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Research Article

Learning Latin and Greek in medieval Wales: textual strategies, glossing practices, and language pedagogy in the *Liber Commonei*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent and modalities of Latin and Greek teaching in early medieval British monastic communities by examining the indirect evidence offered by the manuscript known as the *Liber Commonei*, part of the composite manuscript Oxford Bodleian Auct. F.4.32. Using the patterns and nature of Latin and Old Welsh glosses as they appear in the manuscript, it is argued that, as expected, the monks would learn Classical Latin with the aid of Vulgar Latin and vernacular glosses and that they would tackle texts of a gradually higher complexity, conversely reducing their reliance on glosses. They would then proceed to learn Greek, using biblical excerpts (in Greek and in Latin script) as reference material; by analysing these texts, it is argued here that these British monks in the 9th century worked with the help of a Greek-speaking teacher.

Keywords: language learning; early medieval Britain; history of classics teaching; Greek teaching; Celtic philology

Introduction

One of the best-known characteristics of the manuscript Oxford Bodleian Auctarium F.4.32 is the sheer variety of its contents. At first glance, this fact appears to be rather unsurprising, as it may be considered somewhat intrinsic to its nature as a composite manuscript, that is, a codex which, in its contemporary state, is the result of a binding together of various, often heterogeneous pre-existing manuscripts. This is a defining feature of the aforementioned codex, whose existence in its present form was first recorded in a 1247-1248 catalogue of Glastonbury Abbey's library. Its parchment was likely bound together between the 10th and the 12th centuries in this abbey's workshop, and it is comprised of four distinct parts.[1] The first section is a copy of the treatise *De discernendis coniugationibus* (folios [ff.] 2–9), a grammatical primer on the Latin verbal system written by the grammarian Eutyches (6th century AD), disciple of Priscian;[2] this text contains a number of glosses in Old Breton, which suggests a continental origin and a dating from around the 9th century. The second section is an Anglo-Saxon hagiographical homily on the Invention of the Holy Cross, a text of obvious insular origin dated to the 11th century (ff. 10–18). The third part of the codex (ff. 19–36) is often referred to as the *Liber Commonei*. This text is a heterogeneous collection of excerpts from scholarly works and extracts from the Holy Bible (more specifically, from the Old Testament) and features many glosses and comments in Old Welsh. Both the text and the vernacular glosses were copied in the 9th century from a source which is now lost, likely one from Wales. The fourth and last section of the composite manuscript is a 9th-century copy of the first book of Ovid's *Ars amatoria* (ff. 37–47), which also contains some Old Welsh interlinear glosses and was transcribed in Wales by at least four different scribes in succession.[3] Because of the foundational importance of the vernacular glosses contained in the third and fourth section of the codex for the disciplines of Old Welsh philology and linguistics, this text has received much attention from scholars of the Celtic languages over the century and a half that followed its recovery by Henry Bradshaw.[4] Among Celticists, a habit has crystallised of synthetically referring to the whole composite manuscript as *Oxoniensis Prior*, in opposition to the *Oxoniensis Posterior* (that is, Oxford Bodleian 572, which contains Old Welsh glosses dated to the 10th century),[5] following a nomenclature which can be ultimately traced back to Johann Kaspar Zeuss.[6]

As previously noted, a high degree of variability between the contents of a composite manuscript can hardly be considered exceptional. However, it is noteworthy that most of the variability is actually found in a single section of the codex, specifically its third constituent part, the *Liber Commonei*, which will be the primary focus of the present paper. In a letter addressed to Robinson Ellis, Bradshaw describes it as follows:

> The middle piece (now no. 3) which I call the *Liber Commonei* is undoubtedly the oldest in the volume. It is a quire of useful knowledge written for one Commoneus by his son, palpably a Welshman of Wales. It contains amongst other things the alphabet of Nemniu, and a lunar (19-year) cycle for common use, showing the cycle in which they were living, namely A. D. 817–835. This quire is the patriarch of all Welsh books known.[7]

