

OSKAR VON HINÜBER

HEINZ BECHERT (1932-2005)

– *Obituary* –

On June 14th in 2005, shortly before his 73rd birthday, Professor Dr. Heinz Bechert passed away in Göttingen after a prolonged illness, which was preceded by many years of failing health overshadowing the last years of his life.

H. Bechert, who was born on 26th June 1932 in Munich passed his habilitation in Mainz in 1965, where he had come from Saarbrücken as an assistant to Helmuth Humbach (*1921), when the latter followed an offer by the Johannes-Gutenberg-University to take over the professorship of comparative linguistics succeeding Walter Porzig (1895-1961) in 1961. When a chair of indology was created at Mainz in 1963, H. Bechert changed to Georg Buddruss (*1929) as assistant.

Still in 1965, immediately after his habilitation at the early age of only 33 years ¹, H. Bechert was offered simultaneously chairs at Calcutta, at Bonn in succession to Paul Hacker (1913-1979), who had left for Münster, and at Göttingen. H. Bechert decided to succeed Ernst Waldschmidt (1897-1985), who had been Professor for Indology since 1936, when he accepted (or rather had to accept) the professorship at Göttingen. For, E. Waldschmidt would have preferred to remain in the immediate vicinity of the Indian Museum in Berlin to pursue his studies of Indian art, which would be impossible in Göttingen. The faculty at Göttingen, on the other hand, originally

1. The "Habilitationsschrift" was published in part only in 2005, see note 4 at the end.

suggested Paul Thieme (1905-2001) to succeed to his teacher Emil Sieg (1866-1951), a wish that was blocked by political interference.

These interesting details of the history of indology at Göttingen were unearthed by H. Bechert and read out in his laudatio on the occasion of the renewal of P. Thieme's PhD diploma by the university of Göttingen on the occasion of its 60th anniversary during a small celebration at Tübingen in January 1989 (It was the 60th anniversary because to faculty at Göttingen had simply forgotten the usual renewal after 50 years)².

Even before H. Bechert took up his work in Göttingen, where he held the chair of indology from 1965 until 2000³, he had written already an impressive series of articles and was working on his perhaps most important contribution to Buddhist studies, "Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus".

H. Bechert studied at the university of Munich and got his PhD under the guidance of Helmuth Hoffmann (1912-1992) at the early age of 23 in 1956. The thoroughly revised thesis appeared under the title "Bruchstücke buddhistischer Verssammlungen aus zentralasiatischen Sanskrithandschriften I⁴: Die Anavataptagāthā und die Sthaviragāthā.

2. Paul Thieme received his PhD at Göttingen in 1929 on "Das Plusquamperfektum im Veda" under the guidance of Emil Sieg, although he often pointed out that his scholarly formation was much more influenced by Heinrich Lüders (1869-1943) and Wilhelm Schulze (1863-1935) during his studies in Berlin.

3. This was the longest tenure of a professorship in the history of the chair of indology at Göttingen: The indological *paramparā* at Göttingen begins with Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875 [professor at Göttingen 1831-1867]), Theodor Benfey (1809-1881 [1862-1881]), Franz Kielhorn (1840-1908 [1881-1908]); Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920 [1908-1920]), Emil Sieg [1920-1936], Ernst Waldschmidt [1936-1965], Heinz Bechert [1965-2000] and continues since 2002 after a vacancy of two years with Thomas Oberlies (*1958).

4. The second part never appeared, but cf. "On a Fragment of the Vimānāvādāna, A Canonical Buddhist Sanskrit Work", in: *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I. B. Horner*. Dordrecht, 1974, pp. 19-25 (no. 107), repeated in an abbreviated form as "A collection of 'Minor Texts' from the Buddhist Sanskrit canon", in: *Recent Studies in Sanskrit and Indology* ed. by D. K. Gupta. Delhi 1982, p. 89-94 (no. 186). – The numbers given together with the publications quoted refer to the very careful and comprehensive bibliographies of H. Bechert's writings in his Festschriften: *Studien zur Indologie und Buddhismuskunde. Festgabe des Seminars für Indologie und Buddhismuskunde für Professor Dr. H. Bechert*, hg. von Reinhold Grünendahl, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Petra Kieffer-Pülz. [Indica et Tibetica 22].

Berlin 1961. Sanskrittexte aus den Turfanfunden VI”.

