

1997 marked the 500th anniversary of the death of one of Europe's most important classicists of the early modern age: Philip Melanchthon. Throughout his native Germany, the year was marked by exhibitions, academic and popular conferences, and new publications concerning Melanchthon's promotion of classical education in Europe. It is now generally acknowledged that the study of antiquity in the sixteenth century was much promoted by the writings, teaching, and activities of Melanchthon. It will be worthwhile, therefore, to review briefly the academic life of this *Praeceptor Germaniae*, the "teacher of Germany".

Born in Bretten in 1497, Philip received his early education in the reputable grammar school at Pforzheim, the so-called "Latin school". Encouraged in his studies by his great-uncle, the famous humanist Johann Reuchlin, Philip was offered a large and rare collection of manuscripts and books, should he excel. And excel he did. By 1509 he had enrolled in the BA programme of the university of Heidelberg, and two years later he registered for the Master's degree at Tübingen, a school that promoted the "new way" (*moderna via*) of higher education. Rather than to follow the "old" method of education common to the middle ages, the new way stressed knowledge of classical literature, rhetoric and dialectics. And Philip so distinguished himself as student of the ancient languages that he was called by a Greek name - Melanchthon. By a fanciful translation of Schwarz-erd ("black earth"), the young classicist's surname was changed to the Greek Melan-chthon. It was in fact not uncommon for those promoting the rebirth of classical studies to alter their names into Greek or Latin equivalents. By changing their names, renaissance humanists expressed their "citizenship" in

classical culture. Philip's special interests included Aristotelian philosophy, Latin and especially Greek literature, and astrology. He completed formal training in 1514, when he earned the Master's degree.

In 1514 he worked mainly as a corrector of scholarly texts at the printing press of Thomas Anshelm. This was no easy task, as the revival of classical learning entailed the new publication of ancient texts, commentaries, and academic writings. Melanchthon also lectured part-time at the university, and published his first major work - a Greek grammar. The text was well-received, and the so-called "prince of the humanists", Desiderius Erasmus, publicly praised the work and expressed the conviction that Melanchthon was a promising scholar. The Greek grammar was but one of many works on classical antiquity that Melanchthon would publish in his life, and it was a text that would be used in the classroom for years to come.

In 1518 Melanchthon was appointed professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, at that time the hotbed of the reformation of the church. His inaugural lecture was entitled "On the Improvement of the Studies of the Youth", a speech advocating a deeper understanding of ancient cultures and the study of classical languages. In it Melanchthon joined the chorus of humanists who cried *ad fontes*: "return to the sources!" Melanchthon's classical lectures focused on Homer, Cicero, and the other greats. His classes were attended by hundreds of students, for Philip was a gifted lecturer. In his first years at Wittenberg Melanchthon also published textbooks on the art of rhetoric, grammar, and editions of classical authors. It was clear that "the little Greek" had embarked on a long and illustrious career.

As a classicist, Melanchthon revived the interest in ancient literature by lecturing on Vergil, Terence, and the rhetorical works of Cicero. Furthermore, besides publishing editions of these authors he presented "declamations" - public speeches - on Sallust, Ovid, Quintilian, and Aristotle. And the Greek grammar he published in 1518 was followed by a Latin one in 1525. This book enjoyed some 50 editions and would be used in the schools until the eighteenth century. In his long career at Wittenberg, Melanchthon came to assume a position of prominence throughout Europe in matters relating to the reform of ecclesiastical, political and educational institutions. For each of these matters he relied upon his knowledge of antiquity - its philosophy, history, literature and society.

Melanchthon is credited with being the founder of the modern public school system in Germany. He achieved this distinction by reforming the education system, and by effecting change through many of his students who became teachers. For example, Joachim Camerarius, a student and later friend of Melanchthon, became the first principal of the newly established grammar school at Nuremberg. Melanchthon had produced the blueprint for the curriculum and policies of the new school, and provided the opening lecture in 1526. In it he praised the folks of Nuremberg for their dedication to the training of their children, applauded their eagerness to teach grammar and other “new” subjects, and encouraged them to continue to promote education that would prepare the youth for later life. In the same speech Melanchthon notes that the learning of history, the arts, and literature would have continued to decline were it not for the wisdom of people such as the Nurembergers.

The school of Nuremberg was but one of some 56 institutions throughout Germany that were founded by Melanchthon. As the renaissance was developing in Northern Europe, elementary schools adapted the new subjects and teaching methods, leaving behind the scholasticism of the middle ages. Instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Latin and German became the order of the day for the schools later referred to as *Gymnasia*. The reading of Latin texts, from simple anthologies that included abridged versions, and the learning of classical proverbs prepared students for the study of the more difficult texts. Students reaching the higher levels read Vergil, Ovid and Cicero, as well as Homer, Euripides and the comic playwrights. The objective, according to Melanchthon and the fellow educational reformers, was to instil what they called *Beredsamkeit*, “learned piety”. This goal would be achieved by the cultivation of the powers of the human spirit for the role of the individual in all aspects of life. Civic, religious, and economic life would benefit from diverse disciplines, and Melanchthon accordingly undertook to write manuals on subjects ranging from astrology to zoology.

Besides his extensive involvement in the founding of new or reformed schools in Germany, Melanchthon was actively involved in the improvement of higher education. He rewrote the constitutions of some of Germany’s better universities at the time, including Tübingen, Leipzig and Heidelberg; he also helped to found new institutions of higher

learning. The objective here was to provide training ground not only for the teachers in the new system of schools, but also a place where culture, history and literature would be studied with a view to improving the cultural life of Germany itself. The study of the classics, and the constant “return to the sources” of western civilization, was the cornerstone of many programmes at these universities. While the study of classics in particular benefited from the contributions of Melanchthon, the aspirations of an entire people were lifted to ideals not considered before. It is not surprising that even before he died in 1560, Melanchthon was heralded as the “teacher of Germany”, *Praeceptor Germaniae*.