

Bilingual Roman Empire

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During the first two hundred years of its history, Rome was an open city, where, in addition to Latin, other languages, such as Oscan, Etruscan, Greek, Punic and Umbrian, were spoken. Not even during the Republican Era, when the Roman Empire started growing in size, did any signs of conscious language politics appear; for a long time, there were no attempts to influence the languages of the newly-conquered areas. On the contrary, it may be that from the viewpoint of the Roman “divide and impera” politics it was even considered useful that in the conquered areas different languages were spoken, so that they could not easily organise to form a united anti-Rome front. The situation did not change until the early first century BC, when the Italian “allies” rose against Rome. During the one hundred years following the Social War all Italy was Romanized, partly as a result of conscious policy, partly due to the circumstances of the time. Latin, in practice, became the only language of Italy.

The Romans, however, had a special relationship to the Greek language, which, at an early stage, became the cultural language among the Romans. On the other hand, from the third century BC on, more and more Greek-speaking slaves came to Rome. Acquisition of a good knowledge of Greek was an essential part of Roman education, and, in the beginning, Greek was the language of Roman literature in many fields. When dealing with the Hellenistic world, in which Greek had become the official language throughout all the eastern Mediterranean, the Romans used Greek, with the assistance of an interpretator, if necessary. As Rome, at that time, did not attempt to Latinise the neighbouring peoples of Italy, even less did it interfere in the languages spoken in the conquered Hellenistic territories with a working Greek administration.

During the first one hundred years of the Imperial Era, the Roman Empire became genuinely bilingual. The other minority languages did not get any role in official use; they were not really discouraged in private use, but in public life there was no use for them. Latin conquered the West, the influence of which can still be seen on the European language map. Greek, on the other hand, remained the language of the Eastern Empire. This division, however, does not exclude exceptions; nor does the bilingualism of the Roman Empire resemble, for example, that of Finland. In juristic documents Latin was to be used in the East, too. And when a Roman in the West decided to write a philosophical dissertation, the language which he chose was more probably Greek than Latin.