BELLARIA XXX

DERIVATIONS (3)

The next few *Bellaria* will range far and wide over words whose roots lie in Latin and Greek, and were taken into English.

One of the reasons for the success of Christianity was that Christians worked within the political, social and cultural framework of paganism, slowly reconstructing it as Christian. For example, D.O.M. is often seen on Roman inscriptions: *Deo Optimo Maximo* '[dedicated to] God Greatest Best', i.e. Jupiter, a very ancient form of address. Christians happily took it over, referring to the Christian deity.

Churches

Christians regularly built churches on pagan sites, but they did not resemble Greek or Roman temples: they resembled the Roman *basilica* (via Greek *basileus* 'king'), a quasi-royal, magnificent double-colonnaded hall, used for legal and other civilian purposes but now taken over for Christian purposes, in particular, holding a congregation, and featuring an apse. Contrast pagan temples: they housed the god, who was worshiped outside, at the altar.

Santa Sabina (5th C AD)

Vicars, dioceses and bishops

In the late third century AD, the emperor Diocletian faced a major financial crisis. In order to increase the tax take, he greatly enlarged bureaucracy across the Roman Empire. He replaced the original forty-two provinces with 120 areas, grouped into twelve 'dioceses' (*dioikêsis*, 'administration'), each led by a *uicarius*, 'deputy, substitute', an official taking over the role of a praetorian prefect. (And, incidentally, military command of these new regions was handed to *duces*, 'leaders, generals', whence our 'dukes'.)

Christians reworked these functions. Each of their new administrative 'dioceses' was overseen by an *episcopus* (Greek *episkopos*, 'overseer, guardian') i.e. bishop, who was Christ's *vicarius* 'substitute' on earth. ('Vicar' became the term for a parish priest, 14th C). 'Bishop' does actually derive from *episcopus*: Saxon English dropped e- and final –us, leaving *piscop*, softening the –sc- into sh.

Zeus, god of diaries

What do the day, a journal, Diana, Zeus, *Iup(p)iter* (Jupiter), Jove, and the Latin for a god (*deus*) all have in common? Answer: the same PIE root.

That root is **dei-u-o-*. It seems to have meant 'bright sky', very appropriate for Jupiter and Zeus, who were gods of the bright sky. No surprise, then, that the

Latin for 'day' was *dies*. *Diurnus* meant 'daily', and is the source of our 'journal', and *diarium* was indeed a 'diary'.

One can see how 'Zeus' (who in Greek was pronounced 'Sdeus') and Latin *deus* line up with **dei-u-o-* + terminal s. But what about *Iuppiter*? *Iuppiter* is in fact a combination of **dei-u-o-* + *pater* ('bright sky' + 'father'). He sometimes appears in Latin as *Diespiter*.

Further, **dei-u-o-* also produced the stem *diu-*, as in *diuinus* and the goddess *Di(u)ana*. That 'u(v)' appears again in the stem of *Iu-ppiter*, which was was *Iou-*, → 'Jove'. In astrology, birth under the planet Jupiter bestowed a cheerful frame of mind, → 'jovial'.

Temples

The derivation of Latin *templum* is not secure. It has been associated with Greek *temenos* 'sanctuary, a place "cut off"'. When, for example, a priest examined the flight of birds to try to divine the will of the gods, the first thing he did was to use the correct procedure to 'cut' or mark out a space in the sky—the *templum*—where the relevant birds would appear. On land, a *templum* was a piece of ground marked out for the gods, and then the building constructed on it.

Our word 'template'—a pattern or gauge for shaping a piece of work—derives from *templum*. So does 'contemplate', as in someone watching attentively for an augury from a *templum*.

Syracuse Cathedral, complete with columns from 5th C BC temple of Athena
Photographed by Giovanni Dall' Orto (2008)

Golgotha or Calvary?

