



MAYRHOFER, MANFRED

MAYRHOFER, MANFRED, Austrian scholar of comparative Indo-European linguistics and Indo-Iranian studies (b. Linz, Austria, 26 September 1926; d. Vienna, 31 October 2011). The son of an engineer, he completed his secondary studies in Linz in 1944 and was immediately called up to the Reich Labor Service and to the armed forces. He was taken prisoner at the Italian front, but he was soon released from British captivity (Mayrhofer, 1979-96, II, pp. 459-60). He enrolled in the University of Graz in the winter semester of 1945-46 to study German philology. Soon other subjects attracted his interest, and in the end he specialized in comparative Indo-European linguistics (with Wilhelm Brandenstein), Indo-Iranian philology, and Semitic studies.

He received his doctorate degree in 1949 and in 1953 was appointed assistant lecturer at the University of Würzburg, and he became full professor of comparative philology in autumn 1958. In 1962 he moved to Saarbrücken, where he had been offered the chair of comparative Indo-European linguistics and Indo-Iranian studies at the University of Saarland. In 1966, he was appointed holder of the chair of general and Indo-European linguistics at Vienna University (the chair once held by [Friedrich Müller](#)), where he taught until his retirement in 1988. In 1967, he was elected corresponding member, and in 1968 full member, of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, in the Committee of which he was active as secretary of the Philosophical-Historical Class from 1970 to 1982.

Mayrhofer was one of the most prolific Indo-European and Indo-Iranian scholars of his time; he characterized himself in an autobiographical sketch



(Mayrhofer, 1979-96, II, p. 463) as an enthusiastic writer of manuals. Above all, he is the author of a great number of manuals and dictionaries, but also of books and articles on historical grammar, etymology, and lexicology in the fields of Old Indo-Aryan and Old Iranian linguistics and onomastics, as well as on general Indo-European studies (for a full bibliography, see Schmitt, 2012, pp. 29–84).

If the phrase “life’s work” is justified for a particular achievement, in the case of Mayrhofer that would be his lifelong occupation with an etymological dictionary of the Old Indo-Aryan language. Already in his student days he had begun gathering material for such a piece of work, which was completed in four volumes (*Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*) in 1980, although he had originally planned only for a rather succinct work of reference. In the course of its realization, that dictionary changed in contents radically and became more and more detailed and informative.

Immediately after the completion of those four volumes, although being already advanced in years, he began working on a second but entirely novel work on the same topic, namely, the *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen* (1992–2001), which has nothing in common with the former dictionary other than its author and the subject matter. This dictionary, which is based on years of thorough study of a richly attested language (characterized by him as a *Grosscorpussprache*), introduced for the first time into Old Indo-Aryan etymological research a far-reaching, new approach by separating the entire vocabulary into two groups, differentiating the words attested already in Vedic texts and older literature from those attested for the first time not earlier than the two great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His innovative *modus operandi* resulted in a major research tool that worked to great advantage for students of the field, because to a very large extent those two layers of the vocabulary differ in the principal sources of the words themselves. The older, vedic part of the lexicon for the most part consists of words inherited from common Indo-Iranian and ultimately from the Indo-European proto-language, whereas the majority of words appearing only in the later texts are loan-words borrowed from non-Aryan languages (in particular Dravidian or Austro-Asiatic languages) or from the Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit) vernaculars. Only in exceptional cases is it possible to think of an Indo-European etymon for a term listed in this part. This dictionary, so far the best etymological dictionary of any ancient Indo-European language, has rich indexes and can also be used as a kind of surrogate for the non-existent



Iranian etymological dictionary. The work was also rounded off, in a sense, by the author in his *Die Personennamen in der Ṛgveda-Samhitā* (2003), which is a study on the personal names attested in the oldest Vedic text, the Rig-Veda, and on the names found in indigenous sources for the poets of more than a thousand Rig-Vedic hymns.

Mayrhofer's lifelong lexicographical research centered to a certain extent on Indo-Aryan linguistic history. For several decades, he entertained a lively interest in the history of the early Indo-Aryans attested in the Ancient Near East (in the environs of the Mittani empire) in the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, especially in their linguistic remains, to which he devoted several, mainly bibliographical, surveys (*Die Indo-Arier im Alten Vorderasien*, 1966; *Die Arier im Vorderen Orient*, 1974; and most recently "Eine Nachlese ...," 2006b). Two textbooks on Sanskrit and Pāli, written in his twenties (*Handbuch des Pāli*, 1951; cf. *Sanskrit-Grammatik*; 1953, 2nd ed., 1965) were quite successful due to his admirable didactic skill. His overall occupation with the Old Indo-Aryan vocabulary forced him to deal with problems of the various layers of the non-Aryan (Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic) substratum as well. Those studies led him, however, more and more to a rather sceptical attitude towards assuming such substratum influences, which he had favored excessively at an early age.

