

The Letter Names of the Latin Alphabet

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Contemporary and earlier studies of the Latin language have failed to present and discuss adequately the letter names of the Latin alphabet—in contrast, for example, with the Greek alpha, beta, gamma, etc. Several theories, and their derivation, about the letter names are presented. The ancient evidence—from the third/second century B.C. to the seventh century A.D.—is rather scant and not always clear. While the names of the vowels and of all the consonants except the continuants (F, L, M, N, R, S, X) seem certain, the names of these continuants seem to have undergone changes in the course of history and to be clear only towards the end of antiquity (from the fourth century A.D. on).

It seems strange that beginning Latin books (in English at least), while they have something to say about the *sounds* of Latin, have little or nothing to say about the *names* of the letters of the alphabet—the A B C's, so to speak. Nor in fact do Sturtevant (1920), Kent (1945), Palmer (1954), and Allen (1965) in their valuable books on the pronunciation of Greek and Latin or the sounds of Latin. Nor did my own schooling in Latin ever include any instruction on this—one would think—rather elementary matter, in marked contrast to one's experience in Greek, where we begin at once with alpha, beta, gamma, etc., and it becomes fun to learn the names of all the letters along with the wonderful shapes of the new alphabet.

Nevertheless, at least some of the old standard Latin grammars in English have statements about the letter names: for example, Roby (1881), Gildersleeve & Lodge (1894), Lane (1903), Allen & Greenough (1903), Burton (1911), Postgate (1918), but not—so far as I can discover—Lindsay (1894 and 1915), Harkness (1898), Hale & Buck (1903), Bennett (1895, ed. 3 1918; 1907), or Elmer (1928). The former group, in fact, is in essential agreement about the letter names. Including only the 21 letters of Cicero's, Augustus', and Quintilian's alphabet (to which were later added the letters Y and Z),

the agreed names are as follows: ah, bay, kay, day, eh, ef, gay, hah, ee, kah, el, em, en, o, pay, koo, air (or er), es, tay, oo, and ex (or ix). Besides noting that the sound indicated by -ay is only approximate, “the true sound” being “that of the French *e* in *fête*”, Lane (1898) is alone in adding that the above names “are those employed by Roman grammarians,” although he doesn’t specify which ones and he gives no references or bibliography.

Nor did Buck, when he came to write his own *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (1933), give any supporting evidence or references for his three paragraphs on “the Roman names of the letters”, which nevertheless are worth quoting in full (p. 76) :

The Greek names as a whole were not retained in Italy. They were replaced, perhaps first among the Etruscans, by monosyllabic names representing the simple sound of the letters in the case of the vowels, or, for the consonants, the sound supported by a vowel, usually *e*, following the stops, preceding the others.

For the vowels this was merely an extension of what was also the Greek practice in the names of *ε*, *ο*, and *υ*. The Greek name *πε̑* gave the *pe*, and this, supported by the first syllable of *βῆτα* and *δέλτα*, was followed by *be*, *ce*, *de*, *te*, and the late *ge*; while *ka* accords with the first syllable of *κάππα* and the prevailing use of *k* before *a*; and *qu* both with the normal Etruscan and the prevailing use of *q* before *u*.

The letters for the continuous sounds—that is the nasals, liquids, and fricatives—were perhaps at first, like the vowels, named by their sounds, that is with syllabic *m*, *n*, *l*, etc., which appear to have been frequent in Etruscan. But the attested Latin names are with a preceding supporting *e*, as *em*, *en*, *el*, *er*, *ef*, *es*. The name of the *x*, namely *ix*, shows inversion of the Greek name in its late form *ξ̑*, probably due to the fact that no Latin word begins with *x*. The *h* was often called “*aspirationis nota*” (because of the Greek *ξ̑*), but the name *ha* is attested. [He then speaks of *Y* and *Z*.]

His table of Latin names gives the following: a, be, ce, de, e, ef, ge, ha, i, ka, el, em, en, o, pe, qu, er, es, te, u, ix, plus *y* (no pronunciation indicated) and zeta.

I repeat: Buck gives no supporting evidence for this statement, although he implies having used some testimony, and Lane mentions “Roman grammarians” without further details in his very brief statement on the letter names. What then is the evidence?—apart from what might be deduced from the generally monosyllabic unanimity in the letter names of English and the other Western

European alphabets. Even Buck leaves it doubtful whether he accepted or rejected some of the ancient evidence. No publication—at least since 1882—contains a concise statement of the history of the letter names together with all the supporting evidence and the modern literature on the subject; hence this paper.

