

## Living Latin, introduction to language and culture

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Latin is often said to be a dead language. Those who say so usually refer to the fact that ever since the days of the ancient Romans, Latin has not been anyone's mother tongue but can only be learnt as a foreign language. However, we must not forget that throughout the Middle Ages and even later, this "dead" Latin was the main language of science, the Church and international diplomacy; nor has it lost its cultural significance today, either.

Nevertheless, the statement that Latin is still a living language needs a certain reservation: the life it lives today is different from what it was in the ancient days. Initially, it was a proto-Italic dialect named after the the region of Latium in Central Italy where it was spoken mainly by plundering nomads. It was not until the times when the Romans widened their territory and took their language to the lands they conquered that Latin gradually became the dominant language in Western Europe.

The unique cultural significance of Latin originates in the stimulating influence of the Greeks. Along with the Latin language, the Greco-Roman civilisation spread throughout Western Europe.

During all its existence, the Roman Empire remained bilingual: Latin was the main language in the West, Greek in the East. In the late Imperial Era, this linguistic division contributed to the division of the whole Empire into two parts. The western part where Latin was spoken collapsed as early as the late fifth century AD, whereas the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium, continued to live in the Middle Ages until it came to its end in 1453.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire did not mark the disappearance of the Latin language. The Catholic Church had become its supporting pillar, and when the Christian faith was spread to different countries by priests and missionaries, who had been educated in monasteries, the language they used was Latin. Latin was also the only language of instruction in mediaeval universities which had developed under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. In the course of centuries, the language changed a great

deal, until Renaissance scholars attempted to restore it to its traditional ancient form.

By the late Middle Ages, the national languages had become serious competitors of Latin. In the 17th century, it was gradually replaced by French as the language of international diplomacy. Till the beginning of the 19th century, however, it remained the main language of science due to the Latin terminology which had established itself in various fields of science.

Around the mid-1950s, some enthusiastic friends of Latin brought up the question whether living Latin could be woken up from the kind of hibernation it had gone into under the pressure of modern languages. In 1956, some Latinists of different nationalities started the so-called *Motus vivae Latinitatis*, the Living Latin Movement, to demonstrate that Latin could still be used in communication, not only as the language of the Church and science but also when exchanging thoughts about everyday matters. This movement has, among other things, given rise to Latin seminars organised in different countries, as well as to the publication of some new Latin periodicals.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Finnish Latinists started to play a more active role than before among the friends of living Latin. This was the time when *Kalevala Latina*, Professor Tuomo Pekkanen's Latin translation of our national epic, as well as *Nuntii Latini*, the weekly review of world news in classical Latin produced by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, became renowned all over the world. The teaching of Latin in schools has been radically reformed and many of the methods used in teaching modern languages have been introduced into Latin classes. Didactic reforms have been discussed in various seminars and in the World Congresses of the Academy for the Promotion of the Use of Latin (*Academia Latinitati Fovendae*), one of which was organised in Jyväskylä in 1997.

For example, the so-called "winged words" and well-known scientific terms provide good starting material for teachers familiarising their students with the use of living Latin. In the latter half of my presentation some further examples will be given of how to enrich and enliven Latin expression.