

## Werk

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## Kontakt/Contact

[Digizeitschriften e.V.](#)  
SUB Göttingen  
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1  
37073 Göttingen

✉ [info@digizeitschriften.de](mailto:info@digizeitschriften.de)



## **Johannes Benzing (1913-2001)**

**Lars Johanson**

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*Lars Johanson, Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Mainz, D-55099 Mainz, Germany. E-mail: johanson@mail.uni-mainz.de*

Dr. Johannes Benzing, Professor Emeritus of Oriental Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, passed away in Eddigehausen, Germany, on March 16, 2001, at the age of 88.

Johannes Benzing was born on January 13, 1913, in Schwenningen, a small town located in the Black Forest of Southern Germany. After secondary school, he spent some time as a commercial trainee with a local firm. Very early, however, he had discovered his profound interest in scholarly issues. In 1936, he therefore moved to Berlin to take up Oriental studies.

At the University of Berlin, Johannes Benzing studied Islamic Philology with Richard Hartmann, Hans Heinrich Schaeder and Walther Björkman, Turcology with Annemarie von Gabain, and Mongolistics with Erich Haenisch. At the same time, he acquired practical knowledge of oriental languages at the Oriental Seminar, where Gotthard Jäschke and Sebastian Beck were among his teachers. He also learned Tatar from Saadet Ishaki (Çağatay), the daughter of the famous Tatar intellectual Ayaz

Ishaqi. In 1939, Johannes Benzing received his doctoral degree with a thesis on the verbal system of Turkmen ("Über die Verbformen im Türkmenischen"). In 1942, he completed his habilitation with a thorough study on the Chuvash language ("Tschuwaschische Forschungen").

At that time, in the middle of the war, the young scholar was unable to get an adequate position at a university. Instead, he found a position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the war, Johannes Benzing worked for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spending five years (1950-1955) with his family in Paris, where he established close contacts with the leading French Orientalists. In 1953, Johannes Benzing was elected member of the Oriental Commission of the newly established Academy of Sciences and Literature at Mainz. In 1955, he joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany and one year later was appointed consul of the Cultural Section at the Consulate General in Istanbul.

Besides his diplomatic duties, Johannes Benzing gave courses in Turkic languages at the Turcological Department of the Faculty of Letters ("Edebiyat Fakültesi") of the University of Istanbul. Sporadically, he also taught Turcology at the German universities of Tübingen and Mainz. On December 4, 1963, Johannes Benzing was appointed full professor ("Ordinarius") in Oriental studies ("Islamische Philologie" and "Islamkunde") at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, as the successor of Professor Helmuth Scheel. On February 25, 1966, he was elected Ordinary Member of the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz.

On March 31, 1981, Johannes Benzing retired from his position at the University of Mainz. Soon after the retirement, he and his wife Käte left Mainz and settled in Erdmannsweiler, close to their birthplace in the Black Forest. In March 1998, they moved to Bovenden (region Göttingen) to stay with their daughter, Professor Brigitta Benzing-Wolde Georgis, and her husband, Dr. Kahsai Wolde Georgis.

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Johannes Benzing's scholarly career was determined by interests developed during his early youth. Growing up in an Alemannic-speaking environment, close to the Swabian dialect region, he already as a schoolboy occupied himself with the linguistic history of his native province. As a student in Berlin, he discovered the partly neglected fields of the huge Eurasian territory. His interests very soon focused on the insufficiently known Turkic languages and cultures of Turkistan and the Volga region. As mentioned above, his doctoral thesis was devoted to Turkmen, whereas his habilitation thesis dealt with Chuvash.

Historical-comparative research on Turkic, Tungusic and Mongolic languages was Benzing's main field of interest, to which he contributed outstanding studies. His sagacious investigations into the history of the Turkic languages are particularly important. With his profound knowledge, wide perspective and precise argumentation, Benzing continued the tradition of Willi Bang-Kaup's Berlin school of linguistic Turcology, though markedly broadening its scope and refining its scholarly

working procedures. Typical of Benzing's method is the endeavour to gain new reliable insights through numerous small steps on a solid ground. Equipped with a sharp and creative mind, he preferred a systematic discussion of crucial details over speculative and precipitate general conclusions.

