

LATIN PRONUNCIATION: HOW DO WE KNOW?

Variations within Latin

(a) Chronological

(i) Early Latin to standard Latin

5th-century BC inscription: Garigliano bowl, discovered 1996 (reading of B. Vine, 1997)

ESOM KOM MEOIS SOKIOIS TRIBOS AUDEOM DUOM. NEI PARI MED

= sum cum meis sociis tribus Auditorum duorum. Ne [pare] me.

- k > c no change in sound
- o > u probably reflecting change of pronunciation in 'urban' Latin; non-Roman Latin may well have retained the sound [o] which survived in Italian (son[ɔ] / *am*, *con with*, etc.)
- oi > ei > i reflecting sound change
- duom > duorum reflecting morphological change: older form survives in *duumviri*
- pari > pure reflecting sound change
- med > me reflecting sound change: loss of final /-d/

The fact that there were changes in spelling up to the end of the Republic indicates that writing conventions were, to some extent, keeping up with changes in the spoken language. There is however almost certainly a time lag between a sound change and the corresponding spelling change. The Papii must have been pronouncing themselves as Papii for some time before they decided to change the spelling in 338 BC (Cicero *Ad Fam.* 9.21).

(ii) Standard Latin to later spoken Latin

Papyrus letter of Claudius Terentianus, from Egypt, 2nd cent. AD

Matrem meam aute praegnatam inveni. Nil poterat facere. Dende pos paucos dies parit et non poterat mihi succurrere. Item litem abuit Ptolemes pater meo sopra vestimenta mea et factum est illi venire Alexandria con tirones et me reliquit con matrem meam. Soli nil poteramus facere.

= Matrem meam autem praegnantem inveni. Nil poterat facere. Deinde post paucos dies parit et non poterat mihi succurrere. Item litem habuit Ptolemaeus pater meus super (supra) vestimenta mea et factum est illi venire Alexandria cum tironibus et me reliquit cum matre mea. Soli nil poteramus facere.

Standard spelling with occasional misspellings indicating changes:

- aurem > aute loss of final /-m/: also -m wrongly inserted - matrem meam
- habuit > abuit loss of initial /h-/
- super or supra > sopra change of u to o cf. Italian sopra, Spanish sobre
- tironibus > tirones confusion of cases after prepositions; possible reduction of /-ibus/ to /-es/ in casual pronunciation
- reliquit > reliquid weakening of final /-u/ to /-d/, later lost altogether

These changes are not necessarily 'vulgarisms' i.e. characteristic of non-standard speech at the time of writing. Since the spelling of Latin was largely standardised from late 1st cent. BC onwards, it provides hardly any access to pronunciation changes, whether in standard or in non-standard speech, any more than standard modern English spelling does. Only variants or misspellings can reveal these changes, and in the case of any particular misspelling it is often hard to tell whether it reflects standard or non-standard pronunciation, or is just a confusion in writing. Compare three different kinds of unorthodox spelling in English:

- QUIZ NITE TONITE reflecting standard pronunciation
- WET PIANI (Newcastle upon Tyne) perhaps reflecting non-standard regional pronunciation
- SEA SPICED ABORIGINES (item on the menu of a Chinese restaurant in London) lexical confusion, nothing to do with pronunciation at all.

(b) Social and regional

(i) Lucilius fr. 232 Warmington in Varro, *LL* 7.96 *Cecilius pretor ne rusticus fiat* (ae > e in 'rustic' varieties of Latin, late 2nd cent. BC). This Caecilius may be the consul of 113 BC, a Praenestine. On Praenestine speech see also Plautus *Truculentus* 691: 'comea' for *ciconia*.

(ii) Varro *De Re Rustica* 1.2.14 *rustici etiam nunc quoque viam veham appellat propter vecturas, et vellam, non villam, quo vehunt et unde vehunt.* (But how much of this is observation of 'rustic' pronunciation, and how much is learned etymologising?)

Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.46 (Crassus speaking) *Cotta noster, cuius tu illa lata, Sulpici, nonnumquam imitaris, ut iota litteram tollas et E plenissimum dicas, non mihi oratores antiquos sed menses videtur imitari.*

(What seemed old-fashioned to some, seemed 'rustic' to others. Standard language is often innovative in comparison with geographically outlying varieties, which may therefore seem to resemble a more archaic version of standard speech, and vice-versa.)

(iii) Cicero, *Brutus* 171 ... *in vobis nostrorum oratorum retinuit quiddam et resonat urbanus.* (Completely unhelpful characterisation of 'urban' accent.)

