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Latin Pronunciation: How do we know?

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It’s easy to find out how to pronounce a word in a modern language: you ask a native speaker who knows the word. Ultimately, that’s where the pronunciation rules in our textbooks and dictionaries come from. But this method doesn’t work so well for Latin any more. So how do we know how Latin was pronounced?

Fortunately, we can sometimes eavesdrop on long-ago Latin learners and find out what the native speakers told them. Consider Plutarch. Although he had a Latin name, L. Mestrius Plutarchus, and was probably procurator of Achaia during Hadrian’s principate, Plutarch was Greek, and all his writings are in Greek. He was born in the early first century and died after AD 120; this makes him an older contemporary of Suetonius and Tacitus. Although Plutarch wrote philosophical essays — lots of them! — he is also well known for the Parallel Lives. These are a series of paired biographies, one Greek and one Roman. For example, Theseus and Romulus are paired up, as are Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, Demosthenes and Cicero, Alcibiades and Coriolanus. There are 23 pairs in all (and there were others that no longer survive).

Because Plutarch was writing in Greek about Romans, he had to turn all the Latin names into Greek, and this is where pronunciation comes in. Plutarch (and other Greek writers) wrote the Latin names in the Greek alphabet as they sounded. He writes Κικέρων, rather than, say, Σισέρων. This tells us that the Latin C of Cicero’s name must have sounded like a kappa, or like English K.
Similarly, Plutarch writes Καῖσαρ for “Caesar”: Latin C is consistently Greek kappa, never sigma. And that’s how we know the Romans pronounced C the same way no matter what kind of vowel sound followed it.

Plutarch has put Greek endings on these names. For example, Cicero’s name ends with N in Greek, just like Plato’s (he’s Πλάτων in his own language), because names that end in omega sound feminine in Greek. And in the accusative, where it’s “Ciceronem” in Latin, it’s Κικέρωνα in Greek, because that’s how the third declension works. But the sounds have come directly over from Latin.

There are other sources for Latin pronunciation as well; W. S. Allen’s Vox Latina (Cambridge, 1965) is a good overview. Plutarch’s Greek transliterations, though, are a quick way to answer the skeptical student who wonders how we can possibly know how people spoke 2000 years ago.