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In his publication on the matter (which is primarily concerned with Ovid's text), Ellis observes in passing[8] that the eminent librarian, perhaps more interested in Celtic vestiges than in Classical or religious matters, did not mention that in that same quire many biblical extracts are included, mostly organised in two columns, with the Latin text on the left accompanied by a Greek version in the Latin alphabet on the right. In fact, there are many other interesting features that Bradshaw glossed over in his brief description, therefore it is in the best interest of this paper to recall the full contents of the *Liber*:[9]

- f. 20r: Extract from Isidore, *Etymologies*, III.7.
- f. 20r: Runic alphabet of Nemnivus, with letter names.
- f. 20r: Two paragraphs on the dating of Easter.
- ff. 20v–21r: Schematic rendition of a 19-year cycle, followed by calculations of the placement of Easter Sunday (years 817 to 835).
- f. 21v: Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians (2.14), entitled *De questione apostoli.*
- ff. 22r–22v: Mathematical-astronomical treatise *De abortiua Luna*, derived from the Hiberno-Latin text *De ratione computandi.*
- ff. 23r–23v: Excerpts from Victorius of Aquitaine's *Calculus*, with a bilingual (Latin and Old Welsh) commentary and some purely lexical glosses.
- f. 23v: Table of signs for measures of weight and a multiplication table.
- ff. 24r–28v: Brief Greek extracts from the prophets (*Pauca testimonia de prophetarum libris per Graecam linguam*), namely Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, with each extract accompanied by a Latin translation in the right column.
- ff. 28v–35v: Lectures from Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, and Psalm XLII in Latin, with a Greek version in Latin letters in the right column.
- ff. 19r*–19v* (originally between f. 35 and f. 36; misplaced during binding): Lecture from Deuteronomy.

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, this contribution will help advance and disseminate the knowledge surrounding this manuscript while hopefully providing new perspectives on the history and modalities of Latin and Greek learning within the monastic environment of early medieval Britain. Secondly, some factual differences between the nature of Latin teaching and Greek teaching (and the strategies respectively employed) in such a milieu will be investigated, particularly by evaluating the role played by the vernacular language in this respect, as it emerges from the textual data offered by this manuscript. As such, it is important to note that this codex features Old Welsh glosses of two types: some consist of simple and direct translations of the Latin terms found in the main text (or in a piece of Latin commentary), while others are more elaborate in nature and often expand significantly on the contents of the main text from an exegetical point of view. Clearly, a strong boundary between the two categories cannot (and certainly should not) be drawn, as many of them have the characteristics of both a translation and a paraphrase, yet for the purposes of this paper even a blurred distinction is sufficiently valid since the glosses (both Old Welsh and Latin) will primarily be considered in terms of their pedagogical utility, and the pedagogical function assumed by translations and grammatical indications, as opposed to hermeneutical comments, is immediately apparent.

With this in mind, the argument will be divided in two sections (Sections 2 and 3), which reflect the textual partition between the first portion of the *Liber* (richly glossed in Latin and Old Welsh) and its second part (almost completely devoid of interlinear or marginal glosses) as well as the heuristically distinct analysis of Latin and Greek teaching – and learning – presented here. The results of this brief investigation will then be summarised and commented upon in Section 4.

