

Notes on the rhythm of Latin poetry

There are two ways to learn the rhythms of classical Latin verse.¹ One, listen to someone read it, copy and commit a few lines to memory; then see how well you manage with some unprepared lines: repeat until you can feel the rhythm almost at sight. The other is to study how the verse is put together, syllable by syllable, line by line. Ideally, try both; but remember that the objective is to create a sound, not an abstract formula.

Quantity — the long and the short of it

Each syllable is either ‘long’ or ‘short’². This is nothing to do with the force of breath (i.e. stress), loudness, tone or pitch, but simply the length of time it takes to utter the syllable. By contrast, English verse relies on stress to generate rhythm, as does most medieval Latin poetry. Classical Latin is otherwise:³ the ‘long’ syllable being twice as long to utter as a ‘short’ one, similar to quavers and crotchets of musical notation.

A syllable is long if...

1. the vowel is long by nature (e.g. the 1st declension ablative ending – **silvā** – is long, the nominative short: **silvā**);
2. there is a diphthong (two vowels which together make one sound: **ae**, **au**, **ei**, **eu**, **oe**, **ui**, e.g. **audire**);
3. if the vowel is followed by an **x**, e.g. **conspexit**.
4. if the vowel is followed by two or more consonants⁴, e.g.

Aeneas miratus enim motusque tumultu

Long vowels and long syllables

It is important to distinguish between a syllable made long by a vowel which is long by nature, and a syllable which is long because of the consonants which follow a short vowel. In the latter, the vowel will be pronounced as short, though the time taken to utter the whole syllable will be the same as if it were long. A long syllable is sometimes called a ‘heavy’ syllable to distinguish it from a long vowel.

Quantities of some final syllables

Certain final syllables are regularly long or short. The quantities apply to all words that belong to the declensions or conjugations of the examples given:

¹ ‘Classical’ – broadly c. 60BC – AD130

² Some describe a long or short syllable as a ‘heavy’ or ‘light’ syllable to distinguish the value of a syllable from that of a long or short vowel

³ Stress, however, does play a part: see pp.4-5

⁴ where a short vowel is followed by two consonants of which the second is **l** or **r**, the syllable may be long or short. Where a double **ll** or **rr** follows a vowel, however, the syllable is always long (**currus**, **flagellum**)

<i>ending</i>	LONG	SHORT
-a	silvā (abl.s., 1 st decl.) festinā! (imperative)	silva (nom.s., 1 st decl.) vina (nom.pl./acc. pl., 2 nd decl.) tempora (nom.pl./acc. pl., 3 rd decl.)
-e	rē (abl.s., 5 th decl.) most adverbs sedē! (imperative)	o amice (voc.s., 2 nd decl.) patre (abl.s., 3 rd decl.) bene, male
-ī	annī (gen.s./nom.pl., 2 nd decl.) o Claudi (voc.s., 2 nd decl. - ius) patrī (dat.s., 3 rd decl.) amavī ('I...') misī ('I...')	nisi, mihi, tibi, sibi, ibi, ubi (the final ī of all these may be long or short)
-o	annō (dat./abl.s., 2 nd decl.) amō, moneō, mittō, audiō	ego, homo, modo (occasionally modō)
-u	manū, gemitū (abl.s., 4 th decl.)	
-as	silvās (acc. pl. 1 st decl.) amās, amabās ('you...')	
-es	patrēs (nom.pl./acc. pl., 3 rd decl.) monēs ('you...')	
-is	silvīs (dat.pl./abl.pl., 1 st decl.) annīs (dat.pl./abl.pl., 2 nd decl.) audīs, vīs ('you...': 4 th conjugation)	patris (gen.s., 3 rd decl.) omnis (nom./gen.) mittis, capis ('you...': 3 rd & mixed conjugation)
-os	annōs (acc.pl., 2 nd decl.)	
-us	gemitūs (gen.singular & nom. pl. & acc.pl., 4 th decl.)	annus (nom.s., 2 nd decl.) gemitus (nom.s., 4 th decl.) tempus (nom.s./acc.s., 3 rd decl.)

The hexameter

The hexameter is so called because the line is divided into six 'feet' not unlike musical bars (*hex* is Greek for six). The scheme below represents the hexameter (— for a long syllable, ∪ a for short one):

— ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — || ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪∪ | — ∪

The line does not contain a fixed number of syllables, for there are variables, two short syllables for one long being an option in any of the first four feet. There are, however, certain fixtures (e.g. the first syllable of each foot and the entire fifth foot; and short syllables always come in pairs, except the final syllable of the line). This metre is used by virtually all the poets – Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Juvenal's *Satires* are all in hexameters.⁵

⁵ The hexameter is also one half of the elegiac couplet (see p.3).

Caesura

The mark || represents a caesura, or a 'cutting' between two words. This often (but not always) coincides with a pause in the sense. A 'strong' caesura comes after the first long syllable of a foot, a 'weak' caesura after the first short syllable of a foot. The usual position is in the third foot, though for a particular effect it may come in the second or fourth, sometimes in both, occasionally not at all.

Elision

If a word ends with a vowel or 'm', and the next begins with a vowel or 'h', the last syllable of the first word is elided, forming a single syllable. The sound of the first syllable should not be entirely lost but merged with the sound of the second.

Cocyt*i* stagn(a) alta vides

The letters **u** and **i** (**gemitu**, **patri**) are subject to elision, unless they are used as consonants (**uincere**, **iam**).

The final 'm'

In classical poetry a final 'm' is treated like a vowel. **Septem**, for instance, would lose the final syllable before a vowel (and indeed has lost it altogether in all the evolved Romance words for 'seven' – **sept**, **sete**, etc.). The final 'm' in medieval poetry, however, was not elided. This appears to be a more complete sound, no doubt consolidated by pupils called upon to enunciate the difference between **mensa** and the accusative **mensam**.

