

IN MEMORIAM

Bert G. Fragner

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Bert G. Fragner passed away on December 16, 2021, in Vienna at the age of eighty. Not only an eminent scholar and a great organizer who dedicated his life to strengthening the profile and place of Iranian studies in European academia, he also was an inspiring teacher who captivated his students (and colleagues, even beyond his field) with a number of exceptional abilities: he presented research topics in a fresh and spirited way by thinking outside the box; he was a splendid narrator, drawing on a treasure of witty anecdotes to illustrate issues at stake; his expansive grasp and brilliant conceptualization of the discipline allowed him to mediate and integrate controversial academic debates; he was an engaging, cooperative, and cordial teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend.

He began his academic career in 1960 in his hometown of Vienna, where he initially enrolled in a whole bundle of subjects: Islamic studies, Arabic studies, Turkish studies, Iranian studies, Slavic studies, and ethnology. What could easily be misunderstood as indecisiveness was in fact a sign of his great intellectual curiosity about the world of the Islamic Orient, including Central Asia and Muslim India, beyond the existing petty disciplinary boundaries. In 1965, thanks to a scholarship, Bert Fragner enrolled as a student at the University of Tehran. Iraj Afshar, Mohammad Jafar Mahjub, Mojtabi Minovi, Manucher Sotude, and Zabihollah Safa were among his teachers. As he decided to extend his sojourn he had to make living and became a teacher at a Tehran vocational school run by the Austrian Ministry of Education. It was this five-year stay in Iran (1965–1969) that was

decisive for his choice of Iranian studies as the field to which he would devote himself heart and soul for the rest of his life. A phenomenal mastery of the Persian language, both written and spoken, a great familiarity with the country and its people, both broad and in-depth knowledge of Iranian history and culture, and the sharpening of his deeply emphatic ethnological eye were the indelible fruits of this stay abroad.

After receiving his doctorate in Vienna in 1970, with a PhD thesis on the history of Hamadan in the early Islamic period, he became a research assistant in Islamic studies in the Oriental Department of the University of Freiburg. In research and teaching, he began to map out a broad terrain of Persianate cultures in history and the present, which combined political history from the Middle Ages to the present, economic and social history, administrative and institutional history, diplomatic studies, cultural history of the Persian language, Iranian history in a global context, Persianate societies in the processes of modernization and identity building, and last but not least culinary culture. The publications of the Freiburg years are impressive in their abundance and thematic breadth. Particularly noteworthy are his groundbreaking habilitation thesis (1977, published 1979) on Persian memoirs, his *Repertorium persischer Herrscherurkunden* (Repertory of Persian royal documents, 1980) and his contribution to volume 6 of *The Cambridge History of Iran* on the economic and social affairs of the Timurid, Turkman, and Safavid periods. As an academic teacher, Bert Fagner has known how to fascinate students and inspire them to continue in his field. Not a few have turned to Iranian topics within Oriental studies because of him.

With his appointment to the C4 professorship for Iranian studies at the Free University of Berlin in 1985, Bert Fagner was in the eagerly awaited position to establish his academic program, that is, the cultural and historical study of Persianate cultures from Islamization to the present, on an equal footing with the mostly linguistically and religiously oriented field of Old and Middle Iranian studies. His conceptualization of Iranian studies as cultural studies was further geared to allow this discipline to emerge from the shadow of Islamic studies. In Germany, the latter usually focused on Arabic cultures and religious topics, thereby marginalizing Iranian studies. During his time in Berlin, Bert Fagner also increasingly focused on premodern and Soviet Central Asia, the historical roots of modern Iranian identity, the nation-building of the Tajiks, Iranian–Central Asian history in a universal historical context, and the history and profile of Iranian studies in Germany, Europe, and other parts of the world.

Unexpectedly, only a few years later an even better opportunity arose to advance his academic goals: his appointment to the newly created chair of Iranian studies at the University of Bamberg in 1989—a position which he held until 2003—enabled him to further develop the staff, creative scope, and a syllabus befitting his vision of Iranian studies. He initiated a scholarship program funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which made it possible for students of Iranian studies and related disciplines from all over Germany to study in Iran for one term. The program became a great success and exists in modified form to this day as an exchange program. Academic excursions to Iran were another instrument for familiarizing students with the country after the end of the Iraq–Iran war. The great number of students who, after completing their studies at Bamberg, either embarked on an academic career themselves or succeeded in other fields, such as international organizations or political consulting, impressively demonstrates how well the subject has been established at Bamberg.

Bert Fagner always engaged in a lively exchange with colleagues in Germany, as well as in other European countries, the US, Russia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. He was active in relevant scientific associations and took on leadership roles there. From 1997 to 2002 he was a member of the board of the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*; from 2000 to 2002 he held the position of first chairman. He was actively involved with the *Societas Iranologica Europaea* beginning at its foundation and served on its board from 1989 to 1997, first as secretary, then as president. At this level, too, he was successful in promoting his scholarly objectives. He hosted numerous international conferences, workshops, and meetings in Bamberg, including the Second European Conference

of Iranian Studies (Bamberg 1991), the Fourth International Round Table of Safavid Studies (Bamberg 2003), and the Sixth European Conference of Iranian Studies (Vienna 2007), to mention only a few.

Among the publications of the Bamberg period, the seminal treatise *Die "Persophonie": Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Persophonia: regionality, identity, and language contact in the history of Asia), published in 1999, stands out because it coherently bundles, discusses, and illuminates Bert Fragner's key scholarly concerns against the backdrop of an extensive cultural historical tableau.

For a long time, it had seemed—even to Bert Fragner himself—as if the University of Bamberg was the culmination of his academic career. But when he was offered the directorship of the Institute of Iranian Studies, newly created by the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 2002, his vita took another surprising yet coherent turn. From 2003 to 2009, Bert Fragner served as director of this institute with undiminished vigor, inspiring presence, and continued drive. He was awarded membership in the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 2008. With the help of a young and international team, he succeeded in establishing a center of Iranian studies, which takes an inclusive approach to the field and is thus unique in Europe.

Even after his retirement in December 2009, Bert Fragner continued to devote himself to Iranian affairs, whether as a scholar, as a reviewer and mentor, or as a sought-after guest speaker at scholarly congresses or events of general interest. To the very end of his days he worked on and completed publications, such as an extensive contribution to volume 5 of *A History of Persian Literature* (2021) on the literary aspects of Persian historiography and treatises on the history of Persian cookbook literature (2015 and 2021). The latter reflect not only his familiarity with written sources but also great practical expertise. Supported by his wife Christa, Bert Fragner enjoyed legendary fame for his culinary art and his generous, cordial, and charming hospitality throughout his career.

The scholarly community loses in Bert Fragner an inspired and inspiring scholar, a great organizer, a supporter and friend, and a wonderful human being. We miss him very much. His scholarly legacy will be carried on by his students. He is survived by his wife, Christa, his daughter Shirin, and two grandchildren.

Selective Bibliography¹

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¹ For a complete list of publications see https://www.oew.ac.at/fileadmin/Institute/IFI/PDF/publikationen/fragner_pub.pdf.