

# An Introduction to Latin Metre

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## Introduction

If you read poems with attention to the meaning, to letter sounds, to the natural word accent, to vowels with and without macrons, you will represent the metre naturally enough. It will largely take care of itself, and make itself felt as an undercurrent.

But it is useful to ‘lift the bonnet’ and see how the metre works.

First you should be familiar with the previous guides on pronunciation:

- **Latin letters**
- **Word stress in classical Latin**

and for good measure work through **Pronunciation drills** as well.

## 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, ∪ for a short one):

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

The line does not contain a fixed number of syllables, for there are variables: two short syllables for a second long syllable 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 for the final syllable of the line).

This metre is used by almost all the poets. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and Juvenal’s *Satires* are all in hexameters.<sup>1</sup>

## Scanning a line

‘Scanning’ a hexameter is to map it into its six feet with long and short syllables.

On the Latin Quarter webpage where you found this guide listen to **Recording 1**:

**sed fugit intereā, fugit irreparābile tempus.**

*But time is escaping meanwhile, irretrievable time is escaping.*

Virgil, *Georgics* 3.284

<sup>1</sup> The hexameter is also the first line of the elegiac couplet (see below).



## 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 largely swallowed as it is merged with the sound of the second:

*ī, sequere Ītaliā ventīs, pete rēgna per undās.*

*Go, make for Italy with (the help of) the winds, seek the lands over the waves.*

Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.381

— ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — || — | — ◡ ◡ | — ◡ ◡ | — —  
*ī, se quer (e) Ī ta li am ven tīs, pe te rēgna per undās.*

The letters **u** and **i** (**gemitū**, **patrī**) are subject to elision, unless they are serving as consonants (**uincere**, **iam**). In this guide the consonantal **u** is written as **v**.

## A 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 who were called upon to enunciate the difference between **mēnsa** and the accusative **mēnsam**.

*quid tantum īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī?*

*Why does it please you to yield so much to your mad grief?*

Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.776

— — | — — | — || ◡ ◡ | — — | — ◡ ◡ | — —  
*quid tant (um) īn sā nō iu vat in dul gē re do lō rī ?*

Listen to **Recording 2** and scan the remaining lines. Watch out for two more elisions, one involving a final **-m** and the other an initial **h-** :

*quid tantum īnsānō iuvat indulgēre dolōrī,  
 ō dulcis coniūnx? nōn haec sine nūmine dīvum  
 ēveniunt; nec tē hinc comitem asportāre Creūsam  
 fās, aut ille sinit superī rēgnātor Olympī.*

*Why does it please you to yield so much to your mad grief, sweet husband? These things do not happen without the will of the gods; it is not right for you to take Creusa from here as your companion, nor does that ruler of Olympus on high allow it.*

Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.776-9

## Elegiac couplets

A Latin or Greek ‘elegy’ is so called because of its metre, the elegiac couplet. The couplets are pairs of lines, the first of which is the hexameter, the second is called the ‘pentameter’ (one foot less: *pente* is Greek for five). The pentameter is a shorter nimbler line, which usually brings the sentence or unit of sense neatly to a close.

— uu | — uu | — || uu | — uu | — uu | — u  
 — uu | — uu | — || — uu | — uu | —

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

arma gravī numerō violentaque bella parābam  
 ēdere, māteriā conveniente modīs.

*I was preparing to tell of arms and violent wars in a serious rhythm, with subject matching the metre.*

Ovid, *Amores* 1.1.1-2

— u u | — u u | — || uu | — uu | — u u | — u  
 ar ma gra vī nu me rō vi o lentaque bell a pa rā bam  
 — uu | — uu | — || — uu | — u u | —  
 ē de re, mā te ri ā con ven i en te mo dīs.

## Hendecasyllables

Catullus and Martial were both fond of this metre. Each line has eleven syllables (*hendeca* is Greek for eleven):

u u — u u — u — u — u

cēnābis bene, mī Fabulle, apud mē y  
*you will dine well, Fabullus, at my place*

Catullus, *Poems* 13.1

— — — uu — u — u — —  
 cē nā bis be ne, mī Fa bull (e), ap ud mē

Read the next three lines, also hendecasyllables. Then scan the lines and read them again.

Catullus' impassioned love for Lesbia went through good and bad times. Here, on the up:

vīvāmus mea Lesbia atque amēmus  
rūmōrēsque senum sevēriōrum  
omnēs ūnius aestimēmus assis.

