

Joan Vernet i Ginés (1923-2011). In memoriam*



Joan Vernet i Ginés was born in Barcelona in 1923 and died there on the 23rd of July 2011. He had a PhD in Philosophy and Humanities (Madrid, 1948), was a Full Professor at the University of Barcelona since 1954 and an Emeritus Professor since his retirement in 1988. He was a full member of the Academy of Belles-Lettres of Barcelona (1959), the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences of Paris (1960), the Scientific Council of the Spanish National Research Council (1978), the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (1978), the Royal Academy of History (1981), the Royal Asiatic Society of London (1986) and the Société Asiatique of Paris (1991), and a corresponding member of the Academy of Science of Madrid (1981), the Academy of Science of Baghdad (1985), the Academy of Science of Barcelona (1986) and the Academy of Islamic Studies of Amman (1991). He was also the first to hold the chair at the Institut du Monde Arabe of Paris (1990), he opened the lecture series in the great mosque of this city (1990-1991) and he served as the president of the Fifth International Symposium of History of Arabic Science held in 1992.

He was awarded numerous prizes and distinctions, including the Plaqué of Honour from the government of Andorra (1985), the Monturiol Medal (1985), the George Sarton Medal (United States, 1991), the Menéndez

dez Pidal Prize (1993) and the Alexandre Koyré Medal (France, 1995), and he and all the members of the Institut Millàs Vallicrosa at the University of Barcelona were awarded the prize from the Catalan Research Foundation (1999), St. George's Cross from the Generalitat de Catalunya (2002) and the Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture (2004).

Having listed these honours and awards (which may, unfortunately, not be exhaustive), I wanted to primarily spotlight the impression of excellence which he left and to which those who knew him can attest: with his privileged intelligence and fine sense of humour, he conveyed to us his yearning for knowledge in its most varied guises. However, he was not only concerned with knowledge and drawing us into it; rather he was also constantly attuned to the problems in our personal lives. I am not sure we all would have known how to respond adequately to his generosity...

Regarding his scientific output, I should note that after he had been teaching for 25 years, a group of disciples, myself included, gifted him with a volume entitled *Estudios sobre historia de la ciencia medieval* (1979) in which we reprinted some of his articles published in different scholarly journals, and ten years later we repeated the act with a second compilation entitled *De cAbd al-Rahmân I a Isabel II*, this time to commemorate his 65th birthday. In the first volume, we organised his publications into sections on generalities, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, and sea and land transport, while in the second the subjects were Koran studies, onomastics, science, technology and medicine, and literature and history.

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These two lists might give a glimpse – although only a fleeting one – of the vast stores of knowledge that Vernet had and how he captured them in the most diverse publications. The more than 1,000 pages contained in both of these compilations only account for a tiny fraction of his entire oeuvre: if I am not mistaken, he is the author of around 30 books and more than 300 articles.

The fact is that Vernet is internationally renowned as a historian of science and as the second link in a school started by Millàs i Vallicrosa and later continued by Juli Samsó and other professors from the University of Barcelona. In this sphere, I believe that we must mention his book *La cultura hispano-àrabe en Orient y Occident* (1978), which is a seminal work in gaining an understanding of the science of Arabism and especially its facet in Andalusia. This book has been successfully translated into French (1985), German (1984), Polish (2007) and Arabic (1997) and has gradually changed titles until its latest reissues (1999 and 2006), in which it is called *Lo que Europa debe al Islam de España*.

In his book *Astrología y astronomía en el Renacimiento. La revolución copernicana* (1974 and 2000), Vernet studied the crowning achievements of Copernicus, one of the most prominent figures in the history of humankind, and he analysed and demonstrated the ties between his heliocentric theory and the Arab-Islamic cosmological tradition, particularly as represented by the Cordobans Averroes and Azarchel. Another prominent work is his *Historia de la ciencia española* (1975), which is surprising in that he only spends 33 pages on the Middle Ages – which was his area of expertise – compared to the 200 pages he dedicates to the period between the Renaissance and the 19th century, where he revealed himself to be extraordinarily knowledgeable about the evolution of science in Spain during the reign of Isabel II.

And to conclude this point, last but not least I should mention his and Ramon Parés' supervision of the first volume of the collective work entitled *La ciència en la història dels Països Catalans. I. Dels àrabs al Renaixement* (2004), which won the Serra d'Or Critics' Prize for Research in Other Sciences the year after it was published. This volume analyses the influence of Arab scientists on the future development of science and technology. It should be clearly noted that ever since its publication, the thesis put forth by Millàs i Vallicrosa back in the 1930s stating that Catalonia was the gateway to Arab science in Europe has been proven beyond a doubt. In turn, the demythification of the influence of the so-called Toledo School of Translators has clearly led to a rising consideration of the importance of the translators along the Ebro River Valley working in the first half of the 12th century.

