



A NATURAL
HISTORY OF LATIN
TORE JANSON

The story of the world's most successful language

A Natural History of Latin

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TORE JANSON

*Translated and adapted into English by
Merethe Damsgård Sørensen and Nigel Vincent*

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FOREWORD

This book is for everyone who wants to know more about Latin, about the language and about its influence on the culture and history of Europe. It covers the basic facts about the pronunciation of Latin, the most common words, and something about the forms of words. It also includes a fair number of well-known phrases and quotations. This is not a textbook in any traditional or modern sense. It is mainly about how and when the language was used, and how it has gradually influenced other languages. You will not need special previous knowledge; everything you need to know will be introduced as you go along. My idea is to communicate to the reader what we know about a language and a culture which has had, and continues to have, a very great influence on us all. Of course, I hope that some readers will become so interested that they will want to acquire a thorough knowledge of Latin for themselves, but to do this they will have to move on to ordinary textbooks. My aim here is simply to offer an overview and an appetizer.

Even so, if you want to know the meaning of individual Latin words and expressions, this book will take you quite a long way. At the back there is a brief grammar and a list of basic vocabulary and a collection of the most common phrases and expressions. There is also an index which will enable the reader to find matters that are discussed in the text. The book can be used as a reference work for people who quickly want to find out something about the Latin language.

Latin was both a spoken and a written language in ancient Rome. It gradually fell out of use as anyone's native language, but for more than a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire it was used as a spoken and written language by educated people throughout western Europe. However, the language played a different role in antiquity from the one it came to play later. For this reason the main part of the book falls into two halves, one about Latin and the

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Romans in antiquity and one about Latin and Europe thereafter. The written language has in principle remained the same for two thousand years from antiquity until the present day. This book aims to give a portrait of that language.

While working on this book I have benefited from the opinions, advice and suggestions of Magnus Wistrand, Hans Aili, Eva Halldinger, and not least my wife, Christina Westman. The English version is not just a translation, since the text has been revised and adapted in many places, and a couple of sections are entirely new. It has been a great pleasure to cooperate in this work with the translators, Merethe Damsgård Sørensen and Nigel Vincent (who wrote the sections on Latin and German and on the pronunciation of Latin in England), and with John Davey at the Oxford University Press. None of them is to be held responsible for any remaining errors or flaws.

The translators of the English edition would particularly like to acknowledge the help of John Briscoe, Tim Cornell, Roy Gibson, Kersti Börjars, Martin Durrell, and Katy Vincent, not to mention Tore Janson!

Part I

Latin and the Romans

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Lingua latina: a first acquaintance

Many Latin words are easy to understand. Here is one to start with:

femina

It is easy to guess that this means 'woman'. It's the name of several women's magazines in various countries around the world and is also a brand of perfume. Then there are related words like *feminine*, *female*, and *feminist*. And it doesn't take a big leap of the imagination to link it with the French word *femme* 'woman'. It's often that way when you study languages, particularly one as widespread as Latin. Latin words are sometimes borrowed unchanged. They also frequently appear as parts of learned or abstract words. English has borrowed large numbers of words from Latin, often via French. And there are even greater similarities with French, Spanish, and Italian, languages which have developed out of Latin.

Anyone who has a large vocabulary in English therefore already knows quite a lot of Latin words, and anyone who speaks Spanish or French knows even more. But it also works the other way round. Anyone who has acquired a basic Latin vocabulary will more easily be able to understand many words in other European languages.

Let's build up a little more Latin:

femina clara

This is a bit harder, even if Claire and Clara are English names and *clear* is a loan from Latin (by way of French). Yet in Latin the word usually meant 'light' or 'bright', as in English *a clear day*, but also 'shining' or 'famous'. So *femina clara* means 'a famous woman'.

This example also shows us that Latin has a different word order from English. An adjective like *clara* usually comes after the word it goes with. The same word order can be seen in the phrase which is in the title of this section: *lingua latina*. One can guess that *lingua* means 'language' from the English word *linguistics*, which means

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the science of language, or indeed from the word *language* itself or the French word *langue* 'language'. The word *latina* obviously means 'Latin', and so the whole phrase means 'the Latin language'.

