

## The Alphabet Song of Callias

Callias was an Athenian comic poet of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. This song by the chorus may come from a comedy called the *Alphabet Tragedy* (γραμματική τραγωδία).

τὸ ἄλφα, βῆτα, γάμμα, δέλτα, θεοῦ γὰρ εἶ,  
ζῆτ', ἦτα, θῆτ', ἰῶτα, κάππα, λάβδα, μῦ,  
νῦ, ξεῖ, τὸ οὐ, πεῖ, ῥῶ, τὸ σίγμα, ταῦ, τὸ ὦ  
παρὸν φεῖ χεῖ τε τῶ ψεῖ εἰς τὸ ὦ.

Notes: the letters we call epsilon, upsilon, omicron and omega were at this period called εἶ, ὦ, οὐ, and ὦ. Epsilon or εἶ is called the god's letter because of a large E dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. The scholar Plutarch wrote a treatise on this monument (Moralia 392, called περὶ τοῦ Εἰ τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς) in which he gives various explanations for the E which also represents the number 5. My favorite is that it is a greeting to Apollo. Instead of saying "χαῖρε" Apollo greets those who come to his temple with the inscribed words "γνώθι σαυτόν" ("know yourself") and the worshipper answers with the word "εἶ" which means "you are."

After singing the alphabet, the chorus in pairs went through the letters by consonants and vowels, making syllables and in this way imitating the favored method of teaching young Greek children how to read.

βῆτα ἄλφα βα  
βῆτα εἶ βε κ.τ.λ. (καὶ τὰ λοιπά is Greek for *etc.*)