During his years in Munich members of the unusually brilliant department of linguistics at Munich at that time⁵ deeply influenced the first writings of H. Bechert. This is well documented by a series of early articles on Pāli philology, which were published in the first volumes of the *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* from 1952

Bonn1993 and: *Bauddhavidyāsudhākaraḥ. Studies in Honour of Heinz Bechert on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, edited by Petra Kieffer-Pülz and Jens-Uwe Hartmann. [Indica et Tibetica Band 30]. Swistal-Odendorf 1997. The last entry refers to publications of the year 1996. After that date only very few publications have come to my notice: The original Buddha and the recent Buddha: A preliminary report on Buddhism in a Gurung community, in: *Change and Continuity: Studies in the Nepalese Culture of the Kathmandu Valley* ed. by S. Lienhard. Torino 1996, pp. 367-374; Einleitung (to: Der Buddhismus I. *Der indische Buddhismus und seine Verzweigungen* von Heinz Bechert, Johannes Bronkhorst, Jacob Ensink, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Petra Kieffer-Pülz, Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, Siegfried Lienhard, Ian William Mabbett. [Die Religionen der Menschheit, Band 24,1]. Stuttgart 2000, pp. 1-20 [In response to my review IJ 45. 2002, pp. 77-86, H. Bechert insisted in a letter dated 23rd October 2002 that he was *not* the editor of this volume]; The earliest reliable information on the central conception of Buddhism in western writing: The report by Simon de La Loubère (1691), in: *Vividharatnakaraṇḍaka. Festgabe für Adelheid Mette*, hg. von Christine Chojnacki, Jens-Uwe Hartmann und Volker Tschannerl [Indica et Tibetica 37]. Swistal-Odendorf 2000, pp. 57-66 [The “Buddha images... excavated in Haithabu” (p. 57) cannot be traced, letter dated 1st September 2000, and do not exist; one Buddha image was found indeed, but in Helgö / Sweden in July 1956: B. Gyllensvärd: The Buddha found at Helgö, in: *Excavations at Helgö XVI. Exotic and Sacral Finds from Helgö* by Bo Gyllensvärd et alii. Stockholm 2004, pp. 11-27 (most likely a Kashmir {Gilgit?} Buddha ca. 8th/9th century)]; Die Periode der portugiesischen Herrschaft und die Anfänge der römisch-katholischen Kirche auf der Insel Ceylon, in: *Exotica. Portugals Entdeckungen im Spiegel fürstlicher Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Renaissance* hg. von Wilfried Seipel. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien 2000, p. 87-99; Die Entdeckung der Heiligen Schriften des Buddhismus entlang der Seidenstrasse und ihre Bedeutung für die Buddhismusforschung, in: *Akademie-Journal* 2/2001, pp. 36-41; Indienforschung im Wandel, in: *Spektrum. Informationen aus Forschung und Lehre*. Georg-August-Universität Göttingen 1/2001, pp. 51-54; and lastly, the “Habilitationsschrift” of 1965 (in part): *Eine hochsprachliche Tradition in Südasien. Sanskrit-Literatur bei den buddhistischen Singhalesen*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte 718 [Veröffentlichungen zu den Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 37]. Wien 2005.

5. Hans Oertel (1868-1952) and Ferdinand Sommer (1875-1962) were still active, moreover, Karl Hoffmann (1915-1996 [PD: 1950-1952]) and Helmut Humbach (*1921 [PD: 1954-1956]) taught as young “Privatdozent” in Munich, as did later H. Bechert’s cousin Johannes Bechert (1931-1994), who eventually became Professor for Linguistics at the then newly founded university of Bremen in 1971.

onwards. The first article covers the use of the indicative of different tenses in Pāli (2. "Über den Gebrauch der indikativischen Tempora im Pāli"), which is still the basic article dealing with this particular aspect of the much neglected Pāli syntax. Later, in a very general form, H. Bechert took up this topic again in 1995 in "327. Zur Kontroverse der Aoristformen im Pāli (On the controversy concerning aorist forms in Pāli)". During his later years, he rarely came back to purely philological subjects, e.g., in the important contribution "234. Alte Vedhas im Pāli-Kanon" (1988).

Among the early articles is also a fundamental study on the history of Buddhist schools and sects: "5. Zur Geschichte der buddhistischen Sekten in Indien und Ceylon" (1955)⁶.

From May 1958 to May 1959 H. Bechert spent a year in Ceylon, which broadened the area of his researches considerably. Sinhalese language and Sinhalese literature besides the history of Buddhism in Ceylon came into focus. Together with a number of articles, the edition of the left manuscript by Wilhelm Geiger "18. Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times" by H. Bechert in 1960 is the most visible expression of these new interests. While working on this material, he was still able to consult the widow of Wilhelm Geiger (1856-1943), Magdalene Geiger (1877-1960), for whom he wrote an obituary in ZDMG 111. 1961 (no. 26). Moreover, this close connection to the Geiger family manifests itself in a biography of W. Geiger, "Wilhelm Geiger. His Life and Works" originally published in 1976 (no. 126) and revised and enlarged by an appendix including a bibliography of W. Geiger and his "Short History of Ceylon" in 1995 (no. 328)⁷ at the occasion of a symposium organized in Colombo to mark the centenary of Geiger's first publication on Ceylon, in which H. Bechert also took an active part. Furthermore, H. Bechert edited W. Geiger's "Kleine Schriften" in 1973 (no. 93).

