Vox Anglorum

A re-creation of the Latin Pronunciation of 14th Century England

by

Friar Galen of Ockham
AS XLIX

Table of Contents

How I would love to be able to create a rift in space-time! Not necessarily big enough for me to go back in time myself, but sufficient to be able to hear the Medieval Latin tongue. Imagine being able to eavesdrop on a High Mass in a cathedral, a lecture on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, or a debate in a college courtyard. While I don't expect any great breakthroughs in temporal physics or a visit from a stranger in a blue box, we can obtain some clues as to the spoken Latin of the Middle Ages from documents that have come to us the old-fashioned way. Utilizing these tools, I have reconstructed a pronunciation of Latin as it might have been spoken in mid-fourteenth century England.

The Universal Language?

Latin was by far the most widely known language of the middle ages thanks to the Roman Empire and the predominance of the Roman church in western Europe. Since the universities grew out of the church, they naturally adopted Latin as the universal language of scholarship. The structure imposed by the administrative services likely kept the language consistent throughout the Latin world. Pronunciation, however, was probably not as uniform (Brittain, 1934, p. 7). Erasmus writing in 1528 related a story of an audience granted by Emperor Maximilian of the Holy Roman Empire to the ambassadors of several countries:

> The French ambassador, who was a native of Maine, made a complimentary speech which had been written for him, probably by an Italian. The speech was in Latin, but was delivered with so Gallic an accent that the Italians present thought he was speaking French, and he was several times interrupted by bursts of laughter. A German, a member of the Aulic Council, who was called upon to reply, made an extemporary speech.... His pronunciation...was so Germanic that it could not have been more so if he had been speaking German, and he evoked even more laughter than the Frenchman. A Dane who spoke third might have been a Scotchman, as marvellously [sic] did he reproduce the pronunciation of Scotland. A Dutchman followed him, and one could have sworn that neither of these two was speaking Latin. (Brittain, 1934, pp. 22–23).

Pronunciation Styles

Since Latin pronunciation has not been constant over the centuries, how can we approach a re-creation of the pronunciation of a specific region and time? There are many sources which allow us to come very close to the pronunciation of languages even though we can no longer hear the actual speakers. For example, we have writers of the time who specifically discussed issues of pronunciation. Many manuscripts contain puns, plays on words, transliterations into other languages, and rhymes which give pronunciation clues (Allen, 1978, p. viii). Latin scholars have used these sources to develop pronunciation schemes. Two main pronunciation systems have developed as predominant.

The reconstructed classical pronunciation (Allen, 1978) is commonly found in secular high school and university Latin courses largely due to the popularity of Wheelock's Latin (LaFleur, 2011) as a primary textbook. This system seeks to reconstruct Latin as it would have been spoken throughout

the Roman Empire at its height. The large number of writings from Roman authors representing a broad variety of literary genres allows a high confidence in the accuracy of this reconstruction.

Ecclesiastical (Church) Latin follows the pronunciation rules of modern Italian, as might be expected since the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy has been based in Italy for centuries. The predominance of Italian pronunciation seems to have increased after Pope Pius X wrote to the Archbishop of Bourges in 1912 expressing his pleasure that the Italian pronunciation of Latin was becoming more popular in France (Brittain, 1934, p. 27). This letter did not carry the weight of ecclesiastical law, but appeared to be the catalyst for the spread of the Italian pronunciation of Latin in the church liturgy and Roman Catholic institutions.

Researching the pronunciation of medieval Latin revealed very few discussions of this topic. Only one source gave a detailed discussion of how Latin might have been pronounced in various times and places. *Latin in Church: Episodes in the History of its Pronunciation, Particularly in England* by F. Brittain (1934) chronicles the history of Latin pronunciation from the collapse of the Roman Empire through the English Reformation. Brittain's thesis is that Latin was largely pronounced in the manner of the speaker's native language (Brittain, 1934, p. 8). It was this key discovery that allowed me to move forward with the recreation of how Latin may have been pronounced in medieval England.

Vox Anglorum (the Voice of the English)

To reconstruct the Latin of 14th century England, we need to know the pronunciation of the local language at the time, Middle English. Due to the popularity of the wrings of Chaucer, there are many works on Middle English available, as well as on-line recordings of professionals performing works in Middle English. For my reconstruction the period pronunciation, I have based this work on numerous sources (Burrow & Turville-Petre, 2005, pp. 9–13; Kleinman, n.d.; "Middle English Phonology," n.d., "Teach yourself to read Chaucer: Lesson 2 -- Pronunciation," n.d.). Not all these sources agree as there were many dialects in Middle English that exhibited a broad variety of pronunciation (Kleinman, n.d., p. 1).

