



# KIRSTE, JOHANN FERDINAND OTTO

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**KIRSTE, Johann Ferdinand Otto** (b. 1 October 1851, Graz, Austria; d. 2 May 1920, Graz, Austria), Austrian scholar of Indo-Iranian languages ([FIGURE 1](#)). He served from 1892 until his death as professor of oriental languages at the University of Graz (*Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz*). Though his major achievements concern the edition and linguistic interpretation of Old Indic texts, Kirste was an important pioneer of the study of the paleography and grammar of Avestan and Pahlavi.

Kirste was born into a Calvinist family which in the 18th century had lived in Lissa, a city in the district of Posen in Poland, then a province of Prussia. His father Johann Martin Kirste (1783-1854) was a rope-maker, who in 1816, shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, obtained the citizenship of Graz, an important trading city of the Hapsburg Empire. He established himself as a master rope-maker (*Hofseilermeister*), and became a wealthy and respected business man. Johann Martin Kirste belonged to the founding members of Graz's Protestant congregation and Protestant school. He married twice, and had a daughter and a son with his second wife Antoinette Hieronimy (1817-91).

Johann Kirste received his primary and secondary education in Graz, and after graduating from high school (*Gymnasium*) in 1870, he enrolled at the University of Graz to study Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit with Karl Schenkl



(1827-1900). From 1872 until 1874, in the traditional manner of the time, Kirste studied at several German universities to broaden his training. He first enrolled at Jena, where he strengthened his grasp of Sanskrit with Berthold Delbrück (1842-1922), and afterwards moved to Leipzig to take courses in Vedic and Sanskrit with Hermann Brockhaus (1806-77) and in comparative linguistics with Adalbert Kuhn (1812-81). He spent the academic year 1873/74 in Berlin, where he studied with the Sanskritist Albrecht Weber (1825-1901) and learned Lithuanian with the Slavist August Leskien (1840-1916). In the fall of 1874 Kirste returned to the Hapsburg Empire to complete his academic training at the University of Vienna. He worked on comparative linguistics with Friedrich Müller (1834-98) and Slavonic languages with Franz Xaver von Miklosich (1813-91), and also attended the lectures of the physician Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke (1819-92), the author of a seminal study of the anatomical foundations of speech (*Grundzüge der Physiologie und Systematik der Sprachlaute für Linguisten und Taubstummenlehrer*, 1st ed., Vienna, 1856). In 1876, Kirste was awarded a Ph.D. in comparative linguistics for a dissertation on the palatal sounds (“Über die Palatallaute”).

From 1881 until 1884, Kirste lived in Paris, and was enrolled at the *Ecole pratique des hautes études* where he focused on Vedic, Old Iranian, and Middle Iranian. To continue his work on the Slavonic languages Kirste spent the academic year 1884/85 in Belgrade, the control of which the Ottoman Empire had finally ceded to Serbia in 1867. After a short sojourn in London Kirste returned to Austria in 1885. At the University of Vienna he worked with the Indologist Georg Bühler (1837-98) under whose direction Kirste completed in 1886 a second, more extensive dissertation (*Habilitation*) and was granted the licence to teach university courses in the fields of comparative linguistics, in particular of the Indo-European languages, and Sanskrit.

Kirste’s academic training combined the study of Indo-Iranian and Slavonic languages with comparative linguistics. He was particularly interested in comparative grammar, and for his research he acquired an extensive knowledge of many languages. He spoke not only German, but also French Italian, Russian, Serbian, and English. Kirste was the first to translate into German *Gorski vijenac*, the Serbian national epic about the liberation of Montenegro by Petar P. Njegoš (1813-51), known as Peter II the Prince-Bishop of Montenegro.

Kirste was hired for an entry-level position (*ausserordentlicher Professor*) as professor of oriental languages at the University of Graz in 1892. The



university's Institute of Oriental Philology comprised two chairs (sing. *Lehrkanzel*) which were dedicated to Indo-Iranian and Semitic languages, respectively. Kirste held the Indo-Iranian languages chair (*Lehrkanzel für Orientalische Philologie I Arische Abteilung*), while the Arabist Nikolaus Rhodokanakis (1876-1945) was from 1904 until 1942 professor of Semitic languages (*Lehrkanzel für Orientalische Philologie II Semitische Abteilung*). Kirste was promoted to *ordentlicher Professor* in 1895, and in 1902 he was appointed as *Ordinarius*, a position that he held until his death in 1920.

Among Indologists Kirste is still highly regarded for his work on Indian manuscripts (Lochner, 1976, pp. 81-82; Walter Slaje in Kirste, *Kleine Schriften*, p. v), and his published contributions to Iranian studies document his abiding interest in codicology and paleography (Lochner, 1976, p. 83; 1991, p. 46). Kirste published two papers on Avestan alphabets (1897, 1898), which were based on documents in the manuscript collection of the Indologist [Martin Haug](#) (1827-76) and on documents in the British Museum in London, respectively. Kirste deciphered Pahlavi legends on Sasanian gemstones (1888 b), and proposed to interpret *𐭮𐭭𐭮𐭭 𐭮𐭭* (1888 b), which is preserved in Kushan coin legends (see [BACTRIAN LANGUAGE](#); [HUVIŠKA](#)), as derived from Pahlavi *šāonāno šāo* ("king of the kings"). In his last major work (1917), Kirste studied the legends of coins from Eastern Turkestan to construct, beginning with the form O𐭮ABΣ, the language's phonological values, readings, morphological structure, and etymology. In addition to this document-based research, Kirste explored whether an originally shared Indo-Iranian version of the *Kodāy-nāma* could be construed from the scattered evidence in New Persian (1896), and examined the influence of Semitic verbs and verbal suffixes on Pahlavi (1903).

In his lectures and seminars at the University of Graz (Lochner, 1976, pp. 83-84) Kirste covered Persian literature comprehensively, from the Avesta to the *Šāh-nāma* and Sa'dī. But he was also very interested in recent developments in the fields of literary and legal history, as well as in religious studies, philosophy, and ethnography.

In 1892 Kirste was elected as corresponding member of the Imperial Austrian Academy of Sciences (*Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften*) in Vienna. The Ecole pratique des hautes études in Paris offered Kirste in 1895 a position as professor of Sanskrit and Middle Persian, but Kirste decided to remain in Graz (pers. communication, Daniel Kirste, Dec. 2008). The German Oriental Society (*Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*) appointed Kirste to its board, and he



belonged to the French Oriental Society (*Société asiatique*) and the Linguistic Society of Paris (*Société de linguistique de Paris*). Kirste never travelled to Iran or India, and left Europe only once to attend in 1905 an Oriental studies conference in Algiers. However, an avid letter-writer, he was in close touch with scholars all over the world. Colleagues described him as modest, though aloof and withdrawn, very erudite, yet not easy to approach.

Kirste married in 1888, after several years of courtship, the dressmaker Anna Kallich (1862-1941). His wife had been born in Bohemia, and run in Graz her own tailoring workshop with several employees. Their son Leo Kirste (1892-1965) had a distinguished academic career as aeronautical engineer, and was in 1937 appointed as full professor of aviation (*Ordinarius für Luftfahrtwesen*) at the Polytechnic Institute Vienna (*Technische Hochschule Wien*). Johann Kirste's health had always been delicate, and he died after a long illness. Anna Kirste survived her husband for more than 20 years, and was on 13 March 1941 deported and killed in Hartheim Castle, one of the Nazi euthanasia centers in Upper Austria.

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