

INTRODUCTION

What is Classical Latin?

The term “Latin” refers to Latium, the western central region of Italy, which was dominated by the Romans from the early years of the first millennium BC. Through centuries of almost unremitting warfare and then of military occupation and integration with native populations, the Romans spread the Latin language over a vast empire which embraced the whole Mediterranean basin and stretched north to southern Scotland and east almost as far as the Caspian Sea.

“Classical Latin” is the written language of the period roughly 80 BC – AD 120, the two centuries which saw the collapse of the Roman Republic and the firm establishment of the Imperial system of government, and also produced most of Rome’s greatest literary achievements.

Knowledge of a society's language is by far the single most valuable tool for understanding its culture. There are, however, some obvious and significant limitations to the insights which Classical Latin can give into the beliefs, customs and everyday lives of the Romans. It is important to be clear about these limitations right from the outset.

An ancient language can only be known if it has been recorded. Since the vast majority of Latin speakers were illiterate and have left no written record, we have little direct knowledge of their view of the world. Literacy is acquired through education, and education in antiquity required leisure, a privilege enjoyed by only the very small stratum of wealthy people who formed the ruling class. Therefore, Classical Latin records the interests and preoccupations of a severely limited section of the population. Even within the ruling class, there was a further fundamental limitation: women had almost no public role in Roman society, and this is reflected in the fact that practically all surviving Classical Latin texts were written by men.

Given that the Roman empire was so vast and endured so long, it might seem reasonable to suppose that Latin would display considerable regional variations and developments over time (as American English differs from British English, and Elizabethan English from modern English). Such variations and developments were, in fact, always a marked feature of the spoken language: regional versions of spoken Latin were to evolve into the Romance languages - Italian, Spanish, French etc. in the west, Romanian in the east. This evolution took place very gradually, as Latin supplanted other languages in various parts of the empire. In strong contrast to spoken Latin, however, the written language remained remarkably free from dialectal peculiarities and was very resistant to change. There are several reasons for this.

Roman rule was firmly centralized in Rome itself, which was also the cultural heart of the empire. Not surprisingly, therefore, the standards for proper Latinity were set by Rome. Even though the majority of the great Roman writers came originally from distant parts of Italy and from the provinces, they conformed to these standards, which all but excluded the use of localized idioms and vocabulary.

A further reason for this uniformity is the brevity of the great age of Roman literature, the period which produced the texts which constitute and define Classical Latin. For more than half a millennium after its founding, Rome was essentially a military state, struggling for survival and expansion. Such a society was not congenial to literary and cultural creativity. The second century B.C. brought Rome greater security through the subjugation of Carthage, the only rival power in the western Mediterranean, and wider intellectual horizons through contact with Greece. The way was therefore open for the flowering of Roman culture over the next two centuries.

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Both in ancient Rome and throughout Europe until recent times, the education system was extremely conservative. A very few great prose-writers and poets, Cicero and Vergil above all, were adopted as models of Latinity, and the language was codified, restricted and then transmitted century after century in accordance with these models. This conservatism ensured the purity of Classical Latin, or, to put that differently, it inhibited the further evolution of the written language. As spoken Latin gradually dropped out of use or was transformed into the Romance languages, writers of Latin continued to look back directly to the classical period. A knowledge of Classical Latin will therefore provide the essential basis for reading Latin texts written at any time from pagan antiquity through to the Renaissance and more modern periods.

How Much Latin Do You Know Already?

In the first chapter of *Alice through the Looking-Glass*, Alice has to confess that she has only a vague understanding of the poem *Jabberwocky*:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe *etc.*

She appreciates that the poem is structured like English, but since so many of the words are quite unlike real English words, she cannot know what they mean. She needs Humpty Dumpty to explain to her that “*Toves* are something like badgers – they’re something like lizards - and they’re something like corkscrews ... also they make their nests under sun-dials - also they live on cheese ... a *rath* is a sort of green pig” *etc.* By contrast, since the vocabulary of modern English is fundamentally indebted to Latin, we need no Humpty Dumpty to help us deduce the meaning of the majority of Latin words.

