



SCHLERATH, BERNFRIED

SCHLERATH, BERNFRIED (b. Leipzig, 15 May 1924; d. Berlin, 30 May 2003; [Figure 1](#)), German scholar of Indo-European, chiefly Indo-Iranian, philology and Indo-European cultural studies. As only child of the literary editor Dr. phil. Franz Schlerath and his wife Karoline, née Sutor, he grew up in Frankfurt am Main and received a careful classical education. This provided the basis of his extraordinary broad general knowledge, intellectual independence, and love of music and literature.

Interrupted by two years as wireless operator in the war, he studied Comparative Indo-European Linguistics and Classical Philology, first in Frankfurt am Main (with [Herman Lommel](#) and Erwin Wolff), then in Hamburg (with Ernst Fraenkel), in Mainz (with Franz Specht), and again in Frankfurt, where he took his PhD in 1951 with a dissertation (supervised by Lommel) *Die Behandlung von y and v nach Konsonant in den metrischen Texten des Awesta* (handwritten MS, unpublished). After years of teaching (mostly Latin for law students and Gothic for future teachers of German), he was qualified as a lecturer there in 1958 with his book *Das Königtum im Rig- und Atharvaveda. Ein Beitrag zur indogermanischen Kulturgeschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1960). Extraordinary professor at Frankfurt from 1960, he also taught Indo-European at Saarbrücken (1962), Iranian Studies at Uppsala, Sweden (1966-67), and Indology at El Colegio de México (1969-70). From 1971 to 1973, he held the chair of Indo-European at Marburg (he also taught one term in Vienna, 1972), then at the Freie Universität in Berlin, until his retirement in 1992. His numerous visits to Salamanca, where he tutored an emerging research group



in the 1980s and 1990s gave a strong impulse to Indo-Iranian studies in Spain (see, e.g., publications by Ana Agud and Alberto Cantera).

Within Indo-European Studies, he was introduced to [Avestan](#) by Lommel, but he also studied intensively the history of Indo-Iranian, Greek, Latin, Germanic, and Baltic. A particular influence on him was Paul Thieme (1905-2001), professor at Frankfurt 1953-54. Both quickly became close friends, and they stayed in close contact for the rest of their lives. Schlerath's main field of interest in Iranian Studies was the elucidation of the [Gathas](#) by careful comparison of the [Avesta](#) with Vedic literature, controlled by strict philological methods. The major project of writing a new Avestan dictionary, unfortunately, was never realized, because Schlerath's mind was not sedentary enough to concentrate for another twenty years on transforming his huge collections (all lost now) into veritable lemmata and in creating a synthesis of his subtle interpretations of the Gathas and their innumerable philological problems. He simply could not resist his lively interest in other languages and constantly arising scholarly questions of all kinds.

In the footsteps of his teachers, comparative Indo-European studies for Schlerath not only meant historical linguistics alone, but simultaneously also the unearthing of cultural developments. He always stressed the historical potential hidden in the history of texts and even words. Etymology for him was no play of *l'art pour l'art*, but a precious key to otherwise unattested human conceptions (see, already, Schlerath, 1953, 1954). Working on these lines, he never failed to keep a critical distance and to reflect on the methods and implications of his own research. Against mechanistic models of language change, he defended the "historical and creative dimension of linguistic systems" (1974, title). His lucid reflections about the epistemology of linguistic research (e.g. 1982b, 1989a) led to lively discussion among scholars of Indo-European (e.g., discussion in the annual journal *Incontri Linguistici* framed by his articles of 1984 and 1987). He insisted on the abstractness of every reconstructed lexical item and on the indispensability of sound etymological parallels in the search for literary parallels, the so-called formulas of poetic language (e.g. 2000c). He was conscious of the intimate connection between linguistics and philosophy; his researches on Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) contributed substantially through a series of publications and conferences (e.g. 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1995a) to the international revival of the latter's ideas in the last decades of the 20th century.

He was attracted by the human side of scholarship as well, as is shown by his



numerous articles on extraordinary personalities (e.g. 1977b, 1978, 1988, 1989b) and several necrologies (e.g. 1969, 2001) and not the least by his own colorful autobiography (2000b). He was an accomplished oboe-player (cf. his articles on music and language 1984a, 1999), an inspired hobbyist cook, a passionate gourmet (see 1981, 1990a), and a lover of traveling and of getting involved with foreign worlds. He used to model his experiences with people all over the world in lively narratives, spiced with a vivid sense for humor and the beauties of life. Creating anagrams, palindromes, and spoonerisms saved many a boring committee meeting.

Bernfried Schlerath was one of the most original and broad-minded thinkers among his linguistic colleagues worldwide, as may be inferred from the wide range of his publications. He never made a show of cultural superiority, hated arrogance, vanity, and narrow-mindedness, and was always prepared to share his immense knowledge with non-specialists, students of all sorts, and non-academics. His impact on Indo-European cultural studies was decisive (see also his final study of [Georges Dumézil](#) 's theory [1995b, 1996b]). The small, but comprehensive methodological study *Die Indogermanen* (1973) opened new vistas in respect to the potential and the limits of the field (see Zimmer, 1990, 2003b).

Within Iranian Studies, the two volumes of *Vorarbeiten* (1968) to the planned Avestan dictionary, his edition of Lommel's translation of the Gathas (1971), and his concise articles on many religious terms (1982a, 1984b, 1990b, 1996a and twelve entries in *Encyclopædia Iranica*) will always stand as firm basis for further research. His most popular 'Iranian' achievement is no doubt the brilliant etymology of the name *Zarathushtra* as "whose camels grow old (because of his qualities as herder and breeder)" (1971, 1977a).

On the occasion of his 60th birthday, a small series of articles by former students was dedicated to him in the *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft*, volume 43 (1984); the proceedings of an international congress organized on the occasion of his retirement appeared as a Festschrift on his 70th birthday (Hänsel and Zimmer, eds., 1994). Further information about the scholar and the man is to be found in the obituaries by the present author (2003a, 2004) and by G. Buddruss (2005).

His publications are listed in the above-mentioned Festschrift (1994), in his *Minor Writings* (2000a), and in the obituary in *Kratylos* 49 (Zimmer, 2004).



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