



A Natural History of Latin

Tore Janson, Merete Damsgaard Sørensen (Translator), Nigel Vincent (Translator)

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No known language, including English, has achieved the success and longevity of Latin. French, Spanish, Italian, and Romanian are among its direct descendants, and countless Latin words and phrases comprise the cornerstone of English itself. A Natural History of Latin tells its history from its origins over 2500 years ago to the present. Brilliantly conceived, popularizing but authoritative, and written with the fluency and light touch that have made Tore Janson's Speak so attractive to tens of thousands of readers, it is a masterpiece of adroit synthesis.

The book commences with a description of the origins, emergence, and dominance of Latin over the Classical period. Then follows an account of its survival through the Middle Ages into modern times, with emphasis on its evolution throughout the history, culture, and religious practices of Medieval Europe. By judicious quotation of Latin words, phrases, and texts the author illustrates how the written and spoken language changed, region by region over time; how it met resistance from native languages; and how therefore some entire languages disappeared. Janson offers a vivid demonstration of the value of Latin as a means of access to a vibrant past and a persuasive argument for its continued worth. A concise and easy-to-understand introduction to Latin grammar and a list of the most frequent Latin words, including 500 idioms and phrases still in common use, complement the work.

A Natural History of Latin Details

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From Reader Review A Natural History of Latin for online ebook

Amanda Witt says

Very interesting read of how Latin was once the language of the educated people and also how it slowly became less used. Sometimes called a 'dead' language, it still lives on in legal, medical and botanical terminology.

Diana Sandberg says

Quite engaging. Although this is a kind of history of the Latin language, it becomes, *de facto*, a history of Western civilization from before the founding of Rome forward. Janson has a real talent for giving a very clear condensation of this enormous subject. I am relatively familiar with just about everything he tells us, but really enjoyed and appreciated the overview.

I don't mean to suggest the author neglects the actual linguistic journey, but this is not a book for linguistic scholars, but rather for the interested amateur. One does not even have to be familiar with Latin. The development, spread, dominance and eventual eclipse of the language becomes a remarkable way of viewing the social history of our culture.

The book is in three sections - the first covers the development of the language up to the fall of Rome, the next the role of Latin in subsequent eras. The third is more technical and instructs the reader in the structure of the language itself. Again, in this third section, Janson is quite good at presenting a great deal in a concise manner, but I doubt many readers will be prepared to slog through it all. If one is inclined to actually study the language itself, I believe there are more useful means.

Still, a very good book, very enjoyable.

Gloria says

Gift from my sister, who perhaps is tired of hearing about my complaints about not being allowed to take Latin in high school.

Not a text from which to learn Latin, but a nice text about the story of Latin, with the last half directed toward those with some Latin knowledge. Helpful little cheat-sheet glossary of commonly used Latin phrases can be found in the back.

Pal says

It had great links to the history of the English language and some for the Swedish language, but I wish that it had more about Latin's influence on non-indo european languages.

Dave Maddock says

A nice overview of the history of the use of Latin in under 200 pages. Perhaps a bit too short for my tastes, but enjoyable. The first section deals with Latin in Ancient Rome. The second section is about Latin through the Middle Ages and Renaissance and focused primarily on Christianity, which is reasonable given history but I would've preferred more information about secular literature and less on how Latin is used for scientific terminology. The third section is a short grammar sketch with accompanying word and phrase lists which I found largely pointless.

bridget trinkaus says

i love latin. in fact i am thinking of auditing on latin 1 class at S.U in the fall. i think it will be a good review after taking latin 1 and 2 at oneonta.

it was interesting to learn about the history part of the language. i always found that interesting. so much of our language today is based up latin.

i think everyone should take latin--if you are having grammar problems latin will help.

Matt says

This book offers a broad introduction to the Latin language and its use from its beginnings to today. The breadth of the book is its strength. Few books by Classicists cover Latin's use in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and after, but this book covers literally every period and genre of writing in Latin. The book's depth, however, is rather shallow. It often covers major topics in only a few pages. Of course, if you know the source of the book's title, this is not surprising. "Natural History" sounds a bit like it should cover some intersection of scientific and historical inquiry, but it actually comes from the title of an encyclopedia by the ancient author Pliny the Elder. Pliny's Naturalis Historia is the model for this book, and like Pliny, this book rarely probes deeply into its topics. Still, the lack of any authoritative end notes and the disappointingly brief "Further Reading" section in this book make it even less helpful than it could be.

