is to be found in his fourth (and last) translation of the Gathas (Humbach, 2010, pp. 73-163), in both English and German, thus further revising and developing the earlier ones of 1959 and 1991 respectively. But absolutely new is the introductory part preceding the translations, which presents a quite impressive and extensive examination of the Gathas' sociolinguistic background. Humbach took up many subjects already treated in his previous publications with a new way of argumentation and thus brought them up-to-date. Humbach's goal was to make access to these most ancient and most important testimonies of the Mazdayasnian religion easier. He treated not only the traditional subjects (Zoroaster, Avesta, the Gathas, their language, etc.), but also, as the title of the book makes clear, turned attention to the prophet's rivals and antagonists, with whom Zoroaster had to strive seriously. Thus, here also the later development of Zoroastrianism in Eastern Iran is brought up in a fitting manner.

Humbach's interest in Avestan studies was not restricted to the Gathas. He also dealt with several Young Avestan texts of different kinds. The first of those studies was the examination (undertaken together with Kaikhosroo M. JamaspAsa) of an Avestan text with Pahlavi translation, the *Vaeθā Nask* (q.v.; Humbach, 1969a), which only in 1966 was for the first time published as a whole. Without a doubt, this is a modern concoction in a rather faulty language, but not just a forgery, because it consists of (more or less faithfully rendered) quotations from original Avestan passages, although some of them show influences from Middle Persian or even New Persian. Humbach was able to correct the interpretation of the text in many respects, and moreover the two authors could make it clear that, whereas all the extant manuscripts date from the 19th century, the origin of the text itself goes further back.

Two years later, Humbach edited and published (with translation, extensive notes and glossaries) a Zoroastrian text of an entirely different type (again together with JamaspAsa), the catechism-like *Pursišnīhā* (q.v.) 'Questions' (Humbach, 1971), which had been somewhat neglected in Avestan studies. The work is based on one of the most famous Iranian manuscripts, TD<sub>2</sub>. *Pursišnīhā*, a text of the *Rivāyat* genre, presents 59 questions in Avestan and Middle Persian concerning fundamental issues of the Zoroastrian faith, together with the appropriate answers, which mostly are substantiated by



numerous quotations from Avestan texts.

The edition of another such Avestan-Pahlavi text about problems of the Zoroastrian cult, the *Nērangestān*, which Humbach had started, for some reason never could be finished. Only the edition (in transliteration and transcription together with a quite literal translation) of the *Hērbedestān* (q.v.), which precedes the *Nērangestān* in the manuscripts, was completed with the help of Josef Elfenbein (Humbach, 1990). The *Hērbedestān* discusses in detail and at length matters related to the religious education of Zoroastrians. Although it belongs to the well-known Zoroastrian scriptural tradition, the text remains in vast parts unintelligible and elusive.

Only one of the greater Young Avestan texts was studied by Humbach more carefully, namely the *Zamyād Yašt* (q.v.; Yašt 19), which is of importance for the Avestan geography and thus is related to another central topic of Humbach's scholarly activity (see below). At the same time, this is the reason that in the study of the *Zamyād Yašt* (Humbach, 1998, with Pallan R. Ichaporia) the grammatical and lexicographical aspects of the text are not of the foremost concern, but rather its previously less considered philological problems, since we have here also an essential document of the Mazdayasnian views on the early history of the Iranians, both mythical and legendary. This double nature of the text, which is reflected in its two different titles in the manuscripts (*Zamyād Yašt* and *Kayān Yasn*), finds its explanation in that the text can be divided into two parts, (1) a short list of the mountains of the Iranian world (secs. 1-8, called "The Geographical Fragment" by Humbach) and (2) an enumeration of the members of the *Kayāniān* (q.v.) dynasty holding the *farr(ah)* (q.v.) or (Av.) *x<sup>v</sup>arənah-* "glory", on which their kingship is constituted. Those two parts are tied together in the textual tradition because one of the mountains, Mount (Av.) *Ušaδā* (or *uši.darəna-*) is also of some importance in the Zoroastrian eschatology. Questions of the *Yašt*'s content, name, and (quite defective) transmission are fully treated in the introduction.