I would now like to mention another of the erudite Joan Vernet's important activities: his work in the field of literature. His *Literatura àrabe* (1966 and 2002) was a pioneering volume, an outstanding manual and extraordinarily useful synthesis, not only for students. It encompasses all the periods and wisely includes a study on

aljamiado output, that is, Spanish written in Arabic and/or Hebrew characters, while it also traces its influence on Spanish literature.

His devotion to *One Thousand and One Nights* is quite famous. Vernet published the first direct translation of it from Arabic to Spanish in three volumes (1964-1967) based on the Cairo edition from 1906, while he extended it in another edition published with illustrations by Olga Sacharoff and Grau-Sala (1965) made by J. A. Gutiérrez Laraya and Leonor Martínez Martín. And here I am pleased to mention Vernet's wife, also a prominent Arabist and renowned teacher by those of us fortunate enough to have taken her classes at the University of Barcelona. If I have spoken about Vernet's dedication to this volume – as celebrated in the Western world as it is derided by Arabs – it is because it was the subject of his lecture upon his instatement in the Royal Academy of Belles-Lettres and because on several occasions selections of stories from it have been published, as well as the Sinbad series (1987).

Having reached this point, I think it is wise to recall the fact that at that time we were living under a dictatorship which was engaged in censorship. The publication of his entire translation was possible thanks to the good offices of Dr Riquer and the editor Lara, who gave Vernet the galleys with the text he wanted to cut out. Later, Vernet dealt with this episode with tact and a sound dose of irony in his contribution to the tribute to his colleague Basilio Losada (2000).

In the fields of political and social history as well, Vernet followed in the footsteps laid down by his master Millàs. Along with other members of the History-Archaeology Department of this Institute, he contributed to setting the date – 1988 – of the commemoration of the millennial of Catalonia's independence. However, we should also note that the first ones to recognise Catalonia's sovereignty were the authorities in the Caliphate of Cordoba, which at the times of Count Sunyer (911-942) no longer deemed Carolingian consent necessary and instead dealt with Barcelona in its day-to-day affairs.

Even though he may not have written a specific publication on Andalusian or Islamic history, he devoted many works to studying them, and especially to shedding light, thanks to the Arab chronicles, on diverse episodes in Catalonia's past that we would not have known about were it not for his sagacity. In addition to the origin of the treasure in the monastery of Ovarra, noted by Abadal in his posthumous work and confirmed by a text by al-ʿUdrī, Vernet also discovered through a verse by the court poet of Almanso that the lord of the *taifa* of Zaragoza had been the mastermind behind the marriage between Berenguer Ramon I, 'El Corbat', the son and successor of Ramon Borrell of Barcelona, and Sança, the daughter of Sanç Garcia I of Castile; he even discovered his motives, which were to stop the expansionist threat from Navarre.

I must obviously mention yet another of Vernet's facets which also earned him international renown: his specialisation in studying Islam and the Muslims' holy book.

His 1953 translation of the Koran from Arabic to Spanish was the first of the contemporary translations. It was followed by another one eleven years later which has not only been reissued repeatedly in all kinds of formats but is still used today by many Muslims in its bilingual undated edition, which is distributed by the Maison des Sciences Religieuses of Paris.

Equally comprehensive, insightful and scholarly is the long introduction to this work – which, I should mention, Muslims do not tend to like – which sheds light on the many problems involved in interpreting a text which is regarded as sacred. Also important were his studies on the Prophet Mohamed and the birth of Islam, including his work *Mahoma (Muhammad)* (1987), which is much more than a simple biography, and *Los orígenes del islam* (1990), which has been translated and published in Brazil as well (2004).

To close, and as a sign of Vernet's well-deserved fame as an Islamic scholar, allow me to refer to the laudatory review he wrote of the Catalan translation of the Koran by

Epalza, another of his disciples. In case anyone wondered how he could have read the 1272 pages in this translation plus the five appendixes (2001) so quickly, he explained that all he had to do to assess it was see how some of the passages that he knew through experience had particularly difficult linguistic, religious or moral connotations had been resolved. He was satisfied after reading the ayah entitled "The Throne" (2:255/256), which says: "Allah! There is no God save Him! The Alive! The Eternal! He is sustenance; He sustains everything! Neither slumber nor sleep overtake Him. Unto Him belongs whatsoever is in the Heavens and whatsoever is on the Earth. Who is He that intercedes, that serves as a mediator, that has influence in His presence over what is His, if He does not first confer His leave, His permission, His help? [...] His supreme throne includes the Heavens and the Earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime. He is the Tremendous."

One day he said that he wanted this to be his epitaph.
May he rest in peace.