When H. Bechert came to Göttingen after teaching two terms as "Privatdozent" at Mainz, this inaugurated yet another, essential and very marked change in his many fields of activities. For, in course of

6. This and other later papers are summed up in "189. On the identification of Buddhist schools in early Sri Lanka" (1982).

7. Cf. also S. Fritz: Wilhelm Geigers Beitrag zur Erforschung des Dhivedi, der Nationalsprache der Malediven. MSS 54. 1993, p. 15-32.

time, particularly after completing the monumental work on “Buddhist modernism”, a term coined by H. Bechert as he pointed out at several occasions, “Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft” (no. 37: I: 1966, ²1988 [no.245]; II: 1967, ²2000; III: 1973), the centre of his work shifted more and more from research itself to organization of research.

While H. Bechert took over from E. Waldschmidt the “Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden (SWTF)”, which he edited from fascicle 1 (1973, no. 97) to fascicle 16 (2004), he envisaged himself a second major and closely connected project in 1979, the “Systematische Übersicht über die buddhistische Sanskrit-Literatur (SÜBS)”, which should give, by following the model of the Epilegomena to the Critical Pāli Dictionary, a comprehensive bibliographical survey of the Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Most unfortunately, only two parts appeared in 1979 and in 1995 respectively ⁸. Another offshoot of the SWTF was an important series of ten accompanying volumes containing studies of various aspects of Buddhist philology, the “Beihefte”, which appeared between 1989-2003 (no. 266, 267, 283, 305, 317, 331).

From 1969 onwards, catalogues of Sinhalese and Burmese manuscripts were prepared under H. Bechert’s supervision as parts of the “Katalogisierung der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland ⁹”. When this huge project, which was originally funded by the “Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft” was transferred to the academy of Göttingen from 1st January 1990 onwards under the auspices of the “Conference of the Academies in Germany” (ZDMG 141. 1991, p. 16*), H. Bechert acted in addition as chairman of the project as a whole.

8. Akira Yuyama: *Vinaya-Texte* (no. 167, 163) with additions in : A. Yuyama; Some remarks on two texts related to the Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins. *IT* 28. 2002 [2004], p. 281-299, and E. Steinkellner and M. T. Much: *Texte der erkenntnistheoretischen Schule des Buddhismus* (no. 325). Important bibliographical additions to SÜBS, but outside this series, are contained in Th. Oberlies: *Ein bibliographischer Überblick über die kanonischen Texte der Śrāvakayāna-Schulen des Buddhismus (ausgenommen der des Mahāvihāra-Theravāda)*. *WZKS* 47. 2003, p. 37-84. – Much bibliographical help is also offered by Yasuhiro Sueki: *Bibliographical Sources for Buddhist Studies*. [Bibliographia Indica et Buddhica III]. Tokyo 1998 with addenda I (1999), II (2000), III (2001).

9. *Singhalesische Handschriften* I (1969 [no. 60]); II (1997); *Burmese Manuscripts* I (1979 [no. 158]); II (1985 [no. 214]); III (1996 [no. 329]); IV (2000); V (2004).

Most important, however, in terms of stimulating research, was a series of four conferences, the “Symposien zur Buddhismusforschung” organized by H. Bechert. The first one took place in Göttingen in 1974 on the wide subject of Buddhism in Ceylon and religious syncretism in general (no. 145). The subsequent conferences were more focussed on particular, clearly defined subjects: on the “Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition” in 1977 (no. 172), then on Hīnayāna literature and Buddhist schools in 1982 (no. 222), a conference, which was held at the same time to celebrate the 85th birthday of Ernst Waldschmidt. During the fourth conference held in Hedemünden near Göttingen in 1988 “The Dating of the Historical Buddha” was discussed in a most comprehensive way as documented in three volumes published in 1991 (no. 28), 1992 (no. 288) and 1997. This conference was prepared and accompanied by various articles by H. Bechert starting with “The date of the Buddha reconsidered” in this journal (no. 187, *IT* 10. 1982, cf. no. 194, *IT* 11. 1983), and continuing with “231. Die Lebenszeit des Buddha – das älteste feststehende Datum der indischen Geschichte?” (cf. nos. 247, 263, 269, 302, 326). Moreover, H. Bechert not only contributed valuable introductions to all conference volumes, but also took upon himself the heavy task of editing these voluminous books.

Besides, H. Bechert served as an active member on a number of boards of learned bodies such as the International Association of Buddhist Studies as one of the vice-presidents from 1982 to 1990, or on the board of the Helmuth-von-Glasenapp-Stiftung in different functions from 1968 until his death.

The impressive contribution by H. Bechert to Buddhist studies, particularly to Therāvāda, was duly recognized and honoured by the election to four academies, Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen (1968), Académie Royale des Sciences de Belgique (1973), Kungl. Vitterhets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademie, Stockholm (1988) and Academia Europaea (1989)¹⁰.

10. An obituary by Russell Webb appeared in *Buddhist Studies Review* 22.2.2006, p. 211-216.