



WIKANDER, OSCAR STIG

WIKANDER, Oscar Stig (b. 27 August 1908, Norttälje, Sweden; d. 20 December 1983, Uppsala, Sweden; [FIGURE 1](#)), Iranist, comparatist, and historian of religions.

i. Biography.

ii. Account of his Works.

i. BIOGRAPHY

Wikander was born in a small town in Central Sweden, as the son of a pharmacist. He graduated from high school in Uppsala at seventeen, and immediately enrolled at the city's university. Before he had turned nineteen, he had obtained his M.A. with highest grades in Latin and Greek, a remarkable accomplishment, and afterwards he went to Paris, Berlin, and Copenhagen, where [Arthur Christensen](#) (1875-1945) was professor, to study Iranian and Indian languages and religions (see [IRANIAN LANGUAGES](#), [INDO-IRANIAN RELIGION](#)).

Wikander soon became known as a brilliant young scholar with wide interests and a deep knowledge of many fields. In 1935 and 1936, he and Geo Widengren (1907-1996) were among the members of the Avesta seminars, held by his older compatriot, the professor of Semitic languages at Uppsala University, [H. S. Nyberg](#) (1889-1974). These seminars informed Nyberg's much debated book about ancient Iranian religions. Wikander defended in 1938 his



dissertation at the Faculty of Arts of Uppsala University, thus becoming the first Ph.D. of Iranian languages and religions in Sweden. His research about the lexical evidence in Sanskrit and the [Avestan language](#) for the religious importance of young warrior bands (Ger. pl. *Männerbünde*; cf. Lincoln, p. 193) appeared under the title *Der arische Männerbund*. This work was greatly influenced by research of the Austrian folklorist Otto Höfler (1901-1987), who between 1928 and 1934 had taught German at the University of Lund. In January 1938, Höfler was appointed professor of German philology and folklore at the University of Munich, Germany, where Wikander taught Swedish in 1938-39. In 1941, he published his study about the Indo-Iranian wind god *Vayu*. Subsequently, the University of Lund granted Wikander a *venia legendi* (lit. the licence to teach university courses) and appointed him lecturer (*docent*) of Iranian languages. At the end of World War II, he served as a Red Cross delegate in Greece and Turkey.

During the academic year of 1947-48, Wikander taught history of religions as visiting associate professor (*preceptor*) at Uppsala University, where in 1953 he was appointed chair of Sanskrit and comparative Indo-European philology. Wikander retired in 1974, and amongst his students are Folke Josephson (b. 1934), Professor of Comparative Indo-European Philology at the University of Gothenburg, Gunilla Gren-Eklund (b. 1938), Professor of Indology, and Bo Utas (b. 1938), Professor of Iranian studies, both at Uppsala University. Wikander's wife Gunnel Heikel (1911-73) was a nurse, and they had three daughters.

Wikander was internationally active, and maintained lively contacts with leading scholars of religions. The extent of his friendship with Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) is documented by their recently published correspondence (Timuş, 2005). Early in his career Wikander had become friends with Georges Dumézil (1898-1986), who taught French at Uppsala University between 1931 and 1933. Dumézil drew on Wikander's research (1947, 1949) for his influential theory of Indo-European religion (Lincoln; Littleton, pp. 157-58). In the academic year of 1959-60 Wikander was visiting professor at Columbia University, New York, and in 1967 he taught at the Colegio de México, Mexico City. In October and November 1967, Wikander delivered, on Eliade's invitation, the Haskell Lectures about *Mythic Epic and National Epic* at the University of Chicago (Timuş, 2004).

Wikander probably had a greater impact on the development of new views on the history of religions than may be concluded from his publications. His wide-ranging ideas about Indian and Iranian religions and the comparative study of



philology and religion were published in small articles, often only available in Swedish, and consequently little known. His second monograph, *Vayu*, was originally envisioned as the first volume of the new series *Quaestiones indo-iranicae*, which he had founded with his friend and colleague, the Indologist Kasten Rönnow (1897-1943). Shortly after World War II, Wikander published *Feuerpriester in Kleinasien und Iran*. His third major monograph must be regarded as his most important study, in which he analyzed evidence for the Iranian fire cult (see [ATAŠ](#)) drawing on a wide range of sources in various Iranian languages, aside from Greek, Armenian, and Sanskrit literature.

Wikander had many interests. In 1947, the renowned linguist Bertil Malmberg (1913-94) founded with Wikander the journal *Studia linguistica*, which became a major journal of general linguistics. In the 1950s, Wikander became interested in Kurdish studies, and published a *Recueil de texts kourmandji* in 1959. Later he turned to more speculative research, and published a series of articles about the relationship between the Maya language and the Altaic languages (1967, 1970, 1972). His last monograph was a slim volume about the contacts between Arabs and Vikings, based on medieval Arabic sources. During his final years Wikander focused on the Romantic Swedish poet Erik Johan Stagnelius (1793-1823), and published a number of original articles about his mystical poetry. For a fuller account of Wikander's works, see the following entry.

