

PENTTI AALTO IN HIS ASPECT AS INDOLOGIST

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In a series of articles, I have delineated the history of Finnish Indology.¹ I was at the beginning of my career as a scholar when a lucky manuscript find provided the impetus to write the first article of the series to which I then gave the general title “From the early days of Finnish Indology”. When I now proceed to discuss Pentti Aalto, I must drop out the word “early”. He was the teacher of Bertil Tikkanen and myself, and my own interest in the history of learning originates in his lectures in the 1970s.

Pentti Aalto was born on 27th July 1917 in Pori, on the western coast of Finland. After attending school in Pori, he studied classical philology, Sanskrit and Altaic studies at the University of Helsinki under E. Linkomies,² J.E. Rein³ and G.J. Ramstedt.⁴ In Sanskrit, his teachers were P.E. Pavolini⁵ – visiting Helsinki in 1935–1936 – and Y.M. Biese.⁶ After the war – which he spent at the intelligence

1 See Karttunen 1984, 1994, 1997 and 2003a. On the history of Indology in Finland, see further Aalto 1971, 70 ff. and Parpola 1979a and 1979b, on Aalto, Halén 1999a, 1999b and Parpola 2003.

2 Edvin Johan Hildegard Linkomies (until 1928 Flinck; 1894–1963), Professor of Roman Literature at the University of Helsinki from 1923–1963.

3 Johan Edvard Rein (1873–1940), Professor of Greek Literature at the University of Helsinki from 1930–1940.

4 Gustaf John Ramstedt (1871–1950), Professor of Altaic Linguistics at the University of Helsinki from 1917–1941, a famous specialist in Mongolian and comparative Altaic studies.

5 Paolo Emilio Pavolini (1864–1942) was Professor of Sanskrit and Ancient Indian Civilisation at the University of Florence, remembered for his studies on Buddhism and Indian narrative literature. But he was a versatile scholar who had inherited an interest in the Finnish language and literature from his teacher Emilio Teza. In this field, his main achievement was the Italian translation of the *Kalevala* (1910). He had visited Finland earlier at least two times and came to Helsinki in 1935 after his retirement from the chair in Florence.

6 Yrjö Mooses Jalmari Biese (1903–1983) was originally a specialist in Latin and Indo-European linguistics. After the retirement of Reuter (on him, see Karttunen 2003) he was Docent of Comparative Linguistics at the University of Helsinki from 1932–1965, being also in charge of Sanskrit until Aalto got his chair. However, Biese turned later to modern languages and was from 1946–1967 Professor of English at the University of Turku.

department of the Finnish army headquarters working on decipherment of enemy codes and ciphers – he went to Uppsala to deepen his knowledge of Greek and Sanskrit. His main teacher in Indology there was Helmer Smith.⁷

Aalto got his PhD in 1949 and was nominated Docent of Comparative Linguistics in the same year. He applied for the chair of associate professor of classical philology in 1953 without success. In scholarly merits, he clearly surpassed other applicants, but there were other factors involved. In his statement, which I have knowledge of thanks to Harry Halén, Professor Linkomies characterised him too as many-sided – his interests in Altaistics had little to do with classical philology – and too much a linguist – he could not imagine Aalto teaching the philological interpretation of classical authors, which was an essential part of the job. Instead, the personal chair of Sanskrit and Comparative Indo-European Linguistics was conferred upon Aalto in 1958. He retired from this post in 1980, but actively continued research until his death on 30th November 1998. After the retirement of the Turkologist Martti Räsänen (1893–1976) in 1961, he was many years also responsible for the teaching of Altaic studies.

As a scholar, Aalto was indeed many-sided but always mainly a linguist. Indology formed only part of his work, and I am not competent to judge other aspects.

Early and lasting interests were Latin and Greek languages: He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Latin gerund and gerundive formations (*Untersuchungen über das lateinische Gerundium und Gerundivum*, 1949),⁸ soon followed by a second study on Greek infinitives (*Studien zur Geschichte des Infinitivs im Griechischen*, 1953). Collaboration with his former student Tuomo Pekkanen produced the collection of passages dealing with the peoples of North-Eastern Eurasia in ancient and medieval Latin texts (*Latin sources on North-Eastern Eurasia*, 1–2, Asiatische Forschungen 44 & 57, Wiesbaden 1975–1980).

Another speciality of Aalto was Mongolian and Altaic Studies. In this he was a disciple of Ramstedt and edited many of the unpublished works of his mentor on Korean, comparative Altaic and Mongolian linguistics. He himself wrote on linguistic and textual questions. He also dealt with Turkic, Tibetan, Tocharian and Iranian and an important part of Aalto's list of publications also deals with general linguistics and etymology.

7 Helmer Smith (1882–1956), a linguist and Pāli scholar, Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Linguistics at Uppsala University from 1936–1947.

