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School books, public education and the state of literacy in Early Modern Catalonia

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In 1556, the council of Mataró, a Catalan village with less than 1,000 inhabitants, approved the decision to employ a teacher to instruct children how to read and write. The argument was clear: the teacher was needed, in the words of the council members, ‘for the benefits provided by knowledge and for the detriment that comes from ignorance’. The council provided an annual wage to the teacher and also lodging in exchange for teaching the sons of the poor families at no charge.¹

A similar example comes from the village of Olot, with 1,700 inhabitants, located in the countryside 75 miles north of Barcelona. In 1565, the council’s members reached an agreement with some local friars to open a school for children. Among the conditions, the friars were required to teach, free of charge, all the poor boys in town. In 1581, the council of Olot hired a new teacher for the public school. The conditions, however, did not change. The teacher was asked to teach the sons of all poor families of the village for free.²

Provisions of this sort were common in early modern Catalonia. Although grammar schools existed before, mainly for aspirant clergymen, from the sixteenth century onwards education was extended to the laity, even in the rural areas, and also to the poor. One reason that explains this development is the influence of humanism across Europe. The spread of humanist ideas on education prompted local authorities to promote learning to read and write among children. As we will see below, the books of important humanists, like Erasmus of Rotterdam, Antonio de Nebrija or Lluís Vives, were well known across the country, even in small villages. The works of classical authors like Cicero or Virgil were also used in the public grammar schools. This was nothing new in Europe. According to Lawrence Stone, in the sixteenth century some sectors of English upper classes were influenced by Vives’ optimism about education as a mean to improve society.³

There were, however, practical reasons as well. Geoffrey Parker has pointed out that both religious and civil authorities desired that ordinances and proclamations were understood by the common people. In 1588, the Bishop of Barcelona, Joan Dimas Lloris, reminded the schoolteachers of his diocese of the importance of teaching children to read all kind of legal papers: ‘He [the teacher] will take care that children are capable of reading notarial deeds, legal proceedings, letters and other difficult documents, in order to be good readers of all kinds of writing’. It was common for ecclesiastical and secular authorities to post decrees in public spaces to inform people about

¹ Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó (Archive of the Crown of Aragon. Hereafter, ACA), Notarials, Mataró, 1556–1558, C-3, June 29th, 1556. The subject of this article has been previously developed in the framework of research that I have been doing as an independent researcher since 2014. The result of this work is a book titled *Els mestres de minyons i l’ensenyament públic a la Catalunya Moderna* (Children’s teachers and public education in early modern Catalonia), Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2023. I wish to thank professor Paul Freedman, from Yale University, for ensuring the accuracy of my written English in this article.

² Arxiu Comarcal de la Garrotxa (Archive of Garrotxa County. Hereafter, ACGAX), Ajuntament d’Olot, Llibre de deliberacions, 1564–1578, fol. 59v, July 6th, 1565; *ibid*, 1578–1588, fol. 195v, August 20th, 1581.

³ Lawrence Stone, ‘Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900’, *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), p. 90.

important occurrences. In 1599, for example, the Bishop of Barcelona had a note affixed at the main door of the cathedral, so that it could be 'easily read by everyone', as he pointed out.⁴

In early seventeenth-century Catalonia, access to public jobs, which required a basic level of education, was open to peasants and artisans. Many became jurors or councilors in municipal governments in cities, towns and villages of the region. In Barcelona, artisans were granted the sixth councilor's seat in 1641, a political achievement that had been demanded for years. Artisans also worked in a large variety of civic posts which required education, such as guards of the city gates (supervising passports and bills of health), or controlling the weight of some of the products that entered into towns. Finally, to read, write and count was also important for the trade of many artisans, mainly for business accountancy.⁵

The aim of this paper is to show that in Catalonia, from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, there was an effective public education system, provided by the local councils, that gave a basic education to children from lower and middle classes, including the sons of the poorest families, in most cases for free. In the towns and villages where education was not completely free, it was affordable for most of the families because the local authorities paid a substantial part of the teacher's wages. This public system was complementary to the private education reserved for the families with higher economic means. Education, as we will see, also benefited greatly from the local print trade, which supplied the schools with a great quantity of books. School books, in fact, were produced in a large scale and they became an important part of the income of catalan printers and booksellers in this period.

From 1714 onwards, coinciding with the establishment of the absolutist Bourbon regime of King Philip V of Spain, education in Catalonia entered into a period of decline, mainly because both the state and the local authorities (financially curtailed by new taxes) were unable to improve the school system and to provide it with the necessary funds to face the growth of the population. In relative terms, the number of children that attended school decreased, and this situation affected mainly the sons of the poor families.

The benefits of public education

The importance of primary education for the public good can be seen in the decision taken in 1570 by the council of La Seu d'Urgell, a city of 2,500 inhabitants in the Pyrenees. The members of the council decided to employ a teacher, '—due to the importance of the literacy of the youth for any republic'—. With the word 'republic' they referred to the public interest, from the Latin *res publica*. For the same reason, the council of Vilanova i la Geltrú, a village of 1,000 inhabitants, decided in 1591, after being informed that the teacher of the public school had resigned, to immediately look for a replacement. The council considered that the lack of a teacher would bring great damage to

⁴ Geoffrey Parker, *Europa en crisis, 1598-1648* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1981), pp. 372–373. Arxiu Diocesà de Barcelona (Archive of the Diocese of Barcelona. Hereafter, ADB) Comú, 1591–1594, Llibre 69, fol. 173. February 13th, 1588; *ibid*, Comú, 1597–1599, Llibre 71, fol. 189v, July 6th, 1599.

