

TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN WEST

The ERC-funded LatinNow Project investigates the Latinisation of the northwestern Roman provinces. Dr Alex Mullen explains more

Under the Roman Empire the northwestern provinces underwent radical cultural changes. The precise nature of the transformation has been long debated, even by Roman historians themselves. The linguistic dimension and how it fits into the broader cultural sphere has, however, been underexplored. The five-year ERC-funded project LatinNow is writing the first sociolinguistic history of Latinisation in all its sociocultural complexity, and finding that its themes resonate in modern Europe.

Writing a new social history

LatinNow is an interdisciplinary project linking sociolinguistics, epigraphy and archaeology to write a new social history. Dramatic changes occurred linguistically in the northwestern Roman Empire: a patchwork of local languages which existed in the Iron Age had been all but replaced by Latin as the dominant language by the end of the imperial period. Precisely how, when and why this change occurred, and how it relates to other social phenomena, remains a poorly understood topic central to the Roman world. The story of Latinisation is also the story of local languages: how widespread was bi- and multilingualism, how was Latin itself changed through linguistic contact, and which identities do the linguistic varieties express? In order to undertake this investigation we must cut across provincial boundaries, and those between the Iron Age, Roman and early medieval periods, and reach beyond Classics to modern sociolinguistics and Germanic, Celtic and Palaeo-hispanic studies.



Alex Mullen

The project focuses principally on the Iberian Peninsula, the Germanies, Noricum, Raetia, Gaul and Britain. It employs an approach which exploits both epigraphic and archaeological material (the remains of writing and writing equipment, which in some contexts can be used as a proxy for the uptake of Latin)

and situates the learning of oral and written Latin and the fate of local languages within broader social developments. Drawing together the developing strands of sociolinguistics, bilingualism studies, digital epigraphy, and small finds archaeological investigation into an integrated methodology brings a fresh perspective, founded on empirical data and supported by evolving technologies. Two of these technologies, EpiDoc and Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), will be heavily exploited. EpiDoc, promoted by the Europeana EAGLE project which now provides access to hundreds of thousands of inscriptions, is TEI-XML (Text Encoded Initiative markup language) designed for digital epigraphy and allows complex searches to be undertaken across large volumes of material. RTI is a digital imaging technique which allows difficult-to-read material to become clearer than when viewed with the naked eye. These new technologies and large amounts of new data for digital epigraphy and for numerous other related social phenomena make LatinNow possible.

Outputs and outreach

The project benefits from the expertise at two locations: the University of Nottingham and the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (CSAD), Oxford, both in the UK. The team is also supported by a dozen European special advisers based in several countries. We will produce three open access volumes: the first will present the research of the principal investigator and the research fellows on Latinisation, bi- and multilingualism and literacy in the provinces; the second will transmit the work of an international group of experts on the major social factors related to Latinisation and literacy; and the third will bring together both groups to report on language death and survival in the Roman and post-Roman world. We will be presenting the data collected by the project team in a publicly accessible graphic information system (GIS). Professor Alan Bowman will also be working with the PI to produce a state-of-the-art cursive Latin manual (both online and in print) to help students and researchers read the large amount of output from the Roman world that is written not in lapidary capitals but in



Fig. 1 Map of the Roman provinces under investigation in LatinNow



Fig. 2 Homepage of Roman Inscriptions of Britain online, showing the tombstone of Regina from South Shields, UK

'Roman handwriting', for example, that found on the recently published 'first generation tablets' hailing from the immediately post-conquest Roman London. This manual will showcase all the latest techniques in imaging and digital epigraphy pioneered by the CSAD. The project is also facilitating the completion of the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain online* by Scott Vanderbilt: a fantastic and already well-utilised resource, complete with EpiDoc, for detailed research and for general interest in Roman Britain.

One of the most exciting outputs of the project will be the European Touring Exhibition which will present the project's findings and a range of original and replica materials supplied by the museums along the route. It will promote local cultural histories, unity in diversity and the concept of multiple identities, as well as disseminate skills across the European Research Area via the training of local interested parties in, for example, EpiDoc and RTI. The team will also run multiple schools sessions in the UK which aim to inspire children to learn languages, as well as to enquire about the Roman world and language histories. The project's activities are offered at no charge and suggestions, using the contact details below for materials we should include and stops we should make, are warmly welcomed.

Current concerns in ancient inscriptions

An inscribed funerary monument from second-century South Shields in northeastern England illustrates several of the themes of the project. It is dedicated to a woman, Regina, from the southern British tribe of the Catuvellauni by her husband Barates of Palmyra. Barates may be a *vexillarius*, either a standard bearer or a standard maker, and may have moved from Syria as a military man or as a trader associated with the army. He dedicates to his dead wife in both Latin, which shows influence from both Greek (the lingua franca of the eastern Roman Empire) and British Celtic (presumably spoken, perhaps alongside Latin, by his wife), and Palmyrene, the dialect of Aramaic spoken in central Syria. Here on this 'quadrilingual'

stone we have illustrated some of the entanglements at work in the Roman Empire, the possibilities of multiple identities expressed through language, and the interaction of local and global influences.

As modern Europe contemplates the nature of its existence and faces the proliferation of discourses of isolationism, protectionism and nationalism, we might look to the Roman experience to inform our discussions. Although we must not by any means imagine that the Roman Empire provided entirely positive experiences for its inhabitants, it nonetheless offers examples of ways in which diversity in unity and multiple identities could be successfully accommodated over the long term. Barates was an early Syrian migrant in Britain and the 'first generation tablets' from the City of London may well support the view of some archaeologists that Roman Londinium was founded and populated, at least in part, by economic migrants from the continent.

LatinNow confronts thorny, large-scale sociocultural issues and will contribute to an appreciation of the construction of our diverse European heritage.



Dr Alex Mullen
Principal Investigator
The LatinNow project
University of Nottingham and
CSAD, University of Oxford

LatinNowERC@gmail.com
Tweet @LatinNowERC
<https://latinnow.wordpress.com>