Applying the rules of Middle English pronunciation to Latin, I developed the following system:

Vowels

a	as in f**a**ther
e	- when followed by one consonant and another syllable, like a long 'a' as in **hey**
	- if it has two consonants following, a short 'e' sound as in **bet**
	- at the end of a word or unstressed syllable, pronounced as in hors**es**
i,y, ee	long 'e' sound as in **meet**
o	long 'o' as in n**o**te
u, ou, ow	as in **boot**
au, aw	as in **ouch**
ae, ay, ai, ey, ei	long 'i' as in **white**
oi, oy	as in **boy**

Consonants

In both Latin and Middle English, unlike modern English, all letters in a word are (generally) pronounced. For example, 'knight' would be pronounced similar to 'con nicked' than modern English 'night'. With few exceptions, Middle English consonants are pronounced as in modern English.

ch	hard as in Scottish **loch** or German **Bach**
gn	as **ny**
h	sometimes silent, especially at the beginning of a word
k	always pronounced in words like **knight, know**
l	Pronounced in words like **half, folk**
r	rolled as in Spanish
s	never like 'z' at the end of a word
v	as in modern English **vice**

The pronunciation of the letter 'c' might be controversial. The Middle English references do not specifically discuss this letter. Latin sources vary greatly with the reconstructed classical pronunciation always using a 'k' sound, and ecclesiastical Latin using a variety of sounds (k, s, ch) depending on the circumstances. My recommendation would be to use the 'k' sound, but allow the 's' sound (especially in the middle of words) if it makes the flow of the language better.

Conclusion

The Latin language was an extremely important aspect of the middle ages that has largely been forgotten in the modern era. As participants in the "Modern Middle Ages", knowing some common Latin phrases can add spice to the development of a medieval persona. Learning how Latin might have been pronounced in a specific time and place adds even more depth to our connection with the past. The technique presented here can be used as a template for others to investigate the common tongue their persona would have spoken. I hope it also encourages others to utilize this technique to create their own localized pronunciation of Latin.

Vale!

Appendix

Useful Latin phrases using the Vox Anglorum method

English Phrase:	Latin Phrase:	Pronounce like:
Hello! (to one person)	Salve!	sal-vah
Hello! (to a group)	Salvete!	sal-vay-tah
What is your name?	Quid est nomen tibi?	kwid est no-mehn tee-bee
My name is...	Nomen mihi est...	no-mehn mee-hee est
How are you?	Quid agis?	kwid ah-geese
I'm fine, thank you	Valeo, gratias	vah-lay-oh gra-tee-os
Not bad	Non male	known mah-la
Goodbye (to one person)	Vale	vah-la
Goodbye (to a group)	Valete	vah-lay-ta
No	Non	known
Yes	Ita	eat-ah
Yes	Etiam	a-tee-ahm
Please	Quaeso	kw-eye-so
God bless you	Di te ament	dee teh ah-maynt
What time is it?	Quota hora est?	kwota or-ah est
Beer	Cervisia	ker-vee-see-a
As usual, I'm going to do research	Ut soleo, indagationem acturus sum	oot so-lay-oh een-dah-gat-too-oh-nem ahk-too-roos soom

Above based on *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency* (Traupman, 2006)

Pater Noster

Pater noster, qui es in caelis,	pah-ter no-stair kwee es een ky-lees
sanctificetur nomen tuum.	sank-tee-feek-ee-tour no-main too-oom
Adveniat regnum tuum.	add-ven-nee-aht rayg-noom too-oom
Fiat voluntas tua,	fee-aht voh-loon-tahs too-ah
sicut in caelo et in terra.	see-koot een ky-low et een tay-rah
Panem nostrum quotidianum	pan-em know-stroom kwo-tee-dee-ah-noom
da nobis hodie,	dah know-bees oh-dee-eh
et dimitte nobis debita nostra	et dee-meet-tee know-bees day-bee-tah know-stra
sicut et nos dimittimus	see-koot et no-s dee-meet-tee-moose
debitoribus nostris.	dee-bee-tow-ree-boos know-strees
Et ne nos inducas	et neh no-s een-dook-ahs
in tentationem,	een tayn-tah-tee-oh-nem
sed libera nos a malo.	sayd lee-bay-rah no-s ah mah-low
Amen.	ah-men

Bibliography

Allen, W. S. (1978). *Vox Latina* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brittain, F. (1934). *Latin in Church: Episodes in the History of its Pronunciation Particularly in England.*
London: Cambridge University Press.

Burrow, J. A., & Turville-Petre, T. (2005). *A Book of Middle English* (3rd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell
Publishing.

Kleinman, S. (n.d.). An Introduction to Middle English. Retrieved from
http://www.csun.edu/~sk36711/WWW/engl443/MEintro.pdf

LaFleur, R. A. (2011). *Wheelock's Latin* (7th ed.). Collins Reference.

Middle English Phonology. (n.d.). Retrieved January 19, 2015, from
http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/middle_english_phonology.htm

Teach yourself to read Chaucer: Lesson 2 -- Pronunciation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 19, 2015, from
http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/less-2.htm

Traupman, J. C. (2006). *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency* (4 edition.). Wauconda, Ill: Bolchazy
Carducci Publishers.