

CHAPTER I

Introduction

What did Roman children do first when they arrived at school in the morning? What did they bring with them? What excuse for missing school could be counted on to stave off a whipping from the teacher? What did a Roman banker do when someone came to borrow money? What did a grateful client say to his lawyer after winning a lawsuit? What did a Roman say if he needed to use the toilet? What had to be done before going to bed in a Roman household? These are not the types of questions for which the answers can be easily found in mainstream ancient literature, for Latin literature generally had its mind on higher things.

In the modern world, this kind of information about foreign cultures is often conveyed by language textbooks. A French textbook provides vignettes involving French people engaged in everyday activities in France, while a German textbook depicts German people in typical situations in Germany. Both alert foreign learners to cultural differences that may arouse interest, or that may cause foreigners difficulty if they are not forewarned. The same was true in antiquity, when Latin textbooks used little dialogues and narratives about Roman people engaged in everyday Roman activities both to teach useful Latin expressions and to inform Greek-speaking readers about Roman culture.

These dialogues and narratives, known as ‘Colloquia’, are the focus of this book: descriptions of the Roman world composed by people who knew it first-hand in order to help foreigners understand it. The Roman world was of course a large and varied one, both in time and in space, and the Colloquia range across it rather than focussing on a single period, since they were not written all at once by a single individual. Instead, they are a set of works adapted and expanded by teachers working at different times and places. Their oldest portions, the school scenes, go back at least to the first century AD and probably well into the Republic. The original version of these scenes was

composed in a Latin-speaking area, probably Rome itself, to help Roman children learn Greek; it may have been used by Republican figures such as Julius Caesar, Cicero, or even earlier Romans when they were at school. The versions we have, however, are imperial-period adaptations and reworkings of that original. They provide a fascinating glimpse into the daily activities of schoolchildren – what they studied, how they studied, what they brought to school with them, how they squabbled when the teacher was not looking, etc. Because we have few other sources of information about schools, the school scenes are often considered to be the most important portions of the *Colloquia*.

The portions of the *Colloquia* describing the activities of adults, however, also offer many valuable glimpses into ancient society. They have a separate origin from the school scenes: the adult scenes were composed mostly in the second and third centuries AD, in the Greek-speaking Eastern empire, for the use of people learning Latin. Despite being written by and for residents of the Greek-speaking East, these portions of the textbooks consistently depict life in the Latin-speaking West, just as modern foreign-language textbooks reflect the culture of the language being taught rather than that of its learners. They tell a visitor how to negotiate a visit to a Roman public bath, how to borrow money, what to say at a dinner party, etc.

Unlike most modern language-teaching textbooks, the *Colloquia* are completely bilingual: every sentence in them appears both in Greek and in Latin. This dual presentation was the rule for elementary language instruction in antiquity, when differences in writing conventions made reading in a foreign language far more difficult than it is for modern students. It also made the *Colloquia* easy to transfer between one half of the empire and the other: the portions designed for Latin speakers learning Greek could be adapted for Greek speakers learning Latin simply by changing the order of the two languages. (By contrast, imagine the number of changes that would be needed to turn a modern textbook for English speakers learning French into one for French speakers learning English.) The bilingualism of the original *Colloquia* cannot be replicated in this translation, obviously, but because it had some effect on the content it is worth understanding more fully; it is explained in chapter 12, along with other aspects of the history of the *Colloquia* themselves and the type of language study for which they were designed.

There are six Colloquia; in some passages they are virtually identical, because they were originally all the same text, and in other places they are very different from one another, owing to the way each of the six versions was rewritten independently in antiquity. None is designed to be read as a whole: each is formed of small, separate units suitable for individual lessons. Some of these units have come down to us in excellent condition, but others are fragmentary, and a few make little or no sense in the form in which we have them. What is presented here, therefore, is a set of extracts: only the most coherent version(s) of each unit are given, and the extracts are presented in the order of the original works, that is topic by topic, not version by version.

A good example of the way the different versions overlap is offered by the ancient preface to the Colloquia. This exists in many different versions; some are nearly identical to each other and some almost entirely different. Two of the most different versions are given here to illustrate the range of possibilities.