Mayrhofer made his mark in the field of the Old Iranian languages first by the etymological glossary, which he contributed to the two editions of the Old Persian manual of his teacher Wilhelm Brandenstein: in 1958, to the Spanish version, and in 1964 to the German one (esp. *Handbuch des Altpersischen*, 1964, pp. 99–157), in which he also wrote the morphological sections. That glossary for the first time contained also the Old Persian lexical stock attested outside the royal inscriptions in the so-called collateral tradition of Elamite, Aramaic, and other non-Persian sources. By that work and several subsequent reports on current post-1964 research, he became increasingly involved in anthroponomastic studies, which led him to the conviction that personal names are of crucial importance for Old Iranian lexicological studies and that anthroponymy should be given a central role in Old Iranian linguistic studies.

After some minor or major preliminary studies, in the 1970s he published three monographs on those topics. The first one (*Onomastica Persepolitana*, 1973) was an interim collection and most careful analysis of the (mostly Old Iranian) personal names attested in the Elamite cuneiform tablets of the Persepolis Fortification and Persepolis Treasury archives, belonging to the



reign of Darius I (esp. the period 509-494 BCE) and to the years 492-458 BCE, respectively. This, he was convinced, had to be based on a systematic study of the graphic correspondences between the Elamite and Old Iranian (Old Persian) forms of the names attested in the multilingual royal texts—a study completed by him in a convincing manner (1973, pp. 15-106).

In order to prepare a full collection of the entire anthroponomastic material of Iranian origin attested in both Iranian (from the *Gathas*, to the present time) and non-Iranian languages (from the early 1st millennium BCE on), Mayrhofer in 1969 initiated the *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* as a large-scale project of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The eventual aim of the project was to replace Ferdinand Justi's somewhat obsolete *Iranisches Namenbuch*, which had been published in a time (1895) when only one single Middle Iranian language was known (and inadequately at that) and the archeological excavations that would bring to light substantial linguistic materials at many places had not yet begun. Mayrhofer himself prepared the first volume of the *Personennamenbuch*, treating the names attested in the Avestan texts (preceded by *Zum Namengut des Avesta*, 1977) and in the Old Persian inscriptions. He prepared also a supplement (1978) that contained all newly-found cuneiform inscriptions, including also those that were missing in Ronald G. Kent's *Old Persian* (pub. 1950). So far, a dozen fascicles and volumes of the *Personennamenbuch* have been published, and several more are in preparation. The commission that was launched for the preparation of this *Iranisches Personennamenbuch* is now the very nucleus of the Institute of Iranian Studies founded by the Academy in 2002.

In his last years, after having completed the second etymological dictionary of Old Indo-Aryan, Mayrhofer returned to Iranian studies. In 2006, he published *Einiges zu den Skythen*, a book of only forty-eight pages in which he dealt with the linguistic material of the Scythian language; he confined himself to the Scythian words and names attested on an Old Iranian level (chiefly in Herodotus) and looked out for the special dialectological features of this ancient language. In his last years he worked on an etymological dictionary of Old Persian, which, for reasons of health, regrettably he was not able to bring to completion (see Mayrhofer, 2010).

Among his studies in Indo-European phonological, morphological, and lexical problems in general, the most significant is his *Indogermanische Grammatik* (1986). It is a systematic account of the phonology of the Indo-European proto-language, which he tackled after having taken over the editorship of the series



Indogermanische Grammatik founded by Jerzy Kuryłowicz. He concentrated in this book on the phonemes to be reconstructed for the system of the proto-language (accent and ablaut having been dealt with already by Kuryłowicz himself), as well as phenomena, such as assimilations and dissimilations, which had already taken place in that language. He gave particular attention to all subtleties of the laryngeal theory in a carefully balanced judgement. This account of the Proto-Indo-European phonology later was supplemented by *Die Hauptprobleme* (2004), a description of the dominant problems of the Indo-European consonantal phonemes in 20th-century research, and *Die Fortsetzung* (2005), a special book on the development of the Proto-Indo-European laryngeals in the Indo-Iranian languages. The emphasis in this book is naturally on the rich Vedic evidence, but Iranian, in particular Old Avestan, is also taken into account wherever its archaism helps to promote the research.

Mayrhofer's research centred also on problems of the history of Indo-European studies in the 19th and 20th centuries. In *Nach hundert Jahren* (1981), he dealt with Ferdinand de Saussure's early ideas and theories about the Indo-European proto-language and their reception by the Indo-Europeanists of today; he also discussed the development of Indo-European studies during the 19th century— which he pursued on the basis of the reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European phonological system; step by step, these studies departed from an originally Sanskrit-like notation in favor of a system leaning more toward that used to represent the ancient European languages (*Sanskrit und die Sprachen Alteuropas*, 1983).

A distinct feature of Mayrhofer's writings is his full knowledge and careful use of all relevant specialist literature, which led him to reach balanced judgements. He was endowed with great didactic skills that made him capable of presenting the most complicated linguistic points in a clear, concise, and easily understood scholarly manner. He made valuable contributions to the promotion of Indo-Aryan and Iranian studies, a fact that is appreciated by scholars of the field. He was a member of more than a dozen academies of sciences and learned societies; he was much honored both at home and abroad.



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