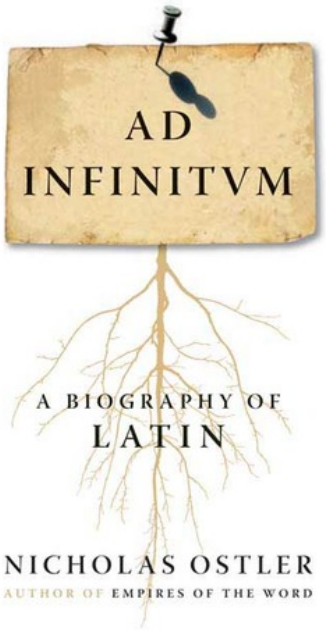

Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin

Nicholas Ostler

Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin

Nicholas Ostler

Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin Nicholas Ostler

Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin Details

Date	:	Published December 1st 2007 by Walker & Company (first published November 5th 2007)
ISBN	:	9780802715159
Author	:	Nicholas Ostler
Format	:	Hardcover 382 pages
Genre	:	History, Humanities, Language, Nonfiction, Linguistics, Classics

From Reader Review Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin for online ebook

Seumas Macdonald says

A fine overview of the history of Latin. Well-written, non-specialist. Opens up whole fields of reflection for classical latin enthusiasts to contemplate, and a few intriguing observations about language dominance, survival, diffusion, and decay.

Rossdavidh says

Subtitle: A biography of Latin. There are books, there are books for nerds, and then there are books for nerds which eschew such topics as physics or history (way too mainstream), and instead are entirely about the language Latin. We have hit a new level of geekiness here. I feel right at home.

Not that I know much about Latin. But I liked the author's previous book, "Empires of the World", which was about how languages and political empires went together (or failed to), so I was willing to follow him as he wallowed in this particular empire/language pairing for over 300 pages, not counting appendices.

The first thing he pointed out which surprised me (although in some sense I must already have known it), was that most of Latin's "life" occurs AFTER the fall of Rome. Here we take "life" to mean from the time the first recognizable form of it appeared, until the end of its common usage as a means of communication by people who were not language devotees, just using what was most convenient. Republic and Empire together, Rome lasted for over half a millenium, but it was well over a millenium after that before it ceased to be a common means of communication.

Ostler covers all of these periods with more or less equal emphasis, from the early tussles between Latin and Etruscan, to the later superiority/inferiority complex with Greek, to the reasons why it was not supplanted by German even though the Germans took over the Empire, and then on through the various Medieval phases of simplification and reaction against the same (going back to Cicero again and again for their role model).

There is a tolerable amount of actual Latin in all of this. If you can't tolerate any, well, this is probably not the book for you, but you don't have to actually know any Latin to find it interesting. You do probably have to be a bit of a linguiphile, but in truth there is more history than vocabulary. The attitude towards Latin of the people who spoke or read it changed with the culture of the time; for example the early Christian church was a great advocate of using simpler and more plebeian Latin, to help spread its message, but centuries later we find it preaching (pun intended) for the preservation of what had been the language of the proverbial "street", well past the time when it was any such thing. It says more about the history of the Church than it does about Latin.

While I shed no tears for the Roman Empire, I do have to say that the idea of all the world's learned folk exchanging letters and books in a common, neutral language is still a tempting one. Any student in high school physics discussing the technical meaning of the word "work" can imagine how it might be useful to use different languages for deep thinking and for ordinary conversation.

It also seems to have helped to convey a sense of solidarity between scholars across national borders, to be

able to communicate freely within their community without hindrance, and to a certain degree without a public spotlight. If in Darwin's time Latin were still the language to publish a book such as "On the Origin of Species", might the theory of natural selection have been better able to ascend from new hypothesis to established theory without so much counterproductive brewhaha? Galileo published in Italian rather than Latin, and appears to have done so as a more or less deliberate provocation of the Vatican. Bully for him, but there is something to be said for the idea that Latin provided a low-censorship space for the exchange of ideas across Europe.

Ostler's account of all this is enjoyable, but there is in any tale of Rome or classical culture an air of melancholy. Latin's persistence past the end of the Empire seems somewhat analogous to a Warner Brother's cartoon character, running of the edge of a cliff for half a dozen steps before they (and gravity) finally notice and plummet ignominiously. Latin today hangs on in odd niches (botany, legal terms, university insignia), not much more significant than Roman numerals.

