Jürgen Untermann (1928-2013)*

Jürgen Untermann, born in Rehinfeldem, Baden, on the 24th of October 1928, died at his home in Braunweiler on the 7th of September 2013. His death marks the end of an entire era in the consolidation of the field to which he devoted his entire life, primarily Indo-European linguistics, Italic languages, palaeo-Hispanic studies and an aspect that should not be forgotten in his scholarly and life’s work: classical philology, to which he remained eternally faithful.

Trained at the University of Tübingen under the tutelage and supervision of the eminent Indo-Europeanist Hans Krahe, he inherited from his master an extraordinary capacity for synthesis and organisation and taxonomies of the most complicated and widely debated linguistic issues, yet he did so with humility and common sense, a far cry from the arrogance that sometimes characterises those who do so successfully, as Untermann did. With his doctorate in hand, in 1959 he also earned his Habilitation in Tübingen under the supervision of the no less illustrious Ulrich Sch moll.

A unique insight in detecting problems and framing possible solutions was coupled with an exceptional work capacity that enabled him not only to simultaneously cultivate different research fields but also to devote part of his time to his extended family, his disciples, who soon became friends, motivated by the bonhomie that Jürgen Untermann always displayed, along with his personal and scholarly generosity. Practically the entire large band of palaeo-Hispanicists on the Iberian Peninsula had the chance to experience this in both Germany and in the course of his journeys around Spain taken by Jürgen Untermann and his inseparable wife, Bertha, who collaborated actively in transcribing the epigraphic documents on the ground. Until Bertha’s death, the Untermanns were a constant fixture at all the colloquia on palaeo-Hispanic studies, and they were wont to pop in at any time at the homes of his countless friends during his long research trips around the land. At this point, we should recall the close friendship that he shared with Pere Vegué, for many years the director of the Gabinet Numismàtic (Coin Collection) of Catalonia, and his family, as well as with Leandre Villaronga, whom he had granted an honorary doctoral degree at the University of Cologne. Precisely at the tribute in honour of Villaronga, Untermann wrote an article published in Catalan: “Intercanvi epistolar en un plom ibéric?” (Barcelona 1993, pp. 93-100).

The Untermanns’ eyes lit up when they spoke about both their friends and their Spanish disciples, whom they had often even welcomed into their home. The long after-dinner discussions with them in Barcelona were a stream of recollections as well as inquiries into the activities of their acquaintances and a constant, deliberate insistence on paying special attention to those who were just starting out. They rarely spoke about themselves, and when they did they immediately and discreetly redirected the conversation towards future projects with contagious zeal, asking the opinions of those who, like myself both then and now, were so much less familiar with the things they were studying than they were. But Untermann had an extraordinary ability to get people on board and at the same time make you feel like an accomplice in his undertakings. After Bertha’s passing, Ulla accompanied him in his later years, becoming beloved as well with her friendliness and the devotion with which she followed Untermann’s interests.

During his active academic life he cultivated many fields, even though palaeo-Hispanic studies was the subject that earned him renown and brought him often to the Iberian Peninsula. A brief glance at Untermann’s publications in these other fields is an illuminating way to capture the universality of his cultivation of the ancient world.

This versatility, which stemmed from his solid classical education, enabled him to write important works in many different fields, such as Wörterbuch des Oskisch-Um-

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Jürgen Untermann was primarily known for his research into palaeo-Hispanic studies. Within his contributions to this field of study, which he helped to update, we should spotlight an entire series of works, some of which in themselves are a "monumentum aere perennius", using the expression by the poet Horace whom Untermann so deeply appreciated.


His classical studies pointed him towards the Italic languages and later to the palaeo-Hispanic languages, a journey he took without ever ceasing to cultivate and further the fields of study that had sparked his earlier interest. This quite uncommon capacity led him to an unquestionable scholarly universality. His attention to and esteem of our land and its peoples, both past and present, spurred our institution to elect him a corresponding member, and we felt honoured to have him among us. Today, now deceased, the memory of Jürgen Untermann remains alive among those of us fortunate enough to interact with him and enjoy his faithful, open friendship, and to make up for his absence the entire scholarly community is left with a solid, academically honest and impeccable body of work which will feed studies of the topics they cover for many years to come and will always be a crucial factor in their development.