

Since my uncle, who is a parish priest, told me that some of his friends really spoke Latin, I have been wanting to do the same. However, I doubted that I was eligible to participate in the *Feriae Latinae* he suggested to me, which are based in the Vatican. Now, UCL, where I study, “that godless institution in Gower Street” (Thomas Arnold, 1795-1842), does have a society that makes its members converse with each other in Latin and offers the basics to do this. *Septimana Latina* was a significant part of my learning experience and I am very thankful for the Stephen Instone travel fund, which contributed substantially to my participation in the study week.

The recipe for a good life, according Seneca and Co. (because it was actually Socrates’ idea), is to be able to speak well: *talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* (*Ep. CXIV*). I would be leading a terrible life if this were true. However, I survived a week at the Accademia Vivarium Novum in Frascati, Italy, and, I have to say, I lived rather high there. Learning to speak Latin is not more awkward than learning to speak any other language. I remember that once, in English, I thanked friends for their “hostility”. (Luckily they had humour: “That’s all we can provide.”) The worst-case parallel in Latin would be: “Thank you for having me as your enemy.” (But I did not say this, sometimes I learn from my mistakes.) To be fair, the hospitality of the community of scholars resident at the academy has perhaps left the deepest impression on me during my one-week stay.

The name of the game was *Septimana Latina*, which meant speaking Latin for a week. This was the daily schedule:

8 am. Canto: singing poetry and other Latin songs, some voices were very enthusiastic considering the early time.

9 am. Colloquium: a small conversation class, preparing us for real-life Latin with Erasmus of Rotterdam.

10 am. Lecture and seminar: on a topic of Cicero’s *Tusculanae disputationes*: death, pain, sorrow, other perturbations of the soul, and the good life.

12 pm. Drama and rhetoric classes.

2.30 pm. Ancient Greek class in ancient Greek.

3.30 pm. Another lecture and seminar: on the day’s Ciceronian topic, from the perspective of other authors and periods.

5.30 pm. The art of writing: prose composition based on Caesar’s tactics employed in the *Bellum Gallicum*.

7.30 pm. Poetry class: lecture on some of Horace’s poems, but more fascinating for me was unwrapping the strange logic of Latin metres.

For the time around noon (drama/rhetoric/ancient Greek classes) and in the evening I retired to a *conclave*, engaged in activities somehow connected to UCL. The brilliant results of the drama and rhetoric workshops, however, were delivered in performance on the last evening of our stay,

and thanks to the tradition of birthday speeches at the academy, I got to hear ancient Greek spoken.

Two trips interrupted the schedule: an afternoon walk to ancient Tusculum, where the forum, theatre, small temples, and other features of the Roman city have been excavated, and a day out in Ostia Antica, obviously a larger archaeological site. I felt quite drained after the week, physically, although actually I was just mentally on the guard, trying to tackle the Latin.



Figure 1: Group photo taken at Tusculum Vetus. Frascati, the academy's home in the Alban hills, c.12 miles south-east of Rome, is Tusculum Novum. You can see me in the front, the seventh person from the right (wearing a khaki jacket with greenish-yellow spot). Of course there are also photos that show the group from the front, but for reasons of data protection they cannot be published here. Photo: Oxford Latinitas Project

Despite the busy timetable, nobody was rushed. In fact the majority of participants were on holidays, as Hilary term had just ended in Oxford, from where the Oxford Latinitas Project had organised the conference week. The Italian way of life was pretty much part of the meals we enjoyed sitting at long tables in a ground-floor room, which I think was a big version of the “Erdsälchen” in Goethe’s garden house in Weimar being decorated with an old engraving of Rome, while the room in Villa Falconieri opens up to the real view of Rome. I had the feeling that the tuition fee we had payed for the week was totally used up for food.

