A LYTEL GREEK IN BRETEN?

It's time to rethink the idea that knowledge of Greek arrived late on Britain's shores, argues **BIJAN OMRANI**

One unfortunate side-effect of a conventional British classical education is that it leaves its students under the impression that the British Isles were always a barbarous backwater, forever laggardly to embrace the warmth and wisdom of the deep Mediterranean South.

This perception comes partly from the classical authors themselves: Tacitus' account of the miserable weather; Horace writing off the British as 'fierce to strangers' (*hospitibus feros*); or Diodorus of Sicily more charitably portraying them as so charmingly out-of-the-way and backward that they were still using chariots for warfare in the 1st century BC, just as the Greek heroes did in the Trojan War. And let us not even mention Ireland, which, according to the Greek geographer Strabo, was 'the home of men who are complete savages… leading a miserable existence because of the cold.' These Irishmen, Strabo elaborated, routinely killed and ate their fathers, and slept with their sisters.

The perception also comes from the story that a classical education generally tells about its own presence in the British Isles. I left school thinking that after the Romans departed Britain, so did a proper knowledge of the classical world. Certainly, we were given to understand, the monks and scribes in the Dark Ages managed to keep some scabrous form of Latin going; but it wasn't anything we as proper classicists should pollute ourselves by reading. As for anything as sophisticated as Greek being known here during those benighted times, one could forget it.

The Grocyn Lectureship at Oxford, which is responsible for ensuring that new undergraduates are brought up to speed in the two classical languages, was named after the Renaissance scholar William Grocyn. This Grocyn, we were taught, was the first person to bring Greek teaching back to these islands – at the end of the 15th century after studying in Italy. Thus, the English, like their determinedly war-chariot-riding ancestors, were resolutely slow to keep up with the attainments of their continental cousins.

It was only later, while studying under the inspiring polyglot scholar David Howlett (for many years editor of the Oxford Medieval Latin Dictionary from British Sources), that I came to realise how wide of the mark this common impression had been. A knowledge of Greek, even if it was not up to the level of Porson or Bentley, was surprisingly widespread in the British Isles from Anglo-Saxon times onwards. The story of its presence deserves to be better known.

ABOVE The scholarly Venerable Bede, as depicted in the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493

Christianity provided an important impulse for people in Britain to learn Greek. In the Christian thinking of this period, Greek was, in the words of the 7th-century encyclopaedist St Isidore of Seville, a 'sacred language'. It was not only the original language of the Gospels and many of the Church Fathers, but also one of the three languages (alongside Hebrew and Latin) used for the notice on top of Christ's Cross. St Augustine commented that in the context of Christ's life, Hebrew called to mind the Jews and their glorying in the law of God; that Latin pointed to the temporal power of the Romans; and Greek 'to the wise men amongst the gentiles.' These ideas were repeated by later English scholars including Bede and Alcuin.

It was also through long-distance connections generated by Christianity that practical knowledge of Greek began to reach the British Isles. The first known instance may have occurred as early as 590, when the Abbot of Bangor, Mo-Sinu moccu Min (who taught the Irish missionary St Columban, founder of several continental monasteries), is recorded to have learned "Computus" (the calculation of the date of Easter and associated mathematical and astronomical studies) directly from 'a certain learned Greek'. This does not prove that the Abbot learned Greek as well as Computus, but it does at least show that people with a knowledge of Greek were present from an early date.

We can be certain that Greek was being taught here by the latter part of the 7th century. Around 669, two Greek-speaking monks arrived in Canterbury from the East. The first was Theodore who came from Tarsus, a city of Cilicia in Asia Minor. He had gone to Constantinople after being displaced from Tarsus by Persian attacks, and later went to one of the Greek-speaking monasteries in Rome, perhaps S. Anastasio. From here, he was sent by Pope Vitalian to become Archbishop of Canterbury. The second monk was Hadrian, who was born in a Greek-speaking part of Libya before 637. He appears to have fled from the region as a result of Arab Islamic invasions, and came to Naples where he entered a monastery. He was Vitalian's first choice for Archbishop of Canterbury, but after modestly declining this offer was later persuaded to take up the post of Abbot of the monastery of St Peter and St Paul at Canterbury.

