

When we began to tell time

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, June 15, 2012, p