

Reciting the Heroic Hexameter

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*This document is intended for the participants of the **Textkit** Pharr study groups. It may be useful to others already familiar with Epic Greek.*

There are already several good resources explaining both the reconstructed pronunciation of Greek and methods for reciting Homeric verse. I have in the past made small complaints (and some large ones) about the recordings of those recitations, so I have, at Bert's request, produced a small sample of my own recitation style with some more detailed explanation about why I've made the choices I have.

The first thing to keep in mind when you listen to me jabbering away is that this method is private, a tool to help me understand Homer better. I don't sing it and I don't usually add emotional acting to the parts. So why do I bother to recite? Because poetry is a verbal art. It is true that we're not going to find the same density of phonetic figuration — alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, etc. — in Homer that we find in Pindar. Nonetheless Homer does, from time to time, produce lines of remarkable phonetic art. I don't want to miss that. Second, interesting things happen around the caesura. It's much easier for me to find the caesura by reciting aloud than it is to try to do a metrical analysis on the fly.

Prerequisites

There is some basic knowledge you need before you go on.

I am using the reconstructed pronunciation of Ancient Greek. This is one of those subjects that people like to argue about, but this is not the place to go into that debate. There are several good explanations of that system but this one is good: **The Pronunciation of Ancient Greek**. He tends to pronounce *iota* like a short English *i* in closed syllables, a habit most English speakers will have. The very best resource for the reconstructed pronunciation is W. Sidney Allen's *Vox Graeca*, which you can sometimes find in used bookstores. Any college library should have it, too.

For those used to the reconstructed system, a few notes about my own habits:

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- η: normally I pronounce this as the long, open *e* — like *set*, but long — but sometimes the quality of that bleeds into the *æ*, as in *bad cat*, a value sometimes assigned to *eta*. I’ve not yet broken myself entirely of that habit.
- Long vowels: a long vowel with a circumflex accent is pronounced as a high-falling pitch (not rise-fall), and a long vowel with an acute is low-rising.
- φθ: in clusters of aspirated consonants I only aspirate the final member. I will agree with Allen that a aspirated cluster is possible, but I remain unconvinced in the case of Greek.
- I pronounce the iota in the long diphthongs $\bar{\alpha}$, η and φ.

It may be possible for people not using the reconstructed pronunciation to follow what I say. In terms of the rhythm of the hexameter, the most important feature of it is that the long vowels which form the backbone of the meter will scan correctly naturally.

You must already be able to do some basic scanning of Homer. Pharr’s introduction should be sufficient (§65–77).

You might also find it helpful to read my [Notes on the Epic Caesura](#), which provides some background for the material I’m now going to cover.

It’s all about the Hemiepes

The rhythmic pattern central to every single line of Homer goes by the somewhat ugly name *hemiepes* (*heh-ME-ah-peas*). It means “half an epic (line).” Using the normal metrical marks it is this: $-\underline{\cup}-\underline{\cup}-$. Every single line of Homer will have this pattern *twice*. Often there will be extra syllables at the end or the beginning of a particular hemiepes, but if you can always find that part, the rest will fall into place.

With only the very rarest of exceptions, every line of Homer will start of with either a plain hemiepes, $-\underline{\cup}-\underline{\cup}-$, or a hemiepes plus a short position, $-\underline{\cup}-\underline{\cup}-\cup$. This first part will be marked off by a word break, the *caesura* of the line. The first line of the Iliad follows the first pattern, the second line the second. For several years now I have randomly recited the first few lines of the Iliad to myself. Constant repetition of the first three words, μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, ([MP3](#)) has helped me to get a strong internal sense of the hemiepes rhythm in its most basic form.

The opening part of the line constrains what can follow. If the line started with the hemiepes+short, then the only possible followup rhythm is $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$, that is, short position, hemiepes, and the final position, which is usually written long, but can actually be either long or short. If the opening of the line is the simple hemiepes, then there are two possibilities for the last part, either $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$ or $\text{---}\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$, i.e., $\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}\cup\text{---}$.

