

RECONSTRUCTING THE ANCIENT LATIN CLASSROOM*

Eleanor DICKEY, *Learning Latin the Ancient Way. Latin Textbooks from the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, XII + 187 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-47457-4, £18.99.

Eleanor DICKEY, *Learn Latin from the Romans. A Complete Introductory Course Using Textbooks from the Roman Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, XVII + 512 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-14084-4, £24.99.

It is well known that ancient Romans learned Greek – a fact amply attested in ancient sources and thoroughly studied for a long time. On the other hand, the idea that Greek speaking inhabitants of the Mediterranean took effort to learn Latin is much less conspicuous, especially for non-specialists. An important contribution to the history of teaching and learning Latin as a second language in antiquity was made by Eleanor DICKEY (henceforth: D.) in 2012 and 2015 when she published her excellent edition¹, including translation and commentary, of the so-called *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* – a fascinating collection of ancient dialogues and phrasebooks, dating from anywhere between 1st and 5th century AD, which were widely used by non-Romans (mainly native speakers of Greek) who wanted to learn Latin² – the language of public life in the Roman Empire, including administration, jurisdiction, and the military. The *Hermeneumata* turned out to be so convenient and effective as learning material that they ended up being used throughout the Middle Ages into the early Renaissance – a success which their original authors never even imagined.

In the 15th–16th century the *Hermeneumata* were replaced by various *Colloquia Scholastica* composed by many Latin teachers³ such as Maturinus Corderius, Laurentius Corvinus, Ioannes Ludovicus Vives, Petrus Mosellanus, Iacobus Pontanus, or – last but not least – Erasmus himself, who elevated this humble didactic genre from simple schoolbooks to a fully fledged literary masterpiece. These new *Colloquia* corresponded much better to the circumstances and conditions of learning Latin at that time, and therefore the ancient *Hermeneumata* became obsolete and largely forgotten⁴.

* I am indebted to Luke Amadeus RANIERI (www.youtube.com/user/ScorpioMartianus) for reviewing the English of this paper.

¹ *The Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*. Vol. I: *Colloquia Monacensia-Einsidlensia, Leidense-Stephani, and Stephani*. Vol. II: *Colloquium Harleianum, Colloquium Montepessulanum, Colloquium Celtis, and fragments*, edited with translation and commentary by E. DICKEY, Cambridge 2012–2015.

² The oldest sections of the *Hermeneumata* were originally composed for Romans learning Greek. On the complex origin of the collection, see the introduction to D.'s edition (esp. pp. 52 and 96), supplemented by her paper *The Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana in the Greek East*, *Linguarum Varietas* VI 2017, pp. 211–229.

³ A convenient list of names and titles, as well as links to full-text electronic resources are available at stoa.org, currently only accessible through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (web.archive.org/web/20190405153208/http://www.stoa.org/colloquia), but hopefully soon to be restored to a stable server. Some of these dialogues are also available as audio recordings made by the students of the University of Kentucky.

⁴ One notable exception is Hans H. ØRBERG's school edition of the Latin text of eleven dialogues from the *Hermeneumata* in the 2004 booklet *Sermones Romani*, which is a part of his *Lingua Latina*

Brought back to light by D.'s edition, the *Hermeneumata* contributed to renewed interest in ancient teaching methods as such, and in the history of teaching Latin as a second language in particular. For D. herself the edition constituted a starting point for a series of "spin-off" books placed within the *Hermeneumata* universe, two of which are the subject of this review article⁵.

