

## BELLARIA XXVIII



### DERIVATIONS (1)

The next few *Bellaria* will range far and wide over the unexpected or not obvious derivations of those words taken into English whose roots lie in Latin and Greek.

But first, it is worth reminding ourselves of the broader picture of how English, a Germanic language, came to be so richly infiltrated with Latin and Greek, with such glorious consequences for the capacity of English to express different tones, shades, colours through its variety of different lexical bases.

## THE ROOTS OF THE ENGLISH 'CLASSICAL' VOCABULARY: A SUMMARY

The term 'Anglo-Saxons' covers Frisians from Holland, Saxons from North Germany, and Angles and Jutes from Denmark. All their languages are 'Germanic'. Since it is that language that the Anglo-Saxons brought over with them to these islands from the 5th C AD, displacing Celtic and whatever Latin was still spoken, English too is a Germanic language.

Till then, we were, as the Romans called us, *Britanni*, living in *Brit(t)an(n)ia*. They derived these names from the discoveries of the famous Greek explorer Pytheas (4th C BC). He called these islands *Pretannikê*, probably because the locals called themselves *Pretanior Priteni* ('painted people').

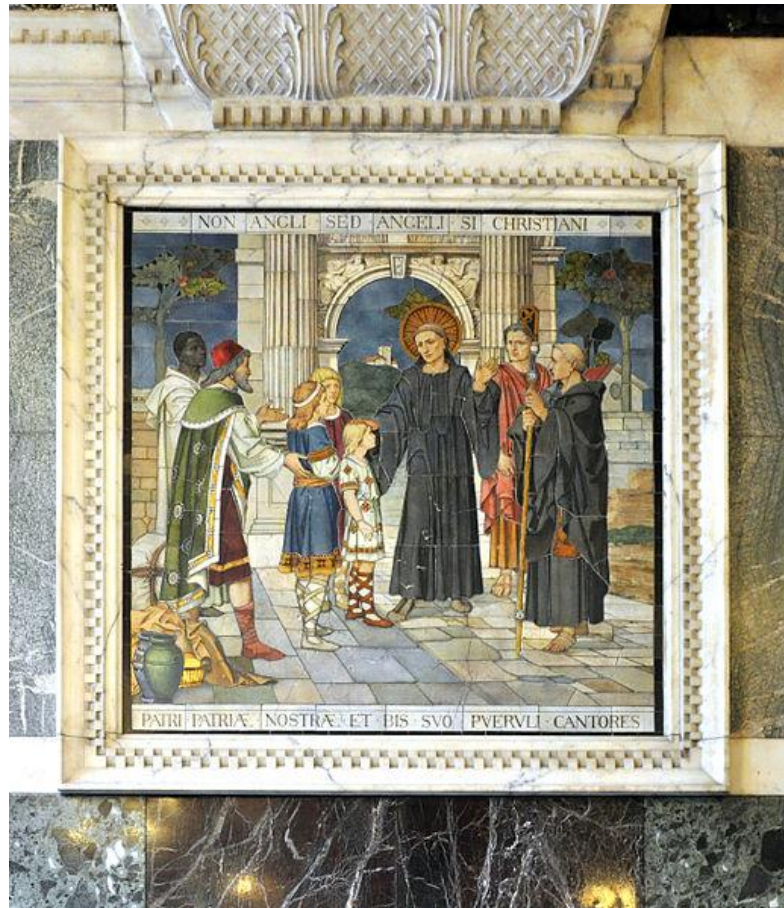


Pytheas: what the well-dressed traveller is wearing

Though in the classical tradition we still lived in Britannia, with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons,

(i) we got another name, 'Engla Land'. ('England' is not recorded till the 16th C.);  
(ii) as a result of which, the Romans now called us *Angli*. Famous joke: when Pope Gregory (d. 604) first saw pale Angle slave boys, he was so impressed he said 'Not *Angli*, but *angeli*, if they became Christians'. The reaction to this screamer is not recorded.

(iii) Interestingly, the Roman historian Tacitus (c. AD 98) refers to a Germanic tribe called the *Anglii*, living on the south Denmark/north German border.



*Non angli sed angeli, si forent Christiani* (Westminster Cathedral)

### From Latin into Anglo-Saxon and English

The Anglo-Saxons who came here had been trading with Romans for a long time and their vocabulary had adopted a lot of Latin words. As a result, Anglo-Saxon gave us 'wine' (via Latin *uinum*), 'mile' (*mille passus*), 'beer' (*bibere*), 'street' (*strata*), 'cheap' (*caupo*), 'sock' (*soccus*), 'sack' (*saccus*).