⁵ An explanation of the social structure of early modern Catalonia can be seen in English in: James A. Amelang, *Honored citizens of Barcelona: patrician culture and class relations, 1490-1714* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

the town, because in the opinion of its members, education was very useful and profitable for the sons of all families.⁶

There is evidence of the existence of free public schools for boys in many Catalan towns and villages throughout the seventeenth century. For example, in Vilanova i la Geltrú in 1650, the council increased the teacher's wage on the condition that he teach for free all the boys who wanted to attend the public school. The same took place in Sabadell in 1670, a village of 1,000 inhabitants; and in 1693 in Verdú, a village of only 500 inhabitants. It is important to point out that public education was available to male children only. In Igualada, the 115 pupils who attended public school in 1570 were, according to the list of names, all boys. There is evidence that some local councils paid female teachers to educate girls in domestic crafts and skills. This was the case, for example, with the agreement reached in 1666 between the councilors of La Seu d'Urgell and a woman called Elionor Vilella, who received some quantity of wheat every year in exchange for teaching the daughters of the poor families to sew.⁷

Free public education was often intended specifically to educate poor children. In 1700, the council of Sitges, a village of 1,500 inhabitants, dismissed the schoolteacher, because he did not accept the sons of the poor families. The teacher argued that those families were not able to pay him. Afterwards, the council employed another teacher for the public school, giving him a higher salary, but with the stipulation that he teach all the boys in town for free.⁸

It is also important to note that during the early modern period, education was not compulsory. Nevertheless, a great number of parents decided to send their children to school. In 1574, for example, in Sant Boi de Llobregat, a small village near Barcelona, 35 out of 38 families signed an agreement with a teacher named Marc Biscarro to provide basic education to their sons. In Igualada, a village with 179 families, one hundred boys attended the local public school in 1566. By 1570, this had increased to 115. The reason for the increase was the order given by the council to the parents, asking them to bring their children to the public school, instead of sending them to the school of other private teachers.⁹

The city councils usually paid the teachers' wages with the revenue from the excise duties on basic foodstuffs such as meat, bread and wine. In 1555, the council of Vic, an important city in the countryside, with some 3,000 inhabitants, approved to pay the salary of the teacher – eight pounds per year – with money obtained from the duty on the sale of fruit in the marketplace. Four years later, the council increased the teacher's wage by another eight pounds, this time taking the money

⁶ Arxiu Comarcal de l'Alt Urgell (Archive of Urgell County. Hereafter, ACAU), Ajuntament de la Seu d'Urgell, Llibre de Consells, 1513–1578, fol. 625, August 27th, 1570. Arxiu Comarcal del Garraf (Archive of Garraf County. Hereafter, ACGAF), Ajuntament de Vilanova i la Geltrú, Acords del Consell, 1576–1593, fol. 206v, September 15th, 1591.

⁷ ACGAF, Ajuntament de Vilanova i la Geltrú, Acords del Consell, 1625–1650, fol. 232, February 20th, 1650. Arxiu Històric de Sabadell (Historical Archive of Sabadell. Hereafter, AHS), Ajuntament de Sabadell, Llibre d'actes del Ple, 1657–1677, fol. 113, March 2th, 1670. Arxiu Municipal de Verdú (Municipal Archive of Verdú. Hereafter, AMVe), Ajuntament de Verdú, Llibre de determinacions, 1692–1733, fol. 1v, March 19th, 1693. Arxiu Comarcal de l'Anoia (Archive of Anoia County. Hereafter, ACAN), Ajuntament d'Igualada, Llibre d'actes de la Universitat, 1570, fol. 72, October 18th, 1570. ACAU, Ajuntament de la Seu d'Urgell, Llibre de Consells, 1661–1707, f. 51v, January 6th, 1666.

⁸ Arxiu Històric Municipal de Sitges (Municipal Historical Archive of Sitges. Hereafter, AHMSi), Ajuntament de Sitges, Llibre del Consell, 1693–1705, fol. 100v, January 24th, 1700.

⁹ Arxiu Històric de Protocols de Barcelona (Historical Archive of the Notaries of Barcelona. Hereafter, AHPB), Bartomeu Bofill, Quadern d'aprisies de 1574, 441/6, June 27th, 1574. ACAN, Ajuntament d'Igualada, Llibre d'actes de la Universitat, 1566, fol. 53; *ibid*, Llibre d'actes de la Universitat, 1570, fol. 72, October 18th, 1570.

from the toll on the city bridge. In La Seu d'Urgell, in 1617, the councillors proposed to the council assembly to offer a higher salary to the grammar school teacher, taking 40 pounds that the city obtained each year from the tax on the wood collected in nearby forests. In doing so, said the councillors, they would be able to find a better teacher. In a similar way, in 1658 in Sallent, a village with 1,000 inhabitants, the teacher was paid with the proceeds of the duty on the meat that came from the slaughterhouse.¹⁰

In 1677, the council of Terrassa, a village of some 1,500 inhabitants, paid the teacher of the public school with money obtained from the taxes on the sales of tobacco and on *aiguarent* (firewater). In this case, the education provided had to be free of charge for all boys. Moreover, in 1699, the council promised 180 pounds per year to a grammar teacher, 44 pounds of which were taken from the duty on the sale of salted fish. The last example of this practice comes from Arbúcies, a village in the countryside, with about 1,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the eighteenth century, many of them living in isolated cottages. In 1711, during the War of the Spanish Succession, the local council approved to pay the schoolteacher from the revenue of all the public excise duties, and it also did the same in 1714.¹¹

It is interesting to observe that the existence of public schools in Catalonia during the early modern period was regular, in spite of the economic difficulties caused by the calamities of the time, such as wars (which caused civilian casualties, but also implied recruitment and billeting of soldiers), plague or natural disasters. These events did not prove an impediment for most of the towns to pay the teacher's wages, which reinforces our notion of the importance attached to education in this period. The capacity of the towns and villages to raise their own duties and to pay their teachers' wages can only be fully understood if we take into account that Catalonia was, until 1700, an autonomous state within the composite monarchy of the Spanish Habsburg. Until this time, the bond between the King and the Catalan *Corts* (Parliament) was based on a mutual compromise of loyalty and respect. After his coronation, the King would travel to Barcelona and swear to uphold the Catalan laws, the *Constitucions*. After doing so, the *Corts* recognised him as the new monarch and, in response, he might agree to concede more laws and privileges (political rights) to his subjects. The deputies sent to the *Corts* by many towns requested the right to raise some duties, like those on basic foodstuffs. In exchange for some of these new privileges, the King would receive a sum of money, agreed upon by the *Corts* and the King's advisors after a negotiation. This money, called the 'donatiu' (donation), was provided during the following years by all the cities, towns and villages and was usually used by the King to finance the army.¹²