The first book in the order of publication, *Learning Latin the Ancient Way*, offers a selection from the *Hermeneumata* and other ancient didactic materials, such as *Sententiae Hadriani* and other legal texts, model letters, annotated passages from classical authors (chapter 2), Dositheus' and Charisius' grammars (chapter 3), glossaries (chapter 4) and transliterations (chapter 7). The layout preserves the two columns of the original, but Greek translations have been replaced with English ones. Two exceptions are: chapter 8, meant for readers acquainted with both languages, where the Greek text is given next to Latin just as it was in the original, and chapter 9, where we are shown some examples of texts, both in Latin and in Greek, edited according to ancient standards, i.e. without word division, punctuation and capitalisation. Each section and each of the selected passages is preceded by a short introduction providing cultural and educational context. Chapter 10, "Overview of the ancient Latin-learning materials", contains a complete list of published sources that have survived from the ancient times, both papyri and in manuscript, each with a short description and estimated dating. The introductory chapter 1 provides a very accessible presentation of the original target groups of these didactic resources and the history of their transmission from antiquity to modern times.

The book is very well researched – as can be expected from the author with such great expertise on the subject – thoughtfully arranged, and extremely interesting. As far as I am aware, the presented sources are not part of any standard curriculum in Classics, and therefore many of them are unknown to anyone who does not specialise in the history of ancient education. D. gave us – and by "us" I mean academic teachers of ancient languages – a chance to directly access a new category of authentic Latin (and Greek) texts, completely different from what we are normally used to. *Learning Latin the Ancient Way*, concise (not even 200 pages) and yet comprehensive, is a prêt-à-porter textbook for a 30-hours course on "Education in Ancient Greece and Rome", or similar. It can also be safely assigned to students as an enlightening independent reading⁶.

That being said, I cannot but point out several thoughts that kept bothering me as I was reading *Learning Latin the Ancient Way* – and trying to use it with my students. In her introduction D. says that the book's intention is "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" (p. XI) and "to make it possible for those who wish to do so to recreate the ancient Latin-learning experience,

per se illustrata series. Most important studies on the *Hermeneumata* are conveniently selected in D.'s open-access article *The Ideal Child Does not Play: Insights from Europe's Oldest Children's Book*, Pallas CXIV 2020, p. 85–94, n. 2 (available at academia.edu).

⁵ The third one is D.'s wonderful *Stories of Daily Life from the Roman World. Extracts from the Ancient Colloquia* (Cambridge 2017). The book's title does not give justice to its content: it is not simply a selection of translated passages, but a full scale introduction to everyday life in ancient Rome, illustrated by the author herself, and appropriate for readers with little or no previous knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman culture. It is not only an interesting read, but can be a very valuable resource to teachers of ancient languages and cultures. It is not, however, connected to the topic of teaching Latin as L2, and therefore I excluded it from this analysis. A Dutch translation is available (Amsterdam 2017), with more languages hopefully to follow.

⁶ As a teaser I suggest sending students a link to *Latin Classes during the Roman Empire*, D.'s guest post at latinitium.com, 28 November 2017, or to her lecture *Naked From the Knees Up – Ancient Latin Textbooks Rediscovered* (The Roman Society in London, 8 November 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0909NqMwxXI).

by presenting the ancient materials in a format that enables modern students to use them as the ancient students did” (p. 8). Such statements, however, do not give justice to the fact that written materials form only a very meagre part of what normally counts as language learning experience, regardless of the language in question. What is more, written materials are not even necessary to learn a language at all – the best example is the way each of us mastered our native language(s) when we could not yet read or write, and the same experience can be repeated with any other language we acquire later in life. Of course, a textbook, a grammar, a word-list, a paradigm, or a translation can be very helpful⁷, but the function of written materials for L2 acquisition is only auxiliary. This is true now and was true in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the Renaissance⁸, for such is the nature of human brain: the most straightforward way to successfully learn a new language is through immersion and interaction. Latin had been taught this way for more than two thousand years: the so-called grammar-translation method, even though it is commonly referred to as the “traditional” one, is in fact only a short episode in the long history of teaching Latin as L2, a distinctive trend that started no more than three hundred years ago⁹. Modern language teachers also briefly experimented with similar methods, but have already renounced them as very ineffective – and a similar development can be currently observed in the teaching of ancient languages¹⁰, even though in natural circumstances they are not normally spoken any more.

