



The Periodic Table of Elements
Element Name Origins

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Like any discipline of science, chemistry has its own nomenclature or system of naming.

Most of the available etymological information can be obtained from a dictionary or a chemical handbook, but neither points out the fact that there are many similarities and trends among the names. For example, many people immediately notice that a few elements are named after famous scientists. What they may not realize, however, is that a few elements are named after prominent mythological figures, too.

To illustrate these patterns better, this file has grouped the elements in some categories according to the origins of their names.

The origins of the names of antique and prehistoric elements cannot be derived. Nine elements were known in ancient time.

Metal	Latin	Non-metal	Latin
Gold	<i>Aurum</i>	Carbon	<i>Carbo</i>
Silver	<i>Argentum</i>	Sulfur	<i>Sulfur</i>
Mercury	<i>Hydrargyrum</i>		
Copper	<i>Cuprum</i>		
Iron	<i>Ferrum</i>		
Tin	<i>Stannum</i>		
Lead	<i>Plumbum</i>		

The most important elements from the time of the alchemists have names with known meanings.

Element	Named after	Language	Meaning
Arsenic	<i>Arsenikos</i>	Greek	Male; masculine
Antimony	<i>Anti monos</i>	Greek	Not alone. Not one
Bismuth	<i>Weisse Masse</i>	German	White matter; white metal
Phosphorus	<i>Phosphorous</i>	Greek	Light-carrier. Venus as morning star

Many elements have been named after celestial bodies.

Element	Named after	Language	Meaning
Helium	<i>Helios</i>	Greek	Greek word for the sun. Helium was observed in 1868 in radiation from the sun. It was not discovered on earth until 1895
Selenium	<i>Selene</i>	Greek	The moon
Tellurium	<i>Tellus</i>	Latin	The earth
Cerium	<i>Ceres</i>	Latin	One of the minor planets between Mars and Jupiter, discovered in 1801. The metal cerium was discovered in 1803
Palladium	<i>Pallas</i>	Greek	Asteroid discovered in 1802. The new element was discovered in 1803

Greek and Nordic mythology have contributed some element names. It seems to have been **Klaproth** who first used mythological names for elements.

Element	Named after
Uranium	Uranos, the first world ruler according to Greek mythology
Titanium	The Titans, sons of Uranos and the earth goddess Gaia in Greek mythology
Vanadium	The goddess Vanadis in Nordic mythology
Tantalum	Tantalus, son of Zeus in Greek mythology
Niobium	Niobe, daughter of Tantalus
Thorium	Thor, the god of thunder in Nordic mythology
Promethium	Prometheus, who in Greek mythology stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind
Neptunium	Neptune, the god of the sea in Roman mythology
Plutonium	Pluto, god of the dead in Roman mythology. A Latin counterpart of the Greek god Hades

During chemical reactions preceding the discovery of an element, chemists have often observed the characteristic color of an element or its mineral so, many elements have names that express their color and color variations.

Element	Named after	Language	Meaning
Cesium	<i>Cæsius</i>	Latin	Sky-blue
Chlorine	<i>Chloros</i>	Greek	Greenish-yellow
Chromium	<i>Chroma</i>	Greek	Color
Indium	<i>Indigo</i>	Latin	The blue color indigo
Iodine	<i>Iodes</i>	Greek	Violet
Iridium	<i>Iris</i>	Greek	Rainbow
Praseodymium	<i>Prasios didymos</i>	Greek	Green twin
Rubidium	<i>Rubidus</i>	Latin	Darkest red
Zirconium	<i>Zargun</i>	Persian	Gold colored

In many cases the discoverer of an element has wished to recall his country or a province, a place or a river. (geographical names)

Element	Named after
<i>Alkaline earth metals</i>	
Magnesium	Magnesia, a region in Thessaly in Greece
Strontium	Strontian, town in Scotland
<i>Rare earth metals</i>	
Scandium	Scandinavia
Yttrium	Ytterby
Europium	Europe
Terbium	Ytterby
Erbium	Ytterby
Thulium	Old Roman name for the far north of Scandinavia
Ytterbium	Ytterby
Holmium	Stockholm
Lutetium	<i>Lutetia</i> , an old name for Paris

<i>Others, except transuranic elements</i>	
Copper	Cyprus
Gallium	Gallia, France
Germanium	Germany
Ruthenium	<i>Ruthenia</i> , Russia
Hafnium	<i>Hafnia</i> , Copenhagen
Rhenium	The river Rhine
Polonium	Poland
<i>Transuranic elements.</i>	
Americium	<i>The Americas</i> , America
Berkelium	Berkeley in California
Californium	California
Darmstadtium	Darmstadt in Germany

The noble gases have names indirectly to their origin or properties.