One might query this translation on the grounds that there is nothing in the Latin expression which corresponds to the English word *the*, or what is called the definite article. But Latin has no equivalent to *the* or to the indefinite article *a/an*. A Latin phrase like *femina clara* can be translated as 'famous woman', 'a famous woman', or 'the famous woman' depending on the context. This is in fact the way things are in most of the world's languages. The definite and indefinite articles are by and large found in modern western European languages like English, German, and French.

Just a few words in Latin quickly give an idea of what is easy and what is difficult. The words are often already known, or at least you can often connect a Latin word with an English word you already know. But the rules for how you put the words together into phrases or sentences, that is the grammar of the language, are very different from those that apply in a language like English. In this book for the most part I focus on words in the main body of the text, and you can read it without bothering about the word endings or other complications. If you are interested, however, you can find the most important rules in the section entitled 'About the Grammar' at the end of the book.

Latin is written with what we have come to call the Roman alphabet, which English and most other European languages have taken over. Our script was originally created to write down Latin, and so the letters correspond very well to the sounds of that language. The words we have met so far are pronounced more or less as we would expect.

Obviously, there are still some differences. In the Latin of antiquity the letter *c* is only used to represent the sound which we indicate with *k* in words of Anglo-Saxon origin such as *kill* or *king*. Due to French influence, we have retained this value for the letter *c* in words of Latin origin such as *clear* or *castle*, but we pronounce it as [s] when followed by *e* or *i*. What the Romans never did was to use the letter *c* to represent an *s*-sound, so that we pronounce several words that

come from Latin in a way that would have surprised the Romans. For example, we say the word *cell* with an initial *s*-sound although it is in fact the English version of the Latin word *cella* 'room' which was pronounced with an initial [k]. It is the same with Latin names like Cicero (which the Romans pronounced approximately *kickerow*), Caesar and Cecilia. In other contexts, the modern pronunciation of Latin in Britain and northern Europe respects the ancient norms and uses the *k*-sound in all words that are spelled with a *c*.

Why there should be these differences requires quite a bit of explaining, and we will deal with the question later in the book. It has to do with the way the pronunciation of Latin changed over the centuries. Here I will just concentrate on how the ancient Romans pronounced their language. There is also a difference between English and Latin as far as the vowels are concerned. Latin had only five vowels, represented by the letters *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, and *u*, which had more or less the same sounds as these letters do in modern Spanish or Italian, so that for example *Roma*, the name of the city of Rome, must have been said in much the same way by the Romans as it is by the Italians who now live there. Similarly, the Romans would not have much trouble recognizing modern Italian or Spanish words like *casa* 'house', *tu* 'you', and *luna* 'moon', whose pronunciation has changed very little in two thousand years. Although the single vowel letters are never associated with the kind of diphthongal pronunciation of the English *i* in *wine* or *a* in *fate*, there are three sequences of vowel letters which represent diphthongs, namely *ae* pronounced roughly as English *I*, *oe* as in English *boy*, and *au* as in English *loud*. With this knowledge you should be able to pronounce Latin words correctly according to the ancient norms. For instance, the Roman pronunciation of *Caesar* was very close to the modern German pronunciation of the word *Kaiser* 'emperor', perhaps not surprising since the latter is a Latin borrowing in German. The main rule is to pronounce each letter exactly as it stands and to use the same sound for a given letter in all contexts, as one would do for example with the English letters *m* or *p*.

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There are relatively few complications. We have already met one in the word *lingua*. The group *gu* is pronounced [gw], so that *lingua* has two syllables. Similarly, the group *qu* is pronounced [kw], as in the word *aqua* 'water'.

This just leaves the question of the stress. In Latin words the stress is always on the second or third syllable from the end. The second last or penultimate is the most common, as in the word *latína*, but several words are stressed on the third from the end or antepenultimate syllable, like *fémina*. (You can find the rules for determining the position of the stress in the section on grammar at the end of the book.) Quite often it is possible to guess which syllable is stressed, as the general rule is that the stress in modern loanwords is still on the same syllable. In this book we sometimes use an accent on the words with antepenultimate stress, particularly if the stress of a loanword is different from the Latin one. In the word list at the back, which contains all the words used in this book, there is an accent on all forms longer than two syllables, and if you are uncertain about how to stress a word, you can check it there. In an ordinary Latin text there are no accents, but we use them here to help the reader.

