

Book Reviews

Via Latina: De Lingua et Vita Romanorum

Aguilar (M.L.), Terrega (J.), Pp. 238, colour ill.
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This is the second edition of a new Latin course which is written entirely in Latin by fluent Latin speakers. As such it is invariably going to be compared with Ørberg's *Lingua Latina per se illustrata*, which I will do later. It is designed for beginners and introduces all five noun declensions, and the present and imperfect tenses. What does this course offer?

The book is beautifully produced with clear layout and many full-colour line drawings illustrating both the storyline and new vocabulary.

The 12 chapters all share the same clarity of structure: they have three passages per chapter, each followed by related exercises, and each chapter ends with a picture for pupils to describe in Latin, and grammar explanation and reference. There is no summary grammar at the end of the book.

The authors, in a transatlantic partnership between Valencia and Boston, have thought through the reason for their approach, which draws on modern second language acquisition theory as well as the renaissance practices of Erasmus and Comenius. They consider that structure and building on knowledge are important principles, as are engaging subject matter and thorough practice. They have written the book for a classroom with a teacher – it is not suitable for self-study by a beginner in the way the *Lingua Latina* by Ørberg is. The variety of exercises is a great strength of this book. Taking inspiration from modern languages, the exercises fall into three categories: understanding the content (*rem tene!*), learning the vocabulary (*vocabula disce!*) and practising the language (*ecce lingua*). Within these categories they have a great variety of exercises which help embed the language through use and manipulation.

The book is based on Livy and forms a continuous, coherent narrative through all 12 chapters. This has its pluses and minuses. Some might immediately rule the book out, considering that the subject matter would not appeal to the majority of their students. Some may see the short account of the abduction of the Sabine women or the longer passage on Lucretia as too problematic. But others may follow the authors in using Livy to compare and contrast customs and morals of the Romans with contemporary values.

Each passage occupies two-thirds of the page-width and has an illustration at the top. It is printed in a large, clear font and the shortness of each line is a help to the beginner. The other third is a shaded column with vocabulary, explained by synonyms, antonyms, derivations within Latin and with copious colour illustrations. These have charm and wit: one of my favourites illustrates the antonyms *gravis* and *levis* with a see-saw with a hippopotamus sitting at one end and a small bird at the other. It is notable that the illustrations use a full range of skin colours in depicting the characters.

The Latin itself is very good, and the writers show an eye for a lively account of the story while keeping true to Livy. The sentence structure remains simple – there is little subordination of clauses in this book, but widespread use is made of coordinating conjunctions such as *atque*, *neque* and *nam*. While there is some use of the imperfect tense, the majority of the narrative is in the present tense, whether real or historic. I would like to have seen dialogues to bring more variety and opportunities for classroom performance.

The cases are introduced in a systematic and clear way, with tables of endings introduced for clarity by the third chapter. Pronoun endings are introduced alongside the nouns, which is helpful in avoiding a pile-up of pronoun forms that some courses have. The vocabulary load is quite heavy – around 1,200 words over the 12 chapters. New words are set out at the end of each chapter alphabetically by each of the three parts: being a book entirely in Latin, no meanings are given. Even though specific exercises target vocabulary acquisition, I suspect that it may be a tough call for some students: extra input from the teacher (with help on English derivations, for example) will be necessary. The infinitive is introduced late in this text (the final chapter) and the present participle in the previous chapter, used mainly as an ablative absolute.

So how does this compare with Ørberg? This course gets approximately halfway through *Lingua Latina* in terms of accident and syntax but proportionately more vocabulary. The stories, based on rugged Roman values, lack the charm, variety and sly wit of Ørberg's *familia* and the lack of dialogue passages means there is less characterisation of the figures and opportunity for acting out stories in the classroom. It does not quite have the intuitive introduction of new material that Ørberg achieves and has a steeper gradient at the start. It certainly needs significant input from a teacher. The teacher's task is made harder because there is currently little online material to support it.

The elephant in the room (yes, they do appear in Chapter 10) is that it is written entirely in Latin. Does this mean it has to be delivered entirely in Latin? I do not think so. It could be taught entirely in English but it does offer teachers an easy way to work more within the language if they are interested in using some spoken Latin but are themselves at an early stage. Given the exam-driven curriculum of schools in the UK, it would be a brave teacher who adopted this as the main textbook leading to GCSE, but as additional reading with a contemporary presentation it has a place. More importantly, any teacher who is interested in developing their pedagogy should get a copy to see how to develop a wider range of exercises and tasks that take some of the best ideas of modern foreign language teaching and apply them to Latin. It will enrich their teaching.

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