Learning Latin the Ancient Way

What did Greek speakers in the Roman empire do when they wanted to learn Latin? They used Latin-learning materials containing authentic, enjoyable vignettes about daily life in the ancient world – shopping, banking, going to the baths, having fights, being scolded, making excuses – very much like the dialogues in some of today’s foreign-language textbooks. These stories provide priceless insight into daily life in the Roman empire, as well as into how Latin was learned at that period, and they were all written by Romans in Latin that was designed to be easy for beginners to understand. Learners also used special beginners’ versions of great Latin authors including Virgil and Cicero, and dictionaries, grammars, texts in Greek transliteration, etc. All these materials are now available for the first time to today’s students, in a book designed to complement modern textbooks and enrich the Latin-learning experience.

ELEANOR DICKEY has taught in Canada and the United States, and is currently Professor of Classics at the University of Reading. She is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Academia Europaea and has published widely on the Latin and Greek languages and how they were studied in antiquity, including Greek Forms of Address (1996), Latin Forms of Address (2002), Ancient Greek Scholarship (2007), and The Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana (2012–15). She is a dedicated and passionate language teacher with extensive experience of teaching both Latin and Greek at all levels, in French as well as in English, and has brought this experience to bear on her adaptations of the ancient Latin-learning materials for modern students.
Frontispiece Judgements of Hadrian (see passage 2.4) in the ninth-century manuscript Vossianus Gr. Q. 7, folio 18r. Printed by kind permission of Leiden University Library.
Learning Latin the Ancient Way

Latin textbooks from the ancient world

ELEANOR DICKEY
This book is dedicated to all the people who originally created the ancient Latin-learning materials, hundreds of individual language teachers most of whose names have long been forgotten but whose work has lasted far longer than they ever expected.
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1. First part of colloquium lawsuit scene in the twelfth-century manuscript Zwettl 1, folio 11r (bottom of columns 1 and 2). Printed by kind permission of Zisterzienerstift Zwettl.

2. Second part of colloquium lawsuit scene in manuscript Zwettl 1, folio 11r (top of columns 3 and 4). Printed by kind permission of Zisterzienerstift Zwettl.


Preface

Learning Latin is one of the key experiences of the modern Classicist; nearly all of us have done it ourselves, and many of us spend much of our time helping the next generation do it. Yet most of us know almost nothing about how our experience of this crucial activity relates to the ancient one; indeed many Classicists are unaware that Latin learning was common in antiquity and that many of the materials used for that purpose have survived. This lack of awareness limits opportunities not only to compare our experience with the ancient one, but also to exploit the ancient Latin-learning materials, many of which are still useful and enjoyable today.

This book aims to show modern Latin teachers and Latin students how ancient Latin learning was conducted, by making the ancient materials accessible to modern readers in a format that allows them to be used as they were originally intended to be used. It is not a Latin textbook and cannot be used by itself to learn Latin (among other reasons, because it includes only a selection of the ancient materials and so omits a significant amount of vital information); rather it is designed to complement a textbook and/or to be used by those who have already mastered the basics. It is not cumulative: the pieces it contains can be read in any order.

Since some aspects of ancient education are alien to modern practice, teachers may actually prefer to use the ancient materials in ways that no ancient teacher ever used them, for example by asking students to translate texts that in antiquity would have been memorized rather than translated. In doing so they will have my blessing; I myself use the ancient materials inauthentically in teaching, because there are good reasons why we no longer use certain ancient methods. But inauthentic use of the ancient materials is best carried out in full awareness of how those materials were originally designed to be used, and for that reason every effort has been made to make clear what the original function of the various materials was. I hope this book will be a tool usable in a wide variety of different ways by people whose own creativity is limited neither by my intentions nor by those of the ancient authors of these texts.

Many people have helped with the creation of this book. Philomen Probert, Martin West, CUP’s sharp-eyed anonymous readers, Holly Eckhardt, Mark Pitter, Cathy Bothwell, and pupils at Manchester Grammar School provided valuable feedback on a draft of the book. Rolando Ferri introduced me to these texts in the first place and helped me to understand them, Philomen Probert offered constant support and encouragement,
Maria Chiara Scappaticcio shared her forthcoming work with me, and Jane Gardner helped me understand the treatise on manumission. Generous funding from the Leverhulme Trust provided time to write the book. Iveta Adams, Christina Sarigiannidou, Fran Hiller, and Michael Sharp ran the fastest and least painful publication process I have ever experienced. Any mistakes that remain are my own.