Often, though not always, the caesura boundary will match a natural boundary in phrasing. This break may be strong enough that punctuation will be written there, but it may be as simple as the end of a noun phrase. Where there is a logical break in phrasing strong enough to require punctuation, I will sometimes pause very briefly. Some people reciting Homer object strongly to this.

Now we're ready for some live Homer.

Iliad 1.1–16

The first line of the Iliad presents us right away with scanning difficulties:

1 μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἄχιλῆος

All the fun is tied up in the single word Πηληϊάδεω. The diaeresis mark, the two dots above the *iota*, is a sign that this vowel is not creating a diphthong with the vowel that comes before it. Friendly editors will mark these, but sometimes you will be required to puzzle out for yourself when what looks like a diphthong is two syllables. Close attention to your dictionary will give you a good warning when this is likely (for example, go look up εῦ to see what Homer does with it).

The second complication here is the genitive ending, -εω. At the end of a word epsilon followed by another vowel is liable to undergo *synizesis*, that is, though the two vowels do not form a diphthong, they are pronounced a single syllable. Some student texts will mark synizesis with a tie, as I have done in the line here.

Synizesis usually involves epsilon, and my usual approach is to pronounce the epsilon like an (English) *y*. So scan -εω as a single long vowel, and pronounce like -yω.

Finally, for two vowels to run into each other at word boundaries, like we have here (...δεω Ἄχι) is called *hiatus*. This is something Homer normally handles in particular ways. Generally it is avoided, but when a final long vowel is immediately followed by another vowel it is usually shortened by *correption*. Yet that isn't happening here. I have found this sort of hiatus is one of the things most likely to derail an easy recitation of Homer. Usually I just have to pause for a moment, figure out what's going on, then recite again and move on.

So, let me give the line again, with the caesura marked:

1 μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, | Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

Let's show the hemiepes with the customary abbreviation, *D* (which stands for “dactylic”). Line one of the Iliad scans *D* | – *D* –. Take a listen: **MP3**. Note that I put a very slight pause after θεά, which you expect in direct address.

You will also notice that for the sake of clarity in the meter, I tend to draw out long positions and go quite quickly through the short positions. We wouldn't expect Greeks to speak this way normally, but a little exaggeration is expected of verse, just as we expect some disturbances of speaking rhythm in song — the meter is part of the point.

Line two presents no trickery, except perhaps a warning about lingering too long at the caesura:

2 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί' | Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκεν,

While a brief pause at the caesura may be reasonable when the sense calls for it, one should take care not to pause there in general, or at least not so long that the elision no longer makes good sense. *D* ∪ | ∪ *D* –: **MP3**.

Line three:

3 πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους | ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν

Notice how I tend to linger a bit over syllable-closing consonants. It is especially noticeable in the last two words, before the π of προ... and before the ψ within προΐαψεν: **MP3** (*D* | – *D* –). We know that a consonant cluster had to take more time to say than a single consonant — otherwise closed syllables wouldn't scan the same as long vowels. In listening to the music of cultures where syllable length still matters in song (Arabic classical, mostly) I noticed a tendency to sometimes linger over consonants, evidently to make the meter. I adopted the practice. It will be fairly obvious in these examples, but at a somewhat faster recitation speed the effect is more subtle.

Another surprise hiatus in line four:

4 ἥρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ | ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν

ἐλώρια started with a digamma, though I pronounce it according to the usual outcome here, with an *h*. *D* ∪ | ∪ *D* –: **MP3**.

There are no surprises in lines five, six or seven:

- 5 οἰωνοῖσί τε δαῖτα, | Διὸς δ' ἔτελείετο βουλή, MP3.
 6 ἔξ οὔ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα | διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε MP3.
 7 Ἄτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ | ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἄχιλλεύς. MP3.

When a final *v* occurs before another consonant in a line, I will assimilate the location of the nasal. For example, I will pronounce τὴν βουλήν as τῆμ βουλήν, and here in line seven I have assimilated ἀνδρῶν_καὶ, with the final *γ* like the first *γ* in ἄγγελος. For most people this assimilation will probably happen naturally.

