

Jean Bingen (Antwerp, 26 March 1920 – Brussels, 6 February 2012)

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Alain Martin

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Jean Bingen passed away a few weeks before his ninety-second birthday.¹ Time had scarcely altered the impression of vitality and youth that shone out from his person, while his mind had lost nothing of its sharpness. Jean Bingen was a faithful friend of this journal, *Diogenes*, as well as of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies, whose acronym in French, CIPSH, he delighted in pronouncing, enjoying provoking perplexed looks on the faces of those who did not recognize it.

From the moment you met him, Jean Bingen impressed you by a strength of personality that is rarely equalled, even among the most eminent of academics. This characteristic derived in the first place from a very powerful and penetrative intelligence, which allowed him instantly to grasp all the different facets of a problem and to perceive just as quickly the possible pathways to a solution. This rare ability was complemented by a natural authority, a heightened sense of duty (but which in no way implied privilege) associated with the rank he had attained, to which can be added a genuine capacity to charm and to grant credit where credit was deserved, as he would have insisted on making clear. He was a fine wielder of irony, not hesitating to turn it against himself at times. Elegance was another highlight of his character; it came out particularly in his written expression which was of an irreproachable correctness. Above all, Jean Bingen demonstrated a visceral attachment to the values on which depend the progress and dignity of humanity; this commitment, both philosophical and social, which was forged in the difficult environment of the 1930s, had led him as a new husband and soon-to-be father to engage in the Resistance.

But I shall limit myself here to the main lines of his scholarly career. Jean Bingen was a Hellenist, and nothing that was Greek, from Mycenae through to Cavafy, Kazantzakis, or Theodorakis, was at all foreign to him.² His attention was particularly drawn to Classical Athenian theatre, but his true passion was for Greek texts inscribed on stone or papyri, associating him thus with epigraphy and papyrology, two disciplines in which he was a leading figure and which he aptly grouped under the term ‘document philology’. In succession to his mentor, Claire Préaux, who had a major influence on the emergence of Bingen’s skill as a scholar and his sensitivity as a historian, he became a specialist in the Egypt of the Hellenistic period.

Corresponding author:

Alain Martin, Université libre de Bruxelles, Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, Campus du Solbosch, ULB CP175, avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50, B-1050 Bruxelles, Belgium.

Email: amartin@ulb.ac.be

But Jean Bingen's superabundant energy could not be fully taken up by simply working in libraries, so he also became an active archaeologist. For a long time he enjoyed the challenges of fieldwork, a pleasure he had already tasted during a period of work at Alba Fucens in Latium, and over the course of his training at the École Française of Athens. He worked firstly on the Belgian excavations of Thorikos in Attica; thereafter he directed an international team on the site of the Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert of Egypt. These efforts were rewarded by significant discoveries. At the Mons Claudianus, the rubbish dump of a Roman camp was to yield thousands of potsherds, the publication of whose inscriptions, begun under his initiative, is continuing under the supervision of H  l  ne Cuvigny. At Thorikos, a cache of Athenian tetradrachma provided him with the opportunity to study the ornamentation of the helmet of Athena, such as it was represented on the obverse of these coins. One had to have heard Jean Bingen demonstrating his skill as a numismatist in comparing this image derived from ancient Greece with the splendid miner's head that adorned the Belgian 50 centime piece (from before the advent of the euro) to appreciate the precision of his aesthetic judgement.

At the same time as he carried on his multiple research projects in a variety of domains, Jean Bingen also maintained a full commitment to teaching, shared between the Universit   Libre de Bruxelles and its sister Dutch-language institution the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: this represented, from the moment when he defended, in uniform, his doctoral dissertation in 1945 until his elevation to the status of professor emeritus in 1995, four decades of stimulating contact with students, but also of behind the scenes work in the service of those institutions and of the ideal of 'free enquiry' that animates them in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Jean Bingen showed the same dedication as a director of the Fondation (today Association)   gyptologique Reine   lisabeth, established in Brussels shortly after the opening of Tutankhamon's tomb, as well as to the editing of its scientific publication, the *Chronique d'  gypte*. Several official honours have distinguished Jean Bingen's exemplary career as a researcher and teacher: he was elected member of the Royal Academy of Belgium, whose Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques he chaired; outside of Belgium, notably in Paris, in London, in Heidelberg, and in Warsaw, other institutions of no lesser prestige welcomed him within their ranks.

