Latin Pronunciation Demystified

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Note: Although flattered by frequent requests, the author regrets that he cannot provide Latin translations or recorded pronunciation samples free of charge. These services are of course available for a consulting fee.

1 Introduction

This paper will tell you how to pronounce Latin words and phrases, given only the spelling and the vowel lengths (which you can look up in any Latin dictionary). I am addressing primarily people who are not schooled in Latin but need to pronounce Latin words because of their interest in science, history, or music.

2 Four rivals

The pronunciation of Latin becomes much less puzzling once you realize that there are at least four rival ways of doing it. The pronunciations you hear in biology or astronomy class don't match the ones you learned from your Latin teacher, and guess what? That doesn't mean they're wrong. They just reflect different periods in history.

Table 1 displays the four main methods. The ancient Roman pronunciation wasn't accurately reconstructed until about 1900. Before that, scholars in every European country pronounced Latin as if it were their own language. With English this gave particularly comical results because English pronunciation had undergone drastic changes at the end of the Middle Ages. Here's an example:

Julius Caesar = YOO-lee-us KYE-sahr (reconstructed ancient Roman)
YOO-lee-us (T)SAY-sahr (northern Continental Europe)
YOO-lee-us CHAY-sahr ("Church Latin" in Italy)
JOO-lee-us SEE-zer ("English method")

Today, we still use the English Method to pronounce historical and mythological names in English context. The constellation Orion is called O'Ryan, not o-REE-on, and Caesar is called SEE-zer.

Italian "Church Latin" is widely though not universally used in the Catholic Church and in singing. **Church Latin pronunciation is very variable.** In Church Latin, long and short vowels are usually not distinguished, and the pronunciation of some consonants (e.g., t in words like dictio) is subject to variation.

I recommend the northern Continental pronunciation for unfamiliar scientific terms, since it resembles many modern languages and is, in fact, the pronunciation used by Copernicus, Kepler, Linnaeus, and other scientific pioneers. Northern Europe is not, of course, perfectly uniform; I give a compromise between several regional variations. For example, in Germany you will hear \mathbf{oe} pronounced like German \ddot{o} .

The ancient Roman pronunciation is of course what we use when teaching or seriously speaking Latin. Its biggest peculiarities are that \mathbf{v} is pronounced like English w, and \mathbf{ae} like English ai in aisle. These two sounds were already changing at the end of the classical period.

3 Do we know how the Romans pronounced Latin?

Surprisingly, yes. The details of the reconstruction are given in W. Sidney Allen, *Vox Latina* (written in English), Cambridge, 1965. There are several main sources of knowledge:

- The Latin alphabet was meant to be entirely phonetic. Unlike us, the ancient Romans did not inherit their spellings from any earlier language. What you see is what you get.
- Language teaching was big business in Roman times, and ancient Roman grammarians give us surprisingly detailed information about the sounds of the language.
- Languages derived from Latin give us a lot of evidence. In fact, many of the letters of the alphabet are pronounced the same way in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. It stands to reason that the original Latin pronunciation has survived.
- Spelling errors made by the ancient Romans are very informative. If two letters are often mixed up, they must sound fairly similar. Likewise, if two letters are never mixed up, we know they sounded different.
 - Here's an example. In classical times, the natives had no trouble keeping **ae** distinct from **e**; if they ever misspelled **ae** it came out **ai**. Later on, they started changing **ae** to **e**. That enables us to pinpoint when the sound of **ae** changed.
- Finally, transcriptions into other writing systems, such as Greek and Sanskrit, often pin down the ancient pronunciation of Latin very precisely.

4 Finding the accented syllable

Fortunately, all four systems agree as to the accented (stressed) syllable. It is always the second or third from last. Specifically, if you number the syllables from the end of the word, like this:

("the southern triangle," name of a modern constellation), then

the accented syllable is 2 if it contains a long vowel or diphthong, or ends in a consonant, and is otherwise 3.