So far I have avoided explaining how to move from line to line. Some people advise a “natural” reading, where there is no pause at the end of a line if the sense of the phrase runs over into the next line. I, on the other hand, will always pause at line end, briefly if the sense calls for it, but usually long enough to inhale for the next line. This is, I believe, implicit in the meter — *brevis in longo* makes little sense without the pause.

There is no metrical trickery in lines 8–10, so I will recite them together:

- 8 τίς τ' ἄρ σφωε θεῶν | ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι;
 9 Λητοῦς καὶ Διὸς υἱός. | ὁ γὰρ βασιλῆι χολωθείς
 10 νοῦσον ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὦρσε | κακὴν, ὀλέκοντο δὲ λαοί, MP3

Note that I always treat a final acute at the end of a line as acute. Some editors will represent 1.9 χολωθείς as χολωθεῖς because the phrase runs over the line. There is a case to be made for each approach.

Line 11 is a good example of why it's important to learn the vowel lengths correctly when learning vocabulary. There are several hidden quantities in this line, that is, one of the vowels *α*, *ι* or *υ* in an open syllable. Without vowel length marks, there's no way to be sure without consulting the dictionary. Here we have Χρῦσην, ἠτίμασεν and ἀρητῆρα:

- 11 οὔνεκα τὸν Χρῦσην | ἠτίμασεν ἀρητῆρα MP3

Line twelve also presents vowel length ambiguities. In the phrase θεῶς ἐπὶ νῆας the first -ας ending is a first declension accusative plural, and there the vowel is long, but in νῆας we have a third declension accusative plural, and this one is short.

- 12 Ἄτρεΐδης. ὁ γὰρ ἦλθε | θεῶς ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν MP3

Line 13 is straightforward:

13 λυσόμενος τε θύγατρα | φέρων τ' ἀπερείσι' ἄποινα, MP3

Line 14 has case of correction. The final syllable of ἐκηβόλου is scanned short. This is quite common in final long vowels when they occur before a word starting with another vowel. Compare this to the first line, where correction did not happen, which is more rare. I handle correction in two ways in recitation. If the final vowel is simple, like -η, or if it's -ου as here, I simply pronounce the vowel briefly to take up the time of a single short position. If the corrected vowel is a diphthong ending in an iota, either subscript (ϝ) or not (οι), I will pronounce the first part of the diphthong briefly, and then start the next syllable with a y sound. We'll see this in line 15. But first, 14:

14 στέμματ' ἔχων ἐν χερσὶν | ἐκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος MP3

Line 15 presents us with two examples of final diphthongs with iota which undergo correction. The first one is especially fun: χρυσέω. For this we first have to cope with synizesis. Following the practice mentioned for line one, I will pronounce the epsilon like an English y. In this particular word that means the accent will shift to the omega — that's the outcome in a dialect which would contract -έω to -ῶ. So here I will pronounce the ending -yω briefly, and then insert another y to stand for the iota subscript before ἀνά.

The other case of correction is between καὶ ἐλίσσετο. Again, I simply pronounce α briefly, with a y leading into ἐλίσσετο.

15 χρυσέω ἀνά σκήπτρω, | καὶ ἐλίσσετο πάντας Ἀχαιοῦς, MP3

Nothing funky in line 16:

16 Ἄτρεΐδα δὲ μάλιστα | δύω, κοσμήτορε λαῶν· MP3

In these first 16 lines of the Iliad I have touched on the majority of the scanning and reciting difficulties you will run into in Homer and other early hexameter verse. Certainly my own recitations you've been listening to could, within the confines of the system I've laid out, be more artistic, or at least a bit less monotone. Nonetheless, I hope this overview will encourage you to try to recite Homer for yourself, not only for the reasons I mentioned at the beginning, but for memorization. In my own experience, when you memorize Homer with the rhythm clearly in mind you make many fewer errors, and the memory of the verses last much stronger.