

## Obituary

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# In memoriam Johanna Narten (1930–2019)

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Johanna (Jo) Narten died on July 15, 2019 in Uttenreuth near Erlangen, aged 88. Born on October 5, 1930 in Hannover, the only child of Karl Narten and Herta Narten née Jäger, she was Professor of Indo-European and Indo-Iranian Studies at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. She never married, but in 2010 she adopted her former student Marcos Albino as her son and lived with him in her family home in Uttenreuth until her death.

Both of Jo's parents studied chemistry in Berlin, where they met as university students. Her father had a PhD in chemistry, but since he had attended a mili-

tary school when he was a boy, he was immediately recruited at the beginning of the Second World War and stationed as an officer in Sicily. During the war Jo was evacuated with her mother to Eisenberg in Thüringen to escape the bombing of Hannover. Living in the house of her uncle and his family, she particularly enjoyed the company of her grandfather, a retired Protestant pastor, who introduced her to the Latin language. She always spoke of him very warmly. At the end of the war she returned with her mother to Hannover, where her father

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I am indebted to Marcos Narten Albino for information especially concerning Johanna Narten's personal life, and to Bernhard Forssman for several valuable comments.

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joined them soon afterwards, coming home from a British POW camp. Her father then started a heating company together with a friend.

Jo attended the Wilhelm-Raabe-Schule in Hannover. After the final High School exam (*Abitur*) in 1950, she at first planned to study theology, and in preparation she learned Greek and Hebrew and took the appropriate exams, the Graecum and Hebraicum. However, following the advice of her parents, she chose Classical Philology instead, matriculated at the University of Saarbrücken in 1951 and studied with Ernst Zinn. When in 1952 Karl Hoffmann took up the Chair of Indo-European Studies at Saarbrücken, Zinn drew Jo's attention to Hoffmann's lectures and predicted that she would go over to Hoffmann "with flying colours". His prediction proved right. Jo changed subject after attending just one of Hoffmann's lectures. "In Hoffmanns Vorlesungen ging mir die Sonne auf", she used to say.

In 1955 Johanna Narten followed Hoffmann to Erlangen. Under his supervision she wrote her PhD thesis on "Entstehung und Ausbreitung der sigmatischen Aoriste in der vedischen Literatur" and was awarded a PhD in 1961. She wrote her D.Litt. (Habilitation) thesis on "Der Yasna Haptanhäiti. Eine philologisch-linguistische Interpretation des ältesten Opfertextes der Zarathustrier" (1971). She was appointed Wissenschaftliche Rätin in 1973, and held a personal chair at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg from 1978 until her retirement in 1993. Johanna Narten was repeatedly invited to apply for Chairs at other universities world-wide, but she remained committed to Erlangen in order to pursue her research in the stimulating environment of the Institute of Indo-Iranian and Indo-European Studies, headed by Karl Hoffmann.<sup>1</sup>

All the scholarly publications of Johanna Narten were carried out to the highest academic standard. The publication of her PhD thesis under the title *Die sigmatischen Aoriste im Veda* (1964) laid the foundation for her reputation as a world-renowned historical linguist. This work is a masterpiece and has remained an essential tool for grammatical analysis in Vedic and Indo-Iranian Studies to the present day. Combining philological acumen and linguistic analysis, Narten examines the morphological category of the sigmatic aorist in Vedic both as a category and as it manifests itself with individual roots. Arranged following the Sanskrit order of the roots, the work is easy to use and is a treasure trove of information and learning. It provides full discussion of the philological problems and lays to rest many ghost forms.<sup>2</sup> It has also become a reference point for

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the atmosphere at the Institute, see, for example, Narten's (1997) and Witzel's (1997) obituaries of Karl Hoffmann.

<sup>2</sup> Wright (1966: 167).

later studies by other scholars of morphological categories of the verbal system in Indo-Iranian languages.

Narten's work *Die Aməša Spəntas im Avesta* (1982) is a careful analysis of the origin, name, order and function of the group of divine beings referred to in Avestan as *Aməša Spəntas*, or 'heilvolle Unsterbliche', as she translates the expression, in the ancient Iranian, Zoroastrian religion. In particular, Narten engages with the question of whether or not the *Aməša Spəntas* form a closed group of seven in the Avesta, and the extent to which they are systematically matched with the seven material creations, as is the case later in the Pahlavi literature. On the basis of the relevant Avestan text passages, she demonstrates that the group is open in the Avesta and not confined to seven, and that the association between the spiritual *Aməša Spəntas* and the material creations, although present, is not yet systematically organised and fixed.