### Church Latin and Greek, from the 6th C AD

From the 6th C AD these islands were Christianised, and the church brought with it a panoply of technical terms into the language, both Latin and Greek.

**From Latin:** mass (*missa*), altar (*altaris*), preach (*praedico*), verse (*versus*), epistle (*epistula*), provost (*praepositus*), noon (*nona* the ninth hour), creed (*credo*), disciple (*discipulus*).

**From Greek,** transmitted into Latin and latinized: school (Greek *scholê* 'leisure', Latin *scola*), apostle (*apostolos* 'sent out', *apostolus*), acolyte (*akolouthos* 'follower', *acolitus*), hymn (*humnos* 'song', *hymnus*), deacon (*diakonos* 'servant', *diaconus*), bishop (*episkopos* 'overseer, attendant', *episcopus*), psalm (*psalmos* 'plucking', *psalmus*), angel (*aggelos* 'messenger', *angelus*), martyr (*martus* 'witness', *martyr*),

demon (*daimôn* 'divinity', *daemon*), paradise (*paradeisos* 'garden', *paradisus*), choir (*choros* 'chorus', *chorus*).

Our 'church' has its origin in Greek *kuriakon* ('the Lord's House'), late Greek *kurikon*, Saxon *cirice*, German *Kirche*. The Latin for 'church' was *ekklêsia*, French *église*, Italian *chiesa*, our 'ecclesiastical'

### The Norman Conquest 1066

But the big one was yet to come. As a result of William Duke of Normandy's conquest in 1066—these Norsemen get everywhere—we *Englisc* were ruled by the French for some 300 years. French being a dialect of Latin, the result was a dramatic increase in Latin-based vocabulary. Thousands of words entered our language at this time via French; but—driven by the wider cultural world opened by the arrival of the French—also *directly* from Latin.



William the Conqueror

Asterisked words derive from Greek:

### From French 1150-1450

Constable, court, government\*, liberty, parliament, peasant, prince, revenue, statute, tax, tyrant\*; accuse, arrest, assault, convict, crime, decree, depose, evidence, fraud, heir, indictment, inquest, judge, libel, perjury, prison, punishment, verdict; abbey, anoint, baptism\*, cathedral\*, charity\*, communion, convent, creator, crucifix, faith, heresy\*, homily\*, mercy, miracle, religion, repent, saint, salvation, schism\*, theology\*, vicar, virgin, virtue; anatomy\*, calendar, clause, copy, gender, geometry\*, gout, grammar\*, logic\*, medicine, metal, noun, pain, physician\*, plague\*, pleurisy\*, poison, pulse, sphere\*, square, stomach\*, surgeon\*, treatise.

## Directly from Latin 1150-1450

Many of these words are of a professional and technical nature. They include:

### *Law and administration*

Arbitrator, client, conspiracy, conviction, custody, homicide, implement, legal, legitimate, memorandum, pauper, prosecute, summary, suppress, testify.

### *Science and learning*

Allegory\*, comet\*, contradiction, diaphragm\*, discuss, equator, essence, explicit, formal, history\*, index, intellect, item, library, ligament, magnify, mechanical\*, prosody\*, recipe, scribe, simile.

The language alone tells us a lot about what is going on at this time. Some idea of the impact of this massive new vocabulary can be gathered from the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (AD 1400): in 858 lines, there are nearly five hundred French loan words.



'And that's one of the ones I borrowed on long loan. *Very* long loan.'

## Doublets

We now find the linguistic phenomenon known as 'etymological doublets' emerging.

French derives from vulgar (i.e. 'every day', Latin: *vulgus* 'mob') Latin. By the medieval period, this Latin had undergone very considerable transformation in becoming French; and it was this French that William the Conqueror imposed on England.

Example: Latin *fragilis* means 'breakable'. In the course of its francification over hundreds of years, it became *fraile*. Thanks to William it entered English and became 'frail'.

But English also borrowed directly from the *original*/Latin, and in that process *fragilis* turned into 'fragile'.