The ample provision of public funds even made it possible for some towns to hire more than one teacher, if this was necessary. In the larger towns, there could be two teachers, who divided the responsibilities to teach reading and writing. In 1677, the councillors of Mataró put a teacher in

¹⁰ Arxiu Municipal de Vic (Municipal Archive of Vic. Hereafter, AMV), Ajuntament de Vic, Acords, 1547–1570, Llibre 6, fol. 82v, April 29th, 1555; *ibid*, fol. 135, April 22th, 1559. ACAU, Ajuntament de la Seu d'Urgell, Llibre de Consells, 1617–1657, fol. 2v, July 30th, 1617. Arxiu Municipal de Sallent (Municipal Archive of Sallent. Hereafter, AMS), Ajuntament de Sallent, Actes del Ple, 1657–1726, May 26th, 1658.

¹¹ Arxiu Comarcal del Vallès Occidental (Archive of Occidental Vallès County. Hereafter, ACVOC), Ajuntament de Terrassa, Llibre de consells, 1658–1678, 7/1, fol. 254, April 25th, 1677; *ibid*, 1678–1715, 8/1, fol. 194v, December 6th, 1699. Arxiu Històric Municipal d'Arbúcies (Municipal Historical Archive of Arbúcies. Hereafter, AHMA), Ajuntament d'Arbúcies, Llibre d'actes del comú, 1680–1740, fol. 173–174, March 8th, 1711; *ibid*, fol. 199–200, November 1th, 1714.

¹² See an approach to the Catalan political system, in English, in: Joaquim Albareda & Manuel Herrero Sánchez (eds.), *Political representation in the ancien régime* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

charge of the boys who learned to read and another one for those who learned to write and count. The decision was taken due to an increase in the number of children attending the municipal public school. In most large towns there was also a third teacher in charge of the Latin grammar studies, attended only by the oldest boys.¹³

In such cases that the salary provided by the councillors was not enough for the teacher to live on, he was allowed to collect money from the parents. In 1562, the council of Olot was able to offer no more than 18 pounds per year to the schoolteacher, and therefore he was authorised to take one sou per month from the boys who learned to read, two sous from those who learned to write and three sous from the students of grammar. In a similar way, in 1569, the councillors of Cardona, a village of some 1,100 inhabitants, located 60 miles northwest of Barcelona, promised 12 pounds per year to the schoolteacher, and allowed him to ask for four sous from the reading students, 10 sous from the writing students and 26 from the grammar students. In 1655, the viceroy of Catalonia, Juan José de Austria, took measures to reduce inflation, including the establishment of a price ceiling for various products and services. The money that parents might give to schoolteachers was established at a rate of two sous per month for the beginners in reading, four sous for those who had an advanced level in reading, six sous for the writing students and eight sous for those who also learned counting. According to the rates implemented by the viceroy, at that time a manual worker's daily wage was between eight and ten sous, which means that the cost of the education of a single son was the equivalent to 2.5% of the monthly income of a working family.¹⁴

Print and education

Public education in Catalonia benefited greatly from the print trade, thanks to the substantial production of short school books. The first book used to teach reading was the alphabet book, popularly known in Catalonia as 'beceroles' (see figure 3.1) and 'cartillas' in Castile. Another popular school book for beginners were the 'salms', that is to say the *Seven Penitential Psalms* (figure 3.2). These books were certainly small and short. Based on the copies that have survived, in the seventeenth century the 'beceroles' commonly had 16 pages and the 'salms' had 32, both printed in 16mo format.¹⁵

After progressing on from the alphabet, pupils continued with a book called 'franselm', which was a compendium of moral advice. In fact, the book bore the formal title *Llibre de bons amonestaments* (The book of good warnings) and was written at the end of the fourteenth century by the Majorcan

¹³ ACA, Notarials, Mataró, 1675–1678, C-17, s.f., August 1st, 1677.

¹⁴ ACGAX, Ajuntament d'Olot, Llibres del consell, 1546–1564, f. 365, April 28th, 1562; Biblioteca de Catalunya (National Library of Catalonia. Hereafter, BC), Batllia de Cardona, Llibre dels Cònsols, 1564–1610, Bat Car 7/4, s.f., October 26th, 1569. See the viceroy price rate in 'Tarifa y postura de preus de les coses infrascrites', in: Ramon Alberch [et al.], *Gremis i oficis a Girona. Treball i societat a l'època pre-industrial*, (Girona: Ajuntament de Girona, 1984), pp. 252 and 263.

¹⁵ See the use of the 'cartillas' in: Jaime Moll, 'La cartilla et sa distribution au XVIIème siècle', in *De l'alphabétisation aux circuits du livre en Espagne, XVI-XIX siècles* (Paris: CNRS, 1987), pp. 311–322; Augustin Redondo, 'Les livrets de lecture (cartillas para enseñar a leer) au XVIe siècle: lecture et message doctrinal', in: Augustin REDONDO (dir.), *La formation de l'enfant en Espagne aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne), 1996, pp. 71–91. The oldest 'beceroles' and 'salms' printed in Catalonia that I have seen date from 1676 and 1677. They have been preserved inside notarial and judiciary documents and are not catalogued. Arxiu Historic de la Ciutat de Barcelona (Historical Archive of the City of Barcelona. Hereafter, AHCB), Notarial, IX-4; ACA, Reial Audència, Plets civils, 23921.

