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# Medieval Wales as a Linguistic Crossroads in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153

**Abstract:** The manuscript known as Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153 contains a copy of Martianus Capella's Latin text *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*. Written in Wales around 900 CE, it includes marginal annotations in Latin and Old Welsh that open a window on the spread of Carolingian educational culture to Celtic-speaking Britain. Evidence is examined here for close interaction between some of the indigenous languages of the island and the learned Latin of the schools, and even for surviving traces of the variety of spoken Latin that had been current in Britain under the Empire.

## 1 Introduction

*De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae*, 'The Wedding of Mercurius and Philologia', is a Latin text that was composed around 400 CE, at a time when the Roman Empire had recently embraced Christianity as its official religion. The subject matter is the body of learning that constituted the full curriculum of late Latin teaching: the seven liberal arts. Grammar, logic and rhetoric formed its basis, the so-called *trivium*, which on a higher level was continued by the *quadrivium*: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and musical theory.<sup>1</sup> To each of these seven branches of learning is assigned a book, while two additional chapters serve as a literary framework: Learning, which is imagined as a girl called Philologia, is adopted amongst the ancient Roman gods by her marriage to the divine Mercurius. The author is Martianus Capella, who figures prominently in the text itself and who probably lived in North Africa.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most remarkable characteristics of *De Nuptiis* is that it is written in an exceptionally convoluted form of Latin.<sup>3</sup> Syntactically straightforward and

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1 Bernt 2002.

2 For a general introduction to the text and a translation, see Stahl, Johnson and Burge 1971–1977.

3 Stahl, Johnson and Burge 1971–1977, vol. 1, 28–40; Teeuwen 2011, 11–12.

relatively short sentences form a minority of the text. Very long sentences, the structure of which can be resolved only by scrupulous attention to stylistic conventions as well as the rules of Latin grammar, are the norm. The vocabulary abounds in obscure Latin words, or common words with obscure meanings, and Greek words are plentiful. Many words allude to aspects of Classical literature and culture. *De Nuptiis* embodies one of its own central tenets: that access to learning is granted only to those who have a perfect command of the language and of the culture in which it is set.

There is little surprise, therefore, that when during the Carolingian period interest in the text once again soared, a rich medieval manuscript tradition of *De Nuptiis* arose, in which explanatory notes (so-called glosses) and commentaries abound. Three major gloss traditions came into being.<sup>4</sup> The first is known as the ‘Oldest Gloss Tradition’ and is believed to have originated in France in the 830s CE.<sup>5</sup> One of the most interesting manuscripts that contains the ‘Oldest Gloss Tradition’ is Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153, better known in scholarly work as the ‘Corpus Martianus Capella’.

It originated in late ninth-century Wales, where most of the main text and its many Latin glosses were copied. Moreover, about 140 Old Welsh glosses were added to the manuscript by one of its most prolific scribes. Afterwards, it was moved to England, where the main text was completed in the course of the 930s. Finally, a two-part, secondary collection of Latin glosses was added to it in the mid-tenth century. In this way, the manuscript was created in several stages over the course of over half a century and is the work of some ten scribes.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Linguistic context

These scribes lived and worked in a linguistically diverse era. The centuries following the fall of Roman power in the West had initially seen educated, written Latin being transformed from the uniform language of Empire – maintained as it was by an imperial school system which enforced a rigid Classical standard of the language – into the plethora of early Romance dialects, which reflected actual speech and which by the end of the first millennium had developed into languages like French, Italian and Spanish. Peculiarities of Romance filtered

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<sup>4</sup> Teeuwen 2011, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Teeuwen 2011, 14–18.

