

Epilogue

In the preceding pages, we have traced the outlines of a long and complex cultural story, the intertwined legacy of Cicero and Luther, extending into the twentieth century. As we have seen, Cicero occupied a prestigious place throughout much of European and American history, but such a highly elevated respect as he once enjoyed can certainly no longer be taken for granted. One question remains: What are the future prospects, if any, in Europe and America for Cicero and the Latin language that he was so instrumental in shaping? And will the destiny of Cicero and the classics ever be linked again with that of Christianity (and Lutheranism) in any sort of meaningful and vital way, particularly in the educational realm?

In Europe it has always been fairly easy to see the connection between the present and the Greek and Roman past. Unlike Americans who have to get on a plane and fly for hours to reach the ancient sites, Europeans have been accustomed for centuries to finding Roman remains quite literally in their own backyards. Will the language of Cicero be at the center of whatever one may think that European cultural identity is going to be in the years to come, if it will even be possible to speak of a single such identity at all?¹

In recent years, there have been serious efforts made to save Latin in Europe, including proposals to have Latin counted as one of the official languages of the European Union.² There are 24 languages, “official and working,” now recognized by the European Union, including Estonian, Irish, Latvian, and Maltese, but Latin is not one of them. One of the main objections to such a proposal, it is easy to imagine, is that Latin is a “dead” language, claimed as a primary language by nobody. When it is still studied, the reason for learning the ancient language is mostly for reading purposes, not for direct communication. Any attempt to resurrect Latin is usually viewed as a quixotic exercise, therefore, doomed to failure by the realities of contemporary political configurations. Furthermore, the inevitable association of Latin with the ancient Roman empire conjures up unfortunate images of hegemonic, colonial discourse that contradict dreams of national autonomy, aspirations to universal

1 In his provocative little study, *Bildung*, Manfred Fuhrmann argues that it would be hard to imagine what European culture would be without its two most formative elements, the Bible and the classics, playing a substantial role.

2 See IJsewijn and Sacré, “Ultimate Efforts to Save Latin,” 51–66.

democracy, and claims to particular cultural identities.³ Many regard the cultivation of Latin as an elitist exercise in domination, associated as the language is with a notoriously patriarchal empire. Even the idea that Latin might be of some practical importance when it comes to reading historical documents can be called into question. Is it really practical to go to such pains to learn Latin for reading purposes only, if the most important historical and literary works have already been translated and are readily available in modern language versions or by using sophisticated translation software?

In some respects, Latin does indeed resemble other languages that could be described as “dead” or extinct, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, ancient Sumerian, or Tocharian. These linguistic cadavers are studied exclusively by specialists who would never dream of trying to speak them or to teach others to do so. Even though once the languages of great civilizations, their influence since the time of their historic flourishing is now decidedly on the wane. But the case of Latin in Europe is somewhat different. It is the “mother language” of a number of modern European languages, not only genetically speaking but also in terms of its use as a linguistic paradigm. The admirable consistency of Latin proved irresistible to grammarians and lexicographers in the early modern period who wanted to elevate the status of their own vernacular languages. Latin influenced the vocabulary of many modern European languages, as well as their spelling and grammar.⁴

Classical Latin has been pronounced dead many times in its long history before now, but such pronouncements have invariably proven to be premature. Latin was in a perilous position in the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, but it was resurrected, thanks to the efforts of one influential political leader, Charlemagne, and his coterie of dedicated scholars. In the seventh and eighth centuries, public knowledge of classical Latin was far less wide spread than it is today in modern Europe, but its fortunes changed, and it went on to become the *lingua franca* of Europe. Some of the most important scientific treatises of the modern era were written in Latin, such as Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (1687) or Carl Linnaeus’s botanical writings. (Linnaeus was thoroughly fluent in Latin,

3 When Latin was eliminated from the first year of the *lycée* curriculum in France, one of the arguments for cutting it was that the language of the Romans represented “an obstacle to democratization” (Waquet, “Social Status,” 380).

4 Witness the aversion in modern English to the split infinitive or the double negative or our learned respelling of words like “doubt” and “indict.”