

Frederick the Great's Statue Incorporating Lucretius Motif

Post by "Cassius" of June 14, 2018 at 3:56 PM

A friend asked me about something we have discussed here before, but I can't remember the resolution: Did we ever locate a picture of the statue which Frederick the Great had prepared of Phoebus Apollo holding a copy of Lucretius? Also, how do we translate the section that Frederick chose to inscribe on the book - "te socium studeo scribundis versibus esse, quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor" -- It is a part but not exactly what is translated here by Munro.

If anyone has pictures please let me know. Martin, I can't remember if you were here for this discussion before. It might have been Uwe with whom I remember discussing this. (That exhausts my list of known German members of our group, but I bet there are others 😊)

While Frederick would not address himself to the poetic imitation of Lucretius until twelve years after this exchange, to be thereafter apostrophized by Voltaire as: "Vainqueur des préjugés, vainqueur dans les combats, Enfant de Marc Aurèle, et rival de Lucrèce . . ." he was meanwhile to adorn the Sans Souci hall of mirrors—completed in the year 1746-47—with a man-size statue of Phoebus Apollo holding in his hands a copy of *De Rerum Natura*. The marble book is open; two lines from Lucretius specifically addressed to Memmius are engraved in golden capitals upon the page surfaces: "Te socium studeo scribundis versibus esse, quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor." We know from a letter of the young king—he had ascended the throne in 1740—to his favorite sister, Wilhelmine of Bairuth, that the conception of this statue was his own.*

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Frederick the Great and Lucretius: Reevaluation of a Relationship

Among the sources which Frederick the Great especially cherished, the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius held a special place. This work, for which none of Frederick's illustrious intellectual contemporaries had as yet an adequate appreciation, was for him a "treasure", a companion during his youth and middle age, a source for poetic imitation, and a book of consolation among the misdeeds.

Presumably when the encounter between Lucretius' text and its princely reader first took place it had to do with the fact that Frederick had perceived a regular humanistic course of instruction, the *De Rerum Natura* would have been, by common early eighteenth-century standards, considered too obscure for inclusion. Given Frederick's illustrious parents' insistence upon a steady program of military education for his son, however, well might all of the young prince's reading in his infancy, adolescence, and adulthood.

Since the poems of Lucretius was considered, in the 1740s and '50s, a mildly scandalous work aimed for the private education of the Enlightenment, it is possible that Frederick got to the poem earlier than did most young men of his generation allowed to benefit from classical training. Besides, contemporary critics of this young prince have been satisfied about reading Lucretius in connection with his life. One of the many handsome illustrated editions of *De Rerum Natura* brought out for the libraries of gentlemen in eighteenth-century Europe came the Latin text only. Frederick, on the other hand, having been forbidden to learn Latin by his father, made acquaintance with the Roman classic exclusively in French translation. We know that a French translation of *De Rerum Natura*, now likely that of the Baron des Costers, sprang from a collection of books Frederick owned early in life' in 1718, Voltaire

continue their races with desire. Since thou then art sole mistress of the nature of things and without thee nothing rises up into the divine borders of light, nothing grows to be glad or lovely, fain would I have thee for a helpmate in writing the verses which I essay to pen on the nature of things for our own son of the Memmi, whom thou, goddess, hast willed to have no peer, rich as he ever is in every grace. Wherefore all the more, o lady,