In the crucifixion story, the Greek New Testament turned Hebrew 'Gulgolet' into Greek 'Golgotha', and when that name is mentioned, the Gospel texts all explain the name - 'which means/is called/is in Hebrew/ the place of the skull' (Greek *kranion*, cf. 'cranium'). But in *Luke*, Golgotha is not mentioned and the Greek simply says, 'and when they came to the place which is called *Kranion*'. Which is wrong. It was called (in Greek anyway) Golgotha.

St Jerome produced the definitive Latin version of the Gospels, correcting the previous Latin ones and presumably using his knowledge of Greek in the process. He translated 'place *of the skull*' as *calvariae*, gen. s. of *calvaria*, 'skull'. Fine.

But when it comes to *Luke*, he translated it 'and when they came to the place, which is called Calvariae'—which the Authorised Version turned into 'and when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary'.

Modern translations have corrected this and translate 'which is called the Skull'. So, alas, Calvary is no more, together (I suppose) with all those hymns mentioning it. 'Skull' and 'cranium' do not have the same ring, somehow.


Golgotha: spot the skull

Elysium

Used of the abode of the blessed after death (but this was just one of any number of pagan beliefs about the afterlife), *Êlusion* was associated with places that were struck by lightning (Greek *êlusia*) and therefore set apart from worldly use—rather as York Minster was, when the genial David Jenkins, the bishop who 'did not believe in the Bible', was consecrated there as Bishop of Durham in 1984. Far from demonstrating divine wrath, it actually demonstrated divine approval...
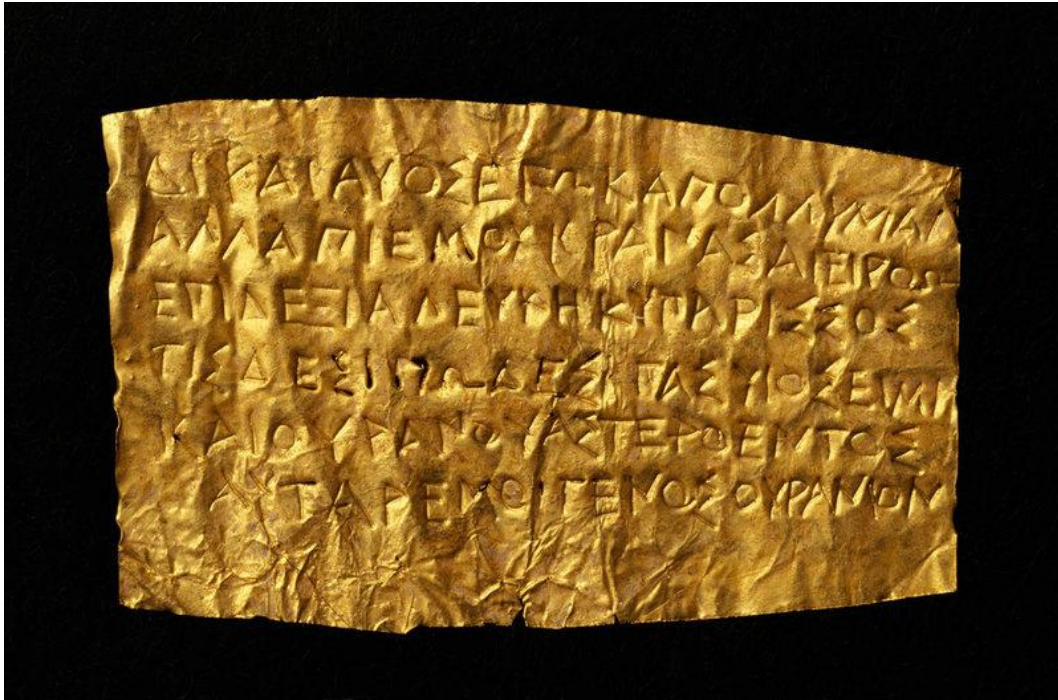
Gold Orphic *lamella*, a passport to Elysium