Here are two other examples:

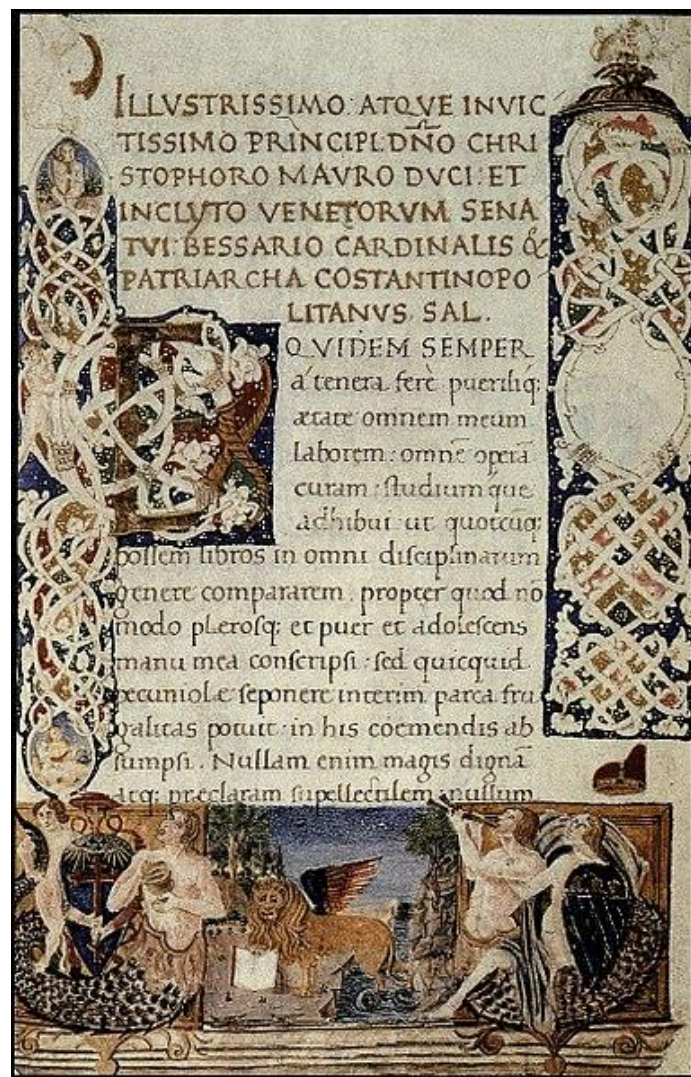
Latin *traditio* became French 'traison', and our 'treason'; directly, it became 'tradition'.

Latin *pauper* became French 'pauvre' and our 'poor'; and directly, 'pauper'.

There is even an etymological triplet: Latin *ratio* became French 'raison' and our 'reason'; and directly from Latin it became both 'ration' and 'ratio'.

### The return of Greek 1450-1650

Another important development was the re-emergence of Greek into Europe. It had died out in the West with the collapse of the Roman Empire there in the 5th C, but when Ottoman Turks started to threaten Constantinople and its Greek libraries in the 14th C, a trade in Greek manuscripts started up in order to bring them to Italy and thence into the West, saving them from probable destruction.



The letter in which Cardinal Bessarion (d. 1472) announced that he was leaving his collection of manuscripts—482 Greek, 264 Latin—to the library of St Mark's in Venice

Given the deep respect in which the ancient world was held, it is no surprise that scholars, scientists and doctors now scoured ancient Greek for the language they needed to describe the dramatic developments in their disciplines at this time. For in the wider world, the Americas were being opened up (Columbus 1492) and Copernicus was re-organising the solar system (1543); and over the next few hundred years Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen and Ptolemy would gradually be replaced as supreme arbiters of the physical, scientific and medical worlds.

So from this period we welcomed:

Adapt, agile, alienate, allusion, anachronism\*, anonymous\*, appropriate, atmosphere\*, autograph\*, capsule, catastrophe\*, chaos\*, climax\*, contradictory, crisis\*, criterion\*, critic\*, disability, disrespect, emancipate, emphasis\*, encyclopedia\*, enthusiasm\*, epilepsy\*, eradicate, exact, exaggerate, exist, explain, external, fact, glottis\*, harass, idiosyncrasy\*, larynx\*, lexicon\*, malignant, monopoly\*, monosyllable\*, obstruction, pancreas\*, parasite\*, parenthesis\*, pathetic\*, pneumonia\*, relevant, scheme\*, skeleton\*, species, system\*, tactics\*, temperature, tendon, thermometer\*, tibia, tonic\*, transcribe, ulna, utopian\*, vacuum, virus.

By this time, a language recognisable as modern English had formed. This, after all, is the world of Shakespeare (1564-1616) and the Authorized Version of the Bible (1611). (The great journalist Frank Johnson once called it the 'St James' Version': *The Times* failed to correct it). And it still goes on, even faster and more urgently, to meet the increasing demands of the scientific, medical and technological worlds.