In trying to recreate ancient (or mediaeval, or 16th-century, for that matter) experience of learning Latin as a foreign language, it is important to remember that such a process took place in an at least partially bilingual, or sometimes even mostly L2-monolingual environment. The learner’s world was full of people speaking and shouting, singing and whispering in the language he was learning. The teacher could be a native speaker of Latin, or at least possessed very advanced communicative skills in the language of the Romans¹¹. And – what seems to be the most important factor – the student’s goal was primarily to be able to communicate with Roman merchants, soldiers

⁷ They can indeed be used with much success especially if the learner already has some background knowledge of grammar and relations between languages, or when he or she is naturally aware of linguistic phenomena – some people, myself included, simply *like* to analyse how languages work, or prefer written forms of communication to oral ones. Such individual propensities do not change the academic consensus that humans are neurologically wired to acquire languages by hearing.

⁸ I am not trying to say that teaching *techniques* remained the same throughout centuries, but it is certain that from the Roman times to the 17th–18th century the main *objective* of learning Latin remained unchanged: to be able to communicate with other people, both orally and in writing; also, the learners had many opportunities for immersion (not to mention that the language used in classroom was Latin). “There is evidence that the teaching of grammar and translation has occurred in language instruction through the ages; but the regular combination of grammar rules with translation became popular only in the late eighteenth century” (C.A. BONILLA CARVAJAL, “Grammar-Translation” *Method. A Linguistic Historic Error of Perspective: Origins, Dynamics and Inconsistencies*, Praxis & Saber IV 2013, p. 247).

⁹ See also BONILLA CARVAJAL, *op. cit.* (n. 8), who analyses “the reductionist assumptions and popular beliefs” concerning the GT approach and argues convincingly – while by no means trying to defend its effectiveness – that it was never even proposed as a “method” and as such should not have been subject to the harsh criticism it has received.

¹⁰ See M.E. LLOYD, S. HUNT (eds.), *Communicative Approaches for Ancient Languages*, London 2021.

¹¹ Cf. the statement by Quintilian who actually *warns* parents against making their children speak only in L2 for too many years, because this might result in a foreign accent contaminating their native language (*Inst.* I 13). The context here is opposite: Roman children learning Greek, but the point remains.

and magistrates, not only to understand Latin texts¹². Considering these circumstances – and I am not even mentioning the relative scarcity of writing materials or general levels of literacy – it is reasonable to assume that in the ancient times the main component of L2 acquisition was the oral-aural one, whereas reading, writing, conscious memorising and understanding the rules of grammar were only supplementary¹³.

Therefore, if we really want to learn Latin “the ancient way”, as the title of D.’s book promises, we should first of all start, in my opinion, by recreating the *Latin speaking* environment. It is excellent that we now have a collection of ancient learning materials at our disposal, but their main value still seems to be in bringing us closer to some aspects of everyday life in ancient Greece and Rome, rather than in reconstructing the linguistic atmosphere of a 2nd century classroom. If we really want to feel what a Greek teenager felt when he was learning Latin, we should try and have conversations in Latin – starting with basic expressions, everyday topics¹⁴ and recent events, moving on to various levels of literature, and eventually to serious matters of law, politics or philosophy. Such an approach would not only mean learning Latin “the ancient way”, but also the way Latin was taught throughout the history of Western civilisation up until the 17th or 18th century¹⁵. And it is already happening¹⁶.

D.’s second book, *Learn Latin from the Romans*, subtitled *A Complete Introductory Course Using Textbooks from the Roman Empire*, is indeed a complete introductory course. However, a quick look at the table of contents is enough to reveal that it is a very well structured textbook of Latin *grammar* rather than Latin *language* as such. Each chapter presents one or more specific grammar categories (1: “Verbs: Inflection and Word Order”, 2: “Nouns: Nominative, Vocative, and Accusative of First and Second Declensions”, 3: “Adjectives: Gender, Agreement, Neuters, and Vocabulary Format”, 4: “Tenses: Future, Perfect, and Principal Parts”, *etc.*, ending with 56: “Relative Clauses with the Subjunctive, Participle Overview”, 57: “Ablative Absolute”, 60–61: “Gerunds”) which are explained in a very comprehensible way. The intended target group are L1 English speaking students with little or no background knowledge of grammar in general – examples are given both in Latin and in English and comparisons are often drawn between the two

¹² D. is, of course, perfectly aware of these educational goals (see p. 2 of her “Introduction”), but they do not seem to be reflected in the way she pictures the teaching process.

