

OBITUARY

CLAUS SCHÖNIG
(23 October 1955–23 June 2019)

The Turkologists of the world mourn the death of Claus Schönig, professor of Turkology at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), who passed away on 23 June 2019 after a long illness. Born in Mainz in 1955, he studied Turkology, Islamic studies and Islamic philology at the University of Mainz. While the range of his studies was extraordinarily broad even by the standards of that time, Schönig took the opportunity to extend his studies well beyond this horizon. Under the decisive influence of his professor and later doctoral advisor Johannes Benzing (1913–2001), he developed an interest in Mongolic studies as well, and the Turkic–Mongolic language relations became one of his main subjects in the subsequent years. In 1984 Schönig published his dissertation on auxiliary verbs in the Tatar language, a work that has become seminal since then and is regarded as a reference work in Tatarstan itself, too. During his time as researcher at the University of Mainz in the 1980s and early 1990s, he concentrated on Siberian Turkic languages, but dealt with other subjects as well. From 1993 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2007 he was researcher at the Orient-Institut Istanbul, in his second term serving as the deputy director of this institute. His stay in Istanbul was very fruitful in scholarly terms—in 1995 he defended his ‘habilitation thesis’ (a second dissertation or ‘post-doctoral thesis’ according to the German academic system) on the *Bāburnāma*, the autobiographical account of Bābur (1483–1530), the founder of the Mughal Empire. While Schönig had previously written about this work—his first article on it was published in 1989—, it was only afterwards that he dealt with both its linguistic and its non-linguistic aspects more extensively.

During his second stay in Istanbul he had to cope with difficult administrative and political problems of the Orient-Institut, but could solve them quickly by handling them sensibly. The scholar used the opportunities of his stay in Istanbul to

establish close and long-lasting ties with his Turkish colleagues, thus Schönig was held in high esteem in the academic world in Turkey. In 2007 he became professor of Turkology at the Freie Universität Berlin at the institute that had been established in 1991 by his predecessor, Professor Barbara Kellner-Heinkele. In the years to follow he soon became a much sought-after expert in the eyes of the German public, but he was perceived mainly as an expert on Turkey, while the focus of his scholarly work was much broader. Due to his illness, Schönig had to reduce his teaching and research activities significantly, but continued to publish until his death.

Claus Schönig's research interests went extraordinarily far: he covered the phonetics and grammar of the Oghuz, Siberian and other Turkic languages, inter-Turkic language relations, linguistic and literary aspects of the *Bāburnāma*, as well as the classification of the Turkic languages, a field to which he made major and innovative contributions¹: contrary to previous, purely genetic approaches, Schönig rightly pointed out the fact that there had been mutual influences well beyond the limits of historically defined subgroups of the Turkic language family. Accordingly, he pleaded for taking into account phonological, grammatical and morphological features as further criteria of classification and not limiting oneself to a purely genetic approach. Any scholar interested in questions of classifying the Turkic languages has to take Schönig's seminal proposals into account. His last monographic publication from 2013, a work on the Turkic word *ker(g)äk* throughout the history of Turkic languages,² once again showed both his extraordinary range of interests and the amount of his knowledge: for Schönig it was natural that a scholar with interest in the history of a lexical item should take into account Old, Middle and Modern Turkic languages alike, covering literary works of Ancient Uyghur as well as the vocabulary of distant languages like Chuvash or Yakut, and touching upon the vocabulary of Mongolic languages, Kurdish and other languages as well. This work was also typical of him in the sense that it consequently followed his proposals for the classification of Turkic languages.

Claus Schönig's ability to deal with and address different audiences with their varying needs and to communicate directly with any colleague was legendary, and this explains his popularity with both his colleagues and his students. It surely was also due to this trait of his that he became chairman of the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, the oldest society of Oriental studies in Germany. His knowledge of subjects far beyond his areas of research was astonishing, so he could, for instance, give a conference talk on the cultural implications of a planned alphabet reform in a Siberian Turkic language or surprise his interlocutors in a chat with his detailed knowledge of marriage patterns in Iceland at the turn of the 20th century. At the same time,

¹ See, among others, Claus SCHÖNIG 1997/1998. 'A New Attempt to Classify the Turkic Languages (1–2–3).' *Turkic languages* I/1 (1997) 117–133; I/2 (1997) 262–277; II/1 (1998) 130–151; Claus SCHÖNIG 1999. 'The Internal Division of Modern Turkic and Its Historical Implications.' *AOH* 52/1: 63–95.

² Claus SCHÖNIG 2013. *Ker(g)äk – zur Biographie eines erfolgreichen Etymons*. [Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 87.] Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

any kind of vanity was totally alien to him, and he preferred direct contact and interaction to academic formalities.

He will be missed by a vast community of scholars and friends.

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