<sup>6</sup> Nooij 2015, 7–23.

through into the written Latin of early medieval manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> The Carolingian scholastic reforms of the late eighth and early ninth centuries altered that situation. In an attempt to re-impose a single *lingua franca* over the multilingual Carolingian empire, Charlemagne and his successors ordered the creation of a new standard of written Latin. This reformed language was, again, based on Classical sources, rather than on any spoken dialect and was therefore highly distinct from the spoken variants of Late Latin on the continent.<sup>8</sup>

In Britain, the linguistic situation was complex. During the Roman era, Latin was not only the language of administration and the army throughout the island; it also developed into a prominent spoken language of the population of the Lowland zone, which essentially covers what is now the south-eastern half of England. By contrast, the Highland zone, which covers modern Cornwall, Wales and the northern half of England and southern Scotland, continued to be dominated more by British Celtic than by Latin.<sup>9</sup> Speakers of British Latin and British Celtic would have been found throughout the British provinces, and the languages were in continual contact with one another. After central Roman power had abandoned Britain in the early fifth century, Roman-style civil administration managed to hold on in the Lowland zone, but soon lost ground to the invading Anglo-Saxon tribes. In the Highland zone, a number of independent, petty kingdoms arose among the population of speakers of Latin and British Celtic, who also had to contend with invaders: Anglo-Saxons from the east and Irish raiders from the west. Over the following centuries, civil government collapsed as the Anglo-Saxons established themselves first in the Lowland zone and then throughout England, barring Cornwall. By the ninth century, the petty kingdoms of the Highland zone had also been pushed back, but managed to hold out in Wales, Cornwall and Strathclyde.<sup>10</sup> Linguistically, the tables had turned as large numbers of Latin-speaking refugees fled the Anglo-Saxon advance and joined their fellow Christians in the British Celtic kingdoms of the North and West. These speakers of British Latin soon adopted British Celtic as their second language, eventually allowing their native Latin, which was well on its way to becoming an early Romance language, to go extinct.<sup>11</sup> Those that remained in England soon found themselves speaking English.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly,

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**7** Wright 2016.

**8** Wright 2016.

**9** Schrijver 2014, 30–58.

**10** Jackson 1953, 196–219.

**11** Jackson 1953, 120–121; Schrijver 2014, 48.

**12** Schrijver 2014, 91–93.

by the ninth century Old English was the dominant spoken language of the Lowland zone and had recently pushed into those regions of England that were originally part of the Highland zone. British Celtic had diversified into the dialects of Old Welsh, the predominant language of Wales, and Old South-West British, which would later turn into Cornish and Breton and was predominant in Cornwall and western Brittany.<sup>13</sup> Old Irish was also spoken in Irish settlements in Wales and Cornwall, as well as in ecclesiastical centres throughout the island.<sup>14</sup> Latin was present in two, distinct forms. Spoken British Latin may well still have been alive and actively spoken by several groups of speakers.<sup>15</sup> Revived Classical Latin, of the type stimulated by Carolingian scholars on the Continent, was written and no doubt spoken in educated, ecclesiastical circles. The latter was by far the most important written language of the period.

The origins of the material preserved in the *Corpus Martianus Capella* manuscript can be traced throughout this linguistically diverse world of ninth- and tenth-century Western Europe. As noted above, the main text is that of the Late Roman author Martianus Capella, which was rediscovered and subsequently copied by Carolingian scholars in the early ninth century. The exemplar of the *Corpus* manuscript has not survived, but given the limited amount of time between the scholarly rediscovery of *De Nuptiis* in the 830s and the first stage of work on this Welsh manuscript, it seems likely that its exemplar was one of the earlier Carolingian copies of the text.<sup>16</sup> The scholars working on this exemplar were most likely situated somewhere in the region between Fleury, Auxerre and Tours – where the ‘Oldest Gloss Tradition’ is known to have originated<sup>17</sup> – and would certainly have included native speakers of the early Romance dialect that was to become Old French. This late dialect of Latin had already undergone a number of phonetic and morphological changes, including a strong reduction of the Classical case system. However, although sound changes are sometimes visible in the use of variant spellings (e.g. <-tio> alongside <-cio>), the Classical morphology of the main text was maintained in the copying process. Revived Classical Latin is readily used in the Latin glosses on the text. Carolingian scholars were therefore using the learned, reformed, written form of Latin, rather than a spoken variety.

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<sup>13</sup> Jackson 1953, 18–28; Schrijver 2011, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson 1953, 154–156.