English and Latin share a common ancestry in the vast Indo-European family of languages, which contains nearly all the languages of Europe and many others as far east as central India. English belongs to the Germanic branch of this language-family, whereas Latin belongs to the quite separate Italic branch. These two branches lost contact with each other several millennia ago, as their speakers went their separate ways in the great migration westwards from the Indo-European homeland, perhaps in Southern Russia. English derives its basic grammatical structure and almost all of its most commonly used words from its Germanic background. With the Norman conquest of the British Isles in and after 1066, however, Latin came to exert a great influence on English, vastly increasing the vocabulary. This influence was exerted both directly, Latin being the language of the church and of the judiciary, and indirectly, since Norman French, spoken by the ruling class, was a Romance language which had evolved from Latin. It is estimated that, whereas only some 3% of the vocabulary of Old English was borrowed from Latin, well over 60% of the vocabulary of non-technical modern English is Latinate. Learning Latin vocabulary is therefore both easy and interesting for a speaker of English, involving as it does the recognition of the earlier history of so many words which we use today.

To appreciate the extent of the influence of Latin on English vocabulary, study the following paragraph of German for a few minutes, and then turn the page and study the Latin version of the same paragraph for the same amount of time.

Nilpferde sind grosse, dicke Tiere, die in Afrika im Nil leben. Zahlreiche afrikanische Tiere sind furchterregend und sehr wild, nämlich Krokodile, Löwen, Leoparden, Nashörner, Hyänen, Skorpione, Aasgeier, Schlangen (z.B. Riesenschlangen, Nattern und Vipern). Ängstlich jedoch sind Nilpferde nicht. Sie haben grosse Körper, grosse Zähne und grosse Füsse, aber ihre Ohren sind klein und ihr Schwanz kurz. Afrika ist ein heisses Land, darum liegen Nilpferde stundenlang im Wasser und dösen. Erst wenn nachts der Mond am Himmel scheint, steigen sie aus dem Fluss und grasen ausgiebig.



The quality of Roman coinage was often not very high, and observation of nature in the ancient world could be surprisingly eccentric. Can you identify the animal portrayed here?¹

Hippopotamī sunt animālia magna et obēsa, quae in Africā habitant, in flūmine Nīlō. bestiae numerōsae Africānae sunt terribilēs et ferōcissimae - crocodīlī, leōnēs, pardī, rhīnocerōtēs, hyaenae, scoriōnēs, vulturēs, serpentēs (exemplī grātiā, pythōnēs, aspidēs, vīperae). sed hippopotamī nōn sunt timidī. corpora magna habent, dentēs magnōs, pedēs magnōs, sed aurēs minūtōs et caudam nōn longam. Africa est terra torrida. ergō hippopotamī hōrās multās in aquā remanent et dormitant. sed, cum nocte lūna in caelō splendet, ex flūmine ēmergunt et herbās abundantēs dēvorant.

An English speaker with no knowledge of either German or Latin will understand the Latin version much more fully than the German version, despite the fact that English is a Germanic language. It will be clear therefore that learning vocabulary is not a great obstacle in the study of Latin.

Not only does English draw so much of its vocabulary from Latin, but there are distinct and obvious patterns in the manner in which most such borrowings are made. It takes specialized linguistic knowledge to understand why the Latin word *gaudium* should have evolved into the English word “joy”, and no one knows quite why the Latin word *nescius*, meaning “ignorant”, became the English word “nice”. Such developments are, however, exceptional. The vast majority of Latin words are constructed with one or other of a large, but well defined, number of endings. When English has adopted these words, it has done so in a way which is generally systematic, and therefore predictable. The following small selection of word-groups will make this process clear:

decor, error, pallor, tremor (no change)
argūmentum, instrūmentum, monumentum, ornāmentum (remove *-um*)
frīgidus, horridus, tepidus, timidus (remove *-us*)
consōlatiō, dominātiō, meditātiō, prōcrastinātiō (add *-n*)
concupīna, disciplīna, doctrīna, medicīna (change *-a* to silent *-e*)
mixtūra, nātūra, pictūra, structūra (change *-a* to silent *-e*)
altitudō, fortitudō, magnitudō, multitudō (change *-o* to silent *-e*)
captīvus, fugitīvus, furtīvus, nātīvus (change *-us* to silent *-e*)
inēvitābilis, memorābilis, probābilis, stābilis (change *-ilis* to *-le*)
abundantia, constantia, elegantia, ignōrantia (change *-tia* to *-ce*)
absentia, eloquentia, indulgentia, patientia (change *-tia* to *-ce*)
colōnia, familia, furia, glōria (change *-ia* to *-y*)
brevitās, dignitās, gravitās, simplicitās (change *-ās* to *-y*)
audax, capax, pugnax, vīvax (change *-x* to *-cious*)².

¹ For a clue, see p. 65.

² The ways in which English adopts and adapts Latin words are illustrated in most chapters in the section *Thēsaurus Verbōrum*.