### The resistance

This new vocabulary was not universally welcomed. John Cheke was appointed first Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge in 1540 when Greek as a subject was still in its infancy. He inveighed against the pollution of English in his letter to Sir Thomas Hoby, July 16 1557:



What a Cheke

'I am of this opinion\* that our tongue should be written clean and pure\*, unmixed\* and unmangled\* with borrowings of other tongues, wherein if we take not heed by time, ever borrowing and never paying\*, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt\*. For then doth our tongue naturally\* and praisably utter her meaning, when she borroweth no counterfeitness\* of other tongues to attire\* herself withal.'

I pedantically asterisk those words of non-Germanic origin.

Indeed, in 1573, Ralph Lever proposed a new series of delightful non-Latinate terms for the study of logic—'endsay' was proposed for 'conclusion', 'ifsay' for 'condition', 'naysay' for 'negation', 'saywhat' for 'definition', 'shewsay' for 'proposition' and 'yeasay' for 'affirmation'.

### **Ancient linguistic 'purity'**

Such debates continue to this day, but there is nothing new about them. Greeks and Romans had been arguing the toss over precisely the same issue—the 'purity' of language—since classical times.

Inevitably, it started with the Greeks. In the diversified world of the 5th C BC city-state, the Greek language was already expressed in many different dialects, which Greek 'colonising' settlers took all over the Mediterranean. When King Philip II's Macedonian court conquered Greece in the 4th C BC, the decision was made to adopt Attic Greek (the dialect of the Athenians) as the standard dialect, which already enjoyed high prestige anyway as the literary language of the Greek world. So it was this dialect that was taken East by Alexander the Great on his way to conquer the Persians and then, of course, to march on as far as India, constructing a ramshackle 'empire' as he went.



Spot the Attic Greek



But what was the literary and intellectual élite of this new ‘Greek’ world, many of whom would not have had Greek as a first language, to make of this? How could they be certain they were speaking, but much more important writing, it correctly? What were the educational implications? *Hellênismos*, a Greekness ‘faultless in respect of rules and without careless usage’ became a priority for them. The Greeks even had an adjective for ‘speaking incorrectly’—*soloikos* (cf. our ‘solecism’), said to derive from the Athenian colonists of Soloi in Cilicia (southern Turkey) what had forgot how to talk proper.

### A Greek purist

Take, for example, the 2nd C AD Greek grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus (‘the grouch’). Apollonius took strongly against ‘those who say there is no right and wrong in such matters, and assume that [linguistic] phenomena have all been established by chance, as unconnected’.

He argued that, if you examined traditional orthography, you could see that there were historical reasons behind word-formation and spelling. These generated rules that could then be learned. As a result, it was possible to identify spelling errors and correct them. If there were no rules, one could not do that.

The same, he argued, applied to every aspect of language. If you examined the whole tradition of language usage, you could see it was governed by rules, and rules could be applied, and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ usage therefore established. Exceptions, as ever, simply proved that rules existed—otherwise how could you tell they were exceptions?

### Pompey’s problem



Pompey the not so Great

The Romans followed suit. A splendid example is the problem Pompey came up against when he was preparing to consecrate his Temple to Victory in 55 BC. He wanted to say that he was ‘consul for the third time’—but what case should he put it in? Should he be *consulem tertium* (‘for the third time’, accusative, expressing time ‘throughout’, i.e. consul throughout the whole of the year) or *consule tertio* (the ablative *tertio* expressing time ‘when’, i.e. consul in the year)?

Overwhelmed by the intractability of this apparently insuperable problem, he consulted widely but could get no definitive answer. So he gave up and went to Cicero to make the final decision. He mulled a bit and suggested he abbreviate it and write *cos. tert.* So he did. Years later, when the wall containing the inscription fell down and was rebuilt, the number of the third consulship was indicated by III.

### The educational implications

The Graeco-Latin based vocabulary listed above reads like a handbook of the language of secondary and higher education. The child who is to graduate successfully from its earliest lexical range—the basic Anglo-Saxon of primary education—to this increasingly Graeco-Latin ‘register’ of secondary and higher education will have no problems if that register is standard in their home. Those for whom this is not the case may well struggle. It is then up to schools to offer a linguistically rich environment accessible to everyone.

This clearly is a situation in which Latin and Greek can make an important contribution, as *Classics for All* has been demonstrating up and down some very deprived areas of the UK.



*This is an extract selected for you as part of Classics for All's 'Bellaria' series to cheer us up during the COVID-19 pandemic. The full series of weekly instalments may be found on our website [classicsforall.org.uk/bellaria/](https://classicsforall.org.uk/bellaria/)*