Here it may be added that Humbach's very last book (Humbach, 2016), a small collection of articles, some of which dealt with the geographical names attested in the Avestan lists of countries and regions in *Yašt* 10.14-15 and *Vidēvdād* 1.2-19 (including the Pahlavi translation and the version of the *Bundahišn*), is testimony to his perpetual interest in the geography of Iran and Central Asia. The merit of the book lies in the comments which Humbach adds to many of his previous publications, and he does not hesitate to correct, append, or revoke his views.



Humbach's interest in Iranian (historical) geography ultimately brought him to the study of Iranian place-names and their history in classical Greek (and Latin) sources. When he began his research, the most urgent task seemed to him to study, in particular, Book 6 of Ptolemy's "Geography" (*Geōgraphias hyphēgēsis*) with the aim of a new edition of this important source for ancient geography of Iran and Central Asia. This task had become more important for Iranian and Central Asian studies since archaeological expeditions in various countries were rather active and successful, and UNESCO had launched a major project on the "History of Civilizations of Central Asia."

Humbach had studied the description of the Central Asian countries in Ptolemy's "Geography" for decades. His first articles on Ptolemaic geography appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and he regularly returned to the subject (e.g., Humbach, 1961a, 1972) and finally published the new edition, together with Susanne Ziegler (Humbach, 1998-2002). In this edition, Ptolemy's maps are reconstructed in a simplified manner (vol. II). In order to produce a solid foundation for future linguistic and onomastic research, he also included the information given by other ancient and medieval historiographers and geographers from Ammianus Marcellinus (q.v., ca. 330/35-395) up to Moḥammad b. Musā K̄vārazmi (ca. 780-850) (which had been collected at Humbach's suggestion by Maria Gabriela Schmidt in *Die Nebenüberlieferung des 6. Buches der 'Geographie' des Ptolemaios*, Wiesbaden, 1999).

The last of Humbach's studies on Ptolemy covers semasiological and onomasiological studies on Herodotus and Ptolemy, i.e., mainly etymological examination of those geographical names and analysis of the information gained from regional and ethnic studies (Humbach, 2012, pp. 22-85). Here, resuming his earlier studies, Humbach discusses also the onomastic material (theonyms, anthroponyms, geographical names, and ethnics) attested in Herodotus's "Scythian Logos" (Humbach, 2012, pp. 1-21). He made a number of new proposals (some of them certainly being rather daring) for the interpretation of the words and names attested in Herodotus and other Greek authors and expressly those ascribed to the Scythians. He attempted to draw conclusions from these data, as far as possible, about the linguistic development of the Iranian tribes on the northern frontier of the Achaemenid Empire and north of the Black Sea.

Another important field of Humbach's research is epigraphy, or to be precise, the epigraphy of some Middle Iranian languages. And because a considerable part of their records is made up of inscriptions of quite different



kinds, Humbach, who had studied and edited numerous inscriptions in various (mostly Middle Iranian) languages, dealt also with more general questions, e.g., the methods used for examining and interpreting epigraphic sources. Based on his own intensive studies in this field, he also contributed an outstanding survey on the theme, its problems, and how to overcome them to the *Encyclopædia Iranica* (“EPIGRAPHY i. OLD PERSIAN AND MIDDLE IRANIAN,” VIII, pp. 478-88).

When for the first time a longer Bactrian (see BACTRIAN LANGUAGE) inscription was found in 1957 in Surkh Kotal [Sork̄ Kōtal] and the first interpretations by André Maricq (q.v.) and Walter B. Henning (q.v.) were published, Humbach could further investigate this text which he understood, in contrast to the supposed misinterpretation by Henning, as a metrical hymn on the apotheosis of the Kushan king Kaniška (see KUSHAN DYNASTY), and he developed an interpretation of the text as a Mithraic hymn (Humbach, 1960a; 1966-67).