Latin and Old Welsh

When indirectly investigating the differences in the teaching and learning strategies adopted for Latin and for Greek in medieval sources such as the manuscript of interest in this paper, a good starting point is to compare the type and complexity of the texts that were transcribed. It is, after all, entirely reasonable to presume that a text of high complexity in a given language implies a high level of competence in that language. It must also be added that a solid grasp of a language would aid the comprehension not only of texts which show a high degree of linguistic intricacy (be it on a morpho-syntactical or a purely lexical level) but also of texts which – regardless of their level of linguistic transparency or obscurity – deal with intricate matters since confidence and good acquaintance with a linguistic system result in a significant reduction of the cognitive load that comes with approaching texts that present difficulties from a content-related point of view. In the specific case of the *Liber Commonei*, the comparison between its Latin and its Greek contents does in fact align with our preliminary expectations regarding the matter at hand. We can indeed expect to observe a better understanding of Latin than Greek on the part of 9th-century monks in Britain; therefore, it is not surprising to detect a substantially higher level of complexity in the Latin texts which form the first portion of the *Liber* (ff. 20r–23v): mathematical and astronomical calculations; intricate theological commentaries on biblical passages; and long-winded discussions on capacity, weight, and length measurement systems (along with their schematic references). These are ostensibly more challenging than Bible excerpts when taken at face value, and they surely require not only a passive knowledge but rather a competent use of the Latin language.

Nevertheless, this preliminary comparison offers limited satisfaction to our investigation. While it aligns with our pre-existing empirical assumptions regarding language learning, it ultimately relies on an argument *ex silentio*: the absence of Greek texts exhibiting comparable intricacy within this specific manuscript (or, in fact, elsewhere in the entire composite codex) does not necessarily imply that the monks who transcribed this manuscript would be unable to engage with them; it is, in fact, merely a suggestion in that direction. To take a more meaningful glance at the language learning strategies involved and at the scribes' level of competence in Classical languages, I propose instead to consider the testimony offered by the glossing practice as it emerges from this manuscript, both in its Latin and in its vernacular iteration. Through this analysis, it may be possible to confirm (or, eventually, to reject or at the very least re-evaluate) the scenario suggested by the thematic disparity between the Latin and the Greek texts in question.

In this respect, the first observation that must be brought forward is that, while (as mentioned) there is no shortage of

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bilingual glosses and comments (both interlinear and marginal) on the very first portion of the *Liber*,[10] in its second part (with the biblical extracts in Greek and Latin) glosses are basically absent since the very few interlinear or marginal annotations amount to simple corrections or small additions to the text. This absence is significant in and of itself, as we will see (Section 3), but to properly evaluate the glossing practice observed in the first portion, we need a more substantial comparison.

In light of this, a useful counterpart can be found in the quire that immediately follows the *Liber Commonei* in the composite codex: the text of Book I of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*. Such comparison is warranted: Although the Ovidian copy constitutes a distinct manuscript that only by chance happened to be bound together with the *Liber Commonei* at a later stage, the two texts were undoubtedly produced in a very similar time, place, and environment – a Welsh monastery in the 9th century. Therefore, the glosses attested in the two adjacent manuscripts can be reasonably expected to represent two separate instances of the same glossing practice, and it is not too far-fetched to assume that different modalities in the glossing of the two texts reflect a difference in the approach to (and in the practical use of) these texts by the British monks, rather than a fundamental difference in the glossing tradition. Naturally, this conclusion cannot be understood as definitive, since there cannot be definitive proof of the fact that, before being bound together at Glastonbury, the two manuscripts were perused in the same context; we will then need to turn to the functional analysis of the two series of glosses to see whether a pattern can be identified.

The Oxonian copy of the *Ars amatoria*, limited to its first book (with a few sparse textual *lacunae*, amounting to seven verses in total), has been recently edited by Paul Russell.[11] Russell's edition extends not only to the main text of the poem but also to the numerous Latin and Old Welsh glosses present in the manuscript. Among Russell's comments on the observable glossing practice, his remarks on the 'pedagogical' nature of many of the annotations featured in his *Introduction* are particularly interesting for the purposes of this paper:

> [T]he glossing of this copy of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, and in other manuscripts, can be considered in the light of Latin pedagogy. Comparison with other glossed and annotated versions of Ovid's poem indicate that our text is particularly heavily glossed with grammatical annotations both in Latin and in Old Welsh. [. . .] Latin verse presented particular problems for the learner, and Ovid's verse more than most. In addition to the general allusiveness of his verse, the range of reference, and the assumption that the reader knows exactly what is going on and so can identify the referents of all the pronouns, the language itself provided many grammatical challenges.[12]