Noble gas	Meaning of the name	Noble gas	Meaning of the name
Helium	From the sun	Krypton	Hidden
Neon	New	Xenon	Stranger
Argon	Slow, lazy	Radon	From radium

Personal names are used in the etymology of element names.

- *Curium* after Marie and Pierre Curie.
- *Einsteinium* after Albert Einstein
- *Fermium* after Enrico Fermi
- *Mendelevium* after Dmitrij Mendelejev
- *Nobelium* after Alfred Nobel
- *Lawrencium* after Ernest O. Lawrence, the inventor of the cyclotron

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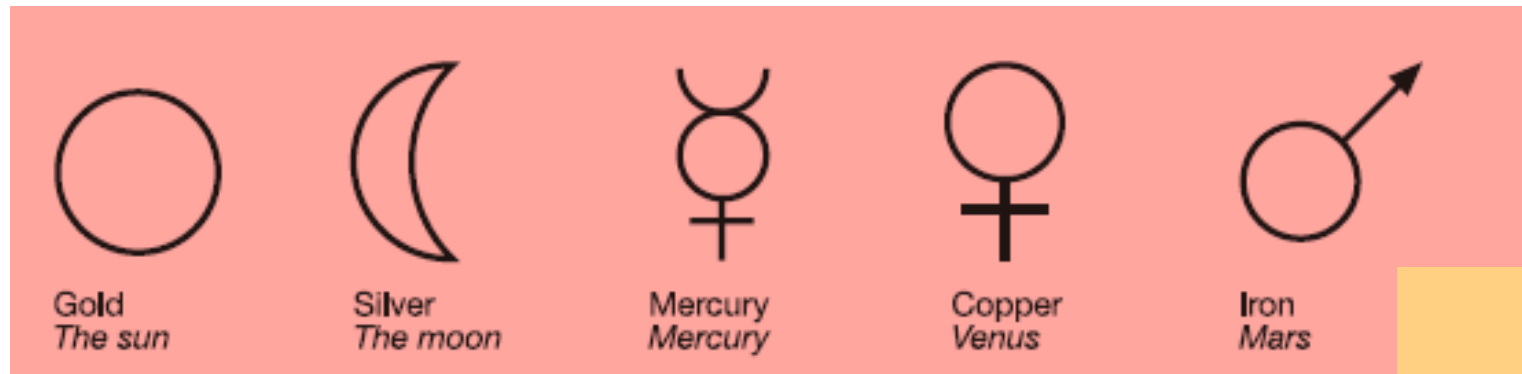
Rutherfordium after Ernest Rutherford

Bohrium after Niels Bohr

Meitnerium after Lise Meitner

Roentgenium after Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen

The seven metals in antiquity early became connected with the symbols for heavenly bodies. These symbols (and many others for compounds) were used by the alchemists and also by artists.



During the powerful development of chemistry in the 18th century the need for appropriate symbols for the elements became obvious. Berzelius in 1813 formulated a simple, brilliant proposal: “Let the first letter in the name of the element be the symbol! Or two letters from the element’s name. But select the letters from the Latin name of the element. Then it will be intelligible in all countries”.

Element	Latin Name	Chemical Symbol	Element	Latin name	Chemical symbol
Iron	<i>Ferrum</i>	Fe	Hydrogen	<i>Hydrogen</i>	H
Copper	<i>Cuprum</i>	Cu	Oxygen	<i>Oxygen</i>	O
Gold	<i>Aurum</i>	Au	Nitrogen	<i>Nitrogen</i>	N
Silver	<i>Argentum</i>	Ag	Chlorine	<i>Chloros (Greek)</i>	Cl
Lead	<i>Plumbum</i>	Pb	Silicon	<i>Silicis silex</i>	Si
Mercury	<i>Hydrargyrum</i>	Hg	Carbon	<i>Carbo</i>	C
Tin	<i>Stannum</i>	Sn	Sulfur	<i>Sulphur</i>	S



Info.



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Ref.



Encyclopedia of the Elements, Per Enghag, 2004

Elemental Etymology, David W. Ball, 2011