

As the ancient Romans said: It's all Greek to us

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A lot of people know that, as Julius Caesar was being stabbed to death, he turned to his friend Brutus, who was one of the assassins, and said "Et tu, Brute?", the Latin for "And you, Brutus?", or "What? You too?".

A lot of people know that, because those were the words put into Caesar's mouth by William Shakespeare. But it's probably wrong. We don't know if Caesar said anything at all – we don't have eye-witness reports.

But we do know that if he did say something, he probably didn't say it in Latin. It's much more likely that his dying words were uttered in Greek. The Roman historian Suetonius – not an eye-witness either, as he was writing about the event over a century after it happened – claimed that what Caesar said was "Kai su, teknon?", the Greek for "And you, my son?".

But surely the language of Ancient Rome was Latin? (It was.) So why on earth would Romans be speaking Greek? Well, most of them didn't – they spoke Latin. But the patricians – the toffs like Caesar – were bilingual in Latin and Greek, and they tended to speak Greek to each other.

When Caesar died in 44BC, Alexander of Macedon had been dead for nearly 300



■ Julius Caesar is more likely to have spoken Greek than Latin.

years. But it was Alexander whose conquests had taken the Greek language across the Middle East and Iran into the places which are now Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, northwestern India, and parts of Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan.

Greek became vitally important as the lingua franca – the language of wider communication – in a very large area of the eastern Mediterranean.

And later on, even under the Roman Empire, Greek was the official language in the provinces of Libya, Egypt, Arabia, Judea, Syria, and Persia, as well as Greece and Asia Minor. This widespread knowledge of Greek, and its usage in the New

Testament, greatly aided the spread of Christianity.

And back in Ancient Rome itself, Greek became the prestigious language of learning and cultivation to such an extent that the upper classes actually spoke it among themselves.

Julius Caesar had a famous love affair with the 21-year-old Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra.

(She was actually in Rome when Caesar was assassinated.)

She might never have been able to seduce him, as she is said to have done, in Alexandria, if Greek hadn't been her mother tongue – and Caesar's second language.