For studying the Bactrian language and its development, Humbach also used the seven younger so-called Hephthalite fragments from the Berlin Turfan Collection (Humbach, 1961b), in spite of their relatively poor preservation. Some years later, after two other versions of the great Kaniška inscription changed the situation, Humbach published a collection of all available linguistic documents (inscriptions, coins, seals) written in the Bactrian language (Humbach, 1966-67). But he still maintained his former analysis of the Kaniška text to a large extent, even if there were some alterations as regards content. Only afterwards, his points of view on this key text of Bactrian came closer to the common opinion, and in the end he admitted his “misinterpretation” (Humbach, 2016, p. 13) of that inscription. Later, he published the newly found text of Dašt-e Nāwor (q.v.; Humbach, 1976) and even the first Bactrian graffiti from the Upper Indus Valley (see below).

In the course of time a number of inscriptions from the reign of the Mauryan emperor of India, Aśoka (q.v., ca. 272-231 BCE), had come to light in Afghanistan (Kandahar, etc.) and Pakistan (Taxila), which were written in a regional post-Achaemenid form of the Aramaic (q.v.) script and turned out to be versions of Aśoka’s edicts. Humbach could establish that the language of those inscriptions mirrors the development of the official Aramaic of Achaemenid times towards the Middle Iranian languages of the same type (Parthian, Middle Persian, etc.), and he was the first to see that several observations led to the presumption of some (regional) Middle Iranian



language, “eine Art Ur-Pehlevi,” as he described it (Humbach, 1969b, p. 12) and called “Aramaico-Iranian.” The definite proof for the heterographic character of the Aramaic forms, and thus for the existence of such an Iranian language, was found in the dating formula of one of the Laghmān inscriptions (cf. Humbach, 1974).

When, in 1979, a German-Pakistani expedition found the first graffiti and rock-paintings at the Karakorum Highway in the Upper Indus Valley, Karl Jettmar, the co-leader of that expedition, was able to persuade Humbach to edit about 200 rock-inscriptions, nearly all in the Sogdian language (q.v.). Based only on photographs (not always of good quality), Humbach published the first part of what are now many thousands of such graffiti (Humbach, 1980). Afterwards Nicholas Sims-Williams took on this task for the final edition of the complete documentation of the archaeological materials found by that expedition. Most of those short texts belonging presumably to the 4th-6th centuries BCE consisted only of personal names, so that the explanation as memorial inscriptions was unavoidable.

In the field of the Western Iranian languages, Humbach’s interest was enthralled by one of the greatest and most important, but at the same time most problematic of Sasanian documents, the bilingual Middle Persian-Parthian inscription of Paikuli. The inscription was in part known from H. C. Rawlinson’s sketches, and later could be reconstructed to a greater extent by Ernst Herzfeld (see HERZFELD iv. HERZFELD AND THE PAIKULI INSCRIPTION). Nevertheless, still in the 1970s, the text was in a regrettably miserable state of preservation. The inscription had once been written on an estimated 220 to 240 stone blocks, which formed the wall of that tall monument but are preserved (or known by photographs) only by half that number, even after Humbach had collected and examined new further scattered materials (first-hand copies and photographs).

Apart from several preliminary and detailed studies, all the relevant work of Humbach and Skjærvø, who supported him actively in translating and commenting on the texts, resulted in a rearrangement of the blocks and the attempt of a not only careful but masterly restoration of their numerous lacunas (Humbach, 1978-83). This outstanding three-volume edition was a great step forward, set a new high standard, and is still the authoritative treatment of the Paikuli document. Strictly speaking, the epigraphic work is strongly supported by a detailed grammatical analysis of the text that is actually preserved, along with a glossary, whose context and content are also



analyzed, as far as it is possible in view of its incompleteness; in any case, the basic structure of the text is ascertained once and for all.

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