

BASQUE AND (PALEO)HISPANIC STUDIES IN THE WAKE OF MICHELENA'S WORK

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Joaquín Gorrochategui
Editor



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The main traits of Michelena's scholarship and its contribution to current research

However incredible it may seem, ten years have passed since the death of one who was, whether from a distance or close at hand, a master for many of us: Luis Michelena.

It cannot be denied that the Department of Basque Philology, as also the Faculty which it belongs to have both undergone considerable change in the ten years that have passed since the death of Luis Michelena; one need only look at the increase in the numbers and academic qualifications of the teaching staff and at the rich and varied selection of subjects now offered in the Programme of Studies. It is equally evident that Basque Philology and Linguistics have not remained at a standstill when faced with the vacuum left by Michelena. In all areas, without any doubt, even if in some more than in others, Basque philology has advanced in these ten years along the pathways that had already been marked out by Michelena, thanks both to the work of young researchers within the university and to valuable external contributions.

The object of this first «K. Mitxelena» Congress on Basque Philology and Linguistics will be precisely to give an account of the advances that have been made in each specific field within the past ten years.

As well as bearing witness to the undeniable influence exercised by Michelena, it is amazing to see how, in such a short period of time in Vitoria, he succeeded in laying the seed for future philological studies in the Basque language and reaped himself its first fruits. It must be remembered that his first official classes on Basque Philology, a field which was totally new and for which there was no precedent in university circles, thus obliging him to prepare everything from scratch, only commenced in the 1979-80 academic year, after the creation of the Faculty of Arts as a part of the University of the Basque Country. During the first years, he gave classes in the area of Indo-European Linguistics as well as in the initial subjects in Basque Philology, a

situation that was to continue until he was forced by the burgeoning needs of that Philology to abandon his attention to Indo-European. Those were not easy years, either from the academic viewpoint or from the viewpoint of general policy, since all problems, of whatever nature, were brought to him. For the rest of us, those years seem to me to have had a certain aura of sweetness, a certain air of the epic and heroic, as often happens in the initial years of any enterprise. One of the most evident reasons for this feeling of ease was the very presence of Michelena, since we received from him shelter, assurance and guidance in our first faltering steps in the world of research.

Only the first two groups of students to emerge from Basque Philology had him as a teacher throughout the whole course of their studies, the rest only experienced his influence through the programme of studies that he had drawn up. One need only take a glance at that programme of studies to realize how wide-ranging and rich was the mind that lay behind it. In the programme of Basque Philology that he had drawn up, students had to study Latin and Romanic linguistics as well as subjects drawn from Hispanic, Greek and Latin literature. This was not only motivated by the undeniable circumstance of the relative poverty of autochthonous material but also by his conviction of the value of this perspective: in his view one could hardly advance in the field of Basque philology without an adequate background knowledge of Spanish literature or without being able to understand French.

It is true of course that, as the years have passed, younger generations of students have come to see L. Michelena simply as the most important Basque linguist of the twentieth century, but one should not forget that he had a wide knowledge of other fields within the humanities. Philologists of whatever discipline could always find in him a wise counsellor and more than a few historians and scholars consulted him on a wide number of topics. There can be no doubt, of course, that first among these was the area of Indo-European Linguistics, an area to which he dedicated many years of his professional career in the University of Salamanca. After his transfer from this latter university to the University of the Basque Country in Vitoria, he took over the professorship of Indo-European and Basque Linguistics, a chair that he was to occupy until shortly before his retirement. I have not the slightest doubt that he felt very much at home with this double denomination, and one can easily understand the regret that he felt when the Ministry of Education, in application of the new university law, obliged him to choose either one or the other. He decided to retain the chair of Indo-European Linguistics, showing in this way that this area formed an important part of his academic activity, while at the same time showing that, now that the foundations had been laid for Basque Philology, it was also necessary that the former area too, the area to which the greater part of his academic activity had been dedicated in the University of Salamanca, should find its place in the University of the Basque Country.

So it was that in the summer of 1987, after the Department that he had founded had been happily functioning for eight years, and as a consequence

of the new university law, there came to an end what might be called the «Vitorian cycle» of his activity, a cycle that was to coincide fatally with the end of his life.

For ten years previous to that, from 1967 to 1977, he had held the chair of Indo-European Linguistics in the University of Salamanca. There he had found the quiet and the environment which were necessary for his intense academic activity. Besides the work derived from his activity as Professor—in which we might mention the History of each of the following languages: Latin, Old English, Gothic and Old Irish; Comparative Linguistics and Literature and seminars on the Pre-Roman languages of the Iberian peninsula—he still found time, though one might wonder where he found it with the labour involved in the preparation of so many different subjects, to continue with his research on topics related to Basque.

L. Michelena's relationship with the University of Salamanca goes back further, however. It goes back to the time when A. Tovar, as Rector of that University, created the «Manuel de Larramendi» Chair in Basque Studies. Thanks to this Chair, Michelena spent some part of each year in charge of a seminar in Salamanca and thus had the opportunity of getting up to date on all the latest bibliographic material which came to the well-stocked libraries of that university. Tovar showed great insight in creating this Chair, since a number of other scholars, apart from Michelena, were later to occupy it and present different aspects of Basque philology and culture. Unfortunately, the University decided, a number of years ago, to discontinue its maintenance, creating in its place a fixed post for a teacher of the Basque language. Though this is the third such post created in a Spanish university outside the Basque Country, it is hard to imagine how any such post could exercise the same influence on the members of the Faculty as was exercised by the previous endowed Chair. During those years in Salamanca, enveloped in the personal and professional esteem of his colleagues, Luis Michelena produced his best academic work. We should not forget that the well-deserved prestige that he had earned in the eyes of all around him were later to stand the Faculty of Arts in the University of the Basque Country in very good stead in the years when it was getting off the ground.



I have lingered a while on this necessarily brief and incomplete sketch of the academic career of Luis Michelena, in order to place on its foundations the *raison d'être* of this new Chair, which is dedicated to his memory and which we present today with so much hope and feeling.

The object of this Chair is to cultivate, within a broad-ranging and rigorous intellectual spirit, all those areas to which Michelena dedicated scientific attention during his life. Those of us who knew him were acquainted with the depth and breadth of his knowledge, his far-reaching interests, his immense scientific and even worldly curiosity, so that I can truly say that I have never