

## In Memoriam

Mercè Comes (8.5.1949 - 26.2.2010)



by Julio Samsó and Roser Puig

The period between 2008 and 2010 has been a tragic one from both a human and a scholarly point of view. We have lost three great friends: John North died in 2008, after a long illness which gave us time to prepare for the event; Edward S. Kennedy followed him in 2009 at the age of 97, and so his death was not unexpected. Nobody, however, was prepared for the sudden death of Mercè Comes, when she was only sixty years old and had no known illness. This was simply a catastrophe for all the members of the Barcelona School. A few months later, more or less recovered from the shock, I am trying here to recollect the history of my relationship with Mercè, which lasted for about thirty years.

I met Mercè for the first time in the early nineteen eighties. At that time I was working at the Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona and, for a couple of years, I was Director of the School of Translation where I was also teaching Arabic. Mercè was one of my students. She had come to the University in her early thirties and she seemed to be one of these young ladies who had married early and had two babies while still young; eight or nine years

later, when her children were relatively independent, she felt free to continue studying.

Once she had graduated from the Translation School, she asked me for some guidance regarding her future studies. I suggested that she should obtain a degree in Arabic Studies at the University of Barcelona to which I had been transferred. She accepted my suggestion and we met again there, where she continued being my student. As she had done quite a lot of Arabic in the Translation School, she was able to obtain her degree in Arabic very quickly: in roughly a couple of years she achieved what most students usually do in five. At the same time, and during her second period as a student, she showed, once more, her enormous capacity for work: she was not satisfied with standard degree studies, and wanted to begin to do research. Aware of her previous experience in translation (apart from having a degree in Translation Studies, she had worked professionally as a translator from English into Spanish) I suggested that she should carry out a comparative study of the Arabic source of one of the Alfonsine *Libros del Saber de Astronomía*: the four *Libros de la Ochava Espera*, which we thought, at the time, to be a translation of al-Şūfi's *Kitāb şuwar al-kawākib*. We spent many hours together revising the texts in the poor Hyderabad edition of al-Şūfi's work and the even worse Castilian edition, by Manuel Rico y Sinobas, of the Alfonsine book. The conclusion she reached now seems obvious, but nobody had thought of it before, mainly because nobody had read carefully the two books together: the *Libros de la Ochava Espera* were not a translation of al-Şūfi's *Uranography*, but an original work which used the Eastern book as one of its sources. As a result, Mercè published a very long paper which is, to the best of my knowledge, the most complete study of the Alfonsine text, in which she proved the existence of a whole team of collaborators of King Alfonso X, who had worked rather independently in the compilation of the final work.

After that, she began work on her doctoral thesis on the Andalusian treatises on equatoria. She prepared the editions of the books on the use of the equatorium by Ibn al-Zarqālluh/Azarquiel and Abū l-Şalt of Denia, and put these materials together with the Alfonsine translations of the treatise of Ibn al-Samḥ and Ibn al-Zarqālluh's book on the construction of this instrument. Although I suggested the subject of her thesis, at this stage her main collaborator was Honorino Mielgo, a computer expert who was working with us at that time. Between the two they designed two reconstructions of Ibn al-Samḥ and Ibn al-Zarqālluh's equatoria which were shown at the exhibition

on *The Scientific Legacy of al-Andalus* (Madrid, 1992) which Mercè and I prepared together.

When Mercè obtained her Ph.D. degree, she became independent and, although I suggested some topics which I considered worthy of research, she did exactly the same with me. She was always extremely curious, looking for new manuscripts that nobody had been concerned with previously: she brought to my attention the Bodleian Library manuscript of Ibn al-Hā'im's *al-Zīj al-Kāmil fī l-Ta'ālīm* and the existence of several interesting Maghribī commentaries on the *Uṛjūza* on mīqāt by al-Jādirī. We were interested in the same subjects (trepidation, for example) and we often published papers using the same sources, although the points of view were obviously different. At a certain stage, after the publication of the great list of geographical coordinates in Arabic astronomical sources by Edward S. and Mary Helen Kennedy, Prof. Kennedy asked her whether she would be interested in preparing a second edition of that volume, and she agreed. This drastically changed her plans for research. She had already been interested in the topic and had devoted several papers to the use, in Western Islamic sources, of the meridian of water which implied a reduction of the length of the Mediterranean to its real size; but she had never thought of spending several years of her very active life compiling lists of thousands of place-names and coordinates in multiple Arabic sources. This is what she did for a long time and she must have thought that her work was practically finished, because her computer contained the text of her introduction as well as the list of sources and a data base from which we expect to extract the contents of a book which will be the result of the joint work of the late Professor E.S. Kennedy, Mary Helen Kennedy and Mercè Comes. Publishing the volume is one of the projects we have in Barcelona in order to honour her memory. We would not like her efforts to be wasted.

