



**PROFESSOR PENTTI AALTO
IN MEMORIAM
(1917-1998)**

Professor *Pentti Aalto* died in Helsinki on November 30, 1998, at the age of 81. His heart, weakened by attacks of illness, finally failed. He was born on July 22, 1917, in Pori.

Pentti Aalto was a philologist of exceptionally wide range. In his Phil.Lic. (Doctoral Candidate) degree in 1949 he had the highest mark in four subjects: Roman Literature, Greek Literature, Sanskrit and Comparative Indo-European Philology, and Altaic Philology. The same year he defended his doctoral dissertation on the complex question of the Latin gerund and gerundive. His *lectio praecursoria* dealt with the use of statistics in linguistic research.

According to his mates in the reserve officers' course of 1939, Pentti Aalto was tranquility personified. In the war in 1941-44 he rose to the rank of lieutenant and worked in the intelligence department as a code breaker.

In 1953, he applied for an assistant professorship in Classical Philology. From a general point of view, he was found the most competent of the three applicants, but, unfortunately, his production fell for the most part outside the scope of classical philology. This was due to the fact that he had been a pupil and collaborator of G. J. Ramstedt and thus directed his interests more on the lines of his great master, i.e., to Mongolian and generally Central Asian studies. After Ramstedt's death in 1950 he had had to edit for publication numerous unfinished works by Ramstedt. Aalto's own text editions and researches in the field of Altaic studies continued with distinction the glorious tradition of this branch of the Finnish national science, established by M. A. Castrén (1813-1852).

In 1958, Pentti Aalto was appointed *Professor Extraordinarius* of comparative linguistics at the University of Helsinki. When Martti Räsänen, Professor of Turkic Philology, retired in 1963, Pentti Aalto began to take care of Altaic Philology in addition to his own chair. He lectured on numerous ancient Indo-European languages as well as on Mongolian, Ancient Turkic, Chuvash and even Tibetan. His teaching career, initiated in 1949 when he was a new docent, continued to 1980. On request he continued to manage the examinations in Altaic Philology until 1982.

Aalto educated the present generation of renowned Finnish Indologists. The year 1969 brought lively international attention, when the Finnish team, to which Aalto also belonged, made public its first announcement concerning the interpretation of the script of the ancient Indus civilization. The team was led by Asko Parpola, Aalto's pupil and successor.

Pentti Aalto acted as the secretary of the Finnish Oriental Society from 1947 to 1956, and of the Finno-Ugrian Society from 1956 to 1965. He was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences in 1962. He made study tours from 1945 onwards to various European countries, Mongolia, the USA and India. In 1963, he, assisted by his pupil Tuomo Pekkanen, arranged the 6th Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC) for the first time in Finland. The "PIAC Medal" was awarded to Professor Pentti Aalto at the 30th Meeting in 1987 in Bloomington, Indiana, USA. As for Ramstedt, Mongolia and the Mongols were especially close to his heart.

For the large scale enterprise entitled *The History of Learning and Science in Finland 1828-1918* Aalto wrote three volumes, which treat the history of Oriental studies (1971), classical languages (1980), and modern languages (1987). His great learning is reflected in his balanced and penetrating interpretation.

Pentti Aalto was the grand old man of Finnish Oriental studies and a honorary member, i.a., of the Finnish Oriental Society. The Society published three anniversary volumes in his honour, the last being that for his 80th birthday. His extensive scholarly production comprises more than 350 items (for a preliminary bibliography, see *Studia Orientalia* 47 (1977), pp. 287-311 and 59 (1987), pp. 260-265).

In his summer place in Kimito Västansfjärd, Pentti Aalto examined with his two sons, interested in nature, plants from remote countries growing up in ballast heaps, thrown on the beach during the period of the great sailing-ships.

His classical refined personality and inexhaustible stories about academic notables of the past conjured up fascinating sound-pictures, which now go on among his pupils as his heritage. His incomparable humour, unpretentious and warm-hearted character together with an incomprehensibly wide learning made him an unforgettable personality, a real living treasure.

HARRY HALÉN