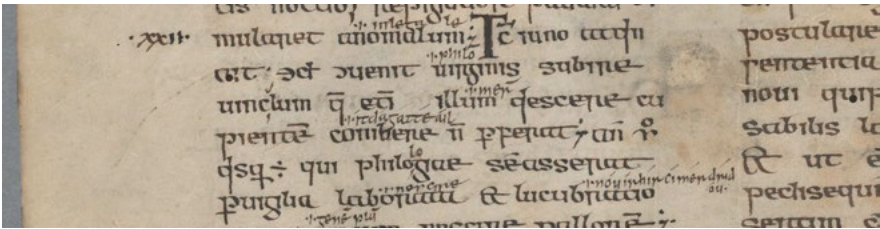
<sup>15</sup> Schrijver 2014, 48; Nooij 2015, 82–84.

<sup>16</sup> Nooij 2015, 18–20.

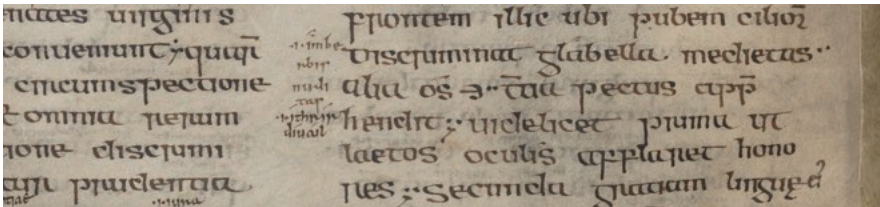
<sup>17</sup> O’Sullivan 2011a, 53–54; O’Sullivan 2011b, 45–46.

### 3 Crossing borders

At some time in the decades following the 830s, a copy was brought to Wales, where its main text was reproduced, along with at least part of its array of Continental glosses. While in Wales, about 140 Old Welsh and bilingual Welsh-Latin glosses were added to this younger manuscript, together with an unknown number of new Latin glosses. Notably, two of the British Celtic glosses found in the manuscript may tell us something about the travels of the exemplar. These glosses are *it dagatte ail gl. comibere* (fol. 4<sup>a</sup> 30, Fig. 1) and *ithr ir diu ail gl. glabella medietas* (fol. 9<sup>v</sup>b 37, Fig. 2).



**Fig. 1:** Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153, fol. 4<sup>a</sup> (detail); courtesy of the Parker Library.



**Fig. 2:** Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153, fol. 9<sup>v</sup>b (detail); courtesy of the Parker Library.

The former translates as ‘he let down an eyebrow’ and glosses a Latin verb meaning ‘to close the eyes’, while the latter gloss can be translated as ‘between the two eyebrows’ and explains two Latin words which together mean ‘the smooth middle’ (i.e. between the eyebrows). The glosses – curiously both employing the word *ail*, ‘eyebrow’ – show South-West British forms, rather than

the Old Welsh forms which are otherwise typical of the vernacular glosses found in the manuscript.<sup>18</sup>

In order to appreciate the meaning of these two glosses in light of the history of the manuscript and its exemplar, it is important to know something of their scribe. Recently, in a study of some of the hands in the *Corpus Martianus Capella*, Nooij has argued that all but one of the vernacular and bilingual (Welsh-Latin) glosses were added by a single scribe.<sup>19</sup> This scribe, known as hand E,<sup>20</sup> was active along with a number of other early, presumably Welsh, scribes. They added the vast majority of the glosses – most of them in Latin and in large part copied from their exemplar, reflecting the ‘Oldest Gloss Tradition’<sup>21</sup> – as well as some missing portions of the main text. They were active shortly after the primary scribe of the main text, known as hand A, finished his work.

The one vernacular gloss not added by scribe E is the work of a hand known as B. This scribe (along with scribes C and D) worked at a markedly later stage than scribe E and his fellow scribes.<sup>22</sup> Whilst the work of scribe A is extensively glossed by scribe E and a number of other scribes, each using a very similar, pointed insular minuscule, the folia added by scribes B, C and D (each using a different script) were glossed only by these scribes themselves. Moreover, in stark contrast to the virtual omnipresence of E and his contemporaries on the folia by scribe A, hands B, C and D are found nowhere beyond their own folia. That B, C and D did work together in a single period of time is confirmed by the facts that C and D copied a column each on a single folio (fol. 17<sup>a</sup> and fol. 17<sup>b</sup> respectively), and that B’s work surrounds that of C and D (fols 16<sup>b</sup> 32–16<sup>v</sup>b and