In 1997 I was asked to prepare the edition of the first of the series of three volumes entitled *La Ciència en la Història dels Països Catalans* (Science in the History of the Catalan-speaking countries) in which it was obvious that a chapter on Catalan and Majorcan Cartography in the later Middle Ages was necessary. Given Mercè's interest in geographical matters, I asked her whether she would agree to write it. She did, and the result was not only the long chapter published in 2004 but also the beginning of her research in a new topic: Mediterranean Cartography, to which she dedicated her last years. Unfortunately she did not have enough time to reach results as interesting as with her previous lines of research. We are still examining the contents of

her computer in order to see if they contain materials worthy of publication.

Mercè was not only a researcher but also a woman who was able to work in any field when she was required to do so. The Department of Arabic Studies of the University of Barcelona is discovering now, a few months after her death, that she was everywhere. Suddenly when problems arise and we ask ourselves why, we realize that nobody is doing what she did and we become aware of the gap she has left behind her. She was not very fond of administrative work but she was conscious of the fact that the job had to be done and she volunteered to do it: she was, consecutively, Secretary and Head of the Department as well as Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Philology. At international level, she became Secretary, Vice-President and President of the Commission of the History of Science and Technology in Islamic Civilization. In fact only a few months before her death she had been elected President of the Commission.

She died when she was reaching the summit of her career: she was an obvious candidate for the new Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies which is going to be created in the University of Barcelona, in preparation for my retirement. This makes her death even more tragic. We take consolation in the fact that she had a full life in which she did almost everything: she had a happy marriage, two sons and two grandchildren, besides being a great scholar and the best friend we could ever dream of.

Julio Samsó

Mercè Comes was a researcher with an insatiable curiosity, a teacher with a true vocation and a wonderfully supportive colleague who always had a smile on her face.

I would like to add some words to those of Julio Samsó by recalling colleagues and students who, in the sad days following her death, expressed their emotions with words and flowers. Writing about Mercè will be much easier in his company.

Although we did not speak, Mercè and I coincided for the first time in the summer of 1982 in Tunis. Mercè herself recalled the moment at a meal with Emilia Calvo and Mònica Rius in February 2008, in front of an old photograph. To avoid talking about work, as the four of us so often did when we were together, we had all decided to bring a photograph from the time before we met, and we laughed as we reconstructed the long path that we had walked along together.

In the mid-1980s, Mercè came to the Faculty of Philology as a student of Julio Samsó. When we left the building, we would often travel home on the same bus, sometimes accompanied by a very young student Miquel Forcada. One day when I was going home on my own at an unusual time I saw her or at least I thought I saw her; this is how I learnt of the existence of Rosa Comes, her twin sister.

1987 was the year of our first trip together, to attend the *Congreso Internacional al-Andalus* held in Cordoba. We travelled on the night train, and as we would do very often in the future, we spent much of the night awake, talking about our interests. The Cordoba congress was followed by many more shared congresses, where Mercè established a wide network of colleagues and friends. First, the International Congresses on the History of Science: Hamburg-Munich 1989, also attended by Emilia and Miquel; Zaragoza 1993, shared with the Kennedys and the Kings, where Mònica Rius became a fully-fledged member of the group; 1997 was the Liège congress and the award of the Koyré Medal to the Grupo Millàs Vallicrosa de Historia de la Ciencia Árabe led by our masters Juan Vernet and Julio Samsó; Mexico 2001, joining our colleague Josep Casulleras and with the unforgettable memory of Mercè climbing the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, in spite of her vertigo; Beijing 2005 and the company of her husband Jordi Prat and other new friends; and joining Montserrat Diaz, at the Budapest meeting of 2009, which is still fresh in all our memories.

We should also mention the Colloques Maghrebins sur l'Histoire des Mathématiques Arabes which established bridges for scientific cooperation and friendship with our Mediterranean colleagues from the École Normale Supérieure in Kouba in Algiers led by Ahmed Djebbar: Youcef Guergour, Malek Bouzari and Anissa Harbili among others, and Taha Abdel-Kaddous and Michel Guillemot in Toulouse, and the participation at the international congresses organized by the *Institute for the History of Arabic Science* in Aleppo (Syria) and coordinated by Mustafa Mawaldi and Sami Chalhoub: Granada 1992 with John North and George Saliba; Ras al-Khayma 1997 with Paul Kunitzsch, and Al-Ayn (Abu Dhabi) 2000 with Constantin Canavas.

Or the Teheran symposium in 1998 *Sciences, Techniques et Instruments dans le Monde Iranien* with Muhammad Bagheri and the trip to Isfahan with the rest of our colleagues. More recently, the two conferences in which Mercè made such an important contribution: *A Shared Legacy. Islamic Science East and West* in Barcelona (2007), which brought together a large group of international historians of Arabic science, and the very recent panel on

Arabic Cartography Visions of Eastern and Western Lands in Medieval Cartography and Chartmaking held at WOCMES Barcelona 2010, organized by her colleagues Mònica Rius and Mònica Herrera, who paid her affectionate tribute.

And many other meetings and occasions where her intelligent sense of humour made us so happy. Mercè, we miss you very much.

Roser Puig

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