Cardinals, and others

Latin *cardo cardin-is* meant 'hinge, pivot' and was used of the pivots or poles on which the universe rotated round the earth; hence 'essential, principal', used of **cardinals** in the Catholic church as well as numbers, sins, virtues and points of the compass. **Angels** were messengers from God (Greek *angelos*, 'human messenger', 'envoy'); an **apostle** (Greek *apostolos*) was 'one sent out', 'ambassador', 'envoy' of God; an **acolyte**, Latin *acolytus*, a minor assistant in religious ceremonies, came from Greek *akolouthos*, 'follower'; the **devil**, Greek *diabolos*, 'one who slanders, accuses, misrepresents', became 'deofol' in Anglo-Saxon, whence 'devil'; **priest** derives either from Latin *presbyter* 'elder'→Anglo-Saxon 'preost'→'pries't, or Latin *praepositus* (as in 'preposition'!) →Germanic 'prest'→'priest', cf. 'provost'; **clergy** (cleric, clerk) all find their origin in late Latin *clericus* from Greek *klêros* 'voting token, lot; allotment, piece of land'—no one is clear precisely why; a **pagan** derives from Latin *paganus* 'countryman, peasant'. But it also meant 'civilian' as opposed to 'soldier'. Apparently, when Christians began calling themselves 'soldiers for Christ', *paganus* was applied to those who were not such soldiers, and therefore must be 'heathens'; finally **cretin** (French *crétin*) whose origin is uncertain but some derive it from *christianus*, first used in the eighteenth century to refer to mentally or physically disabled people, not to abuse them but to remind people that they were humans after all.
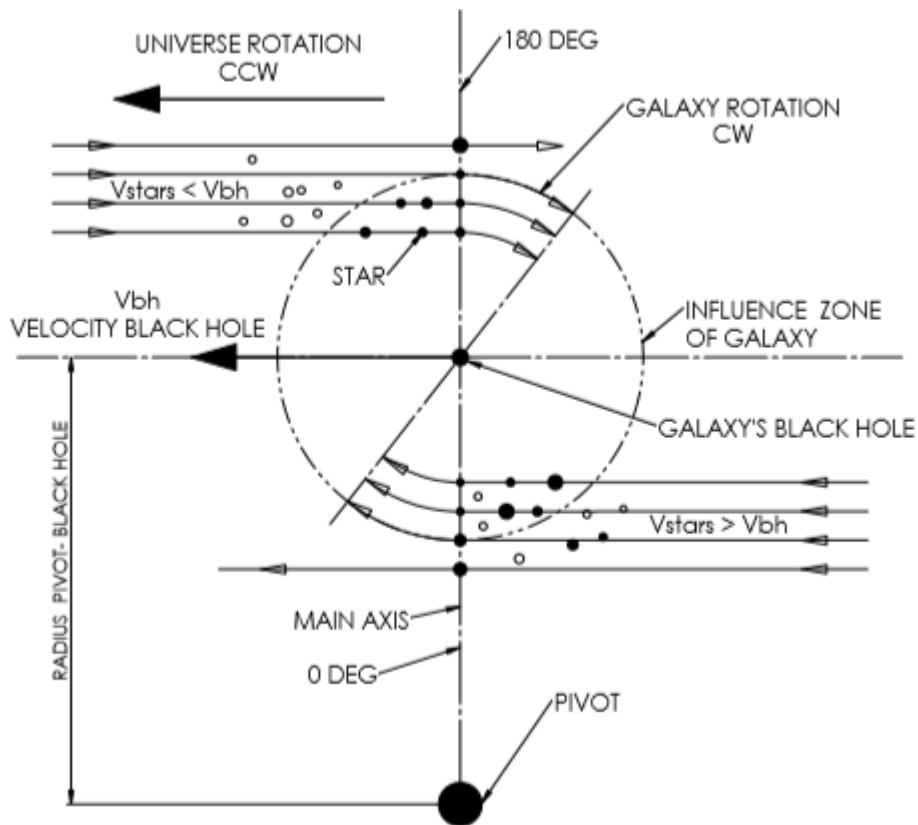
Pivot of the universe (a black hole)

Chancel

At racecourses, courts and theatres, Romans put up barriers in order to control the crowds. These often took the form of grilles or gratings in a lattice or criss-cross pattern. The poet Ovid wrote a poem about going to the races to try to win the favour of his girl. They sat down in the front row, but her legs were too short to reach the ground. So, gentleman that he was at least pretending to be, he suggested she inserts her toes into the grating.