¹³ Or, as BONILLA CARVAJAL put it, “classroom, as well as independent study, compensated what cannot be seen now in the texts” (*op. cit.* [n. 8], p. 248).

¹⁴ When I say “everyday topics” I do not mean forcing students to focus on learning Latin names for all possible modern objects. There is much more to discuss in Latin using classical vocabulary than it is usually assumed. A great example are the 16th-century *Colloquia Scholastica* – most of them are perfectly classical in their lexical choices. I hope that modern yet altogether idiomatic *Colloquia universitaria* can be published one day (cf. www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZ2JP3m5f_0).

¹⁵ See J.C. RICHARDS, T.S. RODGERS, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, New York 2014, esp. pp. 4 ff., with necessary criticism by BONILLA CARVAJAL, *op. cit.* (n. 8). Interestingly, the strong aversion against translation in modern L2 teaching has been fading away in the last decade; it is enough to compare the entries on “(Foreign) Language teaching” in the 2nd and 3rd editions of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (ed. by M. BAKER, G. SALDANHA, Abingdon–New York 2008, pp. 112 ff. and 2020, pp. 271 ff., respectively) to notice that the “monolingual bias” has been recently renounced. The 2020 version of the entry was entirely re-written and now quotes studies that recognise the value of translation (as one of many different teaching techniques, of course – not as a general didactic approach). The broader context of this paradigm shift seems to be the increased interest in bilingual and multilingual education.

¹⁶ See e.g. L. MANNING, *Active Latin in the Classroom: Past, Present and Future*, in LLOYD, HUNT, *op. cit.* (n. 10), pp. 9–16, as well as other contributions to this volume which give examples of the application of the “active” methods of teaching Latin and Ancient Greek all over the world.

languages. A good balance is kept between attention to detail and conciseness. The explanations are very pleasant to read, even entertaining – a feature rarely present in grammar textbooks. It is evident that the book is a result of thousands of hours of lessons given by a passionate teacher – it makes the reader want to enroll to one of D.’s classes. Each theoretical section is followed by “Practice”, which consists of identifying grammatical forms, declining and conjugating, and translating to and from Latin¹⁷.

Some sections are not committed directly to grammar, but to “Reading practice”. The selection of texts is very interesting and non-standard. Apart from some adapted material from the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* (43 passages) the reader is exposed to Martial (27 passages), graffiti and inscriptions (23 passages), Cicero (16 passages, mostly from his *Letters*), several selections from Plautus, Terence, Catullus, Virgil, Vitruvius, Livy, Apicius, Augustine, and the Vulgate, as well as one papyrus letter. The beginning of Caesar’s *De bello Gallico* is also included – as it should be in every decent textbook. Each text is accompanied by a short introduction and a running vocabulary.

Sometimes – not too often – the smooth progression of the material is interrupted by a “Vocabulary to learn” section – a well-chosen list of the most important words that the student should commit to memory.

Audio recordings of the contents of the book – not only Latin passages and exercises, but also the English text and the vocabulary lists! – have been prepared by the author herself and are available at the publisher’s website¹⁸.