friar Anselm Turmeda (fra Anselm), who has been considered a forerunner of Renaissance humanism (figure 3.3). Another book of this kind was *La Peregrinació del venturós pelegrí* (The pilgrimage of the good pilgrim), popularly known as ‘pelegrins’ (figure 3.4). The ‘franselms’ were commonly composed of 32 pages and the ‘pelegrins’ of 48, both printed in an octavo format.¹⁶

There is evidence of the production and trade of these books soon after the arrival of the printing press in Catalonia. Among the books that master printer Pere Posa sold in 1498 to Gaspar Mir and Antoni Vernet, booksellers of Barcelona, were several copies of alphabets, salms and ‘franselms’. In 1503, Joan Rosembach, a German printer by then established in Perpinyà – the second largest city in Catalonia at that time – signed an agreement with Joan Trinxer, bookseller of Barcelona, to print several works, among which were 550 alphabets printed on parchment, and also two reams of alphabets and salms printed on paper. According to an inventory from 1507, 200 ‘beceroles’, 400 psalms and 500 ‘franselms’ were stocked in Pere Posa’s office. Unfortunately, not a single copy of these books is known to have survived.¹⁷

These kind of school books were not only used in urban schools, but also in small villages in the countryside. In 1569, the council of Cardona employed Joan Torrabadella as a teacher for the public school. Under the conditions of his employment, it was agreed that he should teach the beginners using ‘beseroles y sept salms’, that is to say, alphabets and the *Seven Penitential Salms*.¹⁸

In 1588 the bishop of Barcelona, Joan Dimas Lloris, drew up a list of instructions addressed to all schoolteachers of his diocese, mentioning in one instruction a list of books that boys might read:

Regarding the books they use to learn to read, he [the teacher] is ordered that after the alphabets they must read the seven psalms and litanies (...). And he has to assure they read the *franselm*, newly printed and approved, because it contains several examples of good moral advice. And he has to take care that the rest of books they read, either in vernacular language or in Latin, must reflect good and approved doctrine.¹⁹

As we can see, children were taught in both Latin and Catalan, and for this reason school books were printed mainly in these two languages. The knowledge of Latin was important because it was the language of religious services. However, the main tenets of the Christian doctrine – the catechism – was taught in Catalan as instructed by the bishops, who considered that the best way for children to learn Christian principles was in their mother tongue. In 1608, Rafael de Rovirola, Bishop of Barcelona, ordered teachers to use ‘the Catalan doctrine of father Ledesma’. It was the book titled *Doctrina Christiana a manera de diàlogo entre lo mestre y lo dexeble*, written by the Jesuit Diego de Ledesma.

¹⁶ The oldest copy of Turmeda’s book printed in Catalan that I have seen dates from 1584 and belongs to the private collection of the family Domenèch-Ballester, to whom I am grateful for the digital reproduction given to me. The oldest copy preserved in the Catalan public archives and libraries dates from 1667. Biblioteca Pública Episcopal de Barcelona (Library of the Bishopric of Barcelona. Hereafter, BPEP), 243=499 Tur. A copy of the *Peregrinació del venturós pelegrí* printed in Barcelona in 1635 has been preserved in the New York Public Library. Universal Short Title Catalogue (hereafter, USTC), 5034165. The oldest copy preserved in Catalan archives dates from 1677. BC, 6-I-7/1.

¹⁷ Jordi Rubió i Balaguer and Josep Maria Madurell i Marimon, *Documentos para la historia de la imprenta y librería en Barcelona, 1474-1553* (Barcelona: Gremio de Editores y Libreros, 1955), pp. 272, 361 and 456.

¹⁸ BC, Batllia de Cardona, Llibre dels Cònsols (1564–1610), Bat Car 7/4, October 26th, 1569.

¹⁹ ADB, Comú, 1591–1594, Llibre 69, fol. 173, February 13th, 1588.

This book was originally written in Latin but was soon after translated into many languages, including Italian, English, Castilian and Catalan.²⁰

Grammar books, on the other hand, were always printed in Latin, because the knowledge of this language was considered critical to unlock other faculties of higher learning. The most important grammar books used in Catalan schools were the works of the Sevillian linguist Antonio de Nebrija, now considered the most representative author of Spanish humanism (figure 3.5). In 1497, the master printer Joan Rosembach, by then established in Barcelona, printed 500 copies of Nebrija's grammar, commissioned by the bookseller Nicolau Mazà. Again, in 1523, Rosembach and a conglomerate of booksellers agreed to print and sell 1,100 copies of this grammar book.²¹

Antonio de Nebrija's Latin grammar, popularly known as 'antonis', was produced for Castilian and Catalan audiences and reedited many several times over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1625, for example, the booksellers' guild of Barcelona ordered 2,500 copies of this grammar from Esteve Liberós, a local printer. Another piece of evidence is the agreement between a master printer Martí Gelabert and the bookseller Miquel Planella signed in 1677 to print 18 reams of 'antonis'. This translated to a total of some 600 copies, because Nebrija's grammar was usually printed as an octavo of 240 pages. In 1723, the master printer Rafael Figueró, in Barcelona, printed 57 reams of the Nebrija's grammar – nearly 1,900 copies – on order of a conglomerate of booksellers.²²

Among the grammar books, is it also important to point out the importance of the works of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the most distinguished humanist in Europe. Despite the efforts of the Spanish Inquisition, Erasmus' book on syntax, popularly known as 'erasmes', was tolerated and widely used in Catalan grammar schools. In 1570, for example, 2,000 copies of this book were sold in Barcelona by the master printer Claudi Bornat to the merchants Tomàs and Jeroni Lucia. In 1677, Martí Gelabert printed 1,400 'erasmes' by order of multiple booksellers. Not a single copy of Erasmus' syntax printed in Barcelona before the eighteenth century has been preserved in the Catalan public archives and libraries.²³

²⁰ ADB, Comú, 1604–1609, Llibre 74, fol. 123, February 4th, 1068. The oldest translation of Ledesma's doctrine that figures in the USTC was published in Italian in Ferrara in 1569. *Dottrina christiana per interrogazioni a modo di dialogo, del maestro & discepolo per insegnar alli fanciulli*, USTC 763172. The oldest printed copy in Catalan that has been preserved in Catalan archives and libraries, according to the Catàleg Col·lectiu de les Universitats Catalanes (Catalan Universities Collective Catalogue. Hereafter, CCUC), dates from 1692. *Doctrina Christiana a manera de diàleg entre lo mestre y lo dexeble*, BC, 9-II-6.