Elegiac couplets

The couplets are pairs of lines, the first of which is the hexameter, the second is called the pentameter (five feet, *pente* is Greek for five):

— u | — u | — || u | — u | — u | — u

— u | — u | — || — u | — u | —

These are used in the love poetry of Ovid, Propertius and Tibullus, and in the epigrams of Catullus and Martial.

Hendecasyllabics

Every line has eleven syllables (*hendeca* is Greek for eleven).

u u — u u — u — u — u

Catullus and Martial were both fond of this line.

Was it spoken or sung?

No one really knows. An ancient recording would be a wonderful thing, but even so it might not distinguish between speaking and singing, to our ears at least: the quantitative rhythms are themselves musical, already halfway between speech and song. The ancient Greek bard was certainly described as a ‘singer’, and the subclassical Hellenistic poets speak of the ‘song’ and ‘lyre’. These were not to be taken literally, though, at least not in the case of Hellenistic poets.

The cultural inferiority complex Romans felt towards Greece is well documented, and if Roman poets were as slavish to the conventions of imitation as we are sometimes led to believe, then we may assume no music or song accompanied classical Latin poetry. But it’s quite possible they took the convention of song and lyre at face value. Most Romans will have experienced poetry by hearing it recited, often in social gatherings, unlike the bookish isolation of Hellenistic scholar-poets reading quietly in libraries. From the little we know it’s not unreasonable to suppose such readings may have been enhanced by some form of music.

Stress and quantity

Classical rhythms are not solely founded on quantity. Latin seems to have had a stress accent similar to our own: in both English and Latin we stress the penultimate syllable (e.g. *atténction*, **Románi**) or antepenultimate (e.g. *bícycle*, **hómínes**). In longer words, more than one syllable may be stressed (e.g. Hellenistic, **mónachórum**). Not many words are as awkward as ‘quántitative’, but no doubt Latin had its share of peculiarities as well. The general rule is: stress the penultimate syllable if it’s long (**Románi**); or the antepenultimate if the penultimate syllable is short (**hómínes**). Words of two syllables should have the first syllable stressed, even if it’s short – but lightly (**enim**).

Classical poetic rhythms thrive upon an interplay of metre (longs and shorts) and stress. The metres, including the hexameter, were almost all Greek in origin; the stress was native.

Greek was very influential in the development of classical Latin poetry. Roman Hellenophiles and their Greek mentors encouraged the idea of quantity in Latin. The Greeks themselves,⁶ as far as we can see, did not have a stress accent, but one of pitch – the accent was not measured by the weight of the voice, but by its height or pitch. This accent the Romans explicitly tell us they adopted for their own poetry, but this is complicated by the dearth of knowledge of Greek pronunciation, and of changes which may have occurred between the period of classical Greek and the Greek spoken in Virgil’s day some four centuries later – a long time in the life of a language. We know that at some point Greek developed a stress accent, but we do not know when.

Both before and after the classical period, the signs are that Latin verse was driven by a rhythm of stress only. In the fifth and sixth centuries AD, the rhythm of long and short syllables all but disappears. The schools gave fewer hours to teaching classical metres, and the more popular rhythms of early church music influenced the poetry: a rhythm of stress and end-rhyme, much as we have in English. For a thousand years Latin was the second language of Europe, and with some give-and-take nestled alongside vernacular languages, most of which gathered their poetic rhythms from an accent of stress.

⁶ The Greeks of the 5th and early 4th centuries BC (i.e. ‘classical’)

During the Renaissance classical metres were studied and imitated by scholars in whose quarters Latin was now confined. Their enthusiasm for classical perfectionism was as much obituary as renaissance – for medieval Latin at least. The idealised corpse of classical Latin appealed rather more than the living language, a shift of interest that recovers what had been ignored but in turn loses some of the spontaneous ease of medieval Latin.

Evidence of stress in classical Latin poetry

How can we be sure there was stress in classical Latin (and not just the metre)? In France you will hear French readers of classical Latin poetry ignore the stress. In line with their own poetry, which tends to be more ‘syllabic’, they produce a much smoother, more even weighting of all the syllables. Our stress-based accentuation of Latin was thought by some French scholars to be a plodding Germanic disruption of their ancestral tongue. They even formed a society to protect their pronunciation of Latin – ‘La Société des amis de la prononciation française du Latin’ – and perhaps up to a point we must defer; for they may not have all the arguments behind them, but they do have Latin in the blood. The trouble is, though, so do the Italians and others, and all these languages which evolved from Latin do not share a uniform sound.

The most telling argument in favour of the presence of stress in classical verse is the resolution of stress and quantity in the final two feet of the hexameter. You will see in the example that the natural stress (as described above) coincides with long syllables of the last two feet. This is a rule to which there are very few exceptions, a coincidence of stress and quantity that occurs in almost all of Virgil’s hexameters: a rhythm of endlines which was surely deliberate.

The stress is marked , the syllable’s length $\bar{ }$:

**Aurora interea miseris mortālibus ālmam
extulerat lucem referens opera ātque labōres.**

The signs in favour of stress may be hard to ignore, but we know rather less about the precise weight of this stress, and how much it varied. No doubt Latin was similar to other stress-accented languages, with the stress to some extent dependent on the word itself, the speaker, region and period.

For our purposes, let’s assume that Latin rhythms of all eras were founded upon an accent of stress, but during the classical period of Latin poetry the influence of this stress was secondary to the Greek-inspired metres with their longs and shorts. The interplay between the metre and stress helps to create the distinctive music of classical verse.

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