The Latin word for this grille/grating was *cancellus*, also used of the criss-cross lines on an elephant's hide and is the source of our 'cancel'—which you do by using a pen to *cross* things out. It also gives us 'chancellor'—these days a powerful governmental or university official, but originally a *cancellarius*, the humble door-keeper guarding the emperor's palace behind a grill, or a legal scribe sitting behind a grating separate from the crowds. The 'chancel' in a church was originally the lattice barrier that divided the choir and altar from the nave, and then became the term used of that protected space around the altar.

Chancel screen

Grace

Our 'grace' in the sense of God's unmerited goodwill or favour derives from Latin *gratia*. Its Greek equivalent was *kharis* (χάρις, cf. 'charity'). Both words had meanings rooted in the idea of reciprocity, i.e. the social requirement to return benefits (or injuries) tit-for-tat. This was a key feature of ancient values. Christianity put a quite different gloss on the idea: God's favours, freely given, were impossible to reciprocate.

Religio

The root meaning of pagan *religio* centred on ideas of constraint, impediment, prohibition and fear, evoking feelings of awe and reverence and on the other the need for appeasement through ritual, e.g. sacrifice, Latin *sacrifico* lit. 'I make something sacred' and therefore remove it from human use.

'Faith' did not come into it: acknowledging the existence and power of deities by carrying out the right rituals at the right time did. But the derivation of *religio* remains a matter of guesswork: from *religo* 'I bind, constrain'? *Relego* 'I review, consider carefully' (Cicero's analysis, because the *religiosi* were people who 'rehearsed and studied afresh all the ritual involved in divine worship')?


A sacrifice

Superstitio

In Latin *superstitio* meant 'irrational religious awe or credulity'. It derives, bafflingly, from *sto*, 'I stand', and *super*, 'over, above'; and its adjective *superstes* meant 'survivor'. As an adjective *superstitiosus*, it meant 'in a state of religious exaltation, ecstatic'. Deep derivational waters here, Watson: does it hide the idea that 'proper' religion took a long time to shake off all this original, superstitious stuff?

Literature tells us much about such superstitious practices: astrology, witchcraft, calling up the dead, curse tablets and voodoo dolls were all commonplace. In his *Characters*, Theophrastus (fourth century BC) described 'the superstitious man' as someone who went far beyond normal religious devotion, e.g. he would not walk on if a weasel crossed his path unless someone went before him, or he had thrown three stones across the road.

The first century BC statesman Cicero saw '*religio* as a term of respect, *superstitio* one of contempt'. He defined *superstitio* as 'pointless fear of the gods' and contrasted those who explained the world 'through the superstitions of fortune-telling hags' with those who did so 'through explanations based on natural causes'.

In other words, the gods had ordered the universe so that it was comprehensible; and *religio*, with its various cults and ritual, reflected that ordered comprehensibility. Admittedly, Cicero still had doubts about taking auspices, for example, but thought on balance they were 'harmless'.

Roman authorities, however, took *superstitio* very seriously if it seemed to threaten Roman order: magic books, the use of drugs for sinister ends, alternative religions (e.g. Christianity, Druidism) could all evoke the state's intervention.
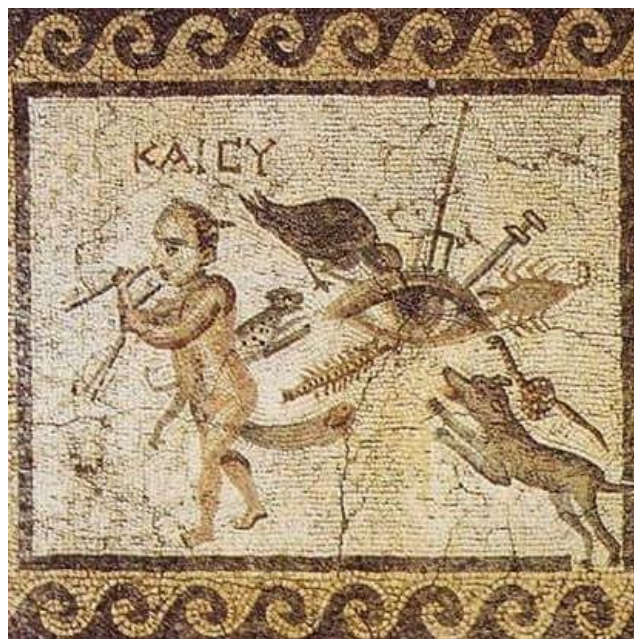
Devices against the Evil Eye (Antioch)