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**18** In the first gloss, *dagatte*, 3<sup>rd</sup> singular imperfect indicative (‘he (used to) let go’) is a form of what in Old Welsh would have been the verb *di(g)ad-*, Middle Welsh *dyad-*. Both go back to a proto-form *\*tu-gat-*. In Welsh, pretonic *\*u* turned into *ə*. In South-West British, however, a highly specific sound law turned *\*u + velar + a* into *a + velar + a*. This sound law was formerly supported by only a single example: Breton *lagad*, Middle Welsh *llygad*, ‘eye’ < *\*lukat-*. The vocalism of *dagatte* means that the sound law is now supported by two examples. In the second gloss, *diu* is the feminine singular of the number ‘two’, agreeing with Middle Breton *diu* and Middle Cornish *dyw*, but not with Welsh, where it is *dwy*, which would have been written *dui* in Old Welsh. The reading was for a time considered doubtful, as it was argued on general grounds that <iu> and <ui> might look very similar in a medieval manuscript. However, in the script used in the *Corpus Martianus Capella*, <i> and <u> are generally distinct; such is also the case for this gloss, which gives support for the reading <diu>.

**19** Nooij 2015, 15–18.

**20** See Bishop 1967 for the generally accepted identification of the scribes of the main text. He distinguished five hands, which he called A–E.

**21** O’Sullivan 2011b, 42–46.

**22** Nooij 2015, 19–20.

folios 17<sup>v</sup>a–18<sup>v</sup>b), demonstrating that they divided the pages amongst themselves. The complete absence of E and his fellow scribes on these folia seems best explained by them having already finished their work on the manuscript before B, C and D began. In his time, scribe E was therefore the sole hand to enter vernacular glosses into the manuscript. And it appears that this hand E added glosses in Latin, Old Welsh and Old South-West British.

It is not unusual for a glossator to use both Latin and a vernacular, and it is even known for glossators to use Latin alongside two different vernaculars.<sup>23</sup> However, what we find here is quite unique: a glossator, who operated in Wales and whom we must assume to have been a fluent and probably native speaker of Old Welsh, has added glosses in two distinct dialects of a single language. Old Welsh and Old South-West British had not yet diversified far enough to become mutually incomprehensible by the ninth century, but they were distinct dialects all the same.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, his other vernacular glosses are thoroughly Welsh, rather than South-West British. It would therefore seem unlikely that scribe E was the author of both the Old Welsh and the Old South-West British glosses; it is more likely that he simply copied the latter from his exemplar. In theory, he might have copied his Welsh and bilingual glosses from the exemplar as well, leaving him the author of no glosses whatsoever. However, this requires one to assume an intermediate, Welsh copy to have existed between the Carolingian manuscript and the *Corpus Martianus Capella*. This is certainly possible, but there is no positive evidence in favour of this more complex scenario. The same is true for the possibility of multiple exemplars having been used in the initial work on the *Corpus Martianus Capella*: it is possible, but again there is no positive evidence favouring it. Therefore, the most economical solution is to assume that scribe E himself was the author of the Old Welsh and bilingual glosses found in the *Corpus Martianus Capella*, and that the two Old South-West British glosses were copied by him from his continental exemplar. This implies that the exemplar spent some time in the hands of a Breton or Cornish scholar, who added at least these two glosses in his native tongue to it, before the manuscript arrived at the Welsh centre where it was used as the exemplar of the *Corpus Martianus Capella*.

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. in the Cambridge *Juvenius* (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.4.42) there are certain hands known to have added glosses in Latin, Old Welsh and Old Irish. For the most recent edition, see McKee 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Schrijver 2011, 4.

