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THE FIRST LATIN WORDS IN ENGLISH

It is well known that Old English had an extremely low percentage of loan words, about three per cent, which means it was a thoroughly Germanic language. Nearly all these loans were of Latin origin. The first Latin words to get into what later became Old English were mostly words learned from Roman merchants and words learned by Germanic legionnaires. The number of these words cannot be established beyond any doubt, the maximum estimate reaching about 170 words. The current state of research is reviewed and the issues of continental and insular borrowings are thoroughly discussed by Kastovsky 1992.

The core of the following list are continental borrowings from Latin (as recognized by most authorities) which have survived into modern times, in some cases reinforced from AN/OF in the Middle English period. Words which were readopted in Middle English and words which have disappeared from English are also given here.

For the sake of comparison, the history of the same Latin words in Czech has been added to the entries. The Latin words either entered Czech via German or were borrowed directly from Latin. If there is no source indicated here, the link between Latin and Czech is in a common Indo-European root.

CHURCH AND RELIGION

arc ‘ark’ < L arca (F arche was adopted into English and was the current term in 13c and 14c); Cz archa < G; Cz rakev < L

bishops ‘bishop’ < popL *biscopus < eccL episcopus; Cz biskup < G

church ‘church’ < WGerm *kirika < medGr kūrikón; Cz cirkev, prob. < G < Gr Sætern(es)dæg, Sæterdæg, translation of Sāturnī diēs

READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:

prēdician ‘preach’ < L prædicāre

angel ‘angel’ < CGerm < eccL angelus; OF angele; Cz anděl < L
EDUCATION AND LEARNING

sclö, sclu < medL sclöla < L schola < Gr (the native word was lärhus ‘lorehouse’); Cz škola < L
dih tan ‘arrange, impose, write’ < L dictäre; modE dight; Cz diktovatí < L
fers ‘verse’ < L versus; Cz verš < L; Cz vrteti
scrífan ‘prescribe, assign’ < L scribere; modE shrive; Cz škrabati
READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:
dih ‘direction, piece of writing’ < L dictum

PLANTS
běte ‘beet’ < CWGerm běta < L běta, perhaps of Celtic origin
cäwel, cäul ‘cole’ < L caulis; Cz dial. kél < G
lilie ‘lily’ < L lilium; Cz lilie < L
mint ‘mint’ < WGerm *minta < L menta, mentha < Gr; Cz máta; Cz coll. pfeřminc < G
naep ‘neep’ (dial. for ‘tur-nip’ < tur-nep) < L nāpus
palm, palma, palme ‘palm’ < CGerm < L palma (‘tree’ through metaphor from ‘part of hand’); Cz palma < L
pere, peru ‘pear’ < popL *pira
piper, pipor ‘pepper’ < L piper < Gr; Cz pepř < L
plūme ‘plum’ < L prūna, orig. pl. of prūnum; Cz bluma < G
popač, papač > popiţ ‘poppy’ < L papāum < papāver
rose, róse ‘rose’ < L rosa; Cz růže < L
READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:
çesten ‘chestnut’ < L castanea; ME chesteine; Cz kaštan < L
círis ‘cherry’ < L cerasus; ME cherie; Cz třesně, Sl círešna, both prob. through Romance languages
cymen ‘cummin’ < L cuminum; OF cumin, comín; Cz kmin < G or F
cyrfet ‘gourd’ < L cucurbita; AN gurde, OF gourde
persoc ‘peach’ < L persicum < Persicum mālum ‘Persian apple’; ME peche; Cz broskev < L
plante ‘plant’ < L planta; OF plante; Cz plantáţ < F
spíca, spíče ‘herb’ < L spíca; modE spike; Cz špychar < G
LOST:
çipe ‘onion’ < L cēpa; Cz cibule < OHG zibolle < L cipolla < cēpa