The earliest period of Rome

The long history of Latin started about 2,700 years ago. It is not always so clear how and where a language comes into existence, but in the case of Latin at least there is no doubt about the place. In the beginning the language was spoken only in the city of Rome and its environs. According to the tradition of the Romans themselves the city was founded in the year 753 BCE (to use our modern system of dating) and modern archaeologists and historians believe that this is quite close to the truth. A small settlement seems to have grown up in the eighth century BCE which included just that spot which was to become the centre of Rome throughout antiquity, the *Forum Romanum* 'the Roman square'. One end of the square slopes

slightly up towards the Palatine hill, where you can still see part of the *Via sacra* 'the Sacred Way', which was used for processions. Beside the road the remains of ancient huts have been found.

We do not know much about the people who lived in this small town but as far as we can tell they spoke an archaic form of Latin. During the first centuries it was probably just a spoken language, but fairly early on it must have begun to be written down. There is an inscription on a stone in the Forum Romanum which has been dated to the sixth century BCE. It has been damaged and is not completely decipherable, but the letters are Latin and it is clear that the language is Latin. Written Latin therefore is at least two and a half thousand years old.

During the first centuries the Romans were just an insignificant small group of a few thousand people among many other such groups to be found in Italy at that time. They lived in the region called *Latium*, which still bears virtually the same name. In Italian it is called *Lazio*, just like the famous modern Roman football team. To the north were the Etruscans, who lived in the area which is now called Tuscany and who were more numerous and more powerful than the Romans.

Obviously we do not know for certain what life was like in Rome in those early years, but the Romans possessed a rich store of traditions. According to legend, Rome was founded by a man called Romulus who in so doing killed his twin brother, Remus. When children, the two brothers had been left to die but had been nursed by a she-wolf and later rescued. A she-wolf is therefore one of the city's most important symbols, and a very old bronze statue of her still exists. When Romulus founded the city, he became *rex* or king. The same root is found in *regina* 'queen' and can also be seen in English words like *regent* 'someone who rules instead of the king or queen' and *regal* 'having to do with a king or queen'. Romulus was followed by another six kings, but the seventh and last king was overthrown and a different system of government was introduced. This is supposed to have happened in 509 BCE, a dating which is in all probability historically correct.

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In the Romans' way of seeing things, kings were not something to be desired. To be ruled by a king was for them more or less like living in slavery, and they looked down on other states that had that kind of government. Their own state was from 509 BCE a republic, a *res publica*, which literally means 'public thing' or 'public affair'. In a *res publica* the highest authority lay not with a king but in principle with the *pópulus* or people. The idea of such a state has recurred time and again in history in many different forms. Both the leaders of the French Revolution and the founders of the United States took the Roman republic as an important model. The American Abraham Lincoln formulated the idea optimistically: 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' Both the idea and the key word come from the Romans. The English word *people* derives from Latin *populus*, via the French word *peuple*.

In reality, what the Romans had could hardly be called a democracy. There were two men together who held the highest office in the Roman republic, and they did so only for a year at a time. Their title was *consul*, a word which is now used for an office in one branch of the diplomatic service. Consuls were elected by the people at a public meeting known as the assembly of the people. They had considerable power during their term of office, but as it was short and the two equal consuls had to agree, no one person was able to dominate politics for very long. What in fact governed Rome after the era of the monarchy was an assembly called the *senatus*. The Roman Senate consisted of a few hundred men (anything from 300 to 1,000 at various points in its history) who had been elected to public offices by the assembly of the people. The Senate comprised exclusively people who had held public office; for example all former consuls were senators. Although they only held their office for a year, once they became senators they held that position for life. All really important decisions were made by the Senate.

Many countries today have a political assembly called the senate; the best known of course is the American Senate. The fact that the American institution bears that name is clear proof of how much

Roman ideals meant when the American constitution was written. The Latin word *senatus* is built on the same root as the word *senex* 'old man', so that the original meaning was something like 'the council of elders'. As members of the Senate kept their seat for life, the term was quite appropriate.