One example of this is Benzing's critical occupation with the so-called Altaic question, the still controversial problem of a possible genetic relatedness of Turkic, Mongolic and Tungusic (maybe even Korean and Japanese). Over the years, Benzing gained an international reputation for his work in this field, though his opponents accused him of an exaggeratedly critical attitude. Those who knew him more closely, however, may certify that his position was by no means an *a priori* anti-Altaist stance. The original driving force behind his work in this field was in fact the desire to find arguments in favour of an Altaic family.

Johannes Benzing also showed a remarkable versatility in other domains of research. The local situation in his native Alemannic region had inspired him early to try to achieve a synopsis of studies in linguistics, folklore and territorial history. By the way, he always maintained his profound interest in dialectal, ethnographic and historical problems of his native region. In particular, Benzing realized the value of linguistic history for the solution of problems of cultural history. In a programmatic and truly visionary paper, "Herrenloses Land: Inner- und Nordasien als philologisches Arbeitsgebiet", he argued that the 'ownerless' territory of Inner and Northern Asia, filling a fifth of the world's surface, finally should be subject to comprehensive scholarly study. He was far-sighted enough to realize that this would not be possible without thorough investigations into the Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic and Paleoasiatic languages.

Besides publishing books and articles, Johannes Benzing devoted much time and care to highly instructive book reviews containing profound analyses and complementary remarks on important scholarly questions. A selection of these reviews, *Kritische Beiträge zur Altaistik und Turkologie*, appeared in 1988 as volume 3 in the series *Turcologica* (Harrassowitz). This book also contains an almost complete list of Benzing's publications.

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As is obvious from the *vita* summarized above, Johannes Benzing for many years had to carry out his scholarly work under rather unfavourable conditions, pursuing his scientific interests in his very limited spare time. Thanks to his incredible self-discipline and absolute dedication, as well as to the unswerving support of his wife, he nevertheless worked his way up the academic ladder, earning increasing international reputation for his valuable work.

When I first met Johannes Benzing in Istanbul in 1963, he was on duty at the German Consulate General, but still found time for his own scholarly work and lively discussions with local and visiting Turcologists. The encounter with his fascinating and joyful scholarly world was the main factor in my own decision to focus

on Turcology. In that same year, Benzing moved to Mainz, where he could finally dedicate himself entirely to research and teaching. For almost twenty years, he was an inexhaustible source of inspiration and support for his students and colleagues, highly respected for his wide knowledge and experience.

Johannes Benzing enjoyed working and discussing with his students and colleagues. Together with his fellow professors Georg Buddruss and Helmut Humbach, he arranged interdisciplinary seminars on Central Asian languages, e.g. Pamir languages, Tajik, Khotanese and Tokharian. It was also Benzing who took the initiative to establish Iranistics as an academic discipline at Mainz. Both in his classes and in scholarly discussions, Benzing displayed a most catching enthusiasm. He would listen carefully, eager to know his interlocutors' opinions and to make his own positions clear, always *sine ira et studio*, always open to counterarguments. He prepared excellent teaching materials for his courses and made considerable efforts to provide his students and colleagues with bibliographical information in their respective fields of interest.

Benzing, who always dealt with the written word in a highly economic way, communicated many of his boldest—and perhaps most fruitful—ideas in oral discussions only, without ever committing them to paper. After the long mobile phases of his life, he did not want to leave Mainz, which meant that he never attended conferences and congresses. On the other hand, he permanently welcomed visiting scholars from all parts of the world, generously sharing his wide knowledge and deep insights with them.

From 1972 onwards, I had the privilege of being able to follow Johannes Benzing's work at Mainz and to profit from permanent contacts with this openminded mentor and sincere friend. I remember with deepest affection and gratitude our innumerable eight-hour-long Sunday conversations—"Fachsimelei" ('shoptalk'), as Benzing used to call them—at his home in Heidesheim. For me, this exciting experience was like attending a private 'institute for advanced studies' of a quite extraordinary kind.

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Johannes Benzing was a warmhearted, tolerant and well-balanced person, a highly appreciated colleague and teacher, who showed an unchangeably constructive attitude towards his fellow men, always without respect of persons. He regarded his own achievements with critical and self-ironical distance. He detested panegyrics and scholarly honors, in particular those conferred on himself. When awarded the gold medal of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference for his outstanding work, he wavered between pride and hilarious self-irony.

Johannes Benzing also would have strongly disapproved of the above lines as an expression of illegitimate personality cult. Nevertheless, one must be allowed to conclude that the work of this unique scholar constitutes a fascinating challenge to Turkic and related studies of the 21st century, which he left at its very beginning.