Her third monograph, *Der Yasna Haptañhāiti* (1986) is an edition, translation and philological-linguistic commentary of a text which at the time had escaped scholarly attention for almost 100 years as Avestan scholars focused on the so-called Gathas of Zarathushtra. Up to then, the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* had been regarded as a text similar in character to the repetitive liturgical litanies of the Younger Avestan sacrificial texts. In contrast, Narten argues that the language of the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* is very close if not identical to that of the Gathas and attributes the few differences between the two types of text to their different literary genres rather than to the age or provenance of the text. She discusses the stylistic rhetorical figures in the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* and argues that they are also due to the specific literary form of the text. She thus puts forward the view that the Gathas and the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* were produced in the same milieu, that is to say by Zarathushtra. Regarding the language of the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* as equal in age to that of the Gathas, she firmly establishes the use of the term Old Avestan as describing the language of both the Gathas and the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*. This allows for the term 'Gathic' to be reserved for the language of the Gathas and the two oldest prayers (*Yasna* 27.13 and 54.1). Next to Ilya Gershevitch's edition of the *Mihr Yašt* (1967 [1959]), Narten's work on the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* is one of the first modern editions of an Avestan text to include in-depth discussions of the text's philological and linguistic problems.

Throughout her academic career Narten worked closely with her teacher, Karl Hoffmann. Together with him and Bernhard Forssman, she served as editor of the *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* from 1968 to 1990, although she was also heavily involved in the editorial process both before and afterwards. She edited the first two (of three) volumes of Hoffmann's articles in 1975 and 1976 and provided them with detailed indices, unlocking the work of Hoffmann for the academic world. In the years following the publication of

her edition of the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti*, Johanna Narten worked particularly closely with Karl Hoffmann on the question of the relationship between the Avestan script and the phonetic properties of the sounds the script represents. This work was jointly published with him under the title *Der Sasanidische Archetypus: Untersuchungen zu Schreibung und Lautgestalt des Avestischen* (1989). Following the refutation of Andreas's theory that the Avestan script tells us little about the sounds of the Avestan language, this work demonstrates that the Avestan script was artificially devised and records the sounds, not the meaning, of the Avestan language. Hoffmann and Narten describe in detail the logic behind the shapes of individual Avestan characters and aim at establishing the sounds these characters represent at the time the script was developed. Their work has put Avestan studies on a new foundation with regard to the search for a system behind the bewildering and seemingly excessive number of characters encountered in the extant manuscripts, and the inconsistent way in which they are used.

Narten's articles, which were published in a collection of 1995 by Marcos Albino and Matthias Fritz (Narten 1995), are no less significant than her books. Her name has become a sort of hallmark far beyond the remit of Indo-Iranian Studies through her eleven-page seminal article "Zum "proterodynamischen" Wurzelpräsenz" (1968), published in a volume in honour of the Leiden Indo-Europeanist F.B.J. Kuiper. In this article, Narten identifies a feature of quantitative ablaut in the athematic paradigm of the Indo-European verb according to which the ablaut is in lengthened grade in the singular, and in full grade in the plural and in the middle, while the accent remains static on the root syllable. Being "eine Stufe höher" ('one level up'), as she used to say, this type of ablaut was different from the standard pattern of full grade in the singular and zero grade in the plural combined with a mobile accent. Narten's article has greatly stimulated scholarship and "Narten" roots and formations came to be found and argued for in both the nominal and verbal paradigms. In an interview she gave for the *Erlanger Nachrichten* in March 1995, on the occasion of her election as member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Narten commented on how she felt about her discovery: "Das ist ein sehr schönes Gefühl, wenn man spürt, etwas Wichtiges herausgefunden zu haben, und die anderen erkennen das auch an."<sup>3</sup> Narten's publications exemplify in an ideal way what Hoffmann had conceived as the field of Indo-Iranian Studies, i. e. neither only Indo-Aryan nor only Iranian, but the two branches taken together as a single discipline, which employs the evidence of the oldest sources of both languages

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<sup>3</sup> "It is a very nice feeling when you realise you have discovered something of importance, and when others acknowledge it" (Hoja 1995).

in order to elucidate either of the two branches and to reconstruct their common prehistoric ancestor.

Johanna Narten's contributions to scholarship were acknowledged with her election on 17.2.1995 as a full member of the historical-philosophical class of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities (Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften), the first woman to be elected since the Academy's foundation in 1759. (Alongside her, the geneticist Regine Kahmann was elected as the first woman in the class of Natural Sciences.) Johanna Narten regularly attended events at the Academy and served on the Council of the Bayerisches Wörterbuch. She was recipient of a *Festschrift* in her honour on the occasion of her seventieth birthday in 2000 (Hintze and Tichy 2000).

Johanna Narten was a spirited person with wide-ranging interests far beyond her academic field. She enjoyed reading books on biology, and loved music and, especially in her younger years, dancing. She had a joyful, sunny personality, and there was always laughter to be heard whenever she entered the Institute in Erlangen. But academia was the passion of Johanna Narten's life, and all her work was produced with enthusiasm and great dedication. Being aware that scholarly publications are often written with much personal involvement ("sie sind mit Herzblut geschrieben", as she used to say), she advised us, her students, to avoid unnecessary harshness when disagreeing with other scholars' opinions or when criticizing their work. She also warned against pushing an argument contrary to the evidence, instead saying that we have to put obstacles into our own way against which we need to test our views ("man muss sich Hindernisse in den Weg legen"). She was a true scholar, driven by the desire to understand and to explain, totally committed to her sources, which she treated with the greatest respect. She was a model of academic integrity.

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