Russell's words are especially significant when paired with the fact that, in the *Ars amatoria*, many instances of the grammatical glosses are in the vernacular language, with many examples of a formulaic usage of prepositions to signify the correct Latin synthetic case in a language such as Old Welsh that had long lost synthetic case-marking (for example, *o/or* 'from/from the', followed by the Old Welsh gloss, is used to represent a Latin ablative; much in the same way, *di* 'to, towards' is used to translate nouns and adjectives in the dative case, for example, *di aperthou* 'to [the] offerings', which translates *muneribus*).[13] In cases such as these, the pedagogical value of the glosses and, consequently, the use of the text of Ovid's poem as a language learning tool is immediately apparent: the presence of Latin and, most importantly, of vernacular elements which are clearly used as meta-linguistic categories is particularly telling in that regard.

In turn, the state of the glossing found in the first part of the *Liber Commonei* presents some major philological difficulties, which prevent a similarly clear-cut analysis. The main issue is that, during the copying process that resulted in the copy of the *Liber* that survived to the modern day within the *Oxoniensis Prior*, at least 2 distinct series of glosses and comments were mistakenly conflated into a single one. The end result is a manuscript portion where marginal and interlinear glosses are often misplaced (that is, spatially removed from the main text's words or phrases which they were originally ascribed to) and miscopied, a situation which not only hinders their comprehension in general but also obscures the interplay between the two batches of glosses that can reasonably be reconstructed and have existed in the lost source manuscript. Nonetheless, eminent Celtic philologists undertook the challenge of editing these glosses.[14] Not only did they establish beyond any reasonable doubt that the apograph of the *Liber Commonei* must have had at least two series of glosses, but they also inferred that, most significantly, the first glossator almost exclusively used Latin, while the second supposed glossator expressed themselves bilingually, often switching between Latin and Old Welsh between sentences or even within the boundaries of a given sentence. Pierre-Yves Lambert went as far as suggesting[15] that the second glossator made use of their own vernacular language in those instances where they felt more emotionally invested in responding to the Latin notes left by their predecessor: This dynamic, if proven true, would align with our knowledge of code-switching as a general phaenomenon[16] as well as in its iterations in the ambit of Celtic medieval glosses.[17]

The most significant cluster of vernacular glosses in the *Liber Commonei* is found in the section that is traditionally known as 'Weights and Measures', that is, the epitomised excerpt from Victorius of Aquitaine's *Calculus* (ff. 23r–23v, with the addition of a piece of commentary copied in the lower margin of f. 22v and linked to the main text through the use of schematic *signes de renvoi*). Both the Latin and the Old Welsh glosses found in this portion of the text are not as straightforwardly grammatical (or, even, plainly lexical) as the ones found in the *Ars amatoria* (see above); instead, these comments engage with the contents of the main text at an ostensibly deeper level, discussing themes as the practical and theological implications of measures of weight mentioned in the Gospels[18] or providing equations useful to navigating the geometric system laid out by Victorius of Aquitaine and integrating it with alternative nomenclatures.[19] Moreover, it is particularly significant to observe how the Old Welsh glosses on the *Calculus* very rarely consist of simple lexical clarifications: Most often, the vernacular is used to integrate the aforementioned discussions with additional (and, at times, alternative) relevant information.

As a result, comparing the glosses on the first section of the *Liber Commonei* with the ones on the first book of the *Ars amatoria* reveals how the latter was employed to learn Latin at a comparatively basic level (or, at the very least, the poem was read and annotated by monks who exhibited a somewhat limited proficiency in the Latin language), while the perusal of the *Liber Commonei* arguably required an already established competence in Latin (and, ostensibly, some familiarity with a remarkable variety of scholarly texts) to engage with its intricate contents. An interesting parallel situation has been observed by Paul Russell as

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part of his research on the bilingual (again, Latin and Old Welsh) glosses to Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153): When confronting two successive batches of glosses on that manuscript (one derived from a pre-existing continental commentary tradition referred to as the Oldest Glossing Tradition [OGT],[20] and the other one independently developed at a later stage), Russell ultimately observed:

> Some of that later work used the same glossing techniques but, it is argued here, seems to have operated at a more elementary level, being more concerned with identifying the references (if only to indicate which were proper names and which were common nouns), indicating the referents of pronouns, and marking up some of the trickier grammatical issues.[21]

It is plain to see, then, how a series of lexical and grammatical glosses can be reasonably argued to reflect a more basic knowledge of Latin and, by extension, a less advanced stage in the process of language learning. Reverting back to the contents of the *Oxoniensis Prior*, this consideration lends further strength to the assumption that, in contrast to Victorius of Aquitaine's *Calculus*, Ovid's *Ars amatoria* was more or less specifically used as a reference text for Latin language learning. In this regard, it is interesting to follow Russell[22] in correlating this information with a passage from the scholastic colloquy *De raris fabulis*, likely originating from Cornwall, where a priest explains the reason behind his limited knowledge of Latin and, accordingly, the poor quality of his Latin production: *Ignoro enim regulas grammaticorum nec exempla poetarum* 'For I am ignorant of the rules of the grammarians nor do I know the examples of the poets' (translation by Russell). This clearly suggests that, as has been argued for the *Ars amatoria*, grammatical treatises and, most significantly, poetic texts made up the foundations of Latin teaching and learning in early medieval Britain, while, by contrast, in a text such as the *Liber Commonei*, Latin is better understood as a tool to teach and learn subjects that went beyond the vehicular language itself.

It might be argued that, in the monastic milieu that we are dealing with, the Greek language was one of the subjects that counted among its prerequisites a good knowledge of Latin, and it is now hopefully clear how the distribution of the vernacular glosses in the *Liber Commonei* serves as an indirect yet solid confirmation for this hypothesis.

Latin and Greek

Let us now turn to considering the evidence offered by the second part of the *Liber* (ff. 24r–35v, plus ff. 19r–19v; see below), which entirely consists of lectures from the Old Testament in Latin and Greek.

Folios 24r–28v contain *Pauca testimonia de prophetarum libris per Graecam linguam* ('brief extracts from the Books of the Prophets in the Greek language'): The Greek text is written down in the left column of each page, while a Latin translation occupies the right column. The first important thing to note when searching for hints of the pedagogic nature of this text is the Greek alphabetic sequence that runs vertically on the left margin of the first page of this portion (24r), to the right of which the Latin transliteration of each symbol is attached. It is interesting to note that, while it is never used in the Greek texts of the manuscript, a *qoppa* appears in the sequence between *pi* and *rho* (along with its Latin counterpart, *q*). Whoever wrote this alphabet down was clearly deeply concerned with its immediate correspondence with the Latin alphabetic sequence, yet a number of egregious mistakes are found: *epsilon* is transliterated with *ee*, just as *omega* is rendered with *oo*, suggesting an erroneous interpretation on part of the scribe of *epsilon* as a long vowel; conversely, *heta* is transliterated as the Latin *h*. It is also interesting to note that aspiration is not consistently marked in the Latin rendition, since *theta* is aptly transliterated with *th*, but *chi* is transliterated with *c* (as opposed to *kappa* – *k*) and the correspondent letter for *phi* is written *f*. Moreover, *psi* is incorrectly transliterated as *ph*. This series of errors would have definitely had some repercussions on a transliteration effort; it must be observed, though, that, in the following portion of the manuscript, where the Greek text is written down in Latin characters, the transliteration is carried out in a way that disregards the prospect in f. 24r completely.