For the most part, I enjoyed reading this book. I would recommend it to current and former students of Latin, as well as high school Latin instructors. There is a lot here to enjoy, but the dry, academic tone makes an odd combination with the more general nature of the content. There are probably better, more exciting books for beginners, but they may lack the breadth of this volume. This seems like a good reference book to provide short readings for early Latin students, so I plan on keeping it on my shelf. But you may want to look elsewhere if you were hoping for something stronger on historical linguistics or more focused on the specifics of textual transmission or paleography (all of which are actually covered, although only for a few pages.)

C. Quabela says

I thought this was a really good cursory look at the history of latin. When I say cursory though, I mean it (only the first half of the book is actually devoted to its history). It does not go into great detail, it just rather

charts its course through western history. Easy to read though and it gives a decent sense of the language and how it stands today. I will say though, for those who have actually studied the language, the second part could come in handy when trying to brush up. It gives a good concise overview of all the verb conjugations and noun declensions et cetera, so if you were going to try and read something again in Latin, it would be a great reference if you no longer possess your old text books.

In the authors defence, I have seen some people write criticisms as to how he presents Christianity. I have to disagree, it is not a bias on his part. What I enjoyed most was how much he balanced the ancient and sometimes pagan traditions along side the assimilation of the language within the Church. Obviously, the church won out, and the history of that battle is far from pretty on the side of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless he does give credit where credit is deserved, and that is in how the church was in fact able to preserve the language and ancient texts through the several hundred years of the middle ages during which a great amount of writings were lost.

I only give this a three because of how sketched out the history is told (and for the fact that it surprisingly has a good deal of spelling and grammar errors of its own, much like this post). I would still recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the subject but who does not wish to devote years of their life reading the actual scholarly work.

RK-isme says

I cannot decide who this book was written for. The first few chapters are filled with basic facts about Roman and European history, very basic facts. It was like a review of my grade 8 social studies class. If the target audience is people wanting to learn that, then the first few chapters are fine. But then the book ends with a review of basic Latin grammar, going into some detail but not enough to be a text. I should think that anyone wanting to learn Latin would need to go to a Latin grammar text. The book is both too detailed, giving examples of the subjunctive mode for example, but not detailed enough, giving only a one sentence explanation of what the subjunctive is. Anyone hoping to learn Latin with this would be quickly frustrated. Similarly the Latin glossary and list of certain terms and sayings would be of little use to a Latin student. The juxtaposition of history and grammar doesn't really work. So two stars.

Dustin Simmons says

I was disappointed, not because the book isn't good or useful, but because I was expecting so much more. This is a mere primer and introduction to the history of Rome and her language. While great for an early student of Latin or Roman history, or anyone with a passing interest in Roman history, I was looking for in-depth discussions of the language and linguistic history and development.

Andrew says

Enjoyable and easy read despite the title. Like a festival lecture from an entertaining emeritus professor.

The book is divided into 3 sections, the first about the contemporary Latin of Rome's Empire, the second about the two millennia since then, and the third an overview of Latin grammar.

Section 1 deserves 4.5 stars, section 2 gets 2 stars, and I can't comment on section 3. I'd call it as 3 stars overall.

The first part is the most colourful, bringing to life some of the characters and their motivations as well as providing a mine of interesting trivia. Recommended! It's unfair that some of the reviews I've seen take the book to task citing comments in this section because it's not intended to be a canonical history.

The second part is far less structured and drifts, the main strand being only that Latin is everywhere. Hardly a surprise, but something of a letdown after the first part. The third section on grammar was not beside reading, for me.

Michael says

Janson's book is a nice companion for Nicholas Ostler's [Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin](#). Janson includes a useful appendix on the structure of the Latin language. My only criticism of the book is the English style, which is infelicitous. This well could be the fault of the translator. The information is clearly presented in a form that would be of interest both to those familiar with Latin at some level and to those with no previous knowledge of the language.