It's a helpful perspective, however, on the current state of languages such as English, French, Modern Standard Arabic, or Spanish, which today span large parts of the world but which are ultimately dependent on a conflux of politics, religion, and economics for their continued existence as living languages. Language is a reflection of how people view themselves, who they want to include and exclude in the conversation, and how they wish to be perceived. Seeing controversies on topics such as what is "proper" Latin (the way people speak, or the way our ancestors wrote) gives some perspective when modern commentators lament the state of written or spoken English. Moreover, the tale of Latin takes in the fall of Rome and the Enlightenment, two topics which are not only important but full of life and death struggle. I have no expectation that a passing knowledge of Latin's history will ever be useful at cocktail parties, even if one assumed I were to attend any, but I make no apologies. I liked this book.

Ushan says

Latin was an IE language spoken in a small area in Central Italy in mid-first millennium BCE. It shared certain features with other IE languages of Italy; for example, the proto-IE consonant bh became f: "bhrater" became "frater", similar to how in Cockney English "things" turn into "fings"; the sound f was also common in the principal non-IE language of Italy, Etruscan. Latin was about as far from the principal Italic IE language of South Italy, Oscan, as Spanish is from Portuguese. The Etruscans dominated Rome for centuries; in an attempt to prevent the falsification of history to the detriment of Rome, Livy claims that Etruscan king Lars Porsena was so impressed by the bravery of Romans that he decided not to take Rome, but Pliny the Elder and Tacitus take it for granted that he conquered the city. Ostler lists about 200 nouns borrowed into Latin from the Etruscan and from the Greek via Etruscan, but I have seen proposed Indo-European etymologies for a few of these words, such as caelum and vagina.

As the Romans conquered the Apennine Peninsula, they spread colonists and the language; it took centuries for the other languages of Italy to die, and after the languages died, local customs such as funeral customs persisted for a few more generations (there are a few Greek-speaking villages in Apulia and Calabria even now, but if you believe Wikipedia, philologists aren't sure if their language is a survivor from ancient times or from Byzantine times). As the Romans conquered the rest of their empire, few local languages could put up resistance to Latin; in the Western half of the Roman Empire sans Africa, 30 languages were spoken in 100 BCE and 5 in 400 CE; other than Latin, they were Welsh, Basque, Albanian and moribund Gaulish; for the empire as a whole, the number dropped from 60 to 12. In the Eastern half of the empire, Greek was the language of inter-ethnic communication, but Latin had its own domains of law and the military.

After the Roman conquest of Greece, Latin absorbed a large Greek vocabulary; the Roman upper classes were bilingual; Latin literature first imitated Greek originals, but later developed on its own to the point where both Latin and Greek were languages of high culture. The sacred writings of the Christian Church were in Greek and Hebrew, but Latin was the language of the common people, so the Western church started to use it, as it still does (less so after the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965), with some peculiar vocabulary (Christians who died for their faith were not called heroes because of this word's association with pagan goddess Hera).

After the Western Roman Empire fell, all provinces except Britain continued to speak a form of Latin, but because economies became simplified and localized and travel became dangerous, people from different parts of the former empire hardly ever spoke to each other, and Latin gradually split into several languages, which lost much morphology and became early forms of Castilian, French, Occitan, Italian and so on. By the Late Middle Ages it was realized that these languages are suitable for literature (epic poems, love poems); around the time of Columbus's voyage, a Spanish scholar produced the first grammar of Spanish and the first Spanish-Latin dictionary. This is different from the Arabic-speaking world, where classical Arabic is still the standard written language, and vernacular varieties are unwritten (the Ethnologue database lists 35 varieties of Arabic and 41 varieties of Romance). However, Latin remained the language of philosophy and science until the times of Newton, Linnaeus and Euler, though it was no longer anybody's native language; in order to make it suitable for translation from the Greek and Arabic, the language had to be enriched with calques from these languages. In order to spread the Word of Christ to speakers of Nahuatl, Quechua and other languages of the conquered peoples of New Spain, missionaries produced grammars of these languages and translated the gospels from the Latin into them; an unknown author translated Aesop's fables from the Latin into Nahuatl, replacing lions with jaguars and foxes with coyotes.

With the coming of modernity in the 17th-18th century, knowledge of Latin and the classical world lost much of its importance. In 1960, University of Oxford dropped knowledge of Latin as an entrance requirement. When the Soviet Union annexed eastern provinces of Poland in 1939 and set them up as western provinces of Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Belarus, Catholic children no longer studied Latin, and Jewish children no longer studied Hebrew. Latin is still studied as a foreign language, and books like *Winnie Ille Pu* and *Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis* are published, but the language and its literature are no longer the sine qua non of Western education that they were 200 years ago.