²¹ Rubió; Madurell, *Documentos para la historia*, pp. 254 and 645. The edition of 1523 by Rosembach: *Aelii Antonii Nebrissensis in latinam grammaticen introductiones*, BC, Mar. 133-Fol. On the grammar books and other classic works used in Catalan schools in the fifteenth century, see: Josep Hernando, 'El llibre escolar i la presència dels autors clàssics i dels humanistes en l'ensenyament del segle XV', *Estudis Històrics i Documents dels Arxius de Protocols*, 29 (2011), pp. 7–42.

²² AHPB, Maties Amell, Dotzè manual, 613/26, September 24th, 1625. *Aelii Antonii Nebrissensis Grammaticarum institutionum*, Barcelona, Esteve Liberós, 1625. Biblioteca Universitària de Barcelona (University of Barcelona Library. Hereafter, BUB), B-62/5/33; AHPB, Joan Alomar, Quart manual, 814/4, fol. 229v–230v, November 23th, 1677. There is an earlier edition of Nebrija's grammar printed by Gelabert by order of the bookseller Francesc Llopis, which includes Catalan comments. *Aelii Antonii Nebrissensis Grammaticarum institutionum libri quatuor*, Barcelona, Martí Gelabert, 1676. BUB, 195/3/3. The agreement between Figueró and the booksellers Jaume Roig, Anton March i Josep Pi, in: AHPB, Isidre Famades i Morell, Desè manual, 916/11, fol. 289r–289v, November 13th, 1723.

²³ AHPB, Miquel Boera, Vintè manual, 396/4, January 9th, 1570; AHPB, Joan Alomar, Quart manual, 814/4, fol. 130v–132, 3 August 1677. On the use of the Erasmus' syntax at the University of Barcelona, see: Antonio

Another classic work used in public schools were Cicero's letters (figure 3.6). This book was commonly used by the local councils in order to elect the school grammar teacher, organising competitive examinations. The candidates' knowledge of Latin was evaluated by examining them on one of Cicero's letters, chosen at random by the examiners by sticking a needle on the fore edge of a closed book to mark the pages that contained the letters that would be used in the test. This method of selection appears in the minutes of the council of Mataró in regard to a competitive examination that took place in 1710.

[The examiners] nailed three needles on the fore edge. After opening the book at the points where those needles were, they found that the first needle pointed to Cicero's seventh letter, book four; the second to the eleventh letter, book eleven, and the third touched the first letter, book fifteen, which starts *Si vos bene valets bene est, etc.* And this last letter was finally given for the exam.²⁴

All of these school books were affordable for Catalans of any social background. According to a price list ordered by the Viceroy of Catalonia in 1655, alphabets should be sold at the price of two deniers each, salms at three deniers, and franselms at nine. Pelegrins, on the other hand, had to be sold for one sou, Nebrija's grammar and Erasmus' syntax for three sous each and Cicero's letters for six sous. According to the same list, a worker's daily wage was ten sous, which means that the cost of an alphabet was the equivalent of less than two per cent of this daily wage.²⁵

The use of grammar books was made compulsory in most Catalan public schools. In 1616, the council of Mataró established the rules for the local grammar teacher, asking him to teach Latin to all his students using the works of Nebrija and Erasmus. Some other classical authors, like Cicero, Virgil and Terence, were left to the teacher's choice. In 1633, the council of Vic employed a grammar teacher for the public school, with clear instructions to read Virgil to his pupils from 7 to 9 am, Erasmus from 9 to 10 am, and Cicero from 2 to 3pm. In a similar way, in 1636 the council of La Bisbal d'Empordà – a village of 1,500 inhabitants – ordered the grammar teacher to give three daily lessons to his students, that is to say: Nebrija, Erasmus and Cicero.²⁶

The trade and distribution of school books

In 1553, the booksellers' guild of Barcelona obtained a privilege from Emperor Charles V that gave them a monopoly on the sale of books within the limits of the city. Thanks to this privilege, the booksellers' guild, to which all booksellers were compelled to belong, was able to prevent printers

Fernández Luzón, *La Universidad de Barcelona en el siglo XVI* (Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2005), pp. 129–132.

²⁴ Arxiu Municipal de Mataró (Municipal Archive of Mataró. Hereafter, ACM), Ajuntament de Mataró, Llibres d'acords, 1705–1712, 7/C, fol. 52, October 21th, 1710.

²⁵ See the Viceroy's price list in: Alberch, *Gremis i oficis a Girona*, p. 303. During the Middle Ages and the early modern period the Catalan currency was based on the Carolingian system, created by Charlemagne in the eighth century. It consisted of *lliures*, *sous* and *diners*. One *lliura* was equivalent to 20 *sous* and to 240 *diners*. One *sou* was equivalent to 12 *diners*. This system was also used in France (*livre*, *sou* and *denier*) and in England (pound, shilling and pence).

