

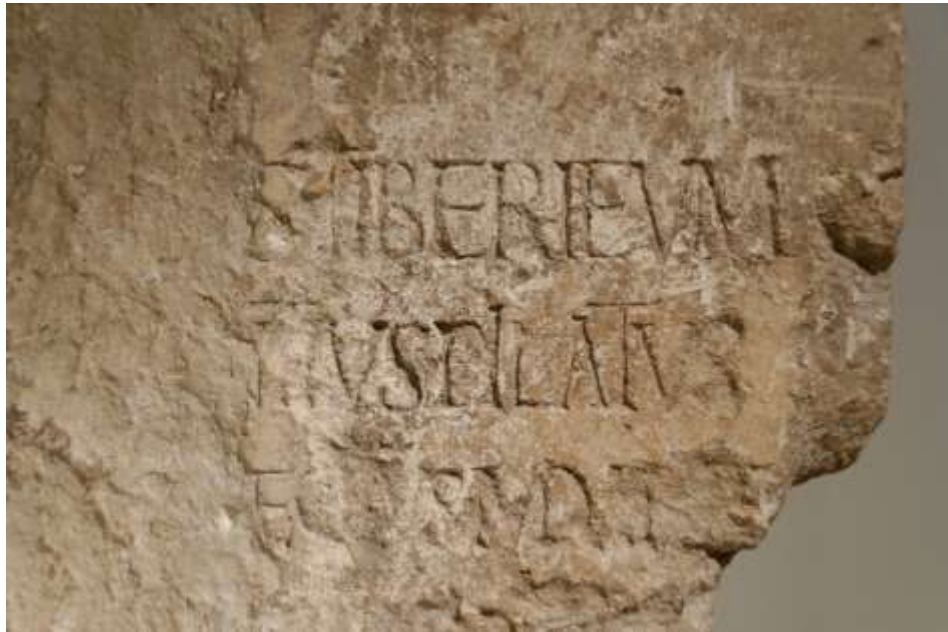
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What is Latin?

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Exploring the Language of Rome and Beyond

1



What is Latin? This Latin inscription, often called the Pilate Stone, records Pontius Pilate's dedication of a temple to Emperor Tiberius.

Courtesy [Photo Companion to the Bible, Matthew](#).

Although the original biblical texts were written mostly in Hebrew or Greek, there is no denying that Latin was one of the most important languages of the biblical world. Indeed, many Jews and early Christians living within the Roman Empire would have spoken and read Latin, and it would have been familiar to and perhaps the first language of many in the early church. While it does not seem that the Roman Empire shared a single language, Latin was certainly the language of Rome—the language of politicians, administrators, and soldiers. In the eastern part of the empire—the Greek-speaking world—Latin never obtained the dominance it had in the West, but it was still known and read.

History of Latin

Latin is in the Italic group of the Indo-European language family, first spoken by small tribes of people called the Latini who lived along the lower Tiber River. Called Latium, it

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was in this area that a small pastoral town in the hills would grow to become the capital of the vast Roman Empire. Rome's location at the only convenient crossing point close to the mouth of the Tiber—a location valuable for both commercial and strategic reasons—may have helped Rome become the region's dominant political entity. Whatever the reason, Rome's political dominance led to the spread of the Latin language. Similar to how Attic Greek became the dominant Greek dialect as Athens gained power, Latin's prominence rose with the spread of Roman power; first in Italy, then the rest of western and southern Europe and beyond.

2

Unlike its Greek contemporaries, early Latin literature is fragmentary at best and shows only a rough, accentual native meter called Saturnian, a few comedic skits, and a practical prose used for speeches and administrative documents. However, once the expansion of Roman power brought Latin speakers into the sphere of Greek civilization in the third century BCE, a cultural revolution began as Roman writers started to travel to Greece and were immersed in Greek literature. Greek literary forms, meters, rhetorical devices, and ideas had a long-lasting influence on Latin literature as Roman writing developed its own unique characteristics.

The first century leading up to the formation of the Roman Empire was an important time in the history of Latin, as Roman writers perfected their literary arts. The works of the **Ciceronian period** (80–43 BCE) were produced during a period of civil war, dictatorships, and political unrest. Many great writers, such as Cicero, Catullus, and even Julius Caesar himself, produced great literary works during this period.

During the **Augustan period** (43 BCE–14 CE), the newly crowned Augustus sought to use literature and the arts as a way to bury the political turmoil of the previous decades and look to the future of his *Pax Romana* ("Roman Peace"). Under his patronage, the poets Virgil and Horace crafted pinnacles of Latin literature, still read by many today. Also prominent during this period were famous writers such as Livy and Ovid.

The **Post-Augustan period** (14–138 CE) saw the rise of more political intrigues, as the Julio-Claudian dynasty had its ups and downs with



Hawara Papyrus 24, a first-century CE text with a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* repeated seven times. This fragment of papyrus is one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of the *Aeneid*.

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imperial rule. This is well reflected in the writings of Roman literary greats, such as Seneca and Petronius and the later writers Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Juvenal.

During the **Patristic period** (late second–fifth centuries CE), much of Latin literature was written by early Christian leaders known as the Church Fathers. This group included the likes of Tertullian, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. Many of these men were well educated and fond of the classical authors who came before them. Jerome, in particular, is famous for producing the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate—named for the “Vulgar Latin” in which it was written. Much like [Koine Greek](#) (the language of the New Testament), this was the Latin people commonly spoke, as opposed to high literary Latin.

Even as the Western Roman Empire crumbled and fell, Latin remained an important administrative and political language in Europe for the next thousand years. Over the following centuries, Vulgar Latin evolved into the various Romance languages spoken across the lands of the former Roman Empire up to this day. These include French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. Latin survived as the language of the church and the intellectual world of the Middle Ages.



Opening page of the Gospel of Mark from the Codex Amiatinus, one of the best preserved and earliest complete one-volume Vulgate manuscripts to survive. It was created around 700 CE at the Benedictine Monkwearmouth-Jarrow Abbey in northeast England.

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Breaking Down Latin

Classical Latin regularly used six cases in the declension (variations in the form of a noun, pronoun, or adjective, which identify its grammatical case, number, and gender) of nouns and adjectives. These cases are nominative, vocative, genitive, dative, accusative, and ablative, with occasional uses of a locative case. Case endings applied to the ends of nouns and adjectives identify which case/number/gender a word should have.

Verbs in Latin exhibit five characteristics: person, number, tense, mood, and voice. Like nouns and adjectives, endings are added to Latin infinitives (conjugated) to indicate person and number, and these endings differ depending on which tense and voice is being used.

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