The Latin translation is organised in the right column in a way that reveals the desire to follow the Greek text on the left as closely as possible, not only in a linguistic sense but most strikingly in physical, spatial terms. The most telling example of this phaenomenon is arguably found at f. 28r, where the Latin line *in gentibus* (translation of the Greek εν ταις εθνεσιν [sic], or 'among the nations'; Malachi 1:11) is repeated twice, in order to maintain the exact correspondence to the Greek text after a 'slip':

Και θισιανοι προσδεξομαι	Et sacrificium n*on* accipiam
εκ τον χερον υμον	de manibus uestris
διοτι απο ανατολον ελιου	q*uoniam* ab ortu solis
και εος δυσμον	usq*ue* clarificatum no*men* meu*m*
το ονομα μου δεδοξασ-	in gentibus
ται εν ταις εθνεσιν	in gentib*us*
και εν παντο το θιμιαματι	et in omni loco incensum
προσαγεται το ονοματυ μου[23]	admouetur nomini meo[24]
[. . .]	[. . .]

In the fourth line of the page, *occasum* (sunset) is omitted from the Latin translation, and as a consequence of this distraction, the rest of the line is filled by the translation corresponding to the subsequent, fifth line of the Greek text on the left column. The scribe, then, reverted this mistake by repeating *in gentibus* over 2 subsequent lines, the fifth and the sixth one.

This demonstration of effort towards the total spatial adherence of the Latin column to the Greek one shows us how this translation practice can be functionally equated with glossing.[25] Since the Latin text plays the same functional role as a continuative series of glosses (that is, to annotate the meaning of words or phrases to facilitate linguistic and contextual comprehension of the main text – in this case, the Greek excerpts), it is no wonder that Old Welsh glosses are nowhere to be found in this portion of the *Liber Commonei*. The exegetic and (here, mainly) pedagogical function of a meta-language is taken on by Latin, revealing how knowledge of Latin was considered a prerequisite to learn Greek.

While these elements alone offer clear indication of the didactic scope underlying the compilation of this manuscript, there are still some aspects to it that need to be investigated. Namely, what can this manuscript tell us about how, in practical terms, Greek language learning was pursued in this particular context? Did the monks rely on a teacher, or was the transmission of written sources their only option for learning Greek? Answers to these questions can be tentatively provided by taking into consideration the texts

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transcribed in the following pages, from f. 28v to f. 35v, with the addition of f. 19 (recto and verso). These pages contain, once again, excerpts from the Old Testament, but instead of featuring a Greek left column accompanied by a Latin translation on the right, in this case the primary text of the biblical extracts (on the left) is in Latin, and the right column is occupied by a Greek translation (clearly derived from the Septuagint version), phonetically transcribed using the Latin alphabet. The lectures are from the Books of Genesis (the Creation and the Binding of Isaac), Exodus, Isaiah, and Psalm 42 ('*Quemadmodum desiderat cervus*', Psalm 41 in Jerome's *Vulgata*). The folio containing the final lecture, from Deuteronomy, was misplaced in its current position (ff. 19r–19v) when the *Liber Commonei* was bound together with the other components of the *Oxoniensis Prior*; for all intents and purposes, we shall consider it as the last folio of this quire, as it originally was.

The Greek transcription in the Latin alphabet is quite consistent in its rules throughout the manuscript, and some of its characteristics reveal that a 'popular', rather than 'learned', pronunciation of Early Medieval Greek[26] underlies this transcription. The conjunction και, widely present in the text as the translation of Latin *et*, is consistently written down as *ce*, revealing the monophthongisation of αι into /e/ and its merging with ε;[27] similarly, η, ι, and ει are clearly merged into /i/, as is evident from the very first sentence of the translation of Genesis (f. 28v): *En archi epoeisen* [sic] *o theos ton uranon ce tin gin* (ἐn ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν; in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth). The Greek φ is consistently rendered as *f*, indicating a completely fricativised pronunciation, as can be seen in that same first paragraph: *ce ipen o theos genethito fos* (καὶ εἶπεν ὁ Θεός· γενηθήτω φῶς; then God said: 'Let there be light');[28] moreover, the use of *nyftan* for νύκτα (night [acc.]) (f. 29r) shows not only the expected fricativisation [kt] > [xt], with [x] represented by approximation with the Latin *f*, but also the hypercorrect addition of a final *-n*, betraying the generalised loss of final nasal sounds in Medieval Greek.[29] In turn, the text shows the retention of the distinction between /i/, /y/, and /u/, which aligns with what is known about the chronology of the development of the Medieval Greek vocalic system,[30] albeit with some graphical inconsistency: Compare *yius* (ὑιούς; sons; f. 19r) with *kyrios*, *kirios*, and *quirios* (κύριος; Lord), all recorded on the very same page, f. 31v.