²⁶ ACA, Notarials, Mataró, C-9, 1608–1618, September 21th, 1616. AMV, Ajuntament de Vic, Acords, 1630–1638, Llibre 16, fol. 334, November 11th, 1634. Arxiu Comarcal del Baix Empordà (Archive of Baix Empordà County. Hereafter, ACBE), Ajuntament de la Bisbal d'Empordà, Llibre d'acords i resolucions, 1608–1652, p. 512, June 29th, 1636.

from selling books, or even to exhibit them publicly at the door of their printing offices. They were allowed, however, to sell books wholesale and unbound. This would prove the beginning of several conflicts between printers and booksellers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because the production and trade in school books had become an important part of the general income of both printers and booksellers. In 1623, the booksellers' guild received another privilege, this time from the city council, that allowed it to compel all booksellers to buy the school books wholesale from the guild, prior to selling them in their respective shops.²⁷

In order to control the distribution of alphabets, psalms and other school books, the guild designated one of its members to deliver the books to the shops of the rest of booksellers. The account books of this distribution that have been preserved are exceptional documents that make it possible to know the quantities of school books produced by the printing offices of Barcelona in the seventeenth century. From 1623 to 1636, the booksellers' guild delivered to the bookshops of the city up to 1,341 reams of printed alphabets and psalms, at an average of almost 96 reams per year.²⁸

The alphabets and psalms printed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were usually produced in a 16mo format, but while the alphabets had 16 pages, the psalms had 32. This means that with a single ream of paper – consisting of 500 sheets of printing paper – it was possible to print 500 psalms or 1,000 alphabets. The problem of converting the 96 annual reams into single copies is that alphabets and psalms are sometimes counted together in the guild account books. The total quantity of each, therefore, can only be estimated. If the 96 reams were of psalms only, the number of printed copies would have been 48,000, but if it were of alphabets, then it would have been 96,000. Considering, as I presume, that both books were consumed in approximately equal quantities, the estimated production can be established in a 2:1 proportion. So, 64 reams out of 96 would be psalms and the remaining 32 would be alphabets, which means that the estimated total number of alphabets and psalms delivered by the guild each year was approximately 32,000 alphabets and a similar number of psalm books.

It is important to consider that the quantity of books delivered to the bookshops was not necessarily the same as the books actually sold during the year, because some of them could have been stored in warehouses for months. However, I think that the estimated annual average of 32,000 copies indicates that the trade in those books was remarkably high. The explanation of such sales figures year after year must be partly due to the fragility of the books themselves. In 1592, the Castilian courts asked permission of the King to regulate the price of the alphabets, because it had been increased excessively. The argument was that the boys damaged the books, so that the copies could not be passed down amongst families, and those who were worst affected by the price hikes were the sons of poor families.²⁹

²⁷ BC, Manuscrits, Ms.1903, fol. 9 and 23–24. These documents are reproduced in: Miquel González Sugrañes, *Història dels antics gremis dels arts i oficis de la ciutat de Barcelona*, vol. 2 Llibreters-estampers (Barcelona: Impremta d'Henrich i cia., 1918), pp. 47–62. See a full explanation of the dispute between printers and booksellers for the book trade in: Xevi Camprubí, 'Llibres i lliure comerç a la Barcelona moderna: els conflictes entre l'impressor Rafael Figueró i la confraria dels llibreters (1671-1711)', *Recerques*, 65 (2012), pp. 75–107. See also: Xevi Camprubí, *L'impressor Rafael Figueró (1642-1726) i la premsa a la Catalunya del seu temps* (Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2018).

²⁸ BC, Manuscrits, Llibre de la administració dels salms, misses i beceroles de la confraria dels llibraters, 1623–1637, MSS. Bergnes-Confraria dels Llibreters, 3.

²⁹ Luis Resines Llorente, *La catedral de papel. Historia de las cartillas de Valladolid* (Valladolid: Diputación de Valladolid, 2007), p. 41.

The sale of school books was the cause of a bitter conflict between printers and booksellers over many years, which is further evidence of the importance of this segment for the book trade. Booksellers used their royal privilege to prevent printers from selling all kind of books to the public, including school books. Royal officials often visited printers' offices and confiscated all their publications, if they had suspicions that they had been selling them. In 1677, for example, as a result of an inspection carried out in Rafael Figueró printing office, the councillors of the booksellers' guild, assisted by the King's officials, found 1,248 alphabets and salms hidden in the warehouse. This affair was brought to court in the same year. During the case, another printer, named Vicenç Surià, claimed to have printed two bales of psalms in 1674 (10,000 copies), and one bale of psalms and alphabets each (5,000 and 10,000 copies, respectively) two years later. After a long judiciary struggle, the booksellers managed to maintain their privilege and, consequently, the monopoly over the retail of books.³⁰

Despite the restrictions imposed by booksellers, printers were crucially aware of the importance of printed books for education, and their own role in producing them. In 1676, during one of these disputes with the booksellers, the printers' guild stated specifically to the city council of Barcelona the value of their work: 'How it would be possible to learn to read without the psalms, 'becerolles', 'franselms' and other books that regularly are being printed for this purpose, if they were hand-written?', asked the printers.³¹

The school books printed in Barcelona were delivered all throughout Catalonia. In 1678, the master printer Rafael Figueró sent 720 copies of salms and alphabets to a fair that took place in the village of Olot, located 60 miles away from Barcelona. Some years later, the book merchant Antoni Lacavalleria sent a cargo of alphabets, 'franselms' and 'antonis' to be sold in the city of Girona. Another example comes from the town of Reus, in the south of Catalonia. There is evidence that in those years a street vendor sold alphabets in the public market.³²

The trade in grammar books was also substantial. From 1635 until 1650 the booksellers' guild of Barcelona delivered up to 18,934 copies of Nebrija's grammar to the city's bookshops, which represents an annual average of 1,183. In the same period, 3,825 copies of Erasmus' syntax were delivered, that is to say, 239 per year, and also 1,289 copies of Cicero's letters, at an average of 80 per year.³³

But the most important document to demonstrate the volume of the school books trade in Catalonia is an inventory made in 1726 that contains the stock of all the printing offices and bookshops in Barcelona at that moment. This inventory was made in order to confiscate all these books by order of the University of Cervera, which some years before obtained the exclusive privilege from King Philip V to print and sell school books. The University of Cervera was created in

³⁰ The details of the inspection in Figueró's office were recorded by a notary. See: AHPB, Francesc Cortés, *Setè manual*, 807/7, fol. 211v–212v, November 12th, 1677. The explanation given by Vicenç Surià to the judge in: ACA, Reial Audiència, Plets Civils, 23921, November 9th, 1677. One bale of paper contained 10 reams. See also: Camprubí, 'Llibres i lliure comerç a la Barcelona moderna', pp. 75–107.