After some time the manuscript was moved to England, where the main text was completed by filling a major gap.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, a two-part, secondary collection of Latin glosses on Martianus' text was appended. It is clear that the gap had already been in existence when the manuscript left Wales, as a start at filling the gap had been made by scribes B, C and D. The lacuna originated with the initial work of scribe A, who consciously left out what would later turn out to be over ten folios' worth of content, which may well reflect a defect in his exemplar. An English scribe, identified by his use of an Anglo-Caroline script typical of England in the 930s CE,<sup>26</sup> was responsible for completing the main text. He had access to a very different exemplar from the one used at the Welsh centre. This exemplar, though itself again lost, is thought to have been closely related to a set of German copies of the text. If the exemplar contained more than a mere handful of glosses, the scribe chose not to copy them into the *Corpus Martianus Capella*, rendering this section very different from its Welsh counterpart. A few decades later, during the mid-tenth century, yet another scribe set out to work on the manuscript, adding the aforementioned secondary collection of glosses to it by way of an appendix. This scribe, using a square minuscule script, is also likely to have been English. The extensive, two-part collection of glosses that he copied into the manuscript is also found in another, English manuscript, but as it is found nowhere else its ultimate source is unknown.<sup>27</sup>

With these two English additions, the manuscript was finally completed. By this point its text had almost certainly come into contact, through its scribes and exemplars, with speakers of the Late Latin dialect of France, revived Classical Latin, Old South-West British, Old Welsh, Old English and, quite possibly, the Germanic dialects of the Continent. It is likely that it had also come across speakers of Old Irish on its travels. Irish monks were active participants in the Carolingian scholarly world,<sup>28</sup> and may well have contributed to the original Latin glosses on the text. Moreover, there is a peculiar gloss that reads *mail gl. mutilum* (fol. 42<sup>v</sup>a 29), i.e. 'bald, defective' glossing the Latin for 'shortened, mutilated'.<sup>29</sup> This gloss may well be Irish.<sup>30</sup> If so, it might mean that scribe E was

<sup>25</sup> Bishop 1967, 263–265 and 273–274; Nooij 2015, 18–20.

<sup>26</sup> Dumville 1994, 139–140.

<sup>27</sup> Bishop 1967, 267–275.

<sup>28</sup> Ní Mhaonaigh 2006, 38–40; Bisagni 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Nooij 2015, 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Mail* closely resembles Old Irish *máel*, 'bald'. The vocalism does not agree with the Middle Welsh cognate *moel*, 'bald', which would have been spelled *moil* in Old Welsh. The <a> might simply be a mistake for <o>, but the manuscript reading itself is clear.



a (non-native) speaker of Irish himself, or that this gloss – like the South-West British glosses – is another relic from his exemplar.

## 4 Spoken British Latin

We noted earlier that two types of Latin existed in post-Roman Britain: the written language was dominated by Classical Latin, or a language that still resembled it closely in terms of grammar. This type of Latin received a new lease of life as the language of the medieval Church and as the language of scholarship, particularly in the wake of the Carolingian Renaissance around 800 CE. The main text and the medieval Latin glosses of the *Corpus Martianus Capella* were written in this variety. The other variety is spoken British Latin, which was the insular counterpart of early medieval French, Spanish, Italian and the other Romance languages. Over the centuries, this developed a slightly different grammatical structure.<sup>31</sup> By the ninth century, the two had become so different that they could be labelled distinct languages. Spoken British Latin strongly affected a large corpus of Latin funerary inscriptions that were written between 400 and 1200 in the west of Britain, most particularly in Wales.<sup>32</sup> The Latin of those inscriptions deviates strongly from the Classical norm by a large number of sound changes and by the simplification of the case system. Those deviations are completely in line with developments in spoken Latin, and it is therefore possible to argue that the inscriptions arose in a community of people who used spoken British Latin as their day-to-day language, well after the collapse of Roman power in Britain in the early fifth century. Essentially, the scribes of these inscriptions aimed to write Classical Latin rather than spoken British Latin but were strongly influenced by spoken British Latin. An example of such an inscription runs as follows:<sup>33</sup> *Figulini fili Loculiti hic iacit*. In correct Classical Latin this should read *Figulinus filius Loculiti hic iacet*, and mean ‘Figulinus, son of Loculitus, lies here’.

