

# **The Pronunciation of Classical \*Attic Greek**

**Classical Period**  
**480 - 323 BC**

**480/479 — Persian Invasion (Xerxes)**

**323 — Death of Alexander the Great**

**\*Hellenistic Period:  
Koine Greek**

**Hellas = Greece**

**Hellenic = Greek**

**Hellenistic = Greek-like**



# Attica

## **\*Consonants vs. \*Vowels**

A consonant is a letter that represents a sound made by closing off the vocal tract in some way.

Such sounds, made by themselves, are inarticulate noises: try, e.g., pronouncing “t” or “b” all by themselves.

These sounds need to be pronounced in conjunction with another sound (a vowel) in order to convey any meaning: hence the term “consonant” (“sounding together with”).

Thus the sound produced by “b” alone means nothing, but “be” and “by” are recognizable words.

Consonants are divided into different classes:

- voiced vs. unvoiced, depending on whether or not they are accompanied by some form of intonation (e.g., “b” vs. “p”)
- stop vs. fricative (e.g., “p” vs. “f”)
- labial vs. dental vs. palatal, depending on where the air passage is closed when making the sound (e.g., “p” vs. “t” vs. “k”)

	Labial	Dental	Palatal
Unvoiced	p	t	k
Voiced	b	d	g
Fricative	f	th	ch

# The Consonants

B	$\beta$	<b>Beta</b>	=	<b>b</b>	
$\Gamma$	$\gamma$	<b>Gamma</b>	=	<b>g</b>	[*always hard: <u>g</u> ood] [ <i>not</i> rigid]
$\Delta$	$\delta$	<b>Delta</b>	=	<b>d</b>	
Z	$\zeta$	<b>Zeta</b>	=	<b>z</b>	[s + d – <u>wisdom</u> ]
$\Theta$	$\theta$	<b>Theta</b>	=	<b>[th]</b>	[an artificial convention]
K	$\kappa$	<b>Kappa</b>	=	<b>k</b>	[unaspirated: “ <u>s</u> kin]
$\Lambda$	$\lambda$	<b>Lambda</b>	=	<b>l</b>	
M	$\mu$	<b>Mu</b>	=	<b>m</b>	
N	$\nu$	<b>Nu</b>	=	<b>n</b>	
$\Xi$	$\xi$	<b>Xi</b>	=	<b>k + s</b>	<b>[<math>\chi</math> + <math>\sigma</math>]</b> [ <u>a</u> xe]

## The Consonants (cont.)

Π	π	<b>Pi</b>	=	<b>p</b>	[unaspirated: “s <u>p</u> in”]
Ρ	ρ	<b>Rho</b>	=	<b>r</b>	[trilled]
Σ	σ, ς	<b>Sigma</b>	=	<b>s</b>	[* <u>s</u> ing — not r <u>is</u> es]
Τ	τ	<b>Tau</b>	=	<b>t</b>	[unaspirated: “s <u>t</u> op”]
Φ	φ	<b>Phi</b>	=	<b>[ph]</b>	[an artificial convention]
Χ	χ	<b>Chi</b>	=	<b>[ch]</b>	[an artificial convention]
Ψ	ψ	<b>Psi</b>	=	<b>p + s</b>	<b>[φ + σ]</b> [l <u>ip</u> s]

## Notes on the Consonants

$\theta$ ,  $\phi$ , and  $\chi$  are difficult for English speakers to pronounce since they involve a distinction in sound that is not acknowledged in modern English.

- linguists discuss such challenges by distinguishing between **phonemic** and **phonetic** features of pronunciation
- a phonemic feature involves a difference in sound that affects meaning
- a phonetic feature involves a difference in sound that has no significance

- ancient Greek distinguishes between a “pure” k, p, t sound and the sound produced when those letters are pronounced with a puff of air (aspiration)
- this is the difference between, e.g., the “p” in “spin” and that of “Pooh”
- the first of these sounds is represented by the Greek  $\pi$ , the second by  $\phi$
- thus  $\pi\hat{\omega}\varsigma$  = “how?” whereas  $\phi\hat{\omega}\varsigma$  = “light”
- the Romans detected this distinction — thus when they heard the Greek word

*φιλοσοφία*

they transliterated it as

*philosophia*

rather than *filosofia*.