8 He maintained an interest in gerund formations and much later gave the Sanskrit gerund as a subject to Bertil Tikkanen, who wrote both his MA thesis and doctoral dissertation on it: *The Sanskrit gerund: A synchronic, diachronic and typological analysis*, (Studia Orientalia, 62) Helsinki 1987.

Aalto was also keenly interested in the history of learning: he wrote three books⁹ and many articles on this subject. This interest continued to his deathbed: He asked his wife to bring the draft of his last paper to the hospital just a few days before his death. The paper was about the Swedish Iranian and Semitic scholar Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974), but was never completed.

After this outline, we shall take a bit closer look at Aalto's Indological and related work. A full list of his publications is found in Halén's two bibliographies and in the Institute bibliography.¹⁰ A collection of his papers was published in 1987 (*Studies in Altaic and Comparative Philology. A Collection of Professor Pentti Aalto's Essays in Honour of His 70th Birthday*, *Studia Orientalia* 59, Helsinki 1987).

The first among Aalto's indological contributions was his study about the use of and attitudes towards alcohol and drinking in ancient India. A teetotaler himself, Aalto dealt with his subject with an outsider's objectivity. Material was mainly culled from Veda, Mahābhārata and Dharmasāstra. The study was first published in two versions, in Finnish and Swedish, in the journal *Alkoholipolitiikka/ Alkoholpolitik*,¹¹ then in a revised English version in *Festschrift Nobel* ("Madyam apeyam", in: Claus Vogel [ed.], *Jñānamuktāvalī. Commemoration Volume J. Nobel*, Delhi 1959: 17–37).

A couple of articles dealt with Sanskrit grammar and philology: "Conditionals in Buddhist Sanskrit" (in: D. Sinor [ed.], *Raghu Vira Memorial Volume*, New Delhi 1968: 1–9) and "On the absolute instrumental in Sanskrit" (*Indologica Taurinensia* 7, 1979: 47–55).

Another Indo-Aryan language in which Aalto had special interest was Romani. In the early 1970s, he was the chairman of the Romani orthography committee appointed by the Finnish Ministry of Education.¹² He wrote "Zur Geschichte der Erforschung des finnländischen Zigeunerndialekts" (*Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft Sonderheft* 42, *Zigeunerkundliche Forschungen* 1, Innsbruck 1977: 61–71). "Le vocabulaire du tzigane d'Ingrie composé par Sjögren" (*Études Finno-Ougriennes* 15, *Années* 1978–79, Budapest 1982: 21–32) is a commented edition of the short word-list of the Ingrian Gypsy dialect collected by Anders Johan Sjögren (1794–1855), probably in the 1820s. Among his students, Valtonen (below) specialised on Romani, but Halén and Tikkanen have also written on the subject.

9 Aalto 1971 and similar volumes on the history of classics (1980) and modern language studies (1987) in Finland, published in the same series.

10 Halén 1977, 1987, and in Karttunen 2003b: 21 ff. (this also contributed by Halén).

11 *Alkoholipolitiikka* 20:3, 1955: 1–15/
Alkoholens ställning i Indiens klassiska kultur. Alkoholpolitik 18:2, 1955: 1–15.

12 See Kimmo Granqvist's article in the present volume.

One article analyses the word-list prepared by the Swedish General (then a Lieutenant in the French army) von Döbeln (1758–1820) in 1783 (“Georg Carl von Döbeln’s glossary of his Indian diary”, *Studia Orientalia* 67, 1991: 127–145). In his diary, now kept in the Military Archives (*Krigsarkivet*) in Stockholm, the young officer had written down a number of words and idioms he found useful during his six months’ stay in South India. It contains about 80 words, a curious mixture of French, Portuguese, Persian, Urdu, and Tamil, all carefully traced and explained by Aalto.

In the late sixties, Aalto was a member of the Parpola group working on the Indus seals. Much earlier, he had considered the general methodology of decipherment,¹³ on Indus seals he wrote “Deciphering the Indus Script, methods and results” (in: *Anantapāram kila śabdaśāstram, księga pamiątkowa ku czci Eugeniusza Śluszkiewicza*, Red. kom. pod przew. J. Reychmana, Warszawa 1974: 21–27). “Marginal Notes on the Meluhha Problem” (in: *Prof. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri Felicitation Volume*, Madras 1971: 234–238) starts from the combination of the Akkadian toponym Meluḥḥa with the Indus civilisation and with words such as Pāli *milakkha* and Sanskrit *mleccha* and proceeds to consider their possible Dravidian background and the possibility of finding traces of a non-Dravidian substrate language through the comparison of Aryan and Dravidian vocabulary and ancient Near Eastern loanwords.