The magnificent Villa Falconieri, with its central hall and frescos, an enfilade dedicated to the four seasons, the baroque garden, and the splendid far-reaching view from the balustrades just added to the general atmosphere. This easily made forget that not even a century ago “Generalfeldmarschall” Kesselring, who was responsible for the killing of 335 civilians at the Ardeatine Caves in 1944, planted his headquarters here. For three years the villa has been the home of the Accademia Vivarium Novum, which started to realise their idea of a world campus for the humanities in Frascati.

It seems a pity that the only institution outside the Vatican where Latin is spoken on an everyday basis accepts only male students. But I felt very much welcomed at the academy, as a female and student, and I can imagine that the decision to accept only male students arose primarily from practical reasons. I was greatly impressed by the scholarship at the academy, the down-to-earth attitude of the teachers, and the students' tolerance with my stammered Latin. It is a place where teaching and learning form a natural part of life – a bit like the colleges at English universities.

Septimana Latina was a community experience with a twist of learning. A very humbling experience for me. Over time, however, I noticed everybody else's favourite words and expressions. In the end, we all get down to the same old tricks.

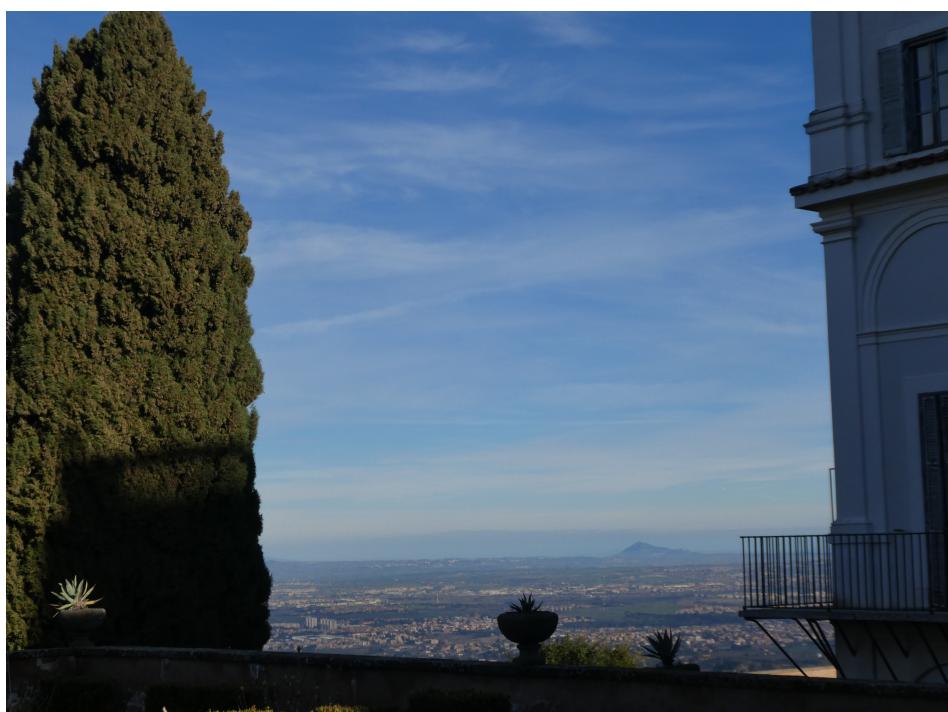


Figure 2: View of Mount Soracte, perhaps from the same perspective as William Turner saw it, when he sketched it in 1828/9 (to see it digitised, please click [here](#)). Photo: Calendula

Of course I did all this to get good marks in my exams, because: *Non vitae sed scholae discimus.* (Sen. *Ep. CVI*). Back at UCL, I surprisingly survived the last week of term, which was perhaps the busiest week I had – after *Septimana Latina*, but in a different way. The thrill of speaking Latin started here for me and I am curious how the Living Latin culture at our department will develop during the remaining two years of my course. Now I will never be able to sit an exam on poetry without singing the poems at least in my head. But I have also found a trick to attain a good life à la Seneca – just do it like the Spartans: *τὸ λακονίζειν ἔστι φιλοσοφεῖν* (Plato *Protagoras* 342ε), in other words: speech is silver but silence is golden.