COOKING
çetel ‘kettle’ < CGerm *katilaz < L catillus; Cz kotel < G
côc ‘cook’ < VL cōcus < L coquus
cyčene ‘kitchen’ < WGerm *cocîna < L coquîna; Cz kuchyně < G
mylen ‘mill’ < L molînus; Cz mlýn < G
panne ‘pan’ < VL panna < L patina; Cz slang fanka < G
THE FIRST LATIN WORDS IN ENGLISH

FOOD AND DRINK

*butere 'butter' < L būyrum (< Gr); Cz dial putra < G
češe 'cheese' < WGerm *kāsjo < L ĉāseus
*must 'must, unfermented juice of the grape' < L mustum; Cz mošt < G
*rādić 'radish' < L rādic-, rādīx; -ish perhaps from blending with F radis; Cz redkev < G
*wīn 'wine' < CGerm *wīnam < L vīnum; Cz víno < G

LOST:

*senep 'mustard' < L sinapi; G Senf

ANIMALS

catt 'cat' < LateL cattus
draca 'drake, dragon' < WGerm *drako < L drācō; Cz drak < L
*pāwa, pēa 'peacock' < L pāvō; Cz pāv < G
turtla, masc., turle, fem. 'turtle-dove' < L turtur; Cz tetřev

READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:

elpend, ylpend 'elephant' < L elefāns; ME olifaunt; Cz dial. elefant < Gr
*mūl 'mule' < CGerm < L mūlus; OF mul; Cz mul < L
strūňa, strýta 'ostrich' < L strūťiō; ME ostrice; Cz pštros < G

VESSELS, BOXES ETC.

*cist 'chest' < Germ *kistā < L cista; Cz coll. kisna < G
cuppe 'cup' < L cuppa < cūpa; Cz kupa
diśč 'dish' < L discus; Cz deska, prob. < L
*sacc 'sack' < L saccus < Semitic saq; Cz sak (> sáček), žok < G
scrīn 'chest' < L scrinium; modE shrine; Cz skřiň < G

READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:

*bytt 'leather bottle' < VL bottis; Cz butylka < Rus < F
cælč, celč, LOE calič, cælič 'cup' < L calic-; OF chalice; Cz kalich < G
*sčutel 'dish' < L scutula, scutella; ME scutel

LOST:

*læfel, lebil 'spoon, cup' < L labellum
orc 'pitcher' < LL orca < L urceus

TRADE

*čeāp 'bargain, price, market' < WGerm *kaupaz < L caupō 'small tradesman, innkeeper'; ModE cheap, Cheapside, Chapman; Cz kupovati < G
mangere 'monger', derived from mangian 'to trade' < Germ *maŋgōjan < L mangō 'dealer, trader' (< Gr)
moneye < OF moneie; Cz mince < G; Cz portmonka < F
*mynet 'mint, coin of money' < WGerm *munita < L monēta 'mint' (in Rome; Monēta was an epithet of the goddess Juno, in, or next to whose temple coins were minted); ME
toll ‘payment, toll’ < L tolēneum

MEASURE AND DISTANCE
mil ‘mile’ < WG *mīlja < L mīlia/mīllia, pl. of mīle/mīlle ‘thousand’ in the phrase mīlle passus or passuum ‘one thousand steps’; Cz mile < G
pund ‘pound’ < CG *pundo < L pondō ‘pound weight’; Cz arch. pud < R < G; Cz funt < G
ynće ‘inch’ < L uncia ‘twelfth part’

READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:
mydd ‘bushel’ < L modius; in modE as mud < Du, and as modius < L
lost:
byden ‘measure, barrel’ < VL butina; Ger Bütte

DRESS
belt ‘belt’ < L balteus, of Etruscan origin
cug(e)le ‘hood, cowl’ < L cuculla; Cz kukla < L
purpure, fem. ‘purple garment’ < L purpura; Cz purpur < G
lost:
síde ‘silk’ < VL seda < L seta

FURNITURE, HOUSEHOLD ITEMS
port ‘door, gate’ < L porta; Cz práti; Cz portyr < G; Cz fortña < G
pyle, pylu ‘pillow’ < L pulvinus
šcamol ‘bench, stool’ < L scamellum, dimin. of scamnum; modE shambles; Cz škamna < L
wic ‘dwelling, village’ < L vīcus; modE wick; Cz ves
lost:
fácele ‘torch’ < L facula
měse, míše ‘table’ < L messa < mensa; Cz mísa < VL; Cz menza < L

