

Films – Goddesses, Myths and Mortals

Notes on the Latin scripts

The Latin in *Dido & Aeneas* is taken directly from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The lines have been edited to create shorter exchanges, including the effect of antilabe where one person starts a line and another completes it. As far as I know this has not been tried before with hexameters.

The other two films, *The Choice of Paris* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*, have been scripted in the main according to the standard rules of classical Latin. That may seem odd in the latter one, for Boethius was writing some five hundred years after the classical period. Some of the phrases are echoes of his *Consolatio* (written in the prison where he died), but only a few. Even so, such was the reverence felt for classical literature that the written Latin of his time and of later generations was deliberately modelled on classical Latin, with different degrees of success.

One of the gaolers claims to speak Latin as well as Cicero once did. Like much else this rogue has to say, this is hardly likely to be accurate. A watered-down imitation of Cicero's written Latin, possibly, but a replication of his choice of language at breakfast or on his way to the forum? That is more difficult to say. While much of Cicero's writings survive him, his day-to-day conversations do not.

This presented us with a mild dilemma. Dialogues such as these ought to represent the spoken language, not the written one. But apart from a few plays written well before the classical period and one or two snatches of spoken Latin in classical writings there is very little to serve as a model. Classical Latin is/was a written language, the preserve of an educated few, and evidently far more elaborate than the chatter of ordinary folk. Our solution was to create a dialogue as close as possible to spoken Latin of the time, while keeping an eye on what would be useful or familiar to those studying Latin today. I am confident that the language of these films would have been intelligible to an ancient Roman, subject perhaps to one or two pauses for repetition, of the kind a semi-polished speaker of a language has to perform to get his point across.

Pronunciation

Dido & Aeneas and *The Choice of Paris* are spoken in the received classical manner, that is to say within a few decades either side of the life of Christ. Scholars have managed to recreate a reasonably full account of this pronunciation – certainly in terms of how we should pronounce individual letters. There is a weight of evidence, part of it internal (clues from the poetry – rhythm and assonance), some from ancient grammarians telling their readers how to speak (a clear sign of variance and change), comparative evidence from other languages (e.g. Caesar was *Kaisar* in Greek) and of course some insights from the languages that developed from Latin (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Romanian). There are also little pockets of highly conservative dialects – in the mountains of Switzerland, in the inner parts of Sardinia, where the language echoes certain knowns of classical Latin, such as the hard 'c'.

Moreover the Latin spoken in all the different regions of the empire will have varied (compare the sounds of English today spoken across Europe and north Africa). So any attempt to conjecture a standard sound for spoken Latin will meet with difficulty. Given such a degree of variance, we can be optimistic that if our characters had pitched up at the Colosseum and asked the way to the Circus Maximus, a few eyebrows might have been raised for sure, but they'd have caused no great surprise as locals were quite used to hearing strangers in their city and the unusual sounds they made with their language.

In *Dido & Aeneas* you'll hear original lines taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book IV), and given the tighter structure of poetry we can be confident that the sound is along the right lines.

The Consolation of Philosophy is spoken in 6th century Latin, or as close as we have been able to get to it. Professor Roger Wright, a specialist in the development of spoken Latin and early Romance, has contributed much advice – though he should be exonerated from blemishes that remain.

Some of the different sounds of 6th century Latin are:

- 'ae' as 'e' in *wet* (i.e. much shorter than the classical sound: *eye*)
- 'c' and 'g' soften before 'i' or 'e' (always hard in classical Latin)
- consonantal 'i' pronounced as a 'j'
- initial 'v' similar to English 'v'; but like our 'w' in the middle of a word.

A guide to pronunciation and further discussion of the sound of Latin can be found in this film-maker's Latin course *Teach Yourself Beginner's Latin* (GDA Sharpley, Hodder & Stoughton/McGraw Hill 1997). For those who want to explore this topic in more detail, *Vox Latina* (W. Sidney Allen, CUP 1965, paperback 1989) remains the most authoritative account. For an exploration of non-literary Latin, see *Vulgar Latin* (József Herman, The Pennsylvania State University Press 2000, trans. Roger Wright).