During this first period of its history Rome depended a great deal on its neighbours to the north, the Etruscans, and several of the kings were Etruscan. The transition from kingdom to republic also had to do with liberation from the Etruscans, and from that time on Rome began seriously to expand her dominion.

How Latin became Latin

Why did the first Romans speak a language of their own? How was it related to other languages?

To those of us who live in Europe in the twenty-first century it may seem strange that a small place with a few thousand inhabitants should have its own language. Languages like English, German, French, and Italian are spoken by many millions of people and are used over large areas. But it is not like that everywhere in the world. In Africa there are at least ten times as many languages as in Europe, although there are about the same numbers of people in the two continents. From a historical and geographical perspective you find that in the long run there is a strong correlation between the number of languages and the number of states or independent political entities. A very long time ago, when there were no large states but at most small tribes or clans, there were no large languages either. The reason is that the way people speak changes constantly. A group of people who live without much contact with other groups will gradually develop their own language, different from all others, although they may once have spoken the same language as people in adjoining areas.

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The language of the small city of Rome similarly developed on the spot, so to speak. But it was not completely different from the languages nearby. Quite a few other languages had features in common with Latin. The most important of these were Oscan and Umbrian. Umbrian was spoken in that region of Italy which is still called Umbria, to the north and east of Latium. Oscan was used in large parts of southern Italy. Both were written languages, and a considerable number of inscriptions, which can for the most part be deciphered, have survived. These show that Oscan, Umbrian, and Latin are quite similar in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but not so close that they were mutually comprehensible. The differences must have been about as great as between, say, Swedish and German, or Italian and Spanish, and perhaps even as great as between English and German or between French and Italian. Oscan, Umbrian, and Latin, together with a few other minor languages, make up what linguists call the Italic languages, and it is generally assumed that the reason for the similarities lies in the fact that there once existed a common Italic language, though it is by no means certain that this was the case.

What is certain is that the Italic languages made up a group within a much larger group of languages, all of which must in some way have had a shared historical origin since they have a number of words and grammatical phenomena in common. This larger group is called Indo-European and includes most modern European languages, together with many of the languages of India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. Within Indo-European, English belongs to the sub-group of so-called Germanic languages, which also includes German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages. This in turn means that English and Latin are related within the same large language family, just as English and Persian or English and Hindi are. It is generally thought that the likenesses among all these languages are due to the existence of a very early common Indo-European language, which, at least in part, many scholars have tried to reconstruct.

However, there are very few words in English and Latin which are similar because they come directly from the same

Indo-European source. One example is Latin *mus* 'mouse' and English *mouse*, which has related forms also in Sanskrit, Avestan, Armenian, and Greek. The consonants of this word are the same but the vowels are different as a result of sound changes. (Interestingly, the modern pronunciation in many Scottish dialects is nearer to that of Latin because they did not undergo the same vowel changes as the dialects south of the border.) Another set which are related are *mother, father, brother* beside their Latin equivalents *mater, pater, frater*, although here the changes have affected consonants and vowels, and made the similarity less apparent. Much closer to the Latin forms, of course, are the English adjectives *maternal, paternal, and fraternal*, but that is because the English words are borrowings direct from Latin rather than the result of shared inheritance from the ancient Indo-European ancestor language.

In fact, it is surprising that such words are even partially similar after more than 5,000 years of separate independent development. Latin and English share only a handful of words as a result of their common ancestry, and often they no longer have any sounds which are the same. For instance, the Latin pronoun *ego* and English *I* come from the same source, but it takes specialist knowledge to reveal the connection. The trick is to look for systematic patterns of sound correspondence. One such is that an English *f* often corresponds to a Latin *p*, as in English *father* beside Latin *pater*, or English *fish* beside Latin *piscis*. That one is fairly straightforward, but there are more surprising ones that can still be shown to be valid. For example, Latin *qu* sometimes corresponds to English *f*, sometimes to *v*, so that English *five* can be proved to be connected with Latin *quinque*. If there has been a meaning change as well, the connection may be even harder to see. English *quick* and Latin *vivo* 'live' can be linked by applying the above rule of correspondence to both consonants in the word, though the original meaning 'live' is only found in English in such fixed expressions as *the quick and the dead* or *quicksilver*. It is striking how in this way comparative linguistic research can reveal ancient links that go back to before the beginning of recorded history.

