

CILIPS Professional Development Fund report: Understanding Latin in Documents and Archives

With Latin less frequently taught in schools nowadays, overall proficiency in the language has decreased – not least among library professionals. This presents an ongoing predicament for those working with Special Collections, many of whose older materials are composed solely or partially in Latin. With the generous help of the CILIPS Professional Development Fund, I was able to enrol in a Latin course at the University of Dundee’s Centre for Archive and Information Studies (CAIS). This module is aimed specifically at those working in library and archive environments, and, as such, provided me with a working knowledge of the language beyond mere grammar exercises: it offered real-life examples of the language being used across a vast array of items often encountered in archival environments. Examples include (royal) charters, bonds, sasines, monumental inscriptions, and a variety of testamentary documents.

Having studied the history, languages, and cultures of the medieval world during both my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (with particular focus on medieval manuscripts and manuscript culture), my lack of Latin skills often proved a stumbling block. Now that I have continued my career working in a special collections department – where I am still regularly confronted with Latin collections – being able to understand and contextualise these documents has become ever more important, especially as my job requires me to assist readers in their research as well. As such, an understanding of the language would allow our Latin sources to be better presented and contextualised to wider audiences, increasing their benefit to our readers and researchers, both onsite and online.

The first few weeks of the course dealt with basic grammar and practice sentences, but as the weeks progressed, we were able to tackle more and more advanced translations, eventually graduating to genuine records. Being able to instantly recognise words and phrases within documents held in the Edinburgh University Library – my ordinary place of work – has been a very good motivator, and it has most certainly enriched my enjoyment of both the course as well as our own collections.

A very beneficial side effect was engaging with other students – often professionals working in special collections departments at other repositories throughout the UK. Although I am surrounded by very knowledgeable colleagues willing to share their enthusiasm and experience, it has been invaluable to discover how other archives and libraries deal with their Latin collections.

Although I am still by no means an expert in Latin, this course has helped me to better understand how the language is used in historical contexts and documents, and has provided me with the tools to tackle any text that needs translating. In fact, it has already helped me to attain one of my long held professional goals: I will finally get to catalogue a few medieval manuscripts myself!