Inflection

Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* consists of 268 words, 195 of which are monosyllabic, while 53 have 2 syllables, 13 have 3 and 7 have 4 (4 of these quadrisyllabic words being "dedicated"). The first 268 words of Cicero's first speech against Catiline, perhaps the most famous of all Latin speeches, offers quite different statistics: 59 words are monosyllabic, while 91 have 2 syllables, 70 have 3, 36 have 4, 11 have 5 and 1 has 6. This radical disparity is not coincidental; it reflects a fundamental difference in the way words are constructed in the two languages.

Most Latin words change their form according to the particular function which they perform in a sentence. This change, which usually involves a modification in the word's ending, while the basic stem remains the same, is known as inflection³. Latin makes very much greater use of inflection than does English, and this is by far the most significant difference between the two languages. Latin nouns, pronouns and adjectives typically have between six and fifteen different endings, adverbs have up to three, whereas most verbs have rather more than a hundred. The contrast with English is stark; English nouns, pronouns, adjectives and adverbs change little or not at all, while almost all verbs have only four forms (for example, "love, loves, loved, loving" or "think, thinks, thought, thinking").

Not surprisingly, the concept of inflection takes some getting used to for speakers of English. In particular, English depends heavily on very strict conventions of word-order to convey meaning, whereas the information about a word's function given by its ending, i.e. its inflection, allows Latin to place words in an order which may initially seem whimsical and arbitrary. Be patient. You will have come to terms with the general principles of Latin word-order by the time you have worked through the first few chapters of this book.

Adjusting to the different structure of a Latin sentence will be very much easier if you learn the paradigms, that is to say, the model tables for the inflection of the various parts of speech, as thoroughly as possible as soon as they are presented, and do not go on to the next chapter until you can use them confidently and accurately. The extensive exercises in each chapter and on line are designed to help you attain this confidence and accuracy.

Few people enjoy rote-learning for its own sake, but there is no substitute for it in language-learning, and not many shortcuts. The following hints and observations will, however, help to make the process as efficient and satisfying as possible:

- All the paradigms to be learned have been recorded on line. Listen to them several times to ensure that you are familiar with the way they are pronounced. This will greatly facilitate learning them quickly and correctly.
- There are considerable affinities between the various systems for verbs, nouns etc. These affinities have been emphasized in the course: similar systems are placed together, since learning one will make learning the others much easier.
- Do not try to master large amounts of material at any one time.
- Write the paradigms out from memory, and then check that you have written each form correctly. Do not rely simply on saying them to yourself, since the variations in the endings are often quite slight and easily confused if not written down.
- Constantly review the material you have already learned.
- Enjoy the sense of achievement which you will quickly experience when you can turn theory into practice, applying your knowledge of word-forms to translation from or into Latin.

If the tables of nouns, adjectives, pronouns and, above all, verbs seem unending, take comfort in knowing that, after working through this book, there will be practically no more such paradigms to learn. You will have mastered the essentials needed for reading Latin texts of any period.

³From the Latin verb *inflectere*, "to bend", denoting the changes in the formation of a word, according to its grammatical function.

The Pronunciation of Latin

There is no universally accepted pronunciation of Latin nowadays. In some countries, particularly those influenced by the Catholic Church, it is pronounced in a manner broadly akin to Italian. English-speaking countries have adopted reforms introduced towards the end of the 19th century, mainly on the basis of German scholarship, in an attempt to return more closely to the classical pronunciation. The latter system will be followed in the rules for pronunciation given here, and almost all of in the audio files on line (at www.jcmckeown.com). It must be emphasized, however, that any system of pronunciation is, to some extent, a modern convention: there are some features of ancient pronunciation about which we are largely or entirely ignorant, and others which almost no one nowadays attempts to emulate, even though they are well documented. Perhaps most significantly, the Romans' known tendency to slur word-endings, or not to pronounce them at all, is all but universally ignored. This tendency, now particularly evident in French (e.g. *Les châteaux sont magnifiques*), contributed greatly to the development of the Romance languages, with their abandonment of so much of the inflection-system.