*Let's live, my Lesbia, and let's love, and let us value at tuppence all the chatter of old men (who are) too strict.*

Catullus, *Poems* 5.1-3

You can hear all of Catullus' Poem 5 at **Recording 3** on the Latin Quarter webpage.

## Was classical Latin poetry spoken or sung?

Recording 3 has some speculative (modern) music added. No one really knows for sure how music was used with poetry presentations, or if the poet was actually singing. 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 described as a 'singer', and the subclassical Hellenistic poets speak of the 'song' and 'lyre'. However, these were not to be taken literally, at least not in the case of the later Hellenistic scholar-poets, for whom 'song' had become a conventional term.

Most Romans experienced poetry by hearing it. It was performed by skilled actors or readers, who used their voices, faces and bodies to bring the verses alive. This idea of performance cannot be overemphasized, and it is safe to assume that music of pipes and strings was never far away.

## Before and after the classical period

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 emerges, much as we have in English. During the millennium AD 500-1500 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 which in turn influenced their pronunciation of Latin verse.

## Division of syllables within words

If there is a single consonant at the beginning of a syllable, the syllable begins with it. **X** is an exception to that rule, because the actual principle is in fact that a syllable can begin with as many consonants that could ordinarily begin a word. Thus most syllables start with a consonant, or even with two, and occasionally with three:

**plau-strum** (**str** can start a word, e.g. **strenuus**)

The consonants which follow a vowel are therefore regarded as belonging to the following syllable – at least all the consonants which could appear together at the beginning of a Latin word.

In the examples below you will see that the first of two consonants at the end of the first syllable of **ob-scūri** and **in-sula** belong to the first syllable, because **bs** and **ns** are combinations which do not start Latin words:

**a-mat**

**a-qua**

**ae-sti-mē-mus**

**ob-scūri**

**in-sula**

## Did Classical Latin poetry have a Greek ‘pitch’ accent?

Each syllable is either long or short. 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. While English verse relies solely on stress to propel the rhythm, classical Latin poetry is founded on a rhythm of quantities (similar to quavers and crotchets in music) where the long syllable is twice as long to utter as a short one. The natural word stresses come into play too creating a counterpoint that is the distinctive feature of classical rhythms. The metres, including the hexameter, were almost all Greek in origin; the stress was native Italian. Latin was a ‘heavier’ language than Greek, an impression created by the greater number of long syllables. The stress, if only light, relieves and invigorates an otherwise more ponderous language.

Many teachers of poetic technique were Greek, and all were steeped in Greek literature. Latin metres were taken from Greek, some with plenty of exposure in Latin before the classical period, some with less. The hexameter had been in use for many years before reaching maturity with Virgil and Ovid. Some of the Greek lyric metres Horace chose for his Odes had not appeared in Latin before.

Classical Greek had a more musical and tonal ‘pitch’ accent, not one of stress. Instead of the weight or emphasis of a sound, the accent was a lifting of the tone. Did the Romans try to import this pitch accent? It is certainly possible. Romans themselves described their accent in the same terms as the Greek one, although this was likely to

be part of the broad attempt to assume Greek literary mannerisms – a defining characteristic of classical Latin literature. Evidence in favour of stress as the natural word accent in Latin is strong, not least the coincidence of stress and ictus in the final two feet of almost all hexameters. (There is no such coincidence of stress and ictus in the final two feet of a Greek hexameter.)

Perhaps a pitch accent was attempted along side the natural stress accent. The next line is a (Greek) hexameter, telling a Greek story, and includes the a Greek word for ‘air’ (āēr) – which could well have carried a pitch accent.

Daedalus is trapped on the island of Crete by the king, Minos – unless he can come up with a plan to escape:

1—001—0

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āēra Mīnos.

*Minos may possess all things, but he does not possess the air.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.187

The final two feet (five syllables) have the usual coincidence of quantity and stress. But the kind of stress is open to question, especially for āēra (*air*). This (originally Greek) word has three syllables (hence the diæresis over the ē), with the first syllable long, and stressed. It is not an easy sound to make unless you raise the pitch of that initial syllable – and then the line seems to soar into life. To raise the pitch here is only conjecture, but quite compelling. The Romans affected all sorts of Greek literary mannerisms. Some stuck, some half stuck, and most faded after the classical period.

## Finally

There are other metres not included here, such as the many lyric metres Horace adapted from Greek.

You can hear a number of poems read at the Latin Quarter website ([www.latinquarter.co.uk](http://www.latinquarter.co.uk)).