

5 MEN. Καὶ τοῦτό μοι δοκεῖ.

ΣΩ. Ἀπορεῖν οὖν αὐτὸν ποιήσαντες καὶ ναρκᾶν ὡσπερ ἡ
νάρκη, μῶν τι ἐβλάψαμεν;

MEN. Οὐκ ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ.

ΣΩ. Προὔργου γοῦν^ν τι πεποιήκαμεν, ὡς ἔοικε, πρὸς τὸ
10 ἐξευρεῖν ὅπῃ ἔχει· νῦν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ζητήσειεν ἂν ἠδέως οὐκ
εἰδώς, τότε δὲ ῥαδίως ἂν⁷ καὶ πρὸς πολλοὺς καὶ πολλάκι
c 1 ὧτε^τ ἂν εὖ λέγειν περὶ τοῦ διπλασίου χωρίου, ὡς δεῖ διπλασί
τὴν γραμμὴν ἔχειν μήκει.⁸

MEN. Ἔοικεν.

ΣΩ. Οἶει οὖν ἂν αὐτὸν πρότερον ἐπιχειρήσαι ζι
μανθάνειν τοῦτο ὃ ὧτε εἰδέναι οὐκ εἰδώς, πρὶν εἰς
κατέπεσεν ἠγησάμενος μὴ εἰδέναι, καὶ ἐπόθησεν⁹ τὸ ε

April Sharp //

The fifteenth letter of the Greek alphabet is currently in the spotlight, but for all the wrong reasons.

On November 26th, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) designated the SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.529 as a variant of concern and gave it the label Omicron. The use of the Greek alphabet to label variants started earlier this year in an effort to provide simple, easy-to-say names that are not stigmatizing or discriminatory. Variants Alpha through Mu were previously labelled, but until now, the Delta variant has been discussed the most widely.

Talking about the Delta variant was easy (even though enduring it has not been). The Greek letter delta was already prevalent in the English language from its mathematical usage. Delta is also the word for a triangle-shaped landform at the end of a river and is the fourth letter of the NATO phonetic alphabet. There have even been a few famous people named Delta. So while the Delta

variant has wreaked havoc on the world, the semantic concept of Delta was easily integrated into the English lexicon.

Omicron is different. It's a new word for many people. It's spelled funny, and it sounds kind of funny. In fact, its pronunciation is being hotly debated, adding to the confusion. This obscure Greek label amplifies the public fear associated with a novel coronavirus variant. Everything about this variant, including the name, remains wild and unknown.

But omicron deserves to be celebrated, not feared. This little letter has a rich history in the Greek language, despite living in the shadows of its more famous siblings. Its existence alone is remarkable. The Greek alphabet was the first written language to include vowels, making written works easier to read and reproduce. Greek not only included vowels, but it featured them prominently, even giving different symbols to variations of some vowel sounds — notably, omicron and omega. Omicron comes from O-mikron or micro (literally “small o”), whereas O-mega translates to “large o.” In English, we call these short and long vowels, respectively, but context clues are necessary to determine whether an “o” should be pronounced like “dog” or “go”. The Ancient Greeks felt it was important to distinguish these sounds, decreasing ambiguity and promoting the accessibility of written language (at least among scholars).

Some of the most crucial ancient Greek words start with omicron. To list them all would be tedious, but a couple deserve special recognition. The masculine Greek definite articles are *ὁ* and *οἱ*, pronounced “hoe” and “hoy”. These words are roughly equivalent to “the” in English, but they have additional significance in Greek. The definite article is used often in Greek to signify a kind or a form of a thing instead of an individual thing. For example, *ὁ ἄνθρωπος* or “ho anthropos” literally translates to “the man”, but would also be used to indicate “man” or “mankind”. Thus, the definite article, led by humble omicron, gave Greek writing an elegant formality, befitting of the language used to describe Platonic forms and Aristotelian categories.

Another simple word with not-so-simple significance is *οὐ*, pronounced like the vowels in “too”, which is the Greek word for “not”. When *οὐ* is used to introduce a question, “yes” is the anticipated answer. Thus the negative phrase elicits a positive response. An example in English would be to ask, “Is it not the case that...?” This semantic trick was used often by Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. Under the guise of drawing out knowledge, Socrates would guide his interlocutors to refute their own beliefs unknowingly, or at least lead them to a conclusion that Socrates could easily refute. Such a small word played a big role in Greek philosophy.

Now this unassuming letter has been plucked from the middle of the Greek alphabet and is plastered at the forefront of public health. Soon after the WHO announcement last week, social media rang out with cries to step back, slow down, and wait until we know more about the Omicron variant. Information, mostly in the form of speculation, has been pouring in since, but every detail about this variant is inextricably paired with the previously little-known Greek letter. Omicron is now a household name, and it’s gaining an unfortunate association with fear, disease,

and possible death. It is important to recognize omicron's humble, but mighty history, so that its reputation can be restored once this new COVID wave washes away.

Image source: author

Works Cited

Mollin, Alfred and Robert Williamson. *An Introduction to Ancient Greek, Third Edition*. University Press of America, 1997.

Editor's note: in its catalogue of variants, the WHO skipped over the Greek letters "nu" (too similar to the English word "new") and "xi" (too much like a certain political leader's name) before arriving at "omicron." Perhaps the most interesting precedent of using "omicron" in literary writing is in Anthony Trollope's novels, where a recurring character, Sir Omicron Pie, is London's leading doctor.