

ACTIONS & VOICES

Greek and Latin classics in Catalan: the Fundació Bernat Metge collection

In 1923 the Fundació Bernat Metge undertook the translation of Greek and Latin classics into Catalan, thanks to the initiative and patronage of Francesc Cambó. The publishing project aspired to the translation and publication of all the classics, in three hundred volumes and ten years. It was to be a collected work of superior quality and sought to stand among the ranks of other European collections of the time. Its unprecedented cultural mission had the support of the bourgeoisie, who had to defend the values of Catalan identity in the midst of the unfavorable situation of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship. The selection of Greek and Latin authors who were to be translated into Catalan also required establishing a literary canon of the classics and went hand in hand with a desire to influence the language at a very crucial moment of its formation. However, after an initial euphoria, and especially from 1929 onward, reality compelled some changes to the initial project. A few years later, the barbarity of the civil war would put an end to the first phase of publication, of an uneven quality. In 1947, work was resumed and has continued up to the current moment, a third era of publication that still maintains a rhythm of six volumes every year. The historical collection today includes more than three hundred fifty volumes and a quite exhaustive catalogue of the primary Latin and Greek authors. Now, for the first time, a specific study on one author has been published, an unimaginable idea at the beginning of the project. The essay *Introducció a la Ilíada: Homer, entre la història i la llegenda* (Introduction to the Iliad: Homer, between History and Legend; Alpha, 2008), by Jaume Pòrtulas, professor of Greek philology at the University of Barcelona and member of the Board of Directors of the foundation, has been awarded this year's National Literature Prize by the newly created National Council of Culture and the Arts.

MONTSERRAT FRANQUESA



INTERVIEW

JAUME PÒRTULAS

MONTSERRAT FRANQUESA

Jaume Pòrtulas (Barcelona, 1949) has dedicated more than five hundred erudite pages to Homer and the Iliad, bringing history, archeology, and legend to bear on Homeric poetry. A specialist in the ancient Greek world and in the translation of the classics, Professor Pòrtulas is aware of the precarious situation of classical languages in our national school programs and the lesser value that today's society grants to humanistic knowledge.

The study of the Iliad is the fruit of many years of research, when you also were a teacher of various generations of students. What were the reasons that drove you to study classics?

This question requires me to go back almost to the beginning, even before I entered university. My interest in the ancients came from before that, from secondary school. I was able to follow an excellent course of studies, which lasted seven years, five of them in Latin. Greek and Latin fascinated me because they were languages that were not used for daily communication; they were languages through which one could access a world that is not ours, in contrast to the "living" languages that can be used to ask for the time or a coffee, a remote world one can only get to by knowing two distant and difficult languages. For me, due to family tradition, Latin had from the first been the language of liturgy. I remember my fascination with it: it transported me to a different realm. I can still recite from memory some of the introits and psalms that won me over with the seductive, fascinating force of words that seemed to come from the beyond.

Who were your teachers, the professors who were able to respond to that fascination for ancient languages?

I began to study at the Institut Milà i Fontanals when it was still at Carrer de la Canuda. It was an excellent place, one of the seven secondary schools in Barcelona at the time. I remember the physics and math classes, of a superior caliber; but I didn't exactly take advantage of them... They were difficult and demanding, with some brilliant professors who called to mind, even for biographical reasons, the Institut-Escola from before the Civil War. The oldest of them had been teachers there; the director of the time, Doctor Casulleras, had been a student; and Josep Vergés had been the secretary. I particularly remember the literature and philosophy classes, very solid, and especially the Greek and Latin classes. The Greek professor, Ribera, who had studied in Salamanca with Unamuno, focused us on learning the language and in those three years I learned more Greek than in the years right after... It was an uncompromising style of teaching, based on memorization. With Latin it was quite different. If the word "humanist" has any real meaning, Vergés was a true humanist. I think now, however, that he was more of a Horace man than Virgil, the author that we translated at the time. He also liked Catullus quite a lot, and he made me read him, even though it was not part of our studies. With Vergés we went through the sixth canto of the *Aeneid*; really it was through Virgil that I came to Homer, as is the case for so many people.

Although the original project of the Fundació Bernat Metge did not foresee the publication of specific studies about authors or works, doesn't an introduction to Homer now come too late?

The initial proposals for the Fundació Bernat Metge happened in an irregular and uneven way. In a kind of foundational document, Joan Estelrich had already suggested that the lyric fragments had to be treated in a special manner. Even now, the catalogue of the Fundació has some significant gaps. Carles Riba himself took some time to get to essential authors such as Aeschylus, perhaps because he thought that going straight to the tragedies would not have pleased the collection's audience, in those years quite limited in size and not well taught. It was certainly a question of phases, or maybe a result of chance, that the Introduction arrived in 2008. I had always wanted to write about Homer; it's probably the unconfessed desire of any Hellenist!

During its first stage, lasting up to the civil war, the FBM collection played a very important role in establishing the Catalan language. After the conflict, from 1947 on, it focused on the task of survival. Today the FBM is experiencing a third phase. What role should a collection of bilingual classics have in our society?

Some time ago, a bookseller friend told me that the classics might be in a state of crisis at the university level, but not in the bookstore. We live in an era of multiple translations and many literary studies, on every level. It is appropriate for a normal culture to have several translation of the same author competing at the same time. One must hope that what can be lost at the high school or college level is compensated, as much as possible, by the fact that people read the great authors on their own; at least, we can't say that they are not well translated! The Fundació does not have a monopoly on the classics any more, as it did in practice for so many years. The market offers many more options; the Bernat Metge collection coexists with others, some of an excellent quality, and each one has its potential audience. This is good in every respect, and also should prompt the Fundació to redefine and specify its own space.