From small town to great power

The small state of Rome with its own small language had several neighbours. Half a millennium before Christ there were many small states in the Italian peninsula. North of the Romans lived the Etruscans, whom we have already mentioned, not in one state but in a number of separate city states. The Etruscans spoke their own language, which did not belong to the Indo-European family and which is not related to any other language which has been preserved. They used their own alphabet, and many inscriptions in Etruscan have survived. For several hundred years the Romans were very dependent on the Etruscans, both politically and economically, and they took over a great deal from them, including their alphabet. The letters in the Roman alphabet represent a slight modification of the symbols used by the Etruscans, who had in their turn borrowed the idea of writing with letters from the Greeks. As a result of the great influence of Latin, all the languages of western Europe have inherited the Roman alphabet, in some cases with additions such as the English and German use of *w*, the French *ç* (called *c cedilla*), Swedish and German *ä* and *ö*, Danish *ø* and so on. Two letters that are now widely used in European alphabets, *v* and *j*, have a different history, which we will come to later.

Besides the letters, the Romans acquired quite a lot else from the Etruscans, including some words which have gone on to be adopted by other languages such as *caerimónia* 'ceremony' and *fenestra* 'window' (whence French *fenêtre* and German *Fenster*). The meanings of these words tell us something about what the Romans learnt from their neighbours in the north. They imported many religious practices and ceremonies and the firm belief that the will of the gods could be read in the flight of birds or the entrails of animals that had been sacrificed. The Romans also got the idea of theatre from the Etruscans; the modern word *person* comes from the Etruscan loan-word in Latin *persona*, which originally meant a theatrical mask—hence a role in a play and so finally 'person'. They also learnt how to build houses instead of windowless huts.

In other respects the Romans could not boast of any cultural achievements in our sense of the word for several centuries. They were first and foremost farmers. But the Romans would not agree that there was a lack of culture. In Latin farming is called *agricultura*, a word which is made up of *ager* 'field' and *cultura*, which originally meant the growing of crops but which gradually acquired the sense of spiritual growth or culture. The Latin word *cultura* is formed from the verb *cólere* 'grow' just as the English word *growth* is derived from *grow*.

Their other principal activity was military service, *militia*. The Romans were excellent soldiers, and during the fifth and fourth centuries and the first half of the third century BC they fought war after war with their neighbouring states. Things did not always go well, but bit by bit the Romans conquered the whole of the Italian peninsula. Slowly but surely they also spread the Latin language over the territory they had conquered. One of the ways they did this was by giving out parcels of the land they had won to soldiers who had completed their military service. The soldiers naturally spoke Latin, and they and their families brought with them the language of the victors to the homelands of the vanquished, where they continued their main activity, farming. In this way islands of Latin emerged in all the other language areas. At the same time Latin was the language of the people who held power, so most people quickly learnt a bit of Latin, and after a few generations Latin had completely taken over.

A soldier, *miles* in Latin, could soon become a *colónus* or grower. A group of such *coloni* formed a *colónia*, a number of Romans living together in a conquered country. The English word *colony* clearly comes from this word.

Not everyone was a simple farmer even in early Rome; there were also rich and powerful people such as those who sat in the Senate, held military command or became consuls. Very early on there was a political distinction between the leaders, who were *patres* 'fathers', a common term for senators, and who were therefore called *patrícii* 'patricians', and those who belonged to the ordinary people or

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plebs, and who were therefore called *plebéii* 'plebeians'. In Rome these terms became outdated after a couple of hundred years, but they have survived to this day as ways of referring to people's social status.

By about 270 BCE their many wars and colonizations had made the Romans masters of the whole of the Italian peninsula, and they began to look with interest at the countries across the sea. On the north coast of Africa, in present-day Tunisia, there was a very successful city called Carthage. The Carthaginians were merchants and seafarers, and they controlled much of the trade and the coast in the western Mediterranean, including for example most of Sicily, an island which the Romans also had their eyes on.