1.1 THE ANCIENT PREFACE: VERSION 1

Version 1 of the preface (Colloquia Monacensia–Einsidlensia 1a–q and 3a–b) was put together in antiquity from two originally separate texts: the first paragraph of the text below was the preface to a set of bilingual glossaries (for which see chapter 12.2), and the second paragraph was the preface to the Colloquia.

May this work turn out fortunately! Since I see that many people desire to speak in Latin and in Greek but cannot easily do so on account of the difficulty of the languages and the large amount of vocabulary they involve, I have spared no effort to create a textbook containing all the necessary information. Many other people have tried to do this and failed, since they did not make an effort commensurate with the importance of the matter, but worked for enjoyment or for their own practice; so they have boasted entirely in vain of completing such a book. There is no need for me to say more about them, but I want to make it clear to everyone that no-one has given better or more accurate translations than I have in the three books that I have written, of which this will be the first. In this book I have given a complete

vocabulary in alphabetical order, from the first letter to the last. So now let me begin.

Since I saw that little boys at the beginning of their education need bilingual conversation books so that they can more easily be taught to speak Latin and Greek, I have written briefly below about daily conversation. . . . Conversation practice ought to be given to all boys, both little ones and older ones, since it is essential.

The join between the two originally separate texts is still clearly visible where the writer says he is about to present a complete vocabulary in alphabetical order and then goes on to discuss something completely different; it is notable that over many centuries of copying no-one ever changed this inconsistency.

Both paragraphs make sales pitches by pointing out to the reader the value of the work they introduce; the first of these pitches is especially interesting because it indicates that this work was in competition with other language textbooks. No other trace of these textbooks has survived, and we would not know that they once existed if we did not have this text. It is striking that despite the author's evident pride in his achievement, his name is not attached to the work: we know neither who the 'I' in the passage above was nor, for that matter, the identities of the other people who contributed to the *Colloquia*. Nor do we know why we do not have their names; perhaps there was a convention in antiquity that authors' names were not attached to elementary works of this type, but it is also possible that a name was originally given and has disappeared at some point in the long process of copying and recopying by which this text was transmitted to us.

The text suggests some uncertainty about the target audience for the *Colloquia*: one sentence mentions little boys just beginning school, and another mentions older as well as younger children. In fact both older and younger schoolchildren are depicted within the *Colloquia* as using them.

1.2 THE ANCIENT PREFACE: VERSION 2

The two prefaces that are combined in version 1 are separate in some other versions. Version 2 (*Colloquium Celtis 1–2*) has only the second preface, the one designed to go with the *Colloquia*. And this version



FIG. 1 Educated woman with stylus and writing tablets (four leaves, tied together with a ribbon), as depicted on a first-century wall painting from Pompeii, now in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy (inv. 9084)

has a very different form of the second preface, so different that the historical relationship between the two versions can only just be seen.

From the ‘Elementary Instruction’ of Cicero, the chapters concerning daily conversation.

Practice in everyday conversation ought to be given to all boys and girls, since it is necessary both for little children and for older ones, on account of ancient custom. So let me begin to write, from the beginning of the day to its end.

Perhaps most notable among the differences is the fact that version 2 attributes authorship of the *Colloquia* to Cicero. The attribution is false; it was probably added in the late antique period by someone who wanted to increase the prestige of this work (of which he was perhaps

selling copies) by associating it with a famous Latin author. Such misattributions are fairly common in manuscripts of ancient texts.

This version of the preface makes explicit an important point left unclear in the rest of the Colloquia: the intended users included girls as well as boys. All the children actually depicted in the Colloquia are male, as are nearly all the adult characters – women appear only occasionally, in supporting roles such as wives, mothers, and nurses – so without this statement it would have been reasonable to conclude that girls were not part of the writer's intended audience. Such a conclusion was indeed often drawn before the discovery of this Colloquium, which was published much later than the others (see chapter 12.7). This situation serves to remind us that it is dangerous to draw too many conclusions from silence about women's roles in antiquity: the simple fact that they are not mentioned as participating in a particular activity does not in itself prove that women did not participate.