The evidence is by no means simple or straightforward in character which is probably the reason why no publication does justice to the complexity of the evidence, at least of some of it. (Manu Leumann, for example, in his 1963 *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre* [in the big *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* series] simply refers to two modern writers without even summarizing their studies or discussing the matter.) The evidence I have found ranges from Plautus (3d/2d c. B.C.) to Isidore of Seville (7th c.) and perhaps even beyond, and thus spans a period of 800 years or more. With the exception of a little evidence from Plautus, Lucilius (2d c. B.C.), and Varro (d. 28 or 27 B.C.) (Lucilius and Varro at second-hand), all the evidence dates from the time of the Empire or later, and comes mostly from Roman grammarians (one writing in verse, which I sometimes don't fully understand) but also from Quintilian (quoting Lucilius), the anonymous *Carmina Priapea*, the poet Ausonius (the "Moselle" poet), the encyclopaedist Isidore, and a scrap of papyrus from Egypt.

In summary, it seems to me that until we get to Varro we can be sure of nothing about the names of the Latin consonants, and even the testimony about Varro is not perfectly satisfactory. In the light of Plautus' *ā* and Lucilius' *ā* and *ē*, and of Terentianus Maurus' and Pompeius' long vowel-names, we can hardly doubt that from the beginning each of the five vowels had a monosyllabic name consisting of the "long" sound of the vowel itself, *ā ē ī ō ū*. But whether before Varro the name of each consonant consisted of the mere sound of the consonant followed by a short neutral or obscure vowel-sound, schwa (as in Sanskrit), which might be held long in verse if the meter demanded it (as perhaps in Lucilius for the names of C and D, and possibly L), or by some other vowel-sound, most likely a long E, it seems impossible to decide from the evidence available. Any relation between the earliest Latin names and the Etruscan names remains entirely hypothetical, therefore dubious, though it must be admitted that, if the Etruscans gave the Romans the symbols of the Greek alphabet, or at least as many of them as the Romans needed, they

must have given them also some sort of nomenclature for the symbols, whether the original Greek names (which in that case the Romans, in due course, reshaped) or the Etruscan (which were presumably based on the Greek). But we simply do not know what the Etruscan names were, though both Hammarström (1920) and Einarson (1967) construct Etruscan nomenclatures from the Greek and what they know or conjecture of the Latin.

For this reason, it seems to me, Sommer's (1914) surmise and Hammarström's theory that the Latin names were borrowed from the Etruscans—rather than being (as Schulze [1904] had thought) an essentially independent, Roman, creation based on the Greek model—makes no advance for us. As Hammarström himself admitted, “the method of phoneticizing the names of the semi-vowels” (i.e., giving them sonant/syllabic names—*f, l, m*, etc.), which he concluded the Romans had borrowed from the Etruscans, was “senseless from the point of view of the Latin language and Latin orthography.” The semivowels were the key letters for Hammarström; he had accepted Schulze's theory that until after Donatus (4th cent. A.D.) the Romans had only “phoneticized” the names of the semivowels (*lautieren* as opposed to *buchstabieren*), and he then found in the later Etruscan consonant-clusters—which always, with few exceptions, contained one of the semivowels L, M, N, R—evidence that these semivowels were already “syllable-forming” in Etruscan, and therefore concluded that the Romans borrowed from the Etruscans the names not only of the semivowels but of the whole alphabet except B, D, O, and X.

Even though quoted by a late, and now anonymous, writer and rejected by Schulze, we should accept as authentic the evidence about Varro, that he “says that the [names of the] semivowels should begin with E and [the names of the] mutes end in E,” with as much confidence as we accept the same writer's several other quotations from Varro as well as his very numerous quotations from other Roman writers, which a glance at Keil's apparatus criticus (Vol. 4, 1864) shows substantially confirmed by their own independent manuscript tradition; Marx's (1905) answer to Schulze's rejection seems fully justified. But questions remain: What does the Varro evidence mean? What is its value? *Debere esse* is the crux. Is Varro trying to reform the names of the semivowels and mutes? Or is he merely being