The article “Kautilya on siegecraft” (in: *Studies in classical and modern philology presented to Y.M. Biese on the occasion of his 80th birthday 4.1.1983*, AASF B223, Helsinki 1983: 11–21) traces parallels for the curious custom of using “incendiary birds” to set a besieged city on fire (KAŚ 13, 4, 14–21). It seems unlikely, as Aalto concludes, that such a device was ever actually used, but it is suprisingly common in literature, ranging from the Bible (*Judges* 15, 4 f. with foxes instead of birds) to Russian, Armenian and Mongol chronicles and to West European and Scandinavian legends.

Aalto’s interests also included the history of religions. “Zur Mystik des Brahmanismus-Hinduismus” (in: Sven S. Hartman & Carl-Martin Edsman [eds], *Mysticism*, Scripta Instituti Donneriani 5, Stockholm 1970: 200–205) is just a brief summary of mystic ideas from the Veda and Upaniṣads to Ramakrishna. More interesting is “On the developments of Indian religions as reflected by non-religious literature” (*Studia Orientalia* 64, 1988: 183–194, original paper read at SOAS in 1970). Here Aalto traces popular religious ideas from the Buddhist canon, from mathematical problems and especially from classical theatre. “Connections

¹³ Notes on methods of decipherment of unknown writings and languages, (*Studia Orientalia*, 11:4) Helsinki 1945, 26 pp.

between Finnish and Aryan mythology” (*Adyar Library Bulletin* 39, 1975: 110–128) reexamines the old question¹⁴ of the similarities between Finnish and Indian cosmogonies, especially the myths of the world egg and of the origin of fire. Finally, the brief article “The three strides of Viṣṇu” (*Temenos* 28, 1992: 9–13) rejects the old idea of Viṣṇu as a solar deity and compares his famous strides to the erratic path of Saturn as seen from the earth. With Viṣṇu as Saturn, even the dance of Kṛṣṇa with the gopīs can be seen as the apparent movements of Saturn in relation to fixed stars, coming closer and distancing in turn.

Quite a number of indological book reviews by Aalto are hidden in the journal *Finnisch-ugrische Forschungen* (1968–1984). He also wrote some popular articles in Finnish, dealing, e.g. with the history of Indian classical literature, with Indian grammatical traditions and with the history of gypsies in Finland.

From the Indian point of view, we must finally mention his studies of the transmission of Indian literature via Tibetan into Mongolian and of Turkic and Mongolian Buddhist texts. Here his main work was the critical edition of the Mongolian translation of a magical Sanskrit text, *Qutug-tu Pañcarakṣā kemekü Tabun Sakiyan neretü yeke kölgen sudur. Nach dem Stockholmer Xylograph 15.1.699. Mit einem Faksimile der Leningrader Handschrift MS š 130* (Asiatische Forschungen 10, Wiesbaden 1961, 211 pp. See also “Prolegomena to an Edition of the Pañcarakṣā”, *Studia Orientalia* 19:12, 1954 = Räsänen Fs., 48 pp.). The article “Zum Āṭavakāvadāna (Türkische Turfan-Texte X)” (*Studia Orientalia* 28:13, 1964, 14 pp.) delves into Buddhist demonology, tracing Pāli, Sanskrit, Sinhalese and Tocharian parallels to help the understanding of the fragmentary Old Turkic text. He also wrote “On the role of Central Asia in the spread of Indian cultural influence” (in: *India’s Contribution to World Thought and Culture*, Madras 1970: 249–262) and on “Sanskrit and Mongol language and literature” (in: *Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture*, 2, New Delhi 1973: 1–13).

Aalto had not many students; the truth is that his method of elementary teaching was deliberately intimidating to students. But anyone who was ready to work hard could also enjoy his enormously wide scope of linguistic scholarship. During his years as professor, Aalto mainly taught ancient Indian and Iranian languages, but also Mongolian and Turkic linguistics. He was always keen to learn new things; in May he decided to learn a new language, and in September he started

14 It was the subject of Herman Kellgren’s dissertation (*Mythus de ovo mundano, Indorumque de eodem notio, Specimen academicum*) as early as 1849 (see Karttunen 1994). See further Aalto’s paper “Rudolf Roth und die Religion der Finnen” in *Antiquitates Indogermanicae. Gedenkschrift für Hermann Güntert*, (Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft, 12) Innsbruck 1974: 267–270.

lecturing on it. This way we, his students, gained some idea of such subjects as Pahlavi, Old Irish and Old Armenian. Tibetan, too, but this he knew well, and also Tamil. It was not easy to be a pupil of Aalto and he did not make things easy for us, but nevertheless it is a cherished memory. I present his main students briefly:

Carl Gustaf Hartman (1922–) was his first post-graduate student in Indology. He received his PhD in 1966.¹⁵ He was a priest by profession and continued his ecclesiastical career.