In most chapters, as noted above, you will have to learn paradigms presenting the various forms in which a particular word may appear. Learning these tables is vitally important, and this unavoidable task will be much easier if you can pronounce each form confidently and consistently. Although it is not known precisely how Latin was pronounced in antiquity, the general principles are clear. Before beginning to work through the course, you should familiarize yourself with these principles. You are strongly advised to listen several times to the paradigms and the Classical Latin texts recorded on line. Some observations, however, may usefully be made here:

- Latin is easy to read, since spelling is phonetic, and every letter and syllable is pronounced in a largely consistent manner. There are no silent letters, except *u* after *q*, as in English. *facile* is a three-syllable word in Latin.
- The sounds required in pronouncing Latin are much the same as those required for English. There are very few unfamiliar combinations of letters. For example, the Latin for "pig" is *porcus*; by contrast, in German it is *Schwein*, in Hungarian it is *disznó*, in Swahili it is *nguruwe*.
- The greatest initial difficulty is in determining whether a vowel is long or short. In many cases, this must simply be learned for the individual word. Patterns will, however, emerge; that is to say, you will soon be able to predict the probable length of a particular vowel in a particular word from your knowledge of other words. To enable you to master this variation in vowel-length, long vowels are marked with a macron (¯) written above them; all other vowels may be presumed to be short. Two forms of the same word may be spelled in exactly the same way, but differ in the length of one vowel. This variation will affect the word's meaning. For example, *puella*, with a short *a*, has a different function from *puellā*, with a long *a*, while *legit* and *lēgit* mean, respectively, "he reads" and "he read".
- The following combinations of vowels, known as diphthongs, are usually run together and pronounced as one sound: *ae*, *au*, *eu*, *oe*.
- The letters *c* and *g* are always hard, as in English *cat* and *goat*, never soft, as in *cider* and *gin*.
- The letter *h* is always pronounced when it occurs at the beginning of a word. Contrast Spanish *hombre*, French *homme*, English *honor*. The combinations *ph* and *th*, used in the adoption of Greek words (such as φιλοσοφία [*philosophia*], θεάτρον [*theatrum*]), may be pronounced as in English, while the *h* in *ch* (a fairly rare combination) should be ignored.
- The letter *v* is pronounced like English *w*, which, like *j* (see below), was not used by the Romans. (*k* and *z* are very rare, and Classical Latin has no letters which we do not employ.)
- The only letter which needs special attention is *i*, which is usually a vowel, as in English, but sometimes a consonant, pronounced like English *y* and the origin of our *j*. *Jūlius* (i.e. *Jūlius*) and *iambus* both have three syllables. Consonantal *i* will be denoted on its first appearance in the form *iam* (*jam*), *iubeō* (*jubeō*).

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- The accent always falls on the first syllable of two-syllable words e.g. *Róma*. It always falls on the penultimate syllable in words of three or more syllables if that syllable is long, e.g. *Románus*, but otherwise it falls on the preceding syllable, e.g. *Itália*. Since the principles of accentuation are so simple, Latin, like English, but unlike e.g. Spanish, French or Classical Greek, does not mark accents; they are added here to illustrate the point being made.

Punctuation

Since there were few or no universally applied rules for the punctuation of Latin in antiquity, and since Classical Latin texts are in any case preserved almost exclusively in manuscripts written many centuries later, when new systems had evolved, it is conventional to adopt modern practices. Proper names are capitalized, as in English. Otherwise, lower case may be used even at the beginning of sentences. This is a matter of individual choice. It is sufficient to be consistent.

The Cultural Context

The influence of the Romans on the modern world is beyond calculation. Without them, our language, our literature, the way we think would have been very different. This said, however, it is important to realize that Roman society was quite alien to ours. Women had almost no role in public life, and were generally under the legal control of their fathers, husbands or brothers. The economy depended on slavery: at the end of the 1st century BC, perhaps as much as one third of the population of Italy were slaves. All classes of society enjoyed the bloody spectacle of gladiatorial contests, first introduced in the 3rd century BC as a form of human sacrifice in honor of the dead: in AD 107, at the Games celebrating his defeat of the Dacians, the emperor Trajan pitted 5,000 pairs to fight each other. Accounts of the expansion of the empire, being written by the Romans themselves, naturally tended to glorify their military achievements: Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul is all but legendary, but it was based on genocide, with perhaps more than a million people being exterminated in less than a decade.

We may not always sympathize with the Romans, but it is impossible not to admire their achievements. In order to provide some insight into Roman culture, Latin texts, giving the actual words of Roman authors, have been used as much as possible throughout the course, and each chapter concludes with a translation of an anecdote or other text which reflects some aspect of Roman life and thought. A brief survey of people, places, events and institutions is given in Appendix 3.



A detail from Trajan's Column, which commemorates his victories over the Dacians in the early second century AD. This 95 ft. tall structure has survived the weather, earthquakes and the depredations of construction workers. On this panel, mounted Roman troops are supervising the execution of barbarian prisoners by their barbarian allies.