The Romans fought three great wars against the Carthaginians, whom they called *poeni* 'Punic (people)'. You can read in the history books about these three Punic wars, which lasted altogether for more than a hundred years. In the end the Romans were victorious and destroyed the city of Carthage, but for a long time the outcome was uncertain. The most spectacular moment during these campaigns was when the Carthaginian general Hannibal entered Italy from what is now France by crossing the Alps with an army which included elephants, the tanks of the ancient world.

For ever after the Romans were inordinately proud of having defeated Hannibal and the Carthaginians, and it was this victory which made them a superpower in the Mediterranean. Yet when it came to writing, education and ideas, science, art, and music the early Romans did not produce much compared to many other peoples. In particular they lagged far behind their neighbours to the east, the Greeks.

How bad were the Romans?

The earliest Romans, those who conquered Italy and defeated Carthage, became some centuries later the models and ideals for

their descendants. Classical Roman writers talk at length about the moral excellence of their forefathers, and since their time the theme has recurred again and again. Even today one still hears mention of 'Roman virtues', 'pithy Roman sayings', and so on.

The picture which posterity has created of the ancient Romans obviously contains elements of truth and myth, and is roughly as follows. In the first place they were simple men who cultivated their own land, but went to Rome to take part in government when required and who went to fight whenever it was necessary to put the neighbouring tribes in their place. The prime example was Cincinnatus, who was ploughing his small plot of land when he was informed that he had been appointed *dictator*, which meant that he could rule unchallenged but for no more than six months. The reason was a war: he had to rescue a Roman army which had been penned in by the enemy. Reluctantly, he left home, won the war, renounced his dictatorship after two weeks, and went back to farm his land again.

Part of this idea of the simple life was that the ancient Romans despised money and luxury, and did not take bribes. On the other hand they liked power. The story goes that the consul Dentatus received a delegation from the Samnites while he was sitting in his tent stirring his porridge, *puls*, in a clay pot. He refused their gold plate and other presents and said that he preferred to use a bowl made of clay himself while ruling over people who owned gold dinner services.

They were also extremely courageous and oblivious to physical pain. A Roman called Mucius tried to kill the Etruscan king Porsenna, but he failed and was captured by the Etruscans. He explained with pride: *Romanus sum* 'I am a Roman', and demonstrated to the king what kind of people the Romans were by putting his right hand into the fire and keeping it there until it had turned to charcoal. The king was duly impressed and relinquished the battle against such doughty warriors.

Finally, they were always just and law-abiding. It is true that they were waging war almost all the time, but their wars were always

righteous, and had been prompted by some insult or injustice that the Romans felt they had suffered. For the sake of justice all human considerations had to be put to one side. The consul Torquatus had his own son under his command, and the son acted very bravely in killing one of the enemy. Unfortunately, in so doing he contravened his father's order not to engage in acts of war, and so Torquatus promptly had his son executed for disobedience.

Nowadays this picture of the Romans may seem less than appealing to many people. But it did remain attractive for many centuries and you do not have to go very far back in time to find societies which exploited it to their advantage. In the 1920s and 1930s the Fascists in Italy developed an ideology that was partly based on this imaginary picture, and their ideological brothers, the Nazis, also adopted some of these ideas.

But these are no more than fantasies, maybe with some foundation in reality. All the above examples and hundreds more of the same kind were written down by Roman or Greek writers who lived about the time of the birth of Christ, several hundred years after the heroic period that lasted up until the defeat of Carthage. It was in their interest to emphasize certain characteristics of the ancient Romans because they wanted to sway their contemporaries. Arguably, the conservative rulers of a later period used the ancient Romans for their own purposes.

Whatever the truth of the matter, this image is connected with a number of significant concepts in the Latin language. The most important of all is probably *virtus*, a word which has been borrowed into many languages including English *virtue*. It is built on the word *vir* which means 'man' and which is also to be seen in words like *virile* and *virility*. In origin therefore *virtus* meant 'manliness'. But it has nothing at all to do with sexuality, and means rather something like 'good qualities', namely those that a man was supposed to have. These include above all else courage, but also all-round ability, care for the family, a sense of business, reverence for the gods, respect for the law and the authorities, and more in the same vein. *Virtus* was seen as the best quality that a Roman could have.

