The Pronunciation of Classical Latin
Determining the pronunciation of a language that hasn’t been spoken by native speakers for several centuries is a tricky business.
While a good deal of information can be gleaned from later grammarians, comparisons with cognate languages, and the comments and practices of the ancients themselves, our sense of how Classical Latin was pronounced remains somewhat limited and artificial.
The problems are several.

For one thing, the pronunciation of any language changes over time.
Consider the following line from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales:

A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man
A knight there was, and he a worthy man

In Chaucer's day, "knyght" was pronounced with a hard initial "k" sound, so that his "kn" sounded like the "cn" of "acne."

The "gh" at the end was pronounced like the "ch" of "Loch Ness."

The result is the pronunciation "cnicht" — not at all similar to the modern pronunciation of "knight."
We can trace similar changes in Latin, particularly in the early centuries of the Christian era, but our evidence for just how and when these changes occurred is somewhat limited, especially for earlier periods.

Semi-literate texts, for example, can be extremely helpful, since these tend to employ phonetic spellings, but our sources for such texts (graffiti, inscriptions) are not as plentiful as they would be, say, for Chaucer’s day.
Pronunciation also varies according to region.

Consider the different types of English pronunciation found today in, say, St. John’s, Boston, the Bronx, and Nashville.

Italy in the modern period is marked by a variety of regional dialects, and there is no reason to believe the situation was any different in antiquity, particularly as Latin came to be employed by various Italic peoples for whom it was not their first language.
And, although we like to claim that Latin is spelled phonetically, no popular system of orthography can capture the variety of sounds produced by the human voice, particularly when it comes to vowel sounds.
Every alphabetic system is to some degree conventional and has to be “corrected” by the native speaker, who understands intuitively what sounds are being represented by a given combination of letters.
English is, of course, particularly bad for this.

Consider, e.g., the following words:

one

gone

A native English reader knows intuitively how to interpret these spellings so as to pronounce them correctly, but a non-native reader would be out of luck.

And in some cases, even the native reader can be challenged — how, for example, do you pronounce the following:

“shone”?

[Pronunciation 1]  [Pronunciation 2]
Let's start with the Latin consonants, many of which are fairly straightforward for an English speaker.

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”)
- smooth 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”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unvoiced</th>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>th</td>
<td>ch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Classical Latin, the following consonants are pronounced as in modern English:

- b
- d
- f
- h
- l
- n
- p
- t
- x [\(= k + s\)]
The following consonants are always “hard” in Classical Latin:

- **c** — as in “cat”  [never “race” or “cello”]
- **g** — as in “good”  [never “rage”]
- **s** — as in “sing”  [never “rises”]
The following consonants are pronounced virtually the same way as in English:

- **r** — pronounced as in English, but trilled (a “rolled” r)

- **m** — pronounced as in English (but final “m” is pronounced as a nasalization of the preceding vowel — cf. French “parfum”)

- **q** — as in English, always followed by “u” and pronounced “kw” (as in English “quick”)

- **z** — a compound of “s” + “d” (as in “Mazda”)
There is no letter “w” in Latin.

The ancients use what is known as a consonantal “u” to represent this sound.

Traditionally, this consonantal “u” has been represented by a “v” in modern editions, and the practice continues in the case of capital letters (e.g., “Verona”), but many more recent editions have reverted to the ancient practice of employing a small “u” to represent both the vowel (very similar to the English “u”) and what in English would be represented by a “w.”
In modern English, this “w” sound has been replaced by the modern “v”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_uirgo</td>
<td>virgin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_uarius</td>
<td>various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_seruus</td>
<td>servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_nouus</td>
<td>novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_grauis</td>
<td>gravity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You will notice that, when “u” has a consonantal force, it always appears at the beginning of a syllable.
When it begins a syllable, this combination is pronounced as “ngn” as in the English “hangnail” (e.g., Latin “Gnaeus”)

