

OBITUARY

PAUL WITTEK

The death of Professor Paul Wittek on 13 June 1978 must have recalled to the minds of his former colleagues and students an exacting standard of scholarship uncommon in his days and ours. It may well be that his manner and method were those traditionally associated with the continental European academic world, but I venture to guess that even there they constituted something of a rarity. He was fond of invoking the tradition of continental scholarship and of stressing its absence in the Anglo-Saxon world to which he had come as a refugee in his middle years, but it must be remembered that some of his most severe criticism was directed especially at what he regarded as the slovenly and slapdash work of European Orientalists. He was not an easy man, even for his friends, but no one of us could ever have doubted that his attention and concern made for a valuable and rewarding experience.

Wittek was born on 11 January 1894 outside Vienna, the son of a headmaster in a period when the Gymnasium represented academic discipline of the highest order. In his later years he would often recall the lessons of his youth in a way which made quite clear his debt to the earliest environment. I remember well his telling me that he knew best those events of Ottoman history which he had learned as a schoolboy in the last years of the Habsburg empire. Much of that was of course nostalgia, no bad thing perhaps in a man whose approach to scholarship and to life was essentially historical. It was his experience in the first World War which led to an interest in Turkish, his study of that language at the University of Vienna, and his return to Istanbul in 1924 as a member of the German Archaeological Institute. His ten years in Turkey provided the foundation of his scholarship and teaching for the rest of his life, and I was often, in the course of our many conversations, struck by the predominantly (and peculiarly) nostalgic quality of his views on the much earlier period of Ottoman history which he had made his special field of investigation. He was able, not only in conversation but also in those extraordinary evening seminars conducted at the School, to evoke an image of society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries at which one might never have guessed from the austere style of his publications.

These were comparatively few in number, but very rich indeed in substance. Of his books, *Das Fürstentum Moldesche* (1934) and *The rise of the Ottoman empire* (1938) came closest to the style of his teaching and, with regard especially to the latter, he could be very amusingly indignant about the effect it had *not* had on contemporary Ottoman studies. Of his some 50 articles most were devoted to epigraphy and diplomatic, and these exhibit a quality of meticulous genius not likely to be surpassed in this or any other generation. It was in particular his work on Ottoman chancery practice, e.g. 'The Turkish documents in Hakluyt's "Voyages"' (*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 1942), 'Notes sur la tughra ottomane' (*Byzantion*, 1948 and 1950), and the remarkable series 'Zu einigen frühosmanischen Urkunden', I-VII (*WZKM*, 1957-74) which provided the material for postgraduate seminars during his tenure of the Chair of Turkish at the School (1948-61). There we learned not merely what to seek in a chancery document but also how to interpret and assess the individual and social features of what might otherwise have passed for a straightforward unidimensional historical relic. The reading of Hakluyt

was especially instructive, an exercise brought recently by one of our group to superb fruition: Susan Skilliter's study entitled *William Harborne and the trade with Turkey, 1578-1582* (OUP, 1977; reviewed in this issue). It was Wittek's insight and industry in this field which has provided a basis for most subsequent work in Muslim diplomatic, ranging from the rhetorical analysis of structural components to the deciphering of the most intricate registry sigla. But in fact it was much more than that: a sense of immediacy, even of participation in the production of chancery documents, essential to a historical understanding of medieval society. Evidence of his contribution to this subject is attested today not only in Anglo-Saxon and European but also contemporary Turkish scholarship.

My own relation with Wittek was nurtured by a shared affection for German literature. He never ceased of course, even in the most informal circumstances, to be the teacher, and I acknowledge my debt to him for an appreciation of George and Musil, whose works I began twenty years ago to read with fresh and inspired guidance. There was argument, naturally: he could not be persuaded, for example, that Kafka and Hesse deserved their international reputations, and I was, and am, inclined to suppose that his bias as a historian must somehow have prevented his recognizing that even in stylistic innovation a nucleus of tradition is preserved. That may seem unfair, but in dispute with Wittek one had to be fairly assertive. His own view of literature, as of history, was derived from a conviction that the basic criteria of taste and understanding were acquired in one's earliest years, and that the experience of age was one of recasting, not of radical discovery. There is, admittedly, something to be said for the view that there is nothing new under the sun, and his admiration for Stefan George was seldom adduced without reference to the translations from Dante. There was also a kind of mystique: as a young man, in Frankfurt I think it was, he had had an opportunity to meet George and declined, for fear of seeing destroyed his carefully conceived image of the great man. I knew when he told me the story, and know even today, what he meant: Wittek was a Romantic, not quite at ease with the society in which he was compelled to live. Born and educated in the world of central European Catholicism, his religious views were those of the medieval mystic, evident in his affection for, and sympathetic understanding of the Šūfī poetry preserved in Turkish and Persian. That literature seldom figured in the formal plan of his teaching, but underlay much of what he had to say about the course of Ottoman history. I think this emerges very clearly from his use of Aḥmedī's *İskender-nāme* in the hypothesis of a *ghāzī* origin for the Ottoman state (*Rise of the Ottoman empire*, 1-15): 'the Ghāzī is the sword of God, he is the protector and the refuge of the believers. If he becomes a martyr in the ways of God, do not believe that he has died—he lives in beatitude with Allah, he has eternal life'. As a historian Wittek was closer to Dürkheim than to Marx, to Isaiah Berlin than to E. H. Carr: there was always an element of ineffability, of a quality which could be indicated but not explained, which in the end must suffice, not merely as literary motif, but as historical motive. That approach might on occasion have been exasperating, but it was never devoid of imagination and an innate sense of style which was nothing if not persuasive. Wittek could move from the most obscure detail to the grandest theory of historical development and remain convincing. I often thought, and still think, that it was as much the personality of the man as the content of his teaching that bewitched the hour. It was an experience shared by many of us and ought not to go unrecorded. He may not have known that it had been:

Ins offne fenster nickten die hollunder
Die ersten reben standen in der bluht,
Da kam mein sohn zurück vom land der wunder,
Da hat mein sohn an meiner brust geruht.

Ich liess mir allen seinen kummer beichten,
Gekränkten stolz auf seinem erden-ziehn,
Ich hätte ihm so gerne meinen leichten
Und sichern frieden hier bei mir verliehn.

Doch anders fügten es der himmel sorgen
Sie nahmen nicht mein reiches lösegeld,
Er ging an einem jungen ruhmes-morgen,
Ich sah nur fern noch seinen schild im feld.

(Stefan George : *Der Einsiedel.*)

JOHN WANSBROUGH