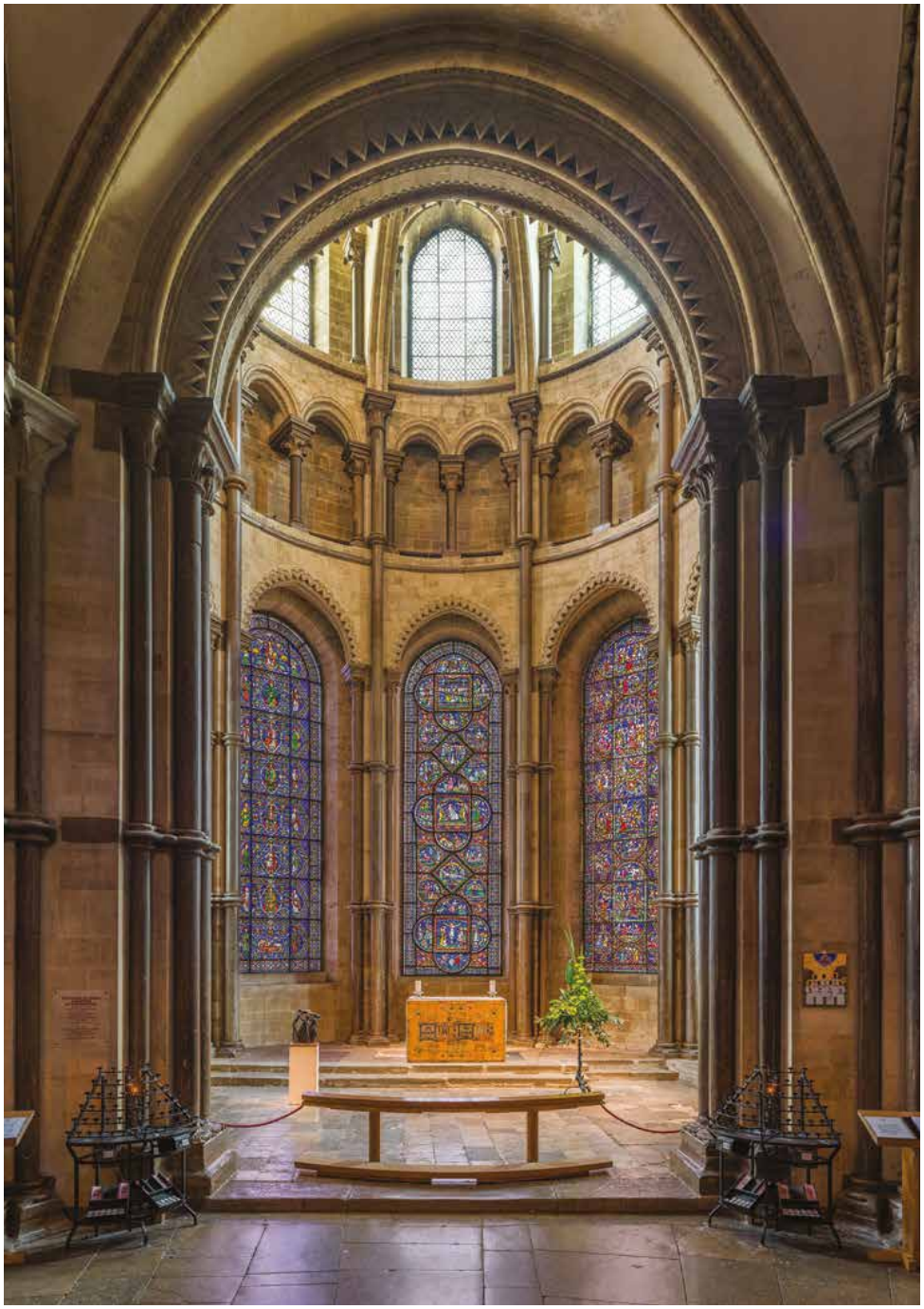
ABOVE Grocyn lecturing in Greek in a window of Worcester Cathedral © *Alamy*

Theodore and Hadrian, according to the Venerable Bede writing around 730, were 'well-versed in sacred and secular literature'. Together, they founded a school at Canterbury to which 'they gathered a crowd of disciples… and, together with the books of holy writ, they taught them the arts of ecclesiastical poetry, astronomy, and arithmetic.' Some of this teaching was in Greek, and, says Bede, there were still alive in his time 'some of their scholars, who are as well versed in the Greek and Latin tongues as in their own, in which they were born.'

Bede names two of their best native students: Tobias, Bishop of Rochester, who was 'abundantly endowed with learning in Latin, Greek and English,' and Albinus, successor to Hadrian as Abbot, who 'had no small knowledge of Greek.'

It was only later in the 20th century that it was possible to verify Bede's claim about the depth of Greek scholarship at Canterbury. In 1953, a manuscript containing Biblical commentaries was discovered by the scholar Bernard Bischoff in Milan, and later published in the 1990s. The manuscript contains direct quotations from Theodore and Hadrian, possibly recorded by Tobias and Albinus themselves. It shows that they were studying subjects ranging from rhetoric to theology, medicine, metrology and the geography of the Holy Land, all at a standard to rival Biblical commentaries of the present day. It also shows that they were closely comparing the text of the Latin Vulgate Bible with the Greek New Testament and the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), discussing the meanings of difficult words in the Greek and picking up on differences between the Latin and Greek texts. They were also reading the Greek works of the Church Father, St Basil the Great.