The international stature of Jean Bingen was to expand even further. His masterly skill in fostering international relationships, his charisma, and his innate tact marked him out for playing an important role within major associations. He climbed their echelons with typical modesty, beginning with his favourite sectors; he became a committee member of the International Association for Greek and Latin Epigraphy, secretary-treasurer, then Honorary President, of the International Association of Papyrologists. He furthermore became treasurer of the International Federation of Classical Studies Associations, whose 16th General Assembly he welcomed to Brussels in 1977 with the assistance of one of his pupils, Guy Cambier, who alas left us at too young an age. He reached his ultimate high-point in 1986, when he became the treasurer of CIPSH, which position he occupied until 1992, before being appointed Secretary-General of that organization from 1996 to 1998. Following on from these latter responsibilities, in 1998 he was appointed to the editorial committee of *Diogenes*.

Jean Bingen's years at CIPSH were the culmination of a destiny directed since childhood towards the marriage of languages and cultures, arising out of his mixed Belgian and Luxemburg roots which themselves probably were grounded in the Rhineland, as his name suggests. This destiny also drew on a youth doubly marked on the one hand by the dialectal speech of his playmates in the streets and on the docks of Antwerp, and on the other by the very elevated quality of the French demanded at the family dinner-table. It was confirmed at high school by a fascination for Athens and Rome and for the Greek and Latin languages, and at university by the discovery of Hellenistic Egypt which was a multi-cultural society *par excellence*, and of which he was to

become one of the most knowledgeable experts. Truth to tell, Jean Bingen always felt himself to be a citizen of the world, and the CIPSH, through the contacts he was able to establish at its headquarters in the rue Miollis in Paris together with the travel that his duties allowed him to undertake to all parts underlined the full significance of this identity, which he claimed with intense pride.

His time at CIPSH also allowed him to forge new relationships: paying little heed to the generation barrier, as with almost every other barrier he encountered, Jean Bingen formed a close association with Luca Maria Scarantino, his deputy at the secretariat-general, while Jean d'Ormesson, closer in age, would soon become a very dear friend,³ though he had not waited till he rubbed shoulders with d'Ormesson at CIPSH to appreciate the latter's novels, eagerly awaited at each printing and immediately devoured and commented on to all who might listen. As I shared an office with Jean Bingen at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, I had the privilege of overhearing, while pretending not to listen, several telephone exchanges between these two lively minds: 'Hello Jean? This is Jean!' chirped my boss, with a beaming smile on his face. The conversation, when it was not about business or financial matters, could become very profound, sometimes trending towards the lyrical, like the expressions I have reproduced below which Jean Bingen pronounced in Florence in 1998 as part of a closing address to a memorable papyrology conference.

Addressing the organizers, who were old companions of his, Jean Bingen laid his heart bare a little, describing the impressions that the scholarly discussions of the week that had just passed had had on him, as well as those brought on by the visits and excursions which form part of the programme of any well planned conference: '... and then especially, and what a great gift it was, that passionate moment that I experience each time that I come back to this land of the spirit, the view that unfolds, a little beyond the austere campanile of Fiesole, of the undulating tapestry of the Tuscan hills, soft in the evening light, an experience full of the silent grace of the idea of happiness' (2001: II, 1354).

A convinced free thinker, but one who was hostile to any exclusive attitudes, Jean Bingen was not expecting anything after death. He observed his final hour approaching with serenity, without departing from that touch of irony which had been almost a personal trait. The key to that last demonstration of wisdom is to be found perhaps in his emotional response to the hills of Tuscany. Something we humans may attain in the 'silent grace of happiness'. I believe that Jean Bingen did attain such happiness, and he was undoubtedly aware of it at the moment he left us for the final time: a happiness that was built through a family united around the central pair-bond, holding strong for nearly seventy years, with Marthe Willendyck, who had the strength to survive him for only a few months; through an academic and scholarly life crowned with success and honours; through a faultless life journey, conforming at all points to the generous and demanding principles to which he himself had willingly adhered.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

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Notes

1. This text reproduces in part the tribute delivered in Warsaw on 3 August 2013 before the general assembly of the International Association of Papyrologists. For a more detailed overview the reader is referred to the obituary which appeared in 2012 in the *Chronique d'Égypte* 87: 2–14; a further portrait is expected to appear in the series *Hermae. Scholars and Scholarship in Papyrology*, published under the direction of Professor Mario Capasso.

2. To understand his passion for Classical Greece, one should read Bingen's 1999 article in *Diogenes* 47(1).
3. Testimony to this friendship may be found in the 2006 text by Jean Bingen.

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