



LENTZ, OTTO HELMUT WOLFGANG

LENTZ, OTTO HELMUT WOLFGANG (b. Hameln, Niedersachsen, February 23, 1900-d. Marburg, Germany, December 8, 1986), German Iranologist who specialized in Middle Iranian and New Persian dialects as well as on Iranian religions ([FIGURE 1](#)). His father was the town's school director, Dr. Phil. Alfred Lentz (d. 8 December 1986 in Marburg). From 1918 to 1923 he studied in Munich and especially Göttingen, and from 1924 to 1942 worked as a scientific collaborator at the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin (Turfan Department). A pupil of F. C. Andreas, as well as Hermann Lommel and Walter Bruno Henning, he was prompted to engage in three research fields: Turfan fragments, Iranian dialectology and, the interpretation of Zarathustra's Gathas. Following four years of military service (1942-45), he worked in various jobs, and was promoted to the position of a lecturer in 1950 and later professor of Iranian studies at the Department of Near Eastern Language and Culture of the University of Hamburg, from which he retired in 1968. He traveled widely, as a member of the German-Russian Altai Pamir expedition in 1928, and of the German Hindu-Kush expedition in 1935, but also privately in Pamir, Afghanistan, NW India, and Iran. He was visiting professor at Columbia University in 1957-58 and at the University of Texas, Austin in 1960-61. He spent his retirement years in Marburg, pursuing Iranian studies, organizing scholarly conferences and readily collaborating with students of Iranian history and religions. In his last years he became very interested in Persepolis, which he visited three times, and wrote on its coordinates and function (1969,



1972). He died at the age of 86, after an incapacitating illness, and was survived by three daughters and a son.

Lentz wrote no voluminous book, but many essays in periodicals, including some pioneer works on Turfan texts, Iranian dialects, local eastern systems of time reckoning, and loan words in Mid. Iranian. His doctoral dissertation (supervised by Andreas) was on North Iranian elements in the *Šāh-nāma* (1926), and won him immediate recognition. He was a stimulating teacher, and many considered him as the last expert of *Iranistik*, knowing the entire field from the Avesta to the Kurdish language, including the history of religion and culture.

In Hamburg in 1966 he elevated the Department of Iranian Studies (*Abteilung Iranistik*) at the Oriental Seminar into a discipline independent from Department of Islamic Studies, where previously only New Pers. philology had been taught (from 1906, under Carl Heinrich Becker in the Colonial Institute). At Hamburg University (founded in 1919, Old Iranian philology had been taught at first by Heinrich Junker (1889-1970) and Heinz Reichelt (1877-1937) from 1919 to 1930 at the Department of Comparative Linguistics, and later, from 1937 to 1954, by the Zoroastrian Jehangir Tavadia, at the Department of Indology.

He aimed at using a thorough methodology, and worked very structurally, both in linguistics (following A. N. Chomsky) and in religion and literature. He considered the historical method as by no means always suited to explain texts that were difficult to understand, and that is why he rejected the theories of G. Dumézil and J. Duchesne-Guillemin, who interpreted the Gathas of Zarathustra on the basis of a reconstructed “religion tripartite.” In his article “*Yasnā* 28” (1954), he examined the frequent change in the levels of meaning and found that the hymn “is entirely directed towards spiritual matters” (p. 976), that there is no “progressive context of the poem” (pp. 978, 997), and that in a constant change within the verses, twenty-five motifs (grouped A-D pp. 982, 997) were addressed, which Lentz clarified in the translation (pp. 931-33) by using differing types of script. The initially confusing effect of the construction is based on a composition of repetition and explanation, which is combined into a solid rhythmic form (p. 990). Therefore Lentz does not consider it possible to deduce a clearly formulated theory from the Gathas, they are no legal text, but poetically formed hymns addressed to the Divinity.

While working on the Manichean Turfan texts, Lentz also paid attention to



literary elements of structure. In his article on the position of “Die Stellung Jesu” (1926), he showed that Mani considered himself as the accomplisher of Christ the Redeemer and his predecessor Zarathustra in final and perfect form. In another “Manichaische Dogmatik” (1933), he pointed out Mani’s “central way of conceiving and expressing the system, the formation of terminological series.” Lentz recognized the series of five light elements as a breakdown of various aspects of thought following the example of the Zarathustrian Aməša Spəntas, and the Manichean myth about the world as a “radicalized and enlarged version of the myth ... as we find it in late Zoroastrianism.” According to Lentz, the Manichean writings belong to the Iranian tradition and cannot be attributed to the Jewish-Christian culture.

The Iranian dialectology was already the subject of his dissertation (1926) dealing with the language of Ferdowsi and the Turfan texts. The starting point of his works always centered on the new Iranian languages, which his teacher Andreas had placed into the public eye. During the German-Russian Pamir expedition in 1928, Lentz was thus able to record several languages in valleys along the upper Oxus (Pandj), among which he dealt with the Shugni in 1933. During the German Hindukush expedition in 1935, he continued this work on the subject of the Kafir language, but he did not publish the collection of texts regarding that language. In Berlin he met the Ossete scholar Georg Grappo Baijev and worked with him. During his activity in Berlin he classified the Manichean manuscripts according to their languages, as shown by the catalogue prepared by Mary Boyce with his cooperation. He also catalogued the Sogdian manuscripts, but this part of his work has not been published. He supervised several dissertations concerned with new Iranian languages.

In the Pamir and Hindu-Kush he observed how calendar makers in the villages determined New Year’s Day with simple methods (1939, rev. ed. 1978). A further ethnological essay about the temple in the Parun Valley appeared in 1959. He sent his materials from Kafiristan to Moesgaard. From 1969 to 1978 he concentrated such studies on Persepolis and Roman-Iranian Mithraism, assisted by the German astronomer Wolfhard Schlosser.

Lentz delved deeply into classical New Pers. literature. He was particularly interested in forms of composition in poetic and prose texts. Due to the absence of a continued theme in the double verses (*bayts*) of the @gazals of Hafez, the *bayts* have often changed places in the manuscripts, and Lentz described this as spiral composition. He published the results of his investigations in an essay on the intellectual structure of the @gazals (1952)



and in another on Goethe and the East (1958). He was a great admirer of mystic poetry and spent many semesters reading Jalāl-al-Din Rumi and Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār with his students. He was also keenly interested in the political developments in Persia, and dealt with them in shorter essays and in his teaching.

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On his life and works see Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "Wolfgang Lentz (1900-1986)," *ZDMG* 139, 1989, pp. 1-20. A volume of essays by his students and friends was dedicated to him as he approached seventy, *Neue Methodology in der Iranistik*, ed. R. N. Frye, Wiesbaden, 1974, contains a full list of his works up to that time.