Augury

The behaviour of birds was seen as a particularly potent indicator of divine (dis)pleasure. The religious official who worked bird-auguries was called an *augur*—its derivation from *augeo* 'increase' (if true) is hard to explain—or an *auspex* (*auis* 'bird' + *spex* 'watcher', from the *spec-* root → 'inspect' etc.). An augury gained from avian behaviour was an *auspicium*, whence our 'auspices, auspicious'. The *haruspex* read entrails.

Haruspex hard at work

Fascinating stuff

The poet Tibullus (first century BC) told how a witch had given him a spell with which he could bamboozle his lover's husband:

> 'I've seen her bringing stars down from the sky,
> reverse fast-flowing rivers with her song.
> Her spells can split the ground, lure up the dead,
> summon bones from smoking pyres ...'

The Latin for 'casting a spell' was *fascinatio*, and a thing that cast a spell was a *fascinum* 'evil spell, bewitchment'. *Fascinum* also meant 'penis', and 'phallic amulet, worn round the neck as a charm'. Well, always worth a try, I suppose. Let Pliny the Elder expand on the matter:

> 'Infants are guarded by *Fascinus*, and so too are generals. *Fascinus*, dangling from under the chariot of a general celebrating a triumph, protects him from envy. The worship of *Fascinus* is overseen by the Vestal Virgins.'

We are told that a large version thereof was the object of their worship.

From Amazon (currently unavailable)

Numen

Latin *numen* (our 'numinous') meant literally 'nod' and came to have a religious significance as a 'divine or supernatural power or influence, divine presence, deity'. When two young Trojans in Aeneas' army proposed a daring expedition against enemies in Italy, an old soldier praised the god under whose *numen* Troy had been sheltered for continuing to look after them. Ovid talked of places you saw of which you could say 'there is a *numen* here'. Objects too could be imbued with *numen*.

Ritual

This has connection with our 'rite', but not our 'right' (a Germanic word related to kings, cf. Reich). It comes from Latin *ritus*, 'ceremonies, practice', which shares links with Greek *arithmos* 'number', in the sense of counting things off in the correct order. 'Ceremony' was popularly derived from Latin *caerimonia* ('sanctity, reverence, rituals'), supposedly referring to religious rituals associated with the Etruscan town of Caere (the –*monia* ending is linked with activity as well as quality). But that is folk-etymology. Or, as the POTUS (though he doesn't drink: so what is he on?) would say, 'fake etymology'.

Cult

Cultus derived from *colo*, 'I inhabit, cultivate, adorn, look after, care for, practise, foster' and embraced knowledge about, and active caring for, everything to do with the gods. This included caring for their holy places, such as temples and shrines, and the ceremonies and rituals with which they were worshipped.

Cult statues

Our 'statue' derives from Latin *statua*, whose root was *sto* (*stat-*), 'I stand', and was something fixed in the ground to remain upright (one's stature—*statura*—was and is one's height in an upright position). To throw a *statua* to the ground was therefore to deny its very nature, a tremendous insult. When Roman emperors

were thrown out of office in disgrace, their statues were usually uprooted—together with their *status* (same derivation), their 'standing', in the world.

A cult statue was normally called a *simulacrum*, a simulated image (*simulo*, 'I pretend, counterfeit'), because one could not tell what a deity actually looked like; by contrast, the usual term for a human statue was *imago*, a 'representation', 'reflection', as in a mirror.