Another keyword is *fortis* 'strong' and *fortitúdo* 'strength', a quality which was regarded as essential in a Roman. But he also had to cling to *ius* 'right, justice', so as to be just, *iustus*. The ideal was *vir fortis et iustus* 'a strong and just man', and also a *pater familiae*, a family father. Those people who were not male heads of families, and hence considered strong and just, were marginalized. Early Roman society was exceptionally patriarchal. The housewife, *mater familiae*, did indeed play a role that was important in itself but only within the four walls of the home. If on the other hand you were a boy (*puer*) or a girl (*puella*) or a slave (*servus* 'male slave' or *serva* 'female slave') you were completely dependent on the *pater familiae* and his authority (*auctóritas*). A child was childlike (*puerilis*) and a slave was expected to be servile (*servilis*).

The fact that Rome was a society where people had slaves may be offensive to us, but the same was the case in all societies in antiquity, both in Europe and in the Middle East. Slavery lived on in Europe well into the Middle Ages, but was abolished quite a long time ago. Elsewhere Europeans used slaves on an industrial scale until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

A voice from early Rome

Our knowledge of ancient history mainly comes from written sources. Obviously the best and most reliable information comes from the writings of people who lived at the time. In the case of Rome, there is not a lot of this kind of material from the earliest times. The Romans certainly had an alphabet and made some use of it from at least 500 BCE, but very little has been preserved that is older than about 200 BCE, principally a number of inscriptions on gravestones and the like. What we know about the earliest period has been passed on by writers who lived much later, around the birth of Christ. The reason why so little has survived is probably because there was not very much to begin with anyway. In the earliest years

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of their history the Romans do not seem to have been a people much given to writing, and the first individuals who could be called writers do not appear until the third century BCE. The fragments that remain of their writing reveal that they were fairly clumsy. There was no written norm, and no instruction in the Latin language in schools.

So we do not really know much about how the oldest Romans thought and felt. There is, however, a book written by an individual who is always cited as an example of what the ancient Romans were like, Marcus Porcius Cato, often called Cato the Elder. He played an important part in the war against Carthage, and one of the things he is famous for is that he is said to have ended many of his speeches in the Senate with the words: *Praeterea censeo Carthaginem esse delendam* 'Moreover it is my opinion that Carthage should be destroyed'. Cato died in 149 BCE, and the book which he has left behind, called *De Agricultura* 'On Agriculture', is one of the very oldest which exists in Latin. Most of it is devoted to very detailed instructions, sometimes highly technical, about how to build an olive press or how to bake a honey cake. Quite a few passages also tell us a lot about Cato himself and his attitude to life.

In the preface he says that farming is the most honourable occupation, and that the ancient Romans considered it a mark of the highest praise when they called someone *Bonum agricolam bonumque colonum* 'a good farmer and a good husbandman' (the addition of *-que* at the end of a word means the same as 'and' before the word). But when Cato starts to describe his own farm, it turns out that he is definitely not the person who does the sowing and ploughing or even the person who superintends these activities. He describes a farm which is managed by an overseer who is in charge of a considerable number of slaves. The role of the Roman, 'the good farmer', is to turn up every now and then, give instructions, call the overseer to account, and pocket the profits. This last is the most important for Cato. He is mean, not to say miserly, and farming is to him just a way of making money. The people who do the work, that is to say the slaves, are simply part of the production line. They get food and clothes so that they can work. If they can't do that they are

surplus to requirements. At one point he reels off a list of things that should be sold: . . . *plostrum vetus, ferramenta vétera, servum senem, servum morbosum, et si quid áliud supérsit* ' . . . an old wagon, old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and anything else that is not needed.'

So on closer inspection it turns out that all his talk about the honest farmer is deceptive. Cato was a rich man who invested in farming for whom the wellbeing of his employees was a matter of no concern. It would be wrong to say that all the ancient Romans were like Cato; we know very little about the rest. It is also the case that Cato lived at a time when the old ideals were being undermined by new circumstances. But it has to be said that the picture of powerful Romans which emerges from reading his book is far from attractive.