Contrast, e.g., “reg-num,” where the two consonants are pronounced separately.
A number of combinations in Latin are designed to represent foreign (Greek) sounds:

ch — an aspirated c, as in English “pack-horse”
     (Greek χ)

ph — an aspirated p, as in English “top-hat”
     (Greek ϕ)

th — an aspirated t, as in English “cat-house”
     (Greek θ)

In modern English (as opposed to French), the letters “c,” “p,” and “t” are all regularly aspirated: unaspirated pronunciations are employed, e.g., when these letters are preceded by an “s” (as in “spin”). But — as opposed to Greek and Latin — the distinction between the aspirated and unaspirated forms of these letters does not affect meaning in English.
The modern English pronunciation of these combinations (as English “ch,” “ph,” and “th”) is demonstrably false: if, for example, in pronouncing the Greek term φιλοσοφία, the Romans heard something similar to the modern pronunciation, they would transliterate the term as: “filosophia” instead of “philosophia.”
The letters y and z are also foreign imports: they represent Greek υ and ζ.
Some final odds and ends regarding consonants:

j — used in some older modern editions to represent a consonantal “i” (see below)

k — replaced by “c” in most texts, but found in archaic words such as “Kalendae” (“Calends” — cf. English “calendar”)

w — not used in Classical Latin (replaced by consonantal “u”)

The Classical Latin Vowels

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

When approaching Latin, the modern English speaker has to rethink some basic assumptions regarding how different vowels are to be sounded.

Greek, Latin, and English are all Indo-European languages — that is, they belong to a broad family of languages that also includes the Germanic, Baltic, Celtic, Slavic, Armenian, Hittite, Tocharian, Iranian, and Indic languages, as well as those languages descended directly from Latin (the so-called Romance languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian).

As linguistic “cousins,” then, you would expect English and Latin to share certain basic notions and practices.
As it turns out, however, a native English speaker has to re-think the pronunciation of many of the long vowels when studying Latin — many of them will seem to have shifted places.

A long “ī” will sound like the English long “ē” [as in English “meet”].

A long “ē” will sound like the English long “ā” [as in English “mate”].

The long “ā” will sound like the English “ā” in “father.”

Long vowels are marked in our text by a raised symbol known as a macron: ¯
This phenomenon is due to what is known as the Great Vowel Shift.

At some point between, roughly, the time of Chaucer and that of Shakespeare (ca. 1450-1750), English-speakers shifted the position of many of their vowels.

This means that the native English speaker is out of sync not only with ancient Latin but with related languages such as French, Italian, and Spanish — as any of you who have studied those languages already knows.
There is also a much greater stress in Latin on the temporal length of vowels and syllables — the amount of time that it takes to pronounce them.

A long vowel in Latin is distinguished, then, in part by the way it is pronounced, but also by the fact that it endures longer than does a short vowel.

Compare the difference between a half-note and a quarter-note in musical notation.
The Classical Latin Vowels: A General Guide

ă — as in English “aha” or “cat”
ā — as in English “father”
ĕ — as in English “pet”
ē — as in French “fiancée”
ĭ — as in English “pit”
ī — as in English “deep”
ŏ — as in English “pot”
ō — as in English “beau”
ŏ — as in French “beau”
ū — as in English “put”
ū — as in English “fool”
Other Vowels

The letter y is used to represent the Greek upsilon — pronounced as in the French “tu.”

The sound signified by the English “y” (as in “yes”) is indicated by the use of what is known as a consonantal “i.”

In modern English, this consonantal “i” has been replaced by a “j”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_ianua</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_iocus</td>
<td>joke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_iudex</td>
<td>judicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_iuuenis</td>
<td>juvenile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diphthongs

A diphthong is a combination of two vowels employed to indicate a complex (impure) vowel sound. They are by nature long in quantity.