Dichotomy Girl says

I am not a linguist, and I have little to no knowledge of Latin, so I am just about as far away from the intended audience for this book that one can be. I checked out the e-book, on a whim, because it sounded interesting. And it was, in parts, unfortunately the other parts usually made my eyes bleed. I do not necessarily blame the author for this, it was just too much for my poor little ignorant brain.

Nevertheless, the sections on the influence of Christianity was particularly interesting.

But if you are like me, and not a linguist, and don't know Latin, I do not recommend that you read this.

Eric says

In this book, Nicholas Ostler, also author of _Empires of the Word_, traces the history of the Latin language from its origins in a melange of dead Italic languages and Greek influences through its heyday as language of Empire and Church and its decline and ghettoization in an ivory prison.

Though biased as a Hellenistic historian, I found the earlier chapters of the book on ancient Latin and its relationship to Greek language and culture to be the strongest. In these chapters, Ostler dazzles the reader with pages and pages of loan words, but organized in such a way so as not to become tedious or pedantic. His style throughout has this quality: you never feel lectured at, even when his discussion ranges to the driest of topics. These early chapters also chronicle the development of the idea of grammar itself, a fascinating subject.

The other strongest part of the book is actually his chapter on Latin America and the bringing of Latin to the New World through Spanish and Portugese universities. The training of local, indigenous priests and educated laymen was at a very high level very soon after the conquest of the Aztecs and Incas, and anecdotal accounts point to a level of linguistic knowledge among these American students that even surpassed that of the clerics back in the Old World.

This book is not just a book on history or culture or linguistics, but a very intelligent and thought-provoking synthesis of all three (and some other things besides). How the Latin language became what it was at various points in history, who used it and how and why, and the dynamic relationship between the speaker and the language he speaks all inform Ostler's analysis. Highly recommended for anyone interested in any of these fields.

Elizabeth says

This is a book that somewhat puzzles me--how did Ostler write his book proposal? I can't quite figure out the audience--it must be people like me, who are well-educated, but feel some inadequacy in their lack of classical learning. But I get the sense that a true classicist would be bored by it. And even as an academic without training in Latin, much of the historical context is well-known. That's not to say there aren't gems hidden within, and as a non-specialist, I did appreciate the greater exposure to the language. I was particularly intrigued by the changes which occurred in the middle ages by Scholastics, who necessarily coined new terms, and standardized certain endings (-tas, atio, and the word entitas--"of being" for example), for the ease of their system of scholarship, namely dictations and disputations. This was useful for understanding why later Renaissance humanists were so adamant about "returning" to Ciceronian Latin. In any case, for the aforementioned features and Ostler's care in research and non-pedantic tone, this book is a 4. I think linguists (linguisticians??) and persons interested generally in language growth, change, and decline would find this an interesting read; but you really have to already have that intrinsic motivation. Definitely not a pick-up and get-sucked-in. :)

Karel says

With Ad Infinitum Nicholas Ostler has achieved a magisterial overview of the history of the Latin language. The work covers the full breadth of the language's history, which spans almost 3000 years, and it predominantly approaches this topic from a historical perspective. That is to say, while Ostler is a trained Linguist and Classicist, it is possible to read this book without any expert knowledge in these disciplines,

and, for the more complex or less directly relevant matters, the author has chosen to use footnotes or taken the time to explain the necessary technical details. An academic bibliography has been included at the back of the book to provide readers with a guide to the academic literature on which Ostler has based his argument.

The chronologically structured chapters brim with erudition and provide insightful, entertaining and expert information from the first to the last paragraph. The book has been written by an exceptionally qualified and intelligent author, and the structure of the argument, the general approach to historiographical writing, the selection of citations from primary sources, and the writer's awareness of societal differences and developments from widely divergent periods all point this out. In one sentence, Ostler has written a singularly smart book for linguistically oriented, historically interested readers.

A point of criticism is that while Ostler's work is both gripping and informative, it is likely that some readers will find his nonchalant writing style somewhat offputting. The work reads as if the author wrote it at a fast pace, and Ostler seems to have prioritised content over stylistic finesse. One occasionally gets the feeling that a more thorough editing job would have benefited the works' overall legibility and intelligibility. Given the quality of Ostler's intellect and historical insights, however, the stylistic infelicities are excusable and should not deter readers from picking up this marvellous work of popular scholarship.

Bryant says

Better on tidbits than on the big picture, this book tries to cover too much in too little space and ends up reading at times like a textbook: superficial summaries of vast swathes of history about which you'd rather know more--or just nothing at all.

