

Pronunciation of the Gods' Names

by Melissa Gold Sept. 2004

How to pronounce the names of the Olympian deities is a frequently asked question. In Classical times, this depended on where the speaker lived, with notable differences among Athenians, Spartans and residents of Thessaly, Boiotia, or Lesbos. Also, pronunciation varied over time, from Homeric or "epic" forms and those found in the urbane writings of Plato¹. In Modern Greek, the pronunciation may be different again. (For more information on Greek dialects, visit: www.friesian.com/archon.htm.) Finally, the form and sound of a god's name varied depending on how it was used in a sentence.

Below is a convenient chart of the Attic dialect form of the gods' names during the Classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE). This is followed by an explanation for those who wish more detail. Given the variation over time and place, however, you could just as correctly use modern English pronunciation. We cannot say what language the gods prefer!

Notes about using the chart:

1. Classical Greek was both a declined and an inflected language.
 - Declined means that the ending or form of the name varied depending on how it was used in the sentence; the form used as the subject of a sentence looks different from the form used as an object. And the vocative, the form used when speaking to the god, was sometimes yet another form. Shown below are the forms of the names used when the god is the subject of a sentence and the vocative forms of the gods' names.
 - Inflected means that in ancient Greek words were distinguished by pitch which are today indicated by accents (e.g., ` or ^ or ´), making ancient Greek a "musical" language. The change from a rise in pitch on a vowel to a stress or emphasis happened by the fourth century CE.² While you certainly may experiment with a rise or drop in pitch, today you can correctly also use emphasis. (The circumflex, ^ indicates both a rise and fall on the same vowel and occurs only on "long" vowels.) The chart shows the accented syllable as being emphasized, using capital letters to show the emphasis.
2. When referring to the god, Greeks added the definite article: ὁ ("ho") for male gods, ἡ ("hay") for female gods. (ὁ Ζεὺς or ἡ Ἀφροδίτη). When they addressed the gods, however, they used the vocative form without the definite article.
3. Double vowels (αι, οι, ευ) in ancient Greek are diphthongs and both sounds are said, one merging into the other. Note that ευ is pronounced "eh-ou" not "you". The single vowel η, however, is not a diphthong, and is not drawled "ay-ee", even though I transcribe it as "ay".
4. The sound of η is similar to ει, with a technical difference which is hard to distinguish, and no effort is made to distinguish them below. The vowel ω is transcribed "aw" but is a sound that tends toward the sound of ô in the French "côte"³ and so is sometimes transcribed as "oh". You may choose either. And υ which is often written "y" in English, is close to the sound of the French "tu".
5. The double consonants θ and φ are now pronounced "th" and "f" but in classical times were pronounced "t-h" and "p-h"; said quickly, they sound like their modern equivalents. The letter Ζ is thought to have become "z" by the fourth century BCE rather than "zd".⁴
6. For more information, consult Vox Graeca: the pronunciation of Classical Greek, by W. Sidney Allen (Cambridge University Press, 1987), which is the pronunciation authority for this chart.
 1. See under the various entries in A Greek-English Lexicon, Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996), also called LSJ.
 2. Vox Graeca, p. 130
 3. Vox Graeca, p. 75
 4. Vox Graeca, p. 56 and following.

English	Greek Nominative	Pronunciation of Nominative	Greek Vocative	Pronunciation of Vocative
Aphrodite	ἡ Ἀφροδίτη	hay ahp-hro-DEE-tay	ὦ Ἀφροδίτη	oh/aw ahp-hro-DEE-tay
Apollo	ὁ Ἀπόλλων	ho ah-POL-lawn	ὦ Ἀπόλλον	oh/aw ah-POL-lon
Ares	ὁ Ἄρης	ho AH-rays	ὦ Ἄρες	oh/aw AH-res
Artemis	ἡ Ἄρτεμις	hay AR-te-miss	ὦ Ἄρτεμι	oh/aw AR-te-mee
Athena	ἡ Ἀθήνη ¹	hay aht-HAY-nay	ὦ Ἀθήνη	oh/aw aht-HAY-nay
Demeter	ἡ Δημήτηρ	hay day-MAY-tayr	ὦ Δημήτερ	oh/aw day-MAY-tair
Dionysus	ὁ Διόνυσος	ho di-O-nu-sos	ὦ Διόνυσε	oh/aw di-O-nu-seh
Hera	ἡ Ἥρα	hay HAY-ra	ὦ Ἥρα	oh/aw HAY-ra
Hermes	ὁ Ἑρμῆς	ho hair-MAYS	ὦ Ἑρμῆ	oh/aw hair-MAY
Hephaistus	ὁ Ἥφαιστος	ho HAYP-hice-tos	ὦ Ἥφαιστε	oh/aw HAYP-hice-teh
Poseidon	ὁ Ποσειδῶν	ho po-say-DAWN	ὦ Πόσειδον	oh/aw PO-say-don
Zeus	ὁ Ζεὺς ²	ho zeh-OUS	ὦ Ζεῦ	oh/aw zeh-OU

1. This spelling of Athena occurred about 400 BCE, prior to that in Athens, she was Ἀθηναίη. Ref. LSJ.

2. The genitive form is Διός or Ζηνός and the accusative is Δία or Διός; in Boiotia, the nominative is Δεύς. Ref. LSJ.