Tuomo Pekkanen (1934–) is mainly a classical scholar and became Professor of Latin at the University of Jyväskylä (1975–1999), where he also occasionally taught Sanskrit. Under Aalto, he wrote a MA thesis on Buddhist Sanskrit (*Mahāraṣṭrā Mahāmantrānusāriṇī nāma mahāyāyasūtraṁ rakṣākalyaṇam*, 1960, 48 pp.), but his doctoral dissertation was on Greek ethnography. His later collaboration with Aalto is mentioned above.

The most competent pupil of Aalto is undoubtedly Asko Parpola (1941–). Parpola got his PhD in 1968, became Docent in 1969 and Professor in 1981 (retired in 2004). This is not the place to present his well known work as a scholar.¹⁶

Pertti Valtonen (1933–1999) compiled an etymological dictionary of the Finnish Romani language,¹⁷ but never completed his doctorate and worked in his later years as a schoolteacher in Eastern Finland.

Harry Halén (1943–) is a scholar of Mongolian language and Lamaist Buddhism, but also wrote an unpublished MA thesis on the Hindu pantheon in the Pāli Jātaka collection. He has later done much important work on the history of learning and exploration and on the vicissitudes of Asian minorities in Finland. Although he never completed his doctorate (he was given an honorary PhD in 2007), he was known at the Institute for African and Asian Studies, where he worked as departmental secretary between 1974–2005, for his immense learning and painstaking scholarship.¹⁸

In the 1970s, Aalto had two students who have continued with Indic studies. Bertil Tikkanen (1949–; Docent 1988) wrote his doctoral thesis on Sanskrit grammar, but is also well known as a specialist of areal linguistics and of

15 Dissertation *Emphasizing and connecting particles in the thirteen principal Upanishads*, Helsinki 1966. His later works, e.g. *Aspects de la déesse Kālī dans son culte et dans la littérature indienne*, Helsinki 1969 and *Śakti and Śes rab, étude indo-tibétaine sur la polarité transcendente. Viśvagarbhā, celle qui contient tout l'univers*, Helsinki 1973, never attracted much attention.

16 On Parpola, see the introduction and bibliography in Karttunen & Koskikallio 2001.

17 *Suomen mustalaiskielen etymologinen sanakirja*. (Tietolipas, 69) Helsinki 1972, 138 pp.

18 His bibliography up to 2003 is published in J. Janhunen & A. Parpola (eds), *Remota Relata. Essays on the History of Oriental Studies in Honour of Harry Halén*, (Studia Orientalia 97), Helsinki 2003.

Burushaski.¹⁹ The second one, me, Klaus Karttunen (1951–; Docent 1990, Professor 2006) is mainly known for studies of Graeco-Indian relations, with additional interests in ancient history, classical Indian literature and the history of learning.

I hope I'll be allowed to add some personal reminiscences. Aalto was not an easy teacher. In the early 1970s, there were perhaps fifteen students at a time to begin the first year Sanskrit course – but only two or three completed it. Most of the others dropped out during the first few weeks. Sanskrit was fashionable, but when the hippies understood that one has to work hard to learn it, they left. Aalto himself used to tell us that Marcelle Lalou, in her times used to teach elementary Tibetan on Saturday mornings because that was the only time not to have the class full of Theosophists.

This is just a small sample of his great store of academic anecdotes. Some said that he was dry and humourless. This was because he told jokes without changing his tone, and usually you had to know classical languages or linguistics well to understand them.

To have very few students was no problem for Aalto. It was clear that only a few could really benefit from his teaching or make a career in Asian studies or comparative linguistics. In more demanding courses, there were two to four of us. I remember how once in the beginning of the semester a message came: Aalto had decided to lecture on Classical Armenian, but nobody appeared. Next week there were three students present: Bertil Tikkanen, myself, and a young man who was then specialising in Pahlavi, but never completed his studies. It was, in fact, very interesting, but I must confess that I have forgotten almost everything I learned of Old Armenian. After that Aalto started to ask about our wishes concerning the subject and thus it was according to Bertil's and my wishes that we still got introductions to Pāṇini and Classical Tibetan before Aalto's retirement.

The methods of research were rather taught through good (and bad) examples than actual direct supervision. But he always kept in mind what his students were doing. I still have many slips of paper containing references in Aalto's handwriting. "It says something about our subject, look yourself whether it is useful." If a student complained of the inability to read, say, French or Italian or Russian, not to speak of the self-evident Latin, his advice was simple: "Learn!" The meetings of Aalto's seminar were held at his home in Munkkiniemi. We remember the great bookshelves, the comfortable sofas and the warm hospitality of his wife, Pirkko Aalto.

¹⁹ See the introduction in this volume.

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