In Classical Latin, the principal diphthongs are:

- ae  —  as in English “high”
- au  —  as in English “how”
- ei  —  as in English “day”
- eu  —  “e-oo”
- oe  —  as in English “boy”
Overview of Latin Pronunciation

ă — as in “aha” or “cat”
ā — as in “father”
ae — as in “high”
au — as in “how”
b — as in English
c — as in “cat” [never “race” or “cello”]
ch — an aspirated c, as in “pack-horse” (Greek χ)
d — as in English
ě — as in “pet”
ē — as in French “fiancée”
ei — as in “day”
eu — “e-oo”
f — as in English
g — as in “good” [never “rage”]
gn — “ngn” (as in “hangnail”)
h — as in English
ǐ — as in “pǐt”
ī — as in “deep”
i (consonantal) = English y, as in “yes”
k — as in English
l — as in English
m — as in English (but final “m” is pronounced as a nasalization of the preceding vowel — cf. French “parfum”)
n — as in English
ō — as in “pot”
ō — as in French “beau”
œ — as in “boy”
p — as in English
ph — an aspirated p, as in “top-hat” (Greek φ)
qu — as in “quick”
r — rolled r
s — as in “sing” [never “rises”]
t — as in English
th — an aspirated t, as in “cat-house” (Greek θ)
ũ — as in “put”
ũ — as in “fool”
u (consonantal) = English w
x — as in English [= k + s]
y — as in French “tu”
z — as in “Mazda”
Accentuation

Classical Latin employs a stress accent, much like English.

Every Latin word has an accent on one syllable — although longer words (especially compounds) might have secondary accents as well.
As often in modern English, the placement of the accent is determined by the nature of the next-to-last (or penultimate) syllable; in Latin, however, the determining factor will be the temporal length of the syllable:

- if the penultimate syllable is long, it receives the accent
- if the penultimate syllable is short, the accent is placed on the preceding syllable (the antepenultimate syllable)

- a syllable is long:
  - if it contains a long vowel or diphthong (in which case it is said to be long by nature)
  - if it contains a short vowel followed by two consonants (in which case it is said to be long by position).
Some Examples

**Accent on Penult**

- *uī-cī-nus* — long penult (long vowel)
- *o-pī-nā-ri* — long penult (long vowel)
- *ex-aé-quat* — long penult (diphthong)
- *un-guén-tum* — long penult (by position)
- *dē-tér-ret* — long penult (by position)

**Accent on Antepenult**

- *mó-ne-ō* — short penult
- *aú-di-ō* — short penult
Lengthening by Position

Latin likes to end all syllables with a vowel:

   e.g., fa-mi-li-a    ae-di-bus    ha-bi-tant    ti-bi-ci-na-rum

When a vowel is followed by two consonants, however, this is often impossible — that is, one cannot pronounce forms such as:

   nu-mquam

The initial combination “mqu” is impossible to say; it has to be split into:

   num-quam

Doing this closes off the first syllable, however, with the result that it takes longer to pronounce it (as your mouth has to form the “m” and then get around to the “qu” at the beginning of the next syllable). The increase in the temporal duration of the first syllable, then, makes it the equivalent of a syllable that contains a long vowel or diphthong: the syllable is then said to be “long by position.”

   Not all consonant combinations need have this effect — consider, e.g.:

   Sta-phy-la    pa-tris
English poetry often relies upon this sort of effect in controlling the rhythm of the verse.

Compare, e.g., the following couplet from Pope’s Essay on Criticism (lines 370-371):

When Ajax strives, some Rock's vast Weight to throw,
The Line too labours, and the Words move slow.
The rules for accentuation set out above apply to the classical period.

In the pre-classical period, it would appear that the accent tended to gravitate toward the beginning of words. This practice is perhaps retained, even in the classical period, in words of the shape \( \underbrace{\circ \circ \circ \times} \) (that is, words of four syllables, the first three of which are short). There is a possibility that these were pronounced, even in Cicero’s day, with the accent on the first syllable. Hence: família, fácilia, cécidero.

In other instances, words have changed their shape over time, but still retain their original accent. E.g., nostrátis \( \rightarrow \) nostrás, illíce \( \rightarrow \) illíc, adhúce \( \rightarrow \) adhúc.

But these are rather specialized matters that can be safely ignored at this point in your study of Latin.