BUILDING ARTS
čealc ‘chalk’ < WGerm < L calc- ‘lime’
copor ‘copper’ < Germ *kupar < L cuprum < cyprium (æs) ‘metal of Cyprus’
pić ‘pitch’ < CGerm < L pic-, pix
post ‘pillar’ < L postis
pytt ‘pit’ < WGerm *putti, putja < L puteus
tígele ‘tile’ < L tēgula; Cz cihla < G
torr ‘tower’ < L turris; reinforced in ME by tūr < AN

READOPTED IN MIDDLE ENGLISH:
cruft(e) ‘crypt’ < L crypta, crypta; Cz hrob; Cz krypta < L; Cz kruchtja < G
šcindel ‘roof-shingle’ < L scindula; ME scingle; Cz šindel < G
solor, solere ‘upper chamber’ < L solārium; AN soler; modE sollar
LOST:

mūr ‘wall’ < L mūrus; Slovak múr < G

crafts, tools

ancor ‘anchor’ < L ancora; Cz pavouk

cylen ‘kiln’ < L culīna; Cz kulinári < L

pipe ‘pipe’ < VL pipa, ult. from L pīpāre, imit.; Cz pípa < lt; Cz fajfka < G

pinn ‘pin, peg’ < L pinna

sicol, siceł ‘sickle’ < VL *sicila < Campanian L secula

sūtere ‘shoemaker, (Scot. & north.E.) souter’ < L sūtor; Cz šiti

readopted in middle English:

regol ‘wooden ruler’ < L rēgula; Cz řehole < L

lost:

clūs(e) ‘bolt, enclosure’ < VL clusa < clausum

military actions

pīl ‘pointed stake, javelin’ < L pīlum; modE pile ‘dart, spike’

stræ:t ‘road’ < L (via) strāta; modE street; Cz stříti

weall ‘wall’ < L vallum; Cz val < G; Cz interval < L; Cz konvalinka < L

other words

fals ‘false’ < L falsus; Cz faleš < G

plaster ‘medical application’ < L plastrum; Cz flastr < G

segn ‘banner; < L signum; Cz signál < L

tyrran ‘turn’ < L tornāre, turnāre; Cz turnaj < G < F; Cz turnus < L; Cz storno-

vat < lt; Cz turniket < F; Cz turné < F; Cz tornādo < Sp

readopted in middle English:

cāserē ‘emperor’ < L Caesār; ME Cesar; Cz císař < G

trifet ‘tribute’ < L tribūtum; ME < L

No claim can be made that the above list is complete or that it brings some fi-
nal answer to a question. The main idea has been to show that a majority of the
Latin borrowings survived into modern English and that a minority disappeared,
just as many other Old English words of domestic origin.

There are words which are regarded as continental by some authorities on
the subject and which have not been included here, eg. munuc. The reason is the
degree of likelihood that the concept of monasticism was known to the speakers
of Germanic dialects before they accepted Christianity. Monasticism existed in
India and in other parts of Asia long before Christianity and the first Christian
monks lived in Egypt (St. Anthony, c. 270 AD). In 340, St. Athanasius went to
Rome and brought the knowledge of monastic life to Western Europe. Mono-
asticism soon became common in Rome and throughout Italy and then it spread to
Gaul and to northern Africa. The patriarch of Western monks, St. Benedict of
Nursia, lived in 480–553, *ie* after the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came to Britain. There is also an argument in favour of regarding *munuc* a continental borrowing: it was first used of the hermits and only later was widened to embrace the coenobites.

**REFERENCES**


HOLUB, Josef, Stanislav LYER (1968). *Stručný etymologický slovník jazyka českého se zvláštním zřetelem ke slovům kulturním a cizím*² [A concise etymological dictionary of the Czech language with special regard to learned and foreign words], Praha.