All the same, several of the tidbits are interesting:

1. in the Middle Ages, a classroom text colorfully depicted the Seven Liberal Arts as having distinct personalities. I particularly like the description of Grammar:

"Grammatica is an old lady with highly polished manners, and various surgical appliances, such as a scalpel to excise the vices in children's tongues, an inky powder that could heal the same, and an extremely sharp medicine ... to be applied to the throat in case of fetid burps brought on by unschooled boorishness."

2. When the Bolsheviks took over Russia, they abolished Latin from the school curriculum, evidence of the extent to which the language was (and still is) perceived as the preserve of an elite.

3. "In 1903 the Italian mathematician Giuseppe Peano, having once received with dismay a letter from another mathematician written in Japanese, made a sustained attempt to rehabilitate a form of Latin as a universal language."

4. As recently as 2006 Finland proposed re-instating Latin as the language of international diplomacy, citing the use of French as an unfair privileging of a contemporary culture. Latin, the Finnish minister argued, does not give special status to any current political dispensation.

Ostler is also very strong on the ways in which the specifically Roman way of conquering places assisted the spread of Latin. But as this book goes on, one senses that Ostler has undertaken a subject that's simply too

big.

Jennifer says

Lector intende: Laetaberis Reader, pay attention. You will enjoy yourself.” Apuleius, Metamorphoseon, i.I. This was a fantastic book filled with fascinating insights that gave me a new perspective on European history. I found it very well-written, thoroughly researched, and scholarly without being dry. While there is a lot of Latin in it and even more in the endnotes, you don’t have to know Latin to read and enjoy this book (although I am sure it is even better if you do). Translations into modern English are provided alongside every Latin quote. To give an idea of what the book explores, here is a quote I found especially memorable: “Languages create worlds to live in, not just in the minds of their speakers, but in their lives, and their descendants’ lives, where those ideas become real. The world that Latin created is today called Europe. And as Latin formed Europe, it also inspired the Americas. Latin in fact has been the constant in the cultural history of the West, extending over two millennia.” (page 20). Another comes from the same page, “it was the [Roman] Empire that gave Latin its overarching status. But, like the Roman arches put up with the support of a wooden scaffold, the language was to prove far more enduring than its creator. As the common language of Europe, spoken and written unchanged by courtiers, clerics, and international merchants, its active use lasted three times as long as Rome’s dominion. Even now, it echoes on in the law codes of half the world, in the terminologies of biology and medicine, and until forty years ago in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, the most populous form of Christianity on earth.”

Jackson Cyril says

An intriguing look at the language that dominated the last 2000 years of European life-- we forget that until the 19th century, fluency in Latin was THE mark of an educated European. Ostler discusses the rise of Latin-- in the face of stiff linguistic competition, it's remarkable ability to absorb words and concepts from other languages, and ultimately the manner in which the adoption of Latin by the Church changed it linguistically but kept it alive long after Rome 'fell'. The chapters on the intersection between Latin and other languages-- Etruscan, Arabic, Hebrew etc-- and the slow evolution of modern European vernaculars are also fascinating.

Andrew Fish says

How do you tell the story of a language? For this book, the answer is to tell the story of the events which gave it rise, propagated it, caused it to evolve and ultimately killed it. From the way you can tell the unrecorded history of ancient migrations and early conflicts through the relationships between languages, through to the popularisation of the nation state and its vernacular, this is a broad-reaching story.

Along the way there are some surprising twists on what we are usually told. So the decline of Roman Britain, evidenced in the much smaller imprint left on the country by Latin, is shown to be based on an early attack of Black Death delivered along the trade routes to the Roman communities, leaving the isolated enclaves of Germanic peoples to make their linguistic mark. Newton's Principia Mathematica was not written in Latin to keep it obscure, but rather because he was at the end of a tradition where all such works were written so. And Latin America gains its name because the language had its final success amongst the natives there, with histories of the Aztec peoples being written not in the Spanish of their conquerors but the Latin of their

conquerors' conquerors. Even the cause of Latin's ultimate decline - a humanistic obsession with preserving the language of Cicero in aspic - is unexpected.

Not unnaturally, such a dense and complicated story is difficult to pot into a few hundred pages - something I suspect would be equally the case in Latin itself - so the book does sometimes seem to operate at a breathless pace. This means that the fine detail of how the language evolved, of the exact process by which the romance languages rose from it, these things are kept to a minimum. This is a shame, since it was more what I was hoping to learn, but it is not a failing of this book so much as a reason to find another for later. When I find it, I suspect the background provided by this accessible volume will help tremendously. And for those who don't really care when and why gracias parted company with obrigado or au revior said goodbye to ciao, Ad Infinitum will still provide an immensely enjoyable and entertaining read.

