



# THE IMPORTANCE OF POST-ANTIQUÉ LATIN

## How Should We Teach the Full Legacy of Latin Literature?

To say that Latin literature did not end with the Romans would be an understatement. In fact the Roman contribution to Latin, however fundamental, is a mere beginning. The amount of surviving Latin literature written in Europe since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the late fifth century CE is almost inconceivably larger than the surviving corpus of literature left by the Romans themselves.

This heritage of post-Roman Latin literature was anything but a sterile idiom reserved for a few reclusive monks. The very pulse of western European civilization, as it developed through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, moved primarily to the rhythms of Latin prose and poetry.

The language of Caesar and Cicero performed new functions and came to be used in ways unimagined by the ancient Romans. Latin became the vehicle for sciences as refined as ballistics and hydrodynamics. Latin exclusively provided the academic and philosophical vocabulary for the expression of Europe's most sophisticated thoughts. Latin was the language in which fundamental concepts, such as gravity and the heliocentric solar system, received their first coherent expression. Latin, along with some revived terms from ancient Greek, supplied the language of botany and zoology. Latin was the international language of cartography, geography, history, and ethnography, the sciences through which the discoveries of Renaissance explorers gradually became part of the consciousness of European civilization. Latin, and not any of the nascent national tongues, was the primary linguistic vehicle for all of this before about 1750 CE.

But medieval and Renaissance Latin was not merely the language of scholars, scientists, and philosophers; it also produced poetry, letters, satire, fiction, and many other genres—including works widely recognized as monuments and masterpieces of world literature, ranging from the stories of the Venerable Bede and the *Carmina Burāna* to Thomas More's *Ūtopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. Even as the language of creative literature, Latin still rivaled the vernacular tongues in the Renaissance.

This international and multicultural role of Latin was in some ways already anticipated in the literature of the Roman Empire, when the peoples of the Roman provinces, especially in the West, began using Latin and not their native tongues as their means of literary expression. Thus Quintilian and Seneca, who were from Spain, wrote in Latin just as the African Apuleius also produced his literary work in Latin. This multicultural role for Latin was even more pronounced in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when Latin served as an international language and a vehicle for a literary tradition that eventually extended even to the New World. Moreover, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Latin was no longer anyone's native tongue, and this long-lasting phenomenon of the Latin language, based on stable written sources rather than fluid popular usage, supporting such a vast, varied, and dynamic literature from about 450 CE to about 1750 CE is arguably more distinctive and significant than any literature produced by people who wrote in their native tongue.

The existence of Latin curricula in the secondary schools is often defended because Latin offers access to the origins of western civilization. The literary heritage of the Romans is certainly fundamental. But the Latin literature produced after the time of the ancient Romans is no less central to our culture, language, and institutions than the literature of the ancient Romans. If "cultural literacy" is one of the goals of our education, teachers of Latin should think seriously about broadening their perspective and consistently exploiting post-antique as well as Roman Latin.

Latin helps students build vocabulary and verbal skills in English and modern languages. Students who have taken Latin in secondary school typically earn higher verbal scores in college entrance exams than their peers who never studied Latin. However, Latin could offer even more linguistic resources and verbal power if more attention were paid to post-antique Latin in secondary school curricula. Medieval Latin lies at the basis of nearly the whole spectrum of the vocabulary for modern universities, degrees, and academic institutions (and this includes basic English words, such as “faculty,” “dean,” “chancellor,” “graduate,” etc.). Medieval and Renaissance Latin is the source for our terminology for telling time (the Romans had no mechanical clocks). The list of our word debts to post-Roman Latin would embrace physics, astronomy, botany, and many other sciences, not to mention such disciplines as philosophy and law.

Yet Latin is typically taught, and Latin teachers are typically prepared, in a way that assumes that Latin is only about the ancient Romans—and not even the entire Roman tradition (since most of Roman literature produced after about 120 CE has little place in canonical curricula). What other literary and linguistic discipline focuses so exclusively on its origins alone? It is time for a change. Both teachers and students of Latin should make the most of what the Latin tradition actually has to offer. In the long run, the place of Latin in our educational system will be more secure, if such a broadening of perspective can be achieved. Some idea of the immense contributions to our culture made by Latin after the time of the Romans and selected readings of some of the astoundingly rich post-Roman Latin literature should be a basic part of the teaching of Latin today at all levels. In *Latin for the New Millennium*, Level 2, we have endeavored to provide teachers, and students who are still learning the fundamentals of the Latin language, with the readings and cultural information that will help to add this wider and richer perspective to the Latin classroom.

This wider perspective added by Level 2 is in no way inconsistent with standard placement tests and activities commonly employed by Latin teachers today. In *LNM* Level 2 the Vocabulary to Learn is composed of a selection of words most commonly employed in such authors as Cicero and Vergil. These words remain common throughout the entire Latin tradition, and our reading selections consistently highlight this vocabulary. *LNM* Level 1 is filled to the brim with information on Roman authors, Roman culture, and Roman history. More information on things Roman is offered in *LNM* Level 2, both in the notes to each chapter, and in the concluding part of each chapter, where the reader will find unadapted readings from the *Life of Atticus* by Cornelius Nepos, a contemporary of Cicero.

Latin teaching in the new millennium should take full account of the fact that Latin literature is a phenomenon spanning the millennia.



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