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(Bo Utas)

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ii. ACCOUNT OF HIS WORKS

Wikander was an inventive, rather controversial scholar, mostly active in Indo-Iranian studies, but also interested in several other fields. In his first book, *Der arische Männerbund* (1938) Wikander compared Skt. *marya* “young man, lover, suitor” with Av. *mairiia-*. [Christian Bartholomae](#) (1855-1925), deeming the words unrelated, had translated *mairya-* as “betrügerisch, schurkisch, Schurke” (*Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, col. 1151). Wikander, however, concluded the existence of *Männerbünde*, already postulated by several scholars (see [i.](#) above), in the Indo-Iranian period. He argued that these young warrior bands, though they had left only pale traces in Indian and Iranian literatures, were reflected in the legends of [Ferēdūn](#) and of the banner of the Kavis (see [DERAFŠ-e KĀVIĀN](#)), the mythical predecessors of the Parthian kings (r. ca. 247 BCE-224 CE), and are comparable to the 16th-century Safavid order.

In his second book *Vayu* (1941) Wikander stressed the importance of the Indo-Iranian wind god in Iran. His thesis was originally very much contested, but later supported by Helmut Humbach (b. 1921).

In *Feuerpriester in Kleinasien und Iran* (1946) Wikander argued that under [Artaxerxes II](#) (r. 404-359 BCE) statues of [Anāhita](#) were erected everywhere, from Iran to Asia Minor. Wikander suggested that these statues had been housed in temples, and adduced as the only extant building structure [Ka'ba-ye Zardošt](#), which undoubtedly was not such a temple. Since Sāsān, the ancestor of the Sasanian dynasty (224-650 CE), was a priest of Anāhita at [Eštākr](#) in Fārs, Wikander concluded that the first Sasanian kings were Anāhita worshipers who did not mind favoring Manicheism. Only with the reign of [Hormozd I](#) (r. 303-309) did Mazdean orthodoxy prevail, and after the *hērbeds* had succeeded the *mobads* as high priests of the fire cult, statues of Anāhita in the temples were replaced by fire altars. Yet, according to Mary Boyce (1920-2006), Zoroastrian iconoclasm originated in the 3rd century CE, and [Ardāšir I](#) (224-41/42) was known to have started with the destruction of images, notably in his conquest of Armenia. The fight against idols ended in the 6th century with their complete suppression by [Kōsrow Anūšervān](#) (r. 531-79).



Wikander's article about mythical pre-suppositions in the Pāṇḍava saga and the Mahābhārata ("Pāṇḍavasagan och Mahābhāratas mystiska förutsättningar," 1947) presents his chief discovery. He argued that the Indian epic corroborated Dumézil's thesis of an Indo-European trifunctionalism, and Dumézil, in turn, included the article's translation in his *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus* (1948). Wikander extended the argument, less convincingly, in "Sur le fonds commun indo-iranien des épopées de la Perse et de l'Inde" (1949), an article about the Persian epic.

"Indoeuropeisk Religion" (1961) is a short review of the successive approaches, up to Dumézil, to the Indo-European religion. In "Épopée et mythologie" (1974b) Wikander examined Dumézil's recent publications about epic and myth.

In "Nakula et Sahadeva" (1957), Wikander analyzed the differences between the epic sons of the Ásvins, the Indian Dioscures. Nakula is brave and handsome, while Sahadeva is intelligent and pious. Nakula is a groom, but Sahadeva prefers bulls, and is the perfect human embodiment of the Indo-Iranian fire.

In "Från indisk djurfabel till isländsk saga" (1964) Wikander explored the relationship between Indian animal fables and the Icelandic sagas.

In "Hethitiska myter hos Greker och Persar" (1951) and "Histoire des Ouranides" (1952) Wikander explored the relationships between Iranian and Hurrito-Hittite myths. It is generally admitted that Hesiod's story of the Ouranos-Kronos-Zeus dynasty was borrowed from a Hurrito-Hittite myth, yet Wikander tried to argue the same origin for the stories of *Jamšid*, *Aždahā*, and Ferēdun as preserved in the *Šāh-nāma*. But it is unwarranted to identify as an Indo-European myth the story of the dragon *Aždahā*, which is a late and only partial imitation.

In "Mithra en vieux perse" (1950b) Wikander convincingly argued that *meso-* in Gk. *mesoromadēs* "mediator," the term used by Plutarch (46-ca.122 CE) in "Isis and Osiris" (*Moralia*, vol. V, pp. 112-13 = 46.266), is the Old Persian form of the name *Mithra*.

In "BAPZOXAPA" (1972b), Wikander correctly analyzed that Gk. *barzochara*, an epithet of Anāhita, which corresponds to Av. *vərəčah-* "splendor" and OPers. *farnah* "royal glory" (see [FARR\(AH\)](#)).



In “Études sur les Mystères de Mithra” (1951a) Wikander followed up on Eliade's suggestion, and tried to explain why the god of the Roman mysteries is not the Iranian Mithra, but a Balkanic equestrian god. This thesis is still unproven.