---

adam says

This is a really good overview of the Latin language which traces its evolution through nearly three centuries of continuous use – albeit in different forms, by different groups, and, especially, for vastly different purposes. Ostler is a trained linguist who, along with David Crystal and Stephen Pinker, has helped to bring the fruits of recent advances in linguistics to a wider audience (his most well-known work being the scholarly but accessible to the lay reader "Empires of the Word.") It is little surprise, then, that Ostler is at his best when he is able to bring linguistic tools and methodologies to bear on the subject. Particularly compelling and simultaneously intriguing is his explanation of the various mechanisms by which Latin spread and took root in the various parts of the Roman Empire, both before, during, and after its peak. The scope of the work is broad, tracing the evolution of Latin through nearly three millennia from its origins as one of several Italic languages to its eventual relegation to the halls of academia today. Along the way he tells of the happy coincidence of Latin's use by a small group of speakers that would slowly but inexorably come to dominate Latium, Italy, the Mediterranean, and beyond, and he shows how, following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Latin persisted and contributed both directly and indirectly to the development of the modern Romance languages and English. Even the well-read Classicist stands to learn a lot from this volume, as he brings light to the seldom studied history of Latin in medieval times and the early renaissance; and in so doing he gives much long overdue attention and credit to the Arab scholars who, in their translations of Aristotle, Euclid, and Plato, were instrumental in transmitting the scientific and cultural knowledge of the Classical world. And even the reader only casually interested in either Latin or the evolution of language in general will find that in telling the story of Latin Ostler cannot but also write a synoptic history of Europe itself.
If there is anything to detract from this thoroughly researched and highly engaging book, it is that at times the vast scope of the project leaves little room for anything but encyclopedic lists of writers, dates, neologisms, and other trivia and tidbits. This can result in some stretches of rather dry reading. A particularly striking example of this tendency is on page ____ where Ostler gives a list of nearly 100 words newly coined by Scholastic writers in order to translate Greek or Arabic into Latin. Such exhaustive lists seem out of place in such a work, in which a few particularly illustrative examples would be sufficient to show how these scholars revitalized and re-imagined the lexicon of Latin.
Overall, Ostler (whose own knowledge of Latin, I might add, appears to be very strong) is a highly entertaining writer who is able to keep one turning the pages even through the dry spells.

Laura says

Finally finished it! My interest in Latin is mostly in the language in a synchronic framework; I've never been that interested in Roman history, though I recognize how important it is. The author writes in great detail about the vocabulary and structure (particularly the vocabulary) of Latin as it was spoken in the lands of the Roman Empire and why it developed the way it did, which is up my alley. He also spends a lot of time on the role of Latin in post-Roman European education... the sort of stuff that it's good to know, as an educated person, but not so interesting to me. The book also has to cover hundreds, if not thousands, of years of European history in a way that provides the appropriate context while also making the book substantially about something else, and so it was hard to really understand that well what was happening historically. But a good read on several topics.

Stewart says

Nicholas Ostler's book is a history of the Latin language from the early Roman state and the Etruscans to the 21st century. As a person who took two years of classical Latin in high school, learned medieval/church Latin as an altar boy, and have periodicaly brushed up on the language, I found the book of great interest. There is much about the development of Romance languages and English. For instance, Latin has six cases and three genders for nouns, reduced to one or two cases and two genders in French/Italian/Spanish/Portuguese. "All the languages lost the genitive, dative, and ablative cases, except for Rumanian, which alone mainained the genitive." Latin is a free-order language with verbs often at the end. The Romance languages are usually SVO, as is English. There is also fascinating information on colors: Latin had four basic colors (niger/black, albus/white, ruber/red, viridus/green). Modern languages have more to choose from. Albus has been replaced in Romance languages and English except in Rumanian (alb). Spanish/Italian "blanco," French "blanc," English "white." Latin retains a great influence in English, providing 50 percent of its vocabulary, and in botanical terminology and the law.

---

satej soman says

Excellent overview of the influence of Greek and Etruscan on early Latin, how Latin interacted with other prestige languages (like Arabic or Nahuatl), and how Latin is a useful testing ground for modern studies of semantics. The entire section on medieval Latin was pretty boring; the period of European rediscovery of Greek and Arabic texts is literally a list of authors, titles, and locations.

Also a great source of trivia - did you know that Denmark and the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty in Latin?