All the above characteristics make the book perfect for self-study, and it has been indeed used this way, as can be seen from many positive customer reviews online. The same reviews, however, deplore the fact that no answer key to the exercises is provided – a shortcoming that can be easily eliminated by the publisher. But even without the answer key, as a classroom textbook for a grammar-oriented course, or in the context of homeschooling with a parent or teacher who knows enough Latin, *Learn Latin from the Romans* will surely satisfy its intended users: “students who have a certain intellectual maturity and want to understand fully everything they learn, but who do not necessarily have any background knowledge of grammar or of the ancient world” and those who “need to have a firm grasp of [...] essentials to avoid fear and confusion” (p. XII). The book is a friendly and accessible yet exhaustive and reliable guide through the intricacies of the Latin grammar system – “so that those who like to understand things can feel confident rather than confused” (*ibid.*).

What it is not, however, is a way “to enable today’s students to learn Latin using the ancient materials” (*ibid.*). First of all, as I mentioned before, D.’s textbook teaches mostly *about* Latin and about Latin grammar, but does not facilitate the acquisition of the competences necessary to master a language: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Analysing the grammatical structure of an L2 passage is not “reading”. Recordings provided online are most welcome, but they seem to serve mainly to familiarise the students with the correct pronunciation and do not involve any real “listening comprehension” practice. Translating from L1 into L2 can be a very useful exercise, but it does not mean “writing” in the sense of “Latin composition”. The last skill, “speaking”, is not taken into account at all¹⁹.

¹⁷ The amount of exercises may seem intimidating, but – as D. herself explains in the introduction – they should not be treated as obligatory (p. XIII).

¹⁸ The first 111 pages have been recorded so far and can be downloaded from www.cambridge.org/highereducation.

¹⁹ With the exception of a short description of the activities of modern Latin speakers in the introduction (p. 2), although the concluding statement that “today’s neo-Latin enthusiasts can easily discuss computers and aeroplanes in Latin” seems to perpetuate the harmful and often ridiculed stereotype of a Latin speaker not interested in classical literature and serious philology.

I am not trying to say that Latin teachers and Latin textbooks should blindly imitate all the practices common in modern language pedagogy – especially since our main goal is different from that of modern language teachers: we strive to enable our students to *understand* Latin texts, and not necessarily to speak Latin fluently²⁰. But the question remains: is the title *Learn Latin...* appropriate for a book in which Latin material (paradigms and exercises included) does not even constitute ¼ of the content? To be sure, this concern can be applied not only to D.'s book, which otherwise has its undeniable merits, but in general to the notorious post-Enlightenment habit of saying "Latin" where one should actually say "Latin grammar". My criticism here is triggered mainly by frustrated expectations: knowing that the source material for D.'s textbook comes from the *Hermeneumata* – dialogues on everyday topics (!), which I have successfully used before as supplementary material in my Latin-speaking classroom (see above, n. 4), I was certain that in *Learn Latin from the Romans* the communicative approach would be taken into account at least to a certain extent.

Which brings me to another important point: *...from the Romans*. This phrase made me ask myself several questions:

1. From *whom* do we ever learn Latin, if not from the Romans? Since literary Latin in its form used in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD became the fixed standard for all subsequent generations²¹, everyone who learnt Latin did it in the context of a specific canon of texts composed by an elite group of Roman writers. Even if sometimes simpler didactic texts were published, such as the Renaissance *Colloquia*, or – in our times – Ørberg's *Familia Romana*, and even D.'s own "modern sentences", as she calls them (p. XIII) – they all strive to reproduce the "classical" or "golden" variant of Latin, once used in the times of Augustus. Since Latin became immortal and unchangeable, the date of composition and the nationality of the author does not matter to the learner – as long as the text is idiomatic²². And even if the author diverges from the classical standard, the

²⁰ I prefer to say "understanding" rather than "reading", because in the history of ancient language teaching the word "to read" changed its meaning and is too often used in the sense "to analyse the grammatical forms and lexical choices of the original text in order to mentally create a working translation in L1". "Understanding", on the other hand, is what happens when I read a text and instantly, intuitively grasp its basic meaning. Structural analysis can be helpful if the passage is particularly difficult, or if I want to make sure that I interpreted it correctly, but it should not be confused with "reading". I believe that understanding Latin texts is a perfectly achievable objective of teaching Latin in a modern classroom, just as it was for the previous generations of those who learned Latin as L2, but still were able to fully participate in the Republic of Letters. Another question, which I cannot answer in this short footnote, is whether understanding texts in L2 is a skill that can be acquired without ever speaking the language, and – even if the answer is positive – to what extent, as well as whether it is not at least helpful to use spoken language in order to facilitate the understanding of written material.