However, the culture of Rome fortunately does not consist solely of the myth of the severe but just patriarch. The door was soon to open on another era.

The meeting with Greece

For many hundreds of years the Romans lived on the fringe of the dominant culture of the age. The Greeks had made unique progress while Rome was still just a small town. They had created an unrivalled literature, had laid the foundations of western philosophy and science, and had made great strides in art and architecture. In addition, they were skilful engineers and successful warriors. In all this they did not start from scratch but were often able to build on what had been achieved much earlier in Egypt and in the great civilizations of Mesopotamia. But the Greeks went further than their predecessors in almost every field, and in turn passed on their advances to others.

During the great cultural flowering in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the region that roughly corresponds to modern Greece was divided into many small states. Towards the end of the fourth century the state of Macedonia subjugated all the small states and its

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king, Alexander, embarked on an extraordinary series of conquests, with the result that he became the ruler of all the countries that surrounded the eastern Mediterranean from Greece to Libya and of the territory that constitutes modern-day Iraq and Iran and right over to Pakistan and India. That empire soon fell apart, but it was the Greeks who ruled over the different states, which therefore kept Greek as the official language.

So to the east of the growing Roman empire there was a huge area which was in every respect more developed. The Greek-speaking world also extended to southern Italy and Sicily, where the Greeks had already had colonies since the eighth century BCE. When the Romans took over those areas they immediately came into contact with Greeks, Greek culture, and the Greek language. This was to lead to great changes for the Romans and their language. Before then, there had been a considerable distance between them and this people with their well-developed educational system and their great literature. The Romans may have had the alphabet for a long time, but they had almost entirely used it only to write down contracts and laws and for inscriptions on gravestones. Now, along with a lot else, they had the chance to learn that written language can also be used to create works of art and simply for the pure pleasure of reading.

The Greek influence developed gradually over a period of several hundred years. During that time the Romans also came to wield greater and greater political power in the eastern Mediterranean. By the birth of Christ they had subjugated both Greece itself and all the other areas which had had Greek as their official language ever since the time of Alexander. In consequence the Romans were deeply influenced by the Greek way of life, Greek science, Greek art, and not least Greek literature. In time, all Romans with any claim to education could read and speak Greek. The Greek and Roman civilizations can almost be said to have merged into one common culture. But it was a long process, and one that was never totally completed.

Literature was probably the field where Greek ideals meant most. The Romans in fact took over the whole idea of writing literature from the Greeks, and the first works were straightforward translations of

Greek originals. But gradually the Romans evolved their own topics and themes, and soon they were competing with their models and indeed trying to surpass them. Latin literature slowly freed itself from Greek influence, and in due course it was Latin literature that served as the model for the whole of Europe for the next two thousand years.

Theatre for the people

The oldest literature in Latin which has been preserved are a number of plays by a man called Plautus, written about 200 BCE and staged in Rome. The models for these pieces were contemporary Greek plays that Plautus translated, at the same time adapting them to the Roman context. They were about the life of what we would call the affluent middle classes. The characters were merchants and landowners and their wives, children, and slaves, and the plots revolved around themes like young lovers who are finally united or lost sons or daughters who turn up unexpectedly. The setting was always a port, with ships arriving from many different places. Rome was developing into just such a cosmopolitan community, and the plays quickly caught on there.

This kind of play has subsequently turned out to be very long-lived. Shakespeare took several themes and plots from Plautus—for example *The Comedy of Errors* is an adaptation of the plot of *Menaechmi*—and in our own times the same basic idea lies at the heart of long-running soap operas like *Dallas*. But Plautus was funnier. He does not worry a lot about plot, concentrating instead on quick-witted slaves and comical misunderstandings, and making fun of boastful generals and bossy fathers.

Slaves often play important roles in these plays and sometimes behaved in ways that they would have been forbidden to do in Rome. In one play, Plautus explains in the prologue that in the course of the play two slaves will marry, and he appreciates that the audience will