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**Guided Tour to an Ancient Empire**

by Harald Weydt

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## Guided Tour to an Ancient Empire

Eleanor Dickey (ed.). 2016. *Learn Latin from the Romans. A Complete Introductory Course Using Textbooks from the Roman Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Latin is a very difficult language for non-native speakers (and no others can be found on our planet today). It has a complex morphology: four declensions (slightly different for substantives, adjectives, and pronouns), four conjugations, active verbs that conjugate like passive ones, irregular verbs, complicated infinite verb forms, such as infinitives in the active and passive voice, gerundives and gerunds. Latin word order contains additional complexities: Compared to English it appears to be “free”, though it follows its own rules. In contrast to English, it is often hard in Latin to detect what the subject and object of a sentence is, and to what element an adjective refers.

How can such a language best be learned? The author, Eleanor Dickey, admits that her own way of acquiring Latin was anything but easy. It took her “years to reach the stage where [she] could read any original literature at all” (XVII). She adds that she was “the only of her (originally large) Latin class who made it to that stage” (ibid.). Her book was written to make the learning task of Latin for elementary students easier and more enjoyable. Throughout the book, the author shows great pedagogical interest and skills. Having taught in several English-speaking countries, she is aware of the pitfalls. For example, she presents the case paradigm in two different orders (p. 35): in “British case order” (nominative, accusative, dative, ablative) and in “ancient case order” (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative). This is a minor detail within her textbook, but it contributes to better usability in the respective countries, as these paradigms have to be learned by heart in the respective order.

### Structure and progression

The introduction offers a short overview of the Indo-European language family, including Latin and its Romance descendants (Spanish, Italian, French...). In this survey, Dickey does not mention the large Slavic language family containing (among others) Russian, Polish, Serbian and Bulgarian. Students should be aware of these linguistic relatives of English, not only as important European neighbors, but also because their languages preserve many features of Latin: case system, rich conjugation system, vocabulary.

Throughout the book, the student receives clear, understandable grammatical explanations which take into account the specific audience of the book: anglophones and the translation possibilities for their language. The course is divided into five parts. Step by step, starting with

the basic concepts of declension and conjugation, the book lays out Latin grammar, ending with complicated morphological forms and syntactic structures. For each new grammar subchapter, the student finds abundant exercises for practice. These exercises are mostly in the form of translations going in both directions, from Latin to English and from English to Latin. After introducing a reasonable amount of new material, “Reading Practices” reward the students for their effort, offering them access to the culture of the ancient world. A list of vocabulary in order of appearance in the text helps, giving the meaning in English. Words of particular importance are often printed in bold. At the end of each lesson, one finds a list of “Vocabulary to learn” in alphabetical order.

One particularity of this book – one that distinguishes it from other approaches – is that it uses authentic texts. From the beginning, the reader/student is introduced to texts that cannot be found in other textbooks – texts that offer interesting glimpses into life in Rome. This in turn gives them insight into the Romans’ everyday culture. In contrast to other more traditional textbooks, which are mainly about “wars, gods and heroes”, this one guides us through pupils’ school life and the way they learned. Through these texts, the student comes to know that for the Romans themselves or other contemporaries, learning Latin was hard work; he gets an impression of slave society, shares the mourning of surviving family members, learns how the ancients cooked, sees the gladiators business (sober lists of losses), follows law suits, and reads personal letters. Beside these everyday texts, the student is also introduced into the art of poetry (e.g. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Terence and Catullus). It is particularly remarkable that the book instructs students to read large parts of the *Aeneid* aloud – as early as in the introductory part, long before any understanding of the text. This helps the student become familiar with the varying lengths of Latin vowels, and with the rhythm of Virgil’s hexameters. The text will be encountered again later in the course.

Can this book be used for self-teaching? I can hardly recommend it for students who start from scratch without a teacher. In spite of the explanations given, it will be difficult for them to read aloud the poetry in the first chapter and later in the textbook. The exercises offered by this book are well selected and inspiring, but they are suited for work in class and for homework. They have an appropriate degree of difficulty, being on the one hand not too easy, but, on the other hand, too difficult to be solved without assistance. As students will feel doubts whether they have found the right answer, they will need corrections and confirmation. Without a teacher’s response, the learner risks producing incorrect forms and subsequently memorizing them. This means that independent learners would need a key with solutions. Teachers are also needed for the oral sections. Hexameters can hardly be learned only from books. Prose

texts should also be heard before pronounced. How are the long and short vowels pronounced and how does the rhythm of the text sound? To a certain degree, students can sidestep this lack of oral guidance, listening to poetry readings from the internet (links given in footnote 3, p. 7). The answer to the question whether the book requires a teacher may be slightly more positive for students who have some previous knowledge of Latin, but have forgotten much of it and want to brush it up. They might be more able to benefit from this book; a key to the exercises, however, would be more than welcome.

Normally, teaching Latin is unidirectional, with translations going from Latin to English. Some consider this direction a logical consequence of the fact that Latin is a language without contemporary native speakers (to avoid the term “dead language”), thus concluding that it is unnecessary to translate from English to Latin. Dickey deliberately includes many translation exercises English > Latin, as only the active use reveals whether the structure has really been understood, and in order to slow down the “inevitable process of forgetting”.

The author points out some important side-effects of Latin. Understanding Latin grammar will help students to understand much of the own English grammar. At the beginning of the Latin course, students might not have a good general knowledge of grammar. Working through this book, one will hopefully acquire insights into one’s own language which might help “to improve one’s ability to write good English” (XII). One point to be added is the enormous support that one can draw from Latin grammar (and vocabulary) for learning other foreign languages, especially those possessing highly developed declension and conjugation systems (like German and the Slavic languages).

This book – used with the help of a teacher – will certainly serve its purpose well: it conveys the necessary linguistic structures, helps the student acquire reliable proficiency, and provides a many-sided picture of Ancient Roman culture. A teacher, however, seems indispensable for giving corrections/confirmations for the exercises, and equally important, giving additional information about the ancient everyday texts, which in my opinion are the book’s main attraction. And the teacher should also give information on the classic authors (Caesar, Virgil, ...).

Can one recommend the publication of a supplement with exercise keys, descriptions of the origin of the texts and a sound guide for pronunciation and recitation? I doubt it. It would change the character of the work. A well-informed and inspiring teacher can hardly be replaced.

**Harald Weydt**

born 1938, is a retired professor of General, Romance and Germanic Linguistics. He taught at many universities in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. From 1993, he was the first Dean of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences at the newly founded Europa-Universität at Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany. His particular areas of focus are grammar, minority languages and foreign language teaching.

Harald Weydt: Review on *Learn Latin from the Romans*. 2016.

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