³¹ AHCB, Consell de Cent, Registre de Deliberacions de 1676, fol. 169v–170, July 27th, 1676.

³² The information on Figueró and Lacavalleria's activities comes from the statements of some witnesses during two different trials, which can be seen in: ACA, Reial Audiència, Plets Civils, 23921, April 25th, 1678; and: *ibid*, 18523, July 22th, 1686. The reference to the Reus street dealer appears in: Arxiu Comarcal del Baix Camp (Archive of Baix Camp County. Hereafter, ACBC), Ajuntament de Reus, Llibre d'actes, 1693–1710, p. 67, August 29th, 1694.

³³ Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (National Archive of Catalonia. Hereafter, ANC), Col·lecció de Manuscrits, Companyia dels llibreters. Subministrament als agremiats, 1635–1662, ANC1-25-T-64.

1717 by order of the king with the aim to replace all other universities in Catalonia, including those of Barcelona, Lleida and Girona, which were abolished as a punishment after the Catalan defeat in 1714, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714). The assets of these universities were all pooled for the benefit of the new University of Cervera. In 1718, King Philip V also gave the University of Cervera the monopoly of the printing of school books, as a means to improve its finances. This was the reason why printers and booksellers were compelled by the university rector to gather all their school books and send them to Cervera.³⁴

The inventory of 1726 showed that the stock of books stored in the printing offices and bookshops of Barcelona was as follows: 222,192 alphabets; 127,205 psalms; 41,882 'franselms'; 57,082 'pelegrins'; 12,842 copies of Nebrija's grammar; 2,192 copies of Cicero's letters and 2,066 copies of Erasmus' syntax. These and other school books – like catechisms, rosaries, Torrelles' grammar, and others – comprised a total amount of 550,000 books.³⁵

Nevertheless, three years later it was necessary to make a new inventory, because the books had not yet been collected. The recount made in 1729 showed that the total amount of school books stored had been reduced to only 45,000 copies. The explanation given by the booksellers was that the missing books had been sold. The difference between these two inventories gives further evidence of the extraordinary volume of trade of school books that existed in the early eighteenth century. Surprisingly, very few copies of these books have survived, due to their popularity and fragility.³⁶

The decline of public education

The Catalan defeat of 1714 ensured the definitive establishment of the Bourbon King Philip V and an absolutist regime in Catalonia. One of his first decisions was to impose substantial taxes on Catalan cities, towns and villages, in order to acquire the financial means to maintain the army deployed across the country. It was, in fact, an imposition of martial law. In 1716, the tax was formally incorporated under the name of 'Cadastre'. The consequences were devastating, because the ordinary economic contribution of the country was multiplied almost eight times. From this point onwards, many local councils could not assure free education for poor boys anymore. This was, in my opinion, the starting point of a regression of the education levels in Catalonia.³⁷

Another decision of Philip V that had negative consequences on education was the suppression of all Catalan universities. In some cities, like Barcelona, Girona or Vic, children's free public education had taken place within the institutional framework of the University, so the abolition left the poor boys literally on the street. Furthermore, the decision taken in 1717 by the

³⁴ See an explanation of this privilege in: Javier Burgos Rincon, 'Privilegios de imprenta y crisis gremial. La imprenta y librería barcelonesa ante el privilegio de impresión de los libros de enseñanza de la Universidad de Cervera', *Estudis Històrics i Documents dels Arxius de Protocols*, XV (1997), pp. 257–298.

³⁵ AHPB, Agustí Güell, Manual de 1726, 960/1, fol. 84v–91v, April 1st, 1726.

³⁶ AHPB, Agustí Güell, Manual de 1729, 960/2, fol. 51–57, July 25th, 1729; ACA, Reial Audiència, Consultas, 1729, Registres, 143, fol. 15–17v, June 19th, 1729. According to the CCUC, not a single copy of 'beceroles' or 'salms' published before 1700 has been preserved. The editions showed in this article do not figure in this catalogue. On the other hand, the CUCC contains two editions of the 'franselm' printed in Barcelona (1667 and c. 1700), and two 'pelegrins', published in 1677 and 1683. The copies of 1584 (franselm) and 1635 (pelegrí) showed above does not figure in the CCUC.

³⁷ Agustí Alcoberro, 'El cadastre de Catalunya (1713-1845): de la imposició a la fossilització', *Pedralbes*, 25 (2005), pp. 231–257.

king to give the University of Cervera the privilege to print and sell all the school books in Catalonia caused a major disruption in the book trade. In 1731, the booksellers' guild of Barcelona sent a petition to the King, asking for the abolition of the privilege. The booksellers argued that the lack of the income provided by the selling of school books was forcing them to close their shops and was reducing their families to poverty. The petition, however, was not accepted. The number of shops that were forced to close is unknown.³⁸

The situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the printing office of Cervera was a complete failure. In 1740, the rector of the university, Miquel Gonser, complained that the printing office had to sell the school books at too high price. The rector blamed the booksellers of Cervera, who were in charge of the binding, because they demanded too much money for their work. As a result of the high prices a black market for school books appeared. Some years later, Gonser complained that the books printed by the University were piled up in the office's warehouse 'as if they were in a swamp'. In 1753, the printing office of Cervera had a debt of more than a thousand pounds, and ended finally in bankruptcy.³⁹

The regression of education was also caused by the loss of the importance that the lower classes had ascribed to education in the previous centuries. The Bourbon regime abolished the ancient electing system, the *insaculació*, that had allowed artisans and peasants to intervene in local politics in all towns and to take civic jobs requiring a basic level of education. So, from that point onwards, the capacity to read and write was no longer relevant for many people.