“Un témoignage kurde sur les Yezidis du Djebel Sindjar” (1953) and “Ein Fest bei den Kurderi und im Avesta” (1960) are based on Wikander's own recordings of Kurdish poems and songs.

In “Armenian *avazan*” (1972a) Wikander explained Arm. *avazan* by interpreting Pahl. *afzōn* “warm bath” (cf. *Kārnamak*, chap. 1,17) as Pahl. *āpzan*, thus rejecting the etymology previously suggested by Oswald J. L. Szemerényi (1913-96).

Wikander's article “Problèmes irano-arméniens” (1948) examines the Armenian borrowing from Iranian languages, in particular of initial *fr-* and intervocalic *δ*.

In “Germanische und Indo-iranische Eschatologie” (1960b) and “Från Bråvalla till Kurukshetra” (1960c) Wikander analyzed the relationship between Norse and Indo-Iranian eschatology, though Dumézil had already compared Norse and Zoroastrian mythical eschatologies with the eschatological features in the Mahābhārata. Wikander observed that in the Norse and the Iranian traditions dualistic thought and the eschatological perspectives are reflected in two types of narrative: on the one hand, myths, such as the *Völuspá*, the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), and the Pahlavi works, and on the other side, epics, such as the Brávellir traditions and the *Šāh-nāma*. In India, however, only an epic tradition is known. Wikander ends the juxtaposition with Dumézil's words: “more than the Iranian version of these cosmic events, it is the Indian epic which is revealed as parallel to the Scandinavian myth” (p. 89).

In *Araber, vikingar, vāringar* (1978) Wikander collected the descriptions of the Vikings in Arabic sources, which he translated into Swedish.

“Sur la langue des inscriptions sud-hispaniques” (1966) presents an analysis of funerary inscriptions from southern Spain with regard to the frequency of a final *-be* and the variety of preceding sounds. Wikander concluded, rightly in the author's opinion, that this *-be* represents Indo-European *-bhi*, which occurs in both Mycenaean and Homeric Greek. Wikander argued that the word *keonii* corresponds to Ved. *śaye* and Gk. *keītai*, while the word *keonabe* is an



equivalent, in the instrumental, of Skt. *śayana* “bed, couch” and Av. *sayana* “habitat, country.”

Wikander studied in three articles about “Maya and Altaic” (1967, 1970, 1972c) the Proto-Altaic initial *p-* in the Maya language. He collected a Maya-Altaic word list, explored the evidence for an initial voiceless labial in Proto-Altaic, and enumerated Maya-Altaic sound-laws. It is, of course, beyond doubt that America was populated from Asia.

Wikander argued in “Jehova-Jova” (1975-76) that the Romantic poet Stagnelius used the term *Jova* to refer to Jehova, the god of the Old Testament.

Wikander gave the 1967 Haskell Lectures about *Mythic Epic and National Epic* at the University of Chicago. They were only posthumously published (Timuš, 2004), although the manuscript has not been preserved in its entirety and the text of the fourth lecture about the Indian epics is lost. Wikander began with an examination of 19th century European scholarship about the origin of epics to explore “The Ideology of the National Epic” (pp. 274-84). He juxtaposed the Greek notions of a heroic and a mythic age in the second lecture (pp. 285-96), though he did not discuss the notion of a divine age, as proposed by Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). The *Šāh-nāma* was the focus of Wikander's third lecture (pp. 297-301). He discussed the term *kavi*, since in the 5th century CE the Avestan names of the Kavis suddenly became popular among the Sasanian royal family, and compared the deeds of Ferēdun and [Indra](#). In the fifth lecture (pp. 302-312), Wikander explored the relationship between myth and history, raising the question of transforming history into myth. Wikander argues that the traditions about Zoroaster and his age are mythical so that that the historical origins of Zoroastrian mythology are difficult to analyze. [Goštāsp](#), however, is depicted in dark colors, though such a negative interpretation can hardly be reconciled with his role as protector of Zoroaster, which Christensen had already observed. In the sixth and final lecture (pp. 313-22), Wikander discussed Indo-European eschatology, proposing a quite fantastic interpretation of Zoroaster. Wikander explained the similarities between Norse and Indo-Iranian eschatologies through a common heritage. Yet he projected “dualism, the limited linear history, developing under divine guidance” (p. 321) unto Zoroastrianism, in order to claim it as part of the shared Indo-Iranian heritage. Consequently, Wikander doubted the historicity of Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism, and suggested that this Near Eastern prophet originated because of the pressure of the prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity.



Întotdeauna Oriental is the Rumanian translation of the French correspondence between Wikander and Mircea Eliade between 1948 and 1977. Frantz Grenet observed in the afterword that “Wikander remained the man of enthusiastic but unaccomplished projects” (pp. 327-28). Amongst those tackled by the two friends is the creation of a science of religions distinct from the history of religions as usually taught, historicism being their *bête noire*.

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