Joan says

A concise, enjoyable history of the Latin language written for the layman. Covers the first known appearance of the language, its usage and evolution throughout the Roman Republic and early/late empires, then on to the middle ages via Church Latin, and modern scientific usage. The latter half of the book consists of tables delineating declension, tense, gender, and case for the most commonly used Latin words and phrases, which will come in very handy when I'm struggling (as who doesn't) with ablative vs. accusative.

Christopher says

I read Latin and Greek as an undergraduate (mainly with a view to Indo-European linguistics) and have long sought a book I could recommend to friends and family who want to know something about classical languages. I thought *A Natural History of Latin* would be just the thing, but I found the book rather problematic.

A Natural History of Latin is a translation and adaptation by Merethe Damsgaard Sorensen and Nigel Vincent of Tore Janson's original *Latin; Kulturn, historien, spraaket* published in Stockholm in 2002. The book is written at a high school level, avoiding jargon and explaining matters as clearly and simply as possibly. Janson starts at the very beginning, with Latin as a single descent of the Indo-European proto-language, a small language confined to Rome overshadowed by its strong neighbour Etruscan. He introduces the major writers of Latin literature, and even quotes passages from the major poets, giving the original Latin and a translation.

Since Latin is a remarkably tenacious language, holding on long after the disappearance of Roman society, and Janson discusses the use of Latin by the Roman Catholic Church, philosophers, and natural scientists.

While Janson talks of the rise of new languages after the fall of the Roman Empire that were descended from Latin yet no longer Latin, I was baffled by his omission of the Strasbourg Oaths, which many readers find an entertaining example of language change.

Though Janson avoids discussion of morphology (the changes the endings of Latin words can go through) in the main of the book, the end of the book contains a 35-page appendix on Latin grammar so that the curious reader can learn more. There is also a basic vocabulary of the most common and influential Latin words, and a collection of common phrases and expressions.

In spite of covering many of the basics of the use of Latin, I found the author injected his own personal biases into the text far too often. Some of my other reviews have complained about his comparison of Cato with Fascist party members, Epicurus with Karl Marx, his assertion that Julius Caesar committed genocide. Now, these are intriguing matters, but Janson makes the comparisons so flippantly that it just drags the level of the text down. Beyond these, there are other problematic passages. For example, after discussing Catullus' poems to the boy Juventius, Janson writes, "That a man might be in love with both women and men did not cause any great surprise in antiquity... It was not regarded as deviant behavior." Such a blanket statement is dishonest, for while the elites of Roman society condoned pederasty, grown men who took the passive role in homosexual acts were despised in the strongest sense. Just look at the character of the cinaedus in Petronius' *Satyricon*, for example.

The author loves to get his digs in at Christianity as well, with a revisionist goal that goes against the long traditions of Oxford University Press' classicist publishing. Of Tertullian, whom classicists have long admired for his eloquent defence of his faith in front of Roman persecution, Janson writes, "[His books'] most striking characteristic is their spiteful attitude to everyone who thought differently from Tertullian himself." Later he writes, "It was not easy to know at the time who actually was a heretic. It depended on who was successful in having their view of original sin or the Trinity finally accepted as the true teaching of the Church." And of St Augustine, Janson writes, "His ideas are strange or even repugnant. This is especially true of the idea of original sin." The doctrine of original sin hardly began with Augustine, nor is it a concept limited to Christianity among the world religions (Buddhism, for instance, has us stuck in cycles of samsara because of lusts and desires).

With his peculiar biases, Janson betrays the fine tradition of Oxford University Press' books on the classical world, and I find the book too enervating to recommend to others. Maybe I should look at Joseph Farrell's *Latin Language and Latin Culture: From Ancient to Modern Times* instead.

Jess says

I had to read this for class, so at first I was un-excited to read it. But I never realized how extensive the history of Latin truly is, or how it connects the history of most of the modern world. As a world history major, this really connected a lot of points together about how nations worked together throughout a millennium of constant warfare. On a side note, the grammar boring, and if you're not a Latin student, don't bother with that section, you won't get it. (It's at the end.)