didactic—laying down the law, so to speak? From a reading of his *De lingua Latina*, which contains very many examples of *debere*, *oportere*, and the passive periphrastic (along with many milder forms of expression, such as *puto*, *arbitror*, *opinor*, *credo*), especially in Books VIII–IX after he has left his etymologies behind, I conclude that *debere* and the like are common expressions of Varro’s and that in our disputed passage *debere* is perfectly in character but, in the lack of a larger context, is neutral in its implication as to whether Varro is trying to *correct* current practice or is only *confirming* it. It is not impossible that there was some leeway or variation in the names of some of the letters—semivowels? mutes?—just as there is still in English with respect to the name of Z, both “zee” and “zed” being still in use (formerly also “izerd” or “izzard”). I conclude that for Varro the names of the semivowels and mutes are as indicated by the anonymous grammarian; that presumably this nomenclature represents what may be called standard usage, but that *perhaps* there was some variation in the names of some letters, most likely the semivowels, less likely the mutes. In view of Varro’s great authority, it is possible also that his nomenclature was influential for the future. In any event, the slight, roughly datable evidence that we have between him and Terentianus Maurus (2nd cent. A.D.)—in the *Carmina Priapea* (about A.D. 14–138?)—confirms the long-syllable character of the names of C, D, and P.

Given the inadequacy of the earlier evidence, the reason for what seems to be the great change—if it was a change—indicated by Terentianus Maurus can only be conjectured. One wishes that Terentianus—having said so much, so clearly, about his inability to put the names of the semivowels into verse because (as we would put it) their names did not constitute syllables in the Graeco-Roman sense—had said more, had spoken of the history of the subject, of Varro’s system, and of the origins of the new system—of which he certainly gives no hint of being himself the founder. Donatus and the other fourth-century writers until we get to Servius simply number, list, and describe the vowels, semivowels, and mutes, but do not give them names. Servius marks a return to Varro’s names for the semivowels; from then on, with the exception of Ausonius (A.D. 390) (who omits them from his list of Latin letter-names, but—unlike Terentianus—gives no explanation), whenever a writer gives names

to the consonants he follows Varro's nomenclature (except for the addition, in the Antinoë papyrus [4th/5th c.], of a second syllable to the names of the semivowels, presumably for the use of Greek speakers learning Latin in Egypt). And this Varronian nomenclature, completed by the "long" names of the five vowels and supported by the authority of Servius, Priscian (early 6th c.), and to some extent Isidore, plus a number of lesser-known or now unknown writers, is what was handed on to Middle-Age and modern Europe.

In imitation, and attempted improvement, of Buck's statement of the truth about the letter names of the Latin alphabet, I would summarize my findings as follows. The Greek names were not retained in Italy. They were replaced—perhaps first among the Etruscans—by metrically long, monosyllabic, names representing the simple sound of the letters in the case of the vowels (\bar{a} , \bar{e} , \bar{i} , \bar{o} , \bar{u}) or, for the consonants, the sound supported by a vowel, usually \bar{e} , following the stops and H (\bar{a} after H and K, \bar{u} after Q), but (eventually, at least) preceding the others. The letters for the continuous sounds, or semivowels (F, L, M, N, R, S, X—the nasals, liquids, and fricatives) were *perhaps* at first, like the vowels, named by their sounds, that is with syllabic *f, l, m*, etc., of which especially *l, m, n, r* appear frequently in later Etruscan writing. The evidence for syllabic L, R, and S appears in Lucilius, for syllabic M perhaps already in Plautus. But the names attested by Varro and again by the Vergil commentator Servius and from then on into the Middle Ages are with a preceding supporting E, as *ef, el, em, en, er, es, ex* (later *ix*). Yet between Varro and Servius the evidence presented by Terentianus Maurus is unmistakably of syllabic *f, l, m*, etc., while Ausonius by failing to mention the semivowels seems to concur in this nomenclature.

The weakness of this statement lies in the character of the Republican evidence—Plautus, Lucilius, Varro—for the semivowels: Plautus' one word *amo*, Lucilius' few lines (quoted at second-hand; needing emendation; and commented on—the lines for R and S—by the one who quotes them, though with some lack of clarity), and Varro's one sentence (again at second-hand and out of context). Furthermore, if the statement is essentially true, the pattern it presents—a *b a b*—is, so far as I know, anomalous and unique; no Roman writer from beginning to end seems to note the fluctuation.

Perhaps, therefore, I lack some of the facts or have not interpreted them correctly.

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