The characteristics that we have just listed make it extremely unlikely that this transcription was originally obtained by transliterating a written, Greek apograph. It is far more reasonable to assume that these texts were originally transcribed by someone who actively spoke Greek and therefore was capable of reading out loud the text of the Septuagint. Alternatively, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the original transcription was carried out indirectly, that is, by listening to someone capable of reading the Greek Bible (and clearly well acquainted with their contemporary Greek language) and writing down the sounds in the Latin alphabet, with an inevitable degree of approximation. Either way, since these transcriptions (or anything that may closely resemble them) are only found in this manuscript of undisputed Welsh origin, the logical consequence of what has been exposed so far is that, in the 9th century (possibly, earlier), some monks in Wales were being taught (or, at the very least, were being exposed to) Greek by at least one Greek-speaking individual and that biblical excerpts were being used to that end as pedagogical tools – tools that were destined to the further education of those monks who had already acquired a working competence in Classical Latin, as testified by the *Liber Commonei* itself.

Conclusions

Although we are still far from tracing a clear and complete picture of the methods and the extension of Latin and Greek teaching in early medieval Britain, some definite elements emerged from the analysis of the *Liber Commonei* carried out in this paper.

Firstly, the expected path of language learning (vernacular language/regional Vulgar Latin → Classical Latin → Greek) is all but confirmed by what we were able to observe in the manuscript. In addition, it is particularly interesting to note how vernacular (in this specific case, Old Welsh) glosses were used as an important part of the metalinguistic toolkit necessary to approach the study of Classical Latin, but their utility in the didactic process decreased in an inversely proportional manner to the increase in the learners' competence in Latin; this is reflected in the reduced frequency (or even absence) of vernacular glosses in those texts which would reasonably be expected to be read by more advanced learners owing to their intrinsic complexity.

Secondly, it has been shown (Section 3) that the transcription of the Greek texts featured in the *Liber* in all likelihood required the involvement of an active Greek speaker, implying that at least one (remarkably good) Greek speaker was active in the monasteries of Britain in the 9th century (or immediately before), possibly in Wales itself. At the moment, nothing more can be reasonably argued regarding how widespread the teaching of Greek might have been in such a milieu or regarding the cultural as well as practical role of supposed Greek teachers: were they explicitly considered language teachers, or was the teaching and learning of Greek just a natural accident of the practice of biblical exegesis, facilitated by the presence of Greek-speaking monks? The data that have emerged from the present analysis lead me to lean towards the former hypothesis rather than the latter. Nevertheless, the evidence is far from conclusive in this regard, and further studies on the matter are required.

In general, the testimony offered by the *Liber Commonei* (and, in turn, by the whole *Oxoniensis Prior*) is exceptional in many ways. It is inherently interesting, in our modern times, to engage with a 9th-century insular manuscript that features Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon, Old Welsh, and Old Breton texts and that exhibits such a variety in literary genera. Hopefully, this brief paper has shown the great potential of analysing the *Oxoniensis Prior* from a language learning perspective, looking at the strategies employed by early medieval British monks to teach and learn the Classical languages, in addition to the long-established scholarly tradition of treating it as one of the oldest and most remarkable sources of Old Welsh.