But the most detrimental factor of the decline of education was the growth of the population, mainly from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Due to the economic difficulties caused by the high taxes, as it has been pointed out above, many local councils could pay the wage of one teacher only – the same number as two hundred years earlier – while in most towns the population had tripled. The increase in the number of pupils brought the education system to its knees. The most severely affected were the children of the poor families, because the economic difficulties made it impossible for the councils to maintain free education.

The grammar schools were permitted to exist in the largest cities only, in order to prevent the councils of the small towns and villages from spending money on something that the Bourbon administration considered worthless. This is, in fact, the idea that Pablo de Olavide had in mind when he worked as a consultant of the Duke of Aranda, Secretary of State of King Charles III. When in 1767 a reform of the universities was ordered, Olavide proposed the suppression of all grammar colleges, because he considered that higher education should be reserved for noblemen and wealthy citizens. In his opinion, the place of the poor was agriculture and industry. It is therefore surprising that Charles III of Bourbon has been considered by many historians as an 'enlightened' king.⁴⁰

The Industrial Revolution, in fact, converted peasants, craftsmen and artisans into workers and sent them to the factory, along with a lot of young poor boys who were obliged to abandon school. The capacity to read, write and count was no longer required for them anymore. As

³⁸ ACA, Reial Audiència, Cartas Acordadas, 1731, Registres, 14, fol. 91–95, April 28th, 1731.

³⁹ ACA, Reial Audiència, Consultas, 1753, 474, fol. 291v, August 23th, 1753. See the failure of the printing office of the University of Cervera in: Marina Ruíz Fargas, 'El privilegio de privativa de libros de común enseñanza de la Universidad de Cervera en tiempos de Manuel Ibarra (1735-1749, 1754-1757)', in: Pedro Rueda Ramírez; Lluís Agustí, *La publicidad del libro en el mundo hispánico (siglos XVII-XX): los catálogos de venta de libreros y editores* (Barcelona, Calambur, 2016), pp. 129–159.

⁴⁰ Antonio Álvarez de Morales, *La Ilustración y la reforma de la universidad en la España del siglo XVIII* (Madrid: Pegaso, 1979), pp. 57–69.

Lawrence Stone and Raymond Williams have pointed out in the case of England, industrialisation was among the factors contributing to a general regression in education.⁴¹

According to a survey made in 1772 by the Reial Audiència – the effective government of the king's administration in Catalonia after 1714 – the number of boys attending the schools of Barcelona had decreased by nearly 200 in the previous years, from 2,549 to 2,351. The explanation given was that those missing boys were actually working at the city chintz factories and, for this reason, they did not go to school. In the following years, the number of boys who did not attend school increased dramatically, to the point that in 1786 the Bishop of Barcelona, Gavino de Valladares, ordered the publication of a catechism book for the boys who worked at the chintz factories. The main concern of the bishop was that the boys were not instructed in the Christian doctrine properly.⁴² The worries of the bishop were not unfounded. A survey made by the Trade Council of Barcelona in 1784 showed that there were 80 textile factories in the city, at which there worked 4,607 men, 1,740 women and, finally, 2,291 boys, representing 25% of the total workforce.⁴³

Due to all these circumstances, while the number of children attending school decreased, the number of public schools did the same. Some villages that are known to have had a school in the seventeenth century had lost it at the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to a survey made in 1797 by order of Spanish prime minister Manuel de Godoy, only 38% of Catalan cities, towns and villages had a public school.⁴⁴

Conclusions

It is widely accepted among historians that the levels of literacy in the early modern period were extremely low. Some authors have pointed out that in this time Catalan society was 'massively' illiterate.⁴⁵ The existence of a public school system allows me to suggest that in Catalonia the levels of literacy in the early modern period must be considered higher than previously estimated. The presence of schools in small towns and villages in the countryside contradicts the idea that the rural areas were less culturally developed than the urban ones. From the sixteenth century onwards the presence of teachers in many Catalan towns and villages increased, in most cases paid for by public funds. The local authorities attached great importance to education, even during times of war. Although school attendance was not compulsory, some examples show that it was quite high. Schooling was possible because the local councils paid the teacher's wages, fully or in part. In some cases, payments were enough to allow free education for all boys. Along with this, the publication and sale of a massive number of cheap school books reinforces the idea that the level of schooling was high.

⁴¹ Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England', p. 76; Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), p. 157.

⁴² ACA, Reial Audiència, Consultas, 1772, 812, fol. 144–170v, September 25th, 1772. See also: Isabel de Azcárate Ristori, 'La enseñanza primaria en Barcelona desde 1600 a 1772', *Cuadernos de Arqueología e Historia de la ciudad*, 5, 1964, pp. 150–151. The bishop's book was: *Promptuari de la doctrina christiana*, Barcelona, Francisco Surià Burgada, 1786.

⁴³ BC, Junta de Comerç, 53, 71, doc.29, 1784. See also: James Thomson, *Els orígens de la industrialització a Catalunya. El cotó a Barcelona, 1728-1832*, (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1994), pp. 214–215.

⁴⁴ Censo de Godoy de 1797, Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

⁴⁵ See: Ricardo García Cárcel, *Historia de Cataluña, siglos XVI-XVII. Los caracteres de la historia de Cataluña*, (Barcelona: Ariel, 1985), p. 388. Robert Darnton also uses the concept of illiterate masses to qualify the peasants in modern French rural areas. Robert Darnton, *La gran matança de gats i altres episodis de la història cultural francesa*, (València: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2006), p. 30.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, at the time of the installation of the Bourbon monarchy, public education in Catalonia started to decline. The main reasons were the growth of the population and the lack of teachers to handle the increase in the number of pupils. The excessive taxes prevented the local authorities from paying the teachers that were needed. This was also an important cause of the end of free education. The situation further worsened at the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution, because for many families, mainly for the poorest, it was more useful to send their sons to the factory than to school.