One flaw with their teaching of Greek is that it appears to have been predominantly oral, and no Greek textbook seems to have been developed to help pass on the knowledge. Bede himself, who learned Greek later in life, appears not to have derived his facility from any teacher or grammar book. Rather, he seems to have taught himself the language by working it out from scattered comments about Greek grammar in the Church Fathers, particularly St Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate Bible, and from intensive study of a parallel Greek-Latin text of the Acts of the Apostles. (The copy he used, MS. Laud Gr. 35, survives in the Bodleian Library; it has also been digitised and can be seen online). This gave him the capacity to comment on nuances of Greek vocabulary, for example the difference between the two words for "life", ΒΙΟΣ (Bios) meaning a 'way of life', and ΖΩΗ, meaning 'life' as opposed to death. He could also draw fine points of commentary from observations of grammar, and was even so bold as to challenge some of Jerome's translations.



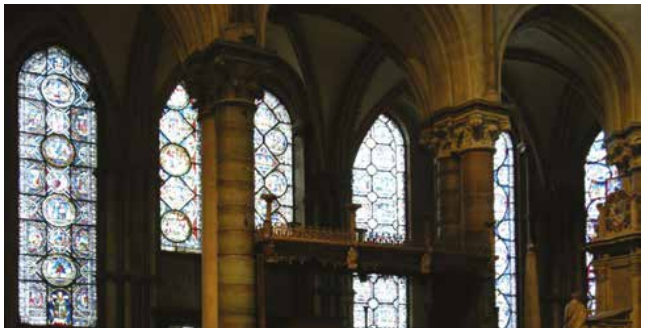
ABOVE Becket's Crown, the eastern chapel of Canterbury Cathedral, Kent © *Diliff/Wikimedia Commons*
RIGHT Canterbury Cathedral © *Alice Dunn*

In Ireland in the following century, the philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (b. 815) was able to obtain an even greater level of proficiency than Bede through teaching himself, even writing Greek poetry and translating Gregory of Nyssa. However, aside from these outstanding scholars, the absence of a dedicated Greek grammar textbook may have been the main cause of deep facility with Greek failing to spread further. The Viking attacks of the period might have been another.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that interest in the language lessened. Of the 1,000 or so manuscripts to survive from Anglo-Saxon England, about 500 contain Greek words or characters. Some of the most significant sources of Greek vocabulary are glossaries explaining the meanings of Greek words in Latin and sometimes Old English. Some liturgies required prayers to be said in Greek. For example, the Greek words of the trisagion ('AGIOS O THEOS, AGIOS YSCORROS [ΙΣΧΥΡΟΣ], AGIOS ATHANATOS, ELEYSON YMAS' [Holy God, Holy, Strong, Holy, Immortal, have mercy upon us – the liturgy recorded the Greek in Latin characters]) were chanted during the veneration of the cross in the Good Friday liturgy. For the consecration of a church, the Greek alphabet was written across the floor from one end to the other.

Greek was even used in medical charms which mixed up quotations from scripture with prayers for relief from ailments. One curious example is a charm for stopping a woman's issue of blood, alluding to Christ's miraculous cure of this in the New Testament. It contains a passage of Greek written forwards and backwards – αμι σο σαρδινο ροφι ιφορ ονιδρας ος ιμα – which appears, more conventionally, to be – αἷμα σοῦ σάρδινος ῥοφεῖ ('the sardine-stone sucks your blood'). The manuscript suggests that the charm is to be spoken by a woman, suggesting that knowledge of Greek at the period was not confined to male scholars.

Greek in England saw another flowering in the Middle Ages, still centuries before Grocyn reached these shores. Robert Grosseteste (born c. 1170) was one of the most renowned scholars of the period, with interests extending from theology and philosophy to mathematics, science and optics. He is credited as having been appointed the first Chancellor of the University of Oxford in the 1220s, and he became Bishop of Lincoln in 1235. He attained a mastery of Greek in his sixties, apparently taught by another Englishman, Master John of Basingstoke, who had lived for a number of years in Athens and had brought back a number of books with him to England. In the last 20 years of his life, Grosseteste was responsible for translating various theological and philosophical works into Latin, including Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the mystical writings of pseudo-Dionysius, as well as philosophical commentaries by Simplicius.



Tacitus and Strabo might have been right about the weather of the British Isles (I confess that I am writing this in the middle of an interminable downpour), but it is a mistake to think that the perpetual rains kept away Greek scholarship. We should remember that the Greek language and Greek literature (even if not always the great works of Homer and the tragedians) have had a far longer influence here than we sometimes realise, and that Britain's historic relationship with them is more interesting and complicated than the usual classical curriculum often lets on. A

FURTHER READING

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