

## *Introduction 0.2.1: The Greek alphabet*

### *On the pronunciation of ancient and koinê Greek*

It is practically impossible to imitate the pronunciation of the Greek language synchronically, such as we think it was during any particular period. We can aim only at approximation, not only on account of our limited knowledge (there are no CD's of Plato or the apostles!...) but because the sounds of a language evolve constantly and they do so in a complex process that includes, among others, numerous dialectal variations. Our best option is to follow the academic tradition that in the twentieth century replaced the national pronunciations of Latin and Greek in different European countries and established a more or less uniform pronunciation based on historical and linguistic knowledge.

Although our pronunciation of ancient Greek will be in some respects anachronistic and less than perfect, it is important to sound out the written texts. As a reward, you will be able to better understand and enjoy Greek prose and poetry, not to mention that the grammar will be much easier to learn if you recognize why some phonetic transformations occurred.

Archaeologists have found abundant prehistoric written records, corresponding to two scripts known as Linear A and Linear B. The latter, deciphered half a century ago, represents the language used in Mycenaean times. It was an ancestor of Greek. Linear A has not been deciphered yet. But when the Minoan, and then the Mycenaean civilizations came to abrupt ends, several centuries followed when culture became, as it had been in the earliest beginnings, oral. In the 8th century BCE the Greeks borrowed from the Lydians a Semitic script. This was one of innumerable cross-cultural exchanges, and it was not a very good fit. They had to adapt it to the phonetic features of Greek, but an adaptation it was. The seams show. On the next page is a chart of what came to be the Greek alphabet.

The second column gives the Roman alphabet equivalents commonly used to represent Greek text when a Greek font is not available or when readers are not expected to recognize the Greek alphabet. This is known as “transliteration.” In this course transliteration will not be necessary.

<i>Greek alphabet</i>	<i>Roman letters</i>	<i>Names of the letters</i>
<b>α A</b>	a	alpha
<b>β B</b>	b	beta
<b>γ Γ</b>	g	gamma
<b>δ Δ</b>	d	delta
<b>ε E</b>	e	epsilon
<b>ζ Z</b>	z	zeta
<b>η H</b>	ē	eta
<b>θ Θ</b>	th	theta
<b>ι I</b>	i	iota

<b>κ Κ</b>	k, c	kappa
<b>λ Λ</b>	l	lambda
<b>μ Μ</b>	m	mu
<b>ν Ν</b>	n	nu
<b>ξ Ξ</b>	x	xi
<b>ο Ο</b>	o	omicron
<b>π Π</b>	p	pi
<b>ρ, ϱ</b> (initial) <b>Ρ, Ϛ</b> (initial)	r	rho
<b>σ</b> (internal) <b>ς</b> (final) <b>Σ</b>	s	sigma
<b>τ Τ</b>	t	tau
<b>υ Υ</b>	u, y	upsilon

<b>φ Φ</b>	ph	phi
<b>χ Χ</b>	ch, kh	khi
<b>ψ Ψ</b>	ps	psi
<b>ω Ω</b>	ō	omega