²¹ For this topic I cannot recommend enough the excellent socio-linguistic study by J. LEONHARDT, *Latin. Story of a World Language*, Cambridge–London 2013. Even in the case of the so-called "Mediaeval Latin" LEONHARDT argues that such a variant should not be distinguished as a separate form of Latin: the best mediaeval writers were perfectly able to write Ciceronian Latin; the others were not as well educated, or simply did not care, and in the end some mistakes became pervasive within the mediaeval literary community. However, the typically mediaeval ways of speaking have never completely replaced the classical forms or prevented them from being understood (which would be a clear sign of language evolution). Even in the Middle Ages the teachers were still the ancient Romans, only the students were more rebellious.

²² I do not take into account lexical development, which can be interpreted as only reflecting changes in the surrounding world, not as a process within the language itself. When new words are introduced, language *expands* and covers more of the existing reality, but its structure remains the same.

readers – if they are competent enough – will be able to correct him according to the Golden Age canon. Ultimately, the Romans are our only teachers.

2. What does it mean that a Latin text is “authentic”? In the context of the 2,000 years of Latin literature, what are the criteria of authenticity? D. says that in her textbook she included many “authentic” passages from the *Hermeneumata* and more than 5,000 “modern sentences” composed by herself. Are her exercises not “authentic” just because she is not an ancient Roman native-speaker of Latin, or because they were written with a didactic purpose in mind? I do not believe so – such a notion would bring us dangerously close to depriving not only Ørberg, Foster or Tunberg, but also Erasmus, Pontanus and Vives of the right to be unreservedly called “Latin writers”²³. D.’s 5,000 sentences do not need to be called “modern” – their author is a 21st century Latinist, but their language is ancient and “authentic” – i.e. based on the *authority* of Cicero *et consortes*. On the other hand, D. provides the learner with the excerpts from the *Hermeneumata*. Are they still “authentic” if – even though they were written by native or near-native speakers of (some variant of) Latin – they could only be included in a Latin textbook after their grammar and spelling had been revised to match classical standards? To me, D.’s own “*agricolae verba mea non legunt*” (p. 27) is more real and more Roman than “*possumne accipere meam pecuniam, quam mihi tam diu debes?*” (p. 77), adapted by her from *Colloquium Harleianum* 23c: “*nondum possum accipere meum quod mihi debes tanto tempore?*”, where post-classical phrases have been replaced with the standard, eternal Latin.

My conclusions after reading these two books are the following: the *Hermeneumata* are a wonderful collection of texts and we should be grateful to Professor Eleanor DICKEY for bringing them back into the spotlight. As a professional classicist, I still prefer her 2012–2015 edition with its comprehensive commentary and all the Greek, but I will happily recommend the more lightweight *Learning Latin the Ancient Way* to my students, with the hope that they are as excited as I was when they read every page of it.

As for *Learn Latin from the Romans*, the selection of original passages – especially the inscriptions and Martial’s epigrams – presented in the textbook is inspiring and I will surely include some of them in my teaching. The *Hermeneumata*, in my opinion, could be better saved for advanced students, who can then read them in their original form with the task of identifying and “correcting” all the non-classical forms. The theoretical sections of the textbook will be very useful in my work with international groups of students, especially with those who feel the need to understand *everything* before they continue with new material. I would also love to watch a series of video recordings of Professor DICKEY herself explaining each concept to real students – I am sure that many Latin learners and teachers would find it highly interesting.

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²³ The hypothesis that Ørberg is a true and original Latin author deserves a separate study, with a full analysis of the entire *Familia Romana* universe.