The only way to find out if a vowel is long is to look in a dictionary. The lengths of vowels have been preserved since ancient times because Latin poetry depends on them, but outside of dictionaries, very few Latin writers mark the lengths. The ancient Romans sometimes marked a vowel long by writing it extra large.

In Greek words borrowed into Latin, $\eta = \overline{\mathbf{e}}$, $\epsilon = \overline{\mathbf{e}}$, $\omega = \overline{\mathbf{o}}$, $o = \overline{\mathbf{o}}$, and for the other vowels, you may have to look in a Greek dictionary.

Diphthongs are double vowels (ae, oe, etc.).

What about syllables that end in consonants? The rules are:

- When dividing a word into syllables, try to make syllables *begin* with consonants (thus **spe-cu-lum**, not **spec-ul-um**).
- Break up double consonants and other groups of consonants: an-nus, rap-tus.
- Nonetheless, do not break up ng, qu, pr, tr, cr, chr, br, dr, gr, pl, cl, bl, or gl.

 This rule tended to confuse even the Romans; thus in late classical times te-ne-brae changed to te-neb-rae, moving the accent from the first to the second syllable.
- Treat **ph th ch** as single letters.
- Treat **x** as two letters because it stands for *ks*.

5 About the alphabet

In classical Latin, the vowels \mathbf{i} and \mathbf{u} can be pronounced non-syllabically as consonants. For example, \mathbf{uia} was not "oo-ee-ah" but rather "wee-ah" and is nowadays written \mathbf{via} .

Except for a few purists, all Latinists today write \mathbf{v} for consonantal \mathbf{u} . This would have puzzled a Roman, who considered U and V to be the same letter.

After classical times, Latin \mathbf{v} came to be pronounced like English v, losing its phonetic resemblance to \mathbf{u} .

Latin dictionaries and textbooks often write consonantal **i** as **j**, but editions of the classics usually do not. Thus you will find *Julius* in the dictionary but *Iulius* in a classical text.

The letter \mathbf{w} did not exist in Latin. In northern Europe, beginning in the Middle Ages, scribes sometimes wrote \mathbf{w} or $\mathbf{v}\mathbf{v}$ to represent the sound of English w in non-Latin names.

6 Accent marks

In Latin dictionaries, long vowels are marked and short vowels are sometimes marked but are more often unmarked.

The dieresis (") means that two adjacent vowels do not form a diphthong; instead they are separate syllables. Thus Horace wanted to write a poem that was *aere perennius* ("more lasting than bronze") and not merely *aëre perennius* (*a-e-re perennius*, "more lasting than air").

Church Latin books often mark the accented syllable with $\hat{}$, as in $\hat{}$ Dóminus $\hat{}$ vobíscum ("The Lord be with you," $\hat{}$ Dominus $\hat{}$ $\hat{}$ $\hat{}$ biscum to a classicist).

Renaissance printed books often have a variety of accent marks, especially $\hat{}$ for a significant long vowel (e.g., $sub\ ros \hat{a}$).

Table 1: Four rival ways of pronouncing Latin.

Letter	Reconstructed	Northern	Southern	English	
Detter	Ancient	Continental	Continental	Method	
	Pronunciation	Pronunciation	Pronunciation	(ancient names in	
	Tronunciation	(recommended for	("Church Latin")	English context)	
		scientific use)	(Church Laun)	Eligiish context)	
		Vowels			
ā	As in father			As in plate	
ă	As in about			As in <i>cat</i> (when accented)	
u	113 III aboat			or about (unaccented)	
ē	Like a in plate			As in complete	
ě	As in <i>pet</i>			As in <i>pet</i>	
1	As in machine			As in <i>dine</i>	
ĭ	As in <i>pit</i>				
ō	As in home				
ŏ	As in British (not American) not				
	(similar to $\bar{\mathbf{o}}$ but less prolonged)				
ū	As in <i>rule</i>			As in <i>duty</i>	
ŭ	As in <i>put</i>				
ÿ	Like German long ü		Like Latin ī		
	(less strictly, like Latin $\overline{1}$)				
ў	Like German short ü				
	(less strictly, like Latin ĭ)				
		Diphthongs			
ae	Like ai in aisle	Like Latin e			
oe	Like oi in coil	Like Latin e			
ei	Like ey in hey	1	Like <i>i</i> in <i>kite</i>		
ui	Like ooey in gooey			Like <i>i</i> in <i>kite</i>	
au	Like ou in about			Like aw in law	
eu				Like eu in feud	
	(more strictly, like ĕ ŭ run together)			_	
ii	Not a diphthong; this is simply two i's in succession, forming two syllables.				
	In biological names like <i>Ziphüdae</i> , both i 's are short.				
	In $-\overline{u}$ as gen. sg. or nom. pl. of $-\overline{u}$	us (e.g. <i>Nelsonii</i>), the fir	st i is short and the s	second is long.	
		, ,			
		Consonants			
b. d. f. h.		Consonants		<u> </u>	
b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n,	As in English	Consonants		<u> </u>	
k, 1, m, n,		Consonants		<u> </u>	
k, 1, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z	As in English		Like ch in church		
k, 1, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before		Like s	Like ch in church	Like s	
k, 1, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z	As in English		Like ch in church		
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere	As in English Like k Like k	Like s			
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before	As in English Like k	Like s	Like <i>ch</i> in <i>church</i> As in <i>gem</i>		
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe	As in English Like k Like k As in goose	Like s			
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose	Like s		Like s	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i)	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem	Like s As in English	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem America	Like s	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i)	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem America	Like s As in English	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vov	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem America	Like s As in English As in English	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vov	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem America As in sit	As in English As in English As in sit	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vov	Like s (in Germany, like ts)	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vor Always as in sit (not as in rose) Like w in wet	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r s v (consonantal u) ch	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vor Always as in sit (not as in rose)	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English Like <i>v</i> in <i>very</i> Like k	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r s	As in English Like k Like k As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding vor Always as in sit (not as in rose) Like w in wet Like k, more emphatic	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English Like v in very	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r s v (consonantal u) ch	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding voor Always as in sit (not as in rose) Like w in wet Like w, more emphatic Like p, more emphatic (postclassically, like f)	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English Like <i>v</i> in <i>very</i> Like k Like f	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r s v (consonantal u) ch ph	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding voor Always as in sit (not as in rose) Like w in wet Like k , more emphatic Like p , more emphatic (postclassically, like f) Like t , more emphatic	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English Like <i>v</i> in <i>very</i> Like k	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the suffix -ēs)	
k, l, m, n, p, qu, t, x, z c before i, e, y, ae, oe c elsewhere g before i, e, y, ae, oe g elsewhere j (consonantal i) r s v (consonantal u) ch ph	As in English Like k Like k As in goose As in goose Like y in yet Always fully pronounced, as in S (not absorbed into preceding voor Always as in sit (not as in rose) Like w in wet Like w, more emphatic Like p, more emphatic (postclassically, like f)	Like s (in Germany, like ts) Scotland or midwestern wel as in British English Like <i>v</i> in <i>very</i> Like k Like f	As in gem America As in sit (as in rose when	As in English As in English As in sit (like z in the suffix -ēs)	

The Mass:

Sanctus (Holy, Holy)

Sanctus, Sanctus Dóminus Deus Sábaoth.
sahnk-toos Dome-ee-noose Day-oose Sah-bah-oath

Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua pleh-nee soont choi-lee eht- teh-rah gloria too-ah

Hosanna in excélsis hoe-zahn-nah ehn ehx-shell-seez

Benedictus que venit in nomine Domini Behn-nee-deek-toos kweh veh-neet een nohm-een-neh Doe-meen-ee

Hosanna in excélsis hoe-zahn-nah ehn ehx-shell-seez

Lamb of God (Anus Dei)

Angnus Dei, qui tollis peccáta mundi ahh-noose Day-ee kwee tohl-ees pek-kah-tah moon-dee

miserre nobis meez-ehr-ray noh-beez

dona nobis pacem doe-nah noe-beez pah-chem