The spelling *iacit* for *iacet* ‘lies’ reflects a sound change that is typical of all spoken Latin, whether British or continental. More complex is the use of what look like the genitives *Figulini* and *fili* for the expected nominatives of the subject nouns *Figulinus* and *filius*. This confusion is not the result of sound

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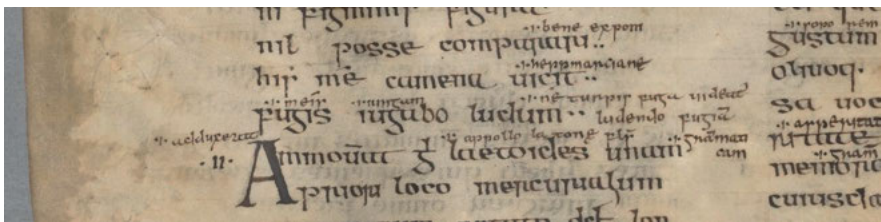
<sup>31</sup> Schrijver 2014, 34–48.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Nash-Williams 1950, 95.

change, but rather of grammatical change in spoken British Latin. In personal names and in nouns denoting family relationships, the Classical Latin vocative (rather than the genitive) form, as in *fili* ‘o son!’, developed a tendency to be used with the function of the nominative. Its final *-i* spread to other words, such as *Figulini*. Apparently, vocatives taking over the function of nominatives were a typical feature of British spoken Latin.<sup>34</sup>

There is a single mixed Welsh-Latin gloss in the *Corpus Martianus Capella* that shows the influence of spoken British Latin. On folio 14<sup>v</sup>a 32 (Fig. 3), the main text reads *his mé Camena vicit* ‘with these (words) Camena has conquered me’. This is glossed as *.i. hepp marciane*, which means ‘i.e. says Martianus’.<sup>35</sup>



**Fig. 3:** Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 153, fol. 14<sup>v</sup>a (detail); courtesy of the Parker Library.

The idea behind the gloss is that it explains who is speaking in the main text: in other words, who is referred to by *mé* ‘me’. *Hepp* is the Old Welsh word for ‘says’, while *marciane* is a medieval spelling of Classical *Martiane*, the vocative of *Martianus*. So we see from the context that the vocative is used instead of the expected nominative. This is typical neither of Classical Latin nor any known variety of spoken Latin on the Continent, in all of which the subject of a verb would be in the nominative case. What is seen here, on the other hand, is characteristic of spoken British Latin. In this single gloss our Hand E slipped up by introducing an element of his spoken Latin into the text. That he could do this means that spoken British Latin must have survived at least until the later ninth century.

The implications are potentially far-reaching. We are used to thinking that in medieval Britain Latin died out as a native language and was re-introduced as a high-status language linked to the Church. On the basis of the Latin inscriptions

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed treatment, see Schrijver 2014, 34–48.

<sup>35</sup> Nooij 2015, 82–84.

of western Britain and our single gloss in the Corpus Martianus Capella, we may now assume that Latin continued to be spoken in Britain after the collapse of Roman power and well into the ninth century. That puts Britain in a similar situation to, say, medieval France, Italy and Spain, but for the fact that in Britain spoken Latin was contending with Celtic in the west and with English in the east, to which it was eventually to succumb. That fate may still have been a distant possibility for Hand E, who, we may assume, spoke both Latin and Welsh as his native languages. This state of affairs may help to explain the Welsh glossators' extraordinary command of Martianus' Latin. It may also shed new light on the origins of the exceptional flourishing of Latin literature in medieval Christian Ireland: the roots of Ireland's Christianity lie in Britain, and it may have been British missionaries and clerics that not only introduced Roman Christianity but also spoken Latin to Ireland.

## 5 Conclusion

Looking back, although the scribes of the Corpus Martianus Capella must have added their glosses to benefit the reader in understanding *De Nuptiis*, it is from their 'mistakes' that we gain most information. By allowing traces of their spoken languages to show in their writings, they afford us a rare glimpse of the linguistic landscape of ninth-century Wales and beyond. Nowadays we may no longer read Martianus for his Latin or his learning, but his core tenet is still valid: that knowledge is attained only through the mastery of the language and of the culture in which it is situated. Indeed, the continuing survival of an entire language may be revealed by a single gloss.

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