Notes

1 Recent and up-to-date overviews of the manuscript's contents can be found in Budny (1992) and Giusteri (2024).

2 Jones, Martindale & Morris, 1980, 445–446.

3 Russell 2017, 36–45.

4 Bradshaw 1889, 281–285.

5 Falileyev 2000, xvii; Jackson 1953, 55.

6 A somewhat concurrent naming tradition refers to the manuscript as '*St Dunstan's Classbook*', in reference to Dunstan (*ca.* 909 to 988), the Abbott of Glastonbury and, later, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The decorated frontispiece of the codex is attributed to the English saint himself in a textual note on its upper margin; other minor textual additions which can be attributed to Dunstan's time (or immediately after) can be found throughout the codex (Budny 1992, *passim*). There seems to be some inconsistency in the usage of this

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moniker, as it appears to be used alternatively to refer to either the whole composite manuscript or its first section alone, *De discernendis coniugationibus*.

7 Ellis 1880, 426.

8 Ellis 1880, 426, note 1.

9 A comprehensive and detailed list of all its contents, along with the relevant bibliographical references, was compiled in 2018 and is available at the following link: https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_675 (last accessed: 30 June 2025). Through the same webpage, it is possible to access a high-resolution scan of the manuscript itself. See also: Lapidge and Sharpe 1985, 83–88.

10 Incidentally, it is reasonable to state that these glosses – especially the ones in Old Welsh – are, arguably, the primary reason behind the relative notoriety of the *Oxoniensis Prior* among the early medieval British manuscripts.

11 Russell 2017.

12 Russell 2017, 57–58.

13 This phaenomenon within the Celtic glossing tradition is thoroughly investigated by Lambert (1987).

14 Thurneysen 1890; Williams 1930; more recently, Lambert 2003.

15 Lambert 2003, 234.

16 Assessments such as those of Gumperz (1982, 50–99) and Auer (1995, 123–132) have shown that, when the appropriate syntactical and pragmatical conditions are met, high emotional participation is likely to activate code-switching; this is particularly relevant in the context of an alternation between a system socio-linguistically perceived as 'high' (such as Classical Latin) and one perceived as 'low' (such as the vernacular) (cfr. Giacalone Ramat 1995). See also Baker (2000; particularly, 109–132) on the importance of code-switching within the process of language learning.

17 On this matter, see Bisagni (2014) and Knight (2021).

18 Lambert 2015.

19 For a detailed and updated discussion of the glosses in question, see Giusteri (2024).

20 Cfr. O'Sullivan 2011.

21 Russell 2022, 117–118.

22 Russell 2017, 11 and 58.

23 King James Version: 'Neither will I accept an offering at your hand.[11] For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name . . . '.

24 Note, incidentally, that this Latin version does not follow the text of Jerome's Latin *Vulgata*: *Et munus non suscipiam de manu uestra/ab ortu enim solis usque ad occasum magnum est nomen meum in gentibus et in omni loco sacrificatur et offertur nomini meo oblatio munda . . .* (Malachi 1:10–11). This is further proof of the fact that it serves as a functional translation of the Greek text on the left column, with pedagogic, rather than ritual, purposes.

25 See the remarks by Blom (2017) in Chapter 2 of *Glossing the Psalms* (9–35). This Latin translation mirrors the form and, most importantly, the function of what in Blom's framework would be called a 'marginal substitution gloss' of the SUB1 type ('synonym/translation').

26 I am following, here, the distinction between 'popular' and 'learned' pronunciation as formalised by Horrocks (2010, *passim*), ultimately stemming from 'popular' and 'learned' variants of Koine Greek. For an overview of the historical pronunciations of biblical Greek, see Kantor (2023).

27 In some instances, the Latin transcription has *cae*; this, of course, has little to no bearing on this argument since, just as expected, in this manuscript *ae* and *e* are used as virtually exchangeable.

28 Naturally, the examples reported here also show how vowel length is disregarded; while it is reasonable to assume that this reflects the loss of the phonemic value of vowel length in Medieval Greek, it must be pointed out that, since the Latin script does not have an inherent system for marking vowel length, the testimony of this transcription in this regard is ultimately inconclusive.

29 Horrocks 2010, 274–275.

30 Browning 1983, 56–57.

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