So far as a first-year language class goes, the challenge is that these sounds are both difficult to pronounce and, still more problematic, difficult to hear.

Thus, for the sake of clarity, I will employ a traditional set of conventions in this class:

$\theta$  = th

$\phi$  = ph

$\chi$  = \*ch [“stomachh” vs. “church”]

## Notes on the Consonants (cont.)

- as noted,  $\gamma$  usually represents a hard “g”
  - before  $\gamma$ ,  $\kappa$ ,  $\xi$ , and  $\chi$ , however, it becomes what is known as a velar nasal
    - $\gamma\gamma$  as in Engl. “sing” (*ἄγγελος*)
    - $\gamma\kappa$  as in Engl. “sink” (*ἀνάγκη*)
    - $\gamma\xi$  as in Engl. “sphinx” (*σφίγξ*)
    - $\gamma\chi$  as in Engl. “synch” (*ἐγχειρίδιον*)

## Notes on the Consonants (cont.)

- as noted,  $\sigma$  usually represents a hard “s,” not the soft “s” in “rises”
  - before  $\beta$ ,  $\delta$ ,  $\gamma$ , and  $\mu$ , however, it does become a soft “s” —  $\acute{\alpha}\sigma\beta\epsilon\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$
- by a convention developed in the Middle Ages, lower-case “s” is written as  $\sigma$  when it occurs at the beginning or middle of a word, and as  $\varsigma$  when it occurs at the end of a word
- in some editions it was once fashionable to print all lower-case sigmas as a lunate sigma ( $\varsigma$ )

## **The Attic Greek Vowel**

Vowel sounds are formed by the relatively free passage of air through the larynx, accompanied by some form of intonation.

Vowels are much harder to pin down: here the limitations of any traditional writing system quickly become evident.

Once again, we'll find that we'll be led to fudge things a bit as an aid to effective communication in class.

# Vowels: The Historical Pronunciation

## Long Vowels

H	η	<b>Eta</b>	= <b>b<u>a</u>d</b>	[but sustained]
Ω	ω	<b>Omega</b>	= <b>ca<u>u</u>ght</b>	[but sustained]

## Short Vowels

E	ε	<b>Epsilon</b>	= <b>g<u>e</u>t</b>	
O	ο	<b>Omicron</b>	= <b>bo<u>o</u>t</b>	[not sustained]

# Vowels: The Historical Pronunciation

## Vowels of Variable Quantity

Ǻ ǻ	<b>Alpha</b>	= <b>t<u>o</u>p</b>	
Ā ā	<b>Alpha</b>	= <b>f<u>a</u>ther</b>	
Ī ī	<b>Iota</b>	= <b>ke<u>y</u></b>	[sustained if the vowel is long]
Υ υ	<b>Upsilon</b>	= <b>Fr. <i>tu</i></b>	[sustained if the vowel is long]

## The Vowel

The distinction between eta and epsilon, and between omega and alpha, is easily lost when pronouncing these letters in various contexts.

Once again, I'll fall back on the older system of pronunciation, that calls upon the parallel of Latin to produce the following:

Ε ε	<b>Epsilon</b>	=	<b>Engl. short ě (get)</b>
Η η	<b>Eta</b>	=	<b>Engl. long ā (fate)</b>
Ϊ ι	<b>Iota</b>	=	<b>Engl. short ĭ (it)</b>
Ϊ̄ ῑ	<b>Iota</b>	=	<b>Engl. long ē (beat)</b>
Ο ο	<b>Omicron</b>	=	<b>Engl. short ǒ (pot)</b>
Ω ω	<b>Omega</b>	=	<b>Engl. long ō (soap)</b>

# \*Diphthongs and Digraphs

A diphthong is a complex, impure vowel sound (a glide) represented by a combination of two vowels.

A digraph is a pure vowel sound represented in the same manner.

Both are by nature long.

## Diphthongs

*aɪ* = **high**

*av* = **how**

*εv* = **ε + v**

*ηv* = **η + v**

*oɪ* = **foil**

*υl* = **υ + l**

## Digraphs

*εl* = **they**

*ov* = **mood**

## \*Iota Subscript/Adscript

The iota in what is now known as the iota subscript ( $\alpha$ ,  $\eta$ ,  $\omega$ ) was originally written on the same line as the vowel with which it is joined and pronounced independently (an offglide, resulting in what is known as a “long diphthong”).

In the case of these particular combinations, sometime around the first century BC, this iota stopped being pronounced and often stopped being written altogether.

It was restored by scholars of the Byzantine period (sometime around the 12th century AD) but was still not pronounced: hence the use of the subscript, as a reminder of a letter that had once belonged there but was no longer acknowledged in pronunciation.

In the case of a capital  $\alpha$ ,  $\eta$ ,  $\omega$ , the iota is simply written on the same line (iota adscript):  $\text{Ἅιδης}$  (modern Hades).

It is a good idea to pronounce the iota subscript, although it is frequently ignored by moderns.

# Accent

Unlike modern English, Classical Attic Greek does not have a stress accent. Instead, words were marked by a change in the pitch of the voice, as, e.g., in Mandarin.

In modern English, the native speaker expects that there will typically be a stress placed on either the next-to-last or the next-to-next-to-last \*syllable of each word: “emphátic” vs. “sénsitize”

In the normal course of things, the ancient speaker of Attic Greek expected to hear the pitch of the voice rise on one of the final three \*syllables of each word and fall back to the original pitch on the following syllable.

## Accent (cont.)

In the Hellenistic Period a system for indicating this change in pitch was introduced as an aid to the many non-Greek speakers who were now using the language.

- ' — \*acute accent: indicates a rise in pitch
- ^ — \*circumflex accent: indicates both a rise and fall in pitch (over a long vowel or diphthong/digraph)
- ` — \*grave accent: indicates the lack of a rise in pitch (or a limited rise in pitch?) where one would ordinarily expect one (only on the final syllable of a word)

*αὐτουργός*

*ᾠδε*

*αἶρει*

*ἠῶος*

*ῥεῦμα*

*ψυκτῆρ*

## **Accent (cont.)**

In reading Greek aloud, the older system was to treat the Greek pitch accent as if it were a stress accent: this helped students to memorize where the accent fell on any particular word and served as an aural reminder that the rhythms of spoken Greek are not those of modern English.

This system breaks down, however, when reading verse, since poetic rhythms work independently of the pitch accent.

I'll encourage you to use the older system in reading aloud, but we'll invest relatively little in memorizing particular accents beyond some basic rules, which I will expect you to learn and apply.

# Aspiration

Classical Attic Greek does not employ an equivalent of the letter H, nor is aspiration overtly marked except at the beginning of words.

Aspiration is indicated by a breathing mark that is placed above an initial vowel (or above the second vowel of a diphthong/digraph).

- ◌<sup>◌</sup> indicates the presence of aspiration (= h)
- ◌<sup>◌</sup> indicates the lack of aspiration.

Initial *ρ* and *υ* are always aspirated.

Where an accent is also indicated, the aspiration appears before an acute or a grave accent and below a circumflex.

οὐκ

αὐτουργός

εὕρηκα

Ἄθως

ὀ

υῖός

οὔσα

Αῖας

ῥεῦμα

αῖρει

ἠῦρον

Ἄιδης

Aspiration is marked within words by the use of aspirated consonants ( $\theta$ ,  $\phi$ ,  $\chi$ ).

This is readily seen in the formation of compound words.

- e.g., the combination of the preposition  $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\acute{o}$  with the verb  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  yields  $\acute{\upsilon}\phi\acute{\alpha}\iota\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  (“to filch):

$$\acute{\upsilon}\pi(\acute{o}) + \acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega \longrightarrow \acute{\upsilon}\pi\text{-}\acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega \longrightarrow \acute{\upsilon}\phi\acute{\alpha}\iota\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$$

The  $\phi$  in  $\acute{\upsilon}\phi\acute{\alpha}\iota\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  reflects the aspiration that attends the first syllable of  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ .

# Punctuation

Punctuation marks were first introduced in the Hellenistic Period. The system we employ was developed over the following centuries.

- — period
- , — comma
- — question mark
- — colon / semicolon



ΜΑΝΤΙΚΛΟΣ Μ' ΑΝΕΘΗΚΕ ΦΕΚΑΒΟΛΟΙ ΑΡΓΥΡΟΤΟΞΟΙ  
ΤΑΣ ΔΕΚΑΤΑΣ ΤΥ ΔΕ ΦΟΪΒΕ ΔΙΔΟΙ ΧΑΡΙΦΕΤΤΑΝ ΑΜΟΙΒ[ΑΝ]

Μάντικλός μ' ανέθεκε φεκαβόλοι ἀργυροτόξοι  
τᾶς {δ} δεκάτας· τὸ δέ, Φοῖβε, δίδοι χαρίφετταν ἀμοιβ[άν]

"Mantiklos offers me as a tithe to Apollo of the silver bow;  
do you, Phoibos, give some pleasing favor in return."

(early 7th C. BC)



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ΑΒΟΛΟ  
ΑΡΤΥΡΟΤΟΧΣΟΙΤΑΣ  
ΑΜΟΙΒΑΤΑΤΑ  
ΑΠΟΦΑΝΤΙΣΑΤΑ

# **SOCIETY FOR THE ORAL READING OF GREEK AND LATIN LITERATURE (SORGLL)**

Introduction to basic pronunciation

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## **Ariadne: Resources for Athenaze (2nd ed.)**

Audio Files of Various Readings and Exercises

[http://www.cornellcollege.edu/Classical\\_Studies/ariadne/audio/  
index.shtml](http://www.cornellcollege.edu/Classical_Studies/ariadne/audio/index.shtml)

ὁ Δικαιοπόλις Ἀθηναῖός ἐστιν· οἰκεῖ δὲ ὁ Δικαιοπόλις οὐκ ἐν ταῖς Ἀθήναις ἀλλὰ ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς· αὐτουργὸς γάρ ἐστιν· γεωργεῖ οὖν τὸν κλῆρον καὶ πονεῖ ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς· χαλεπὸς δέ ἐστιν ὁ βίος· ὁ γὰρ κλῆρὸς ἐστὶ μικρὸς, μακρὸς δὲ ὁ πόνος· αἰεὶ οὖν πονεῖ ὁ Δικαιοπόλις καὶ πολλάκις στενάζει καὶ λέγει· “ὦ Ζεῦ, χαλεπὸς ἐστιν ὁ βίος· ἀπέραντος γάρ ἐστιν ὁ πόνος, μικρὸς δὲ ὁ κλῆρος καὶ οὐ πολὺν σῖτον παρέχει.” ἀλλὰ ἰσχυρὸς ἐστιν ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄοκνος· πολλάκις οὖν χαίρει· ἐλεύθερος γάρ ἐστι καὶ αὐτουργὸς· φιλεῖ δὲ τὸν οἶκον· καλὸς γάρ ἐστιν ὁ κλῆρος καὶ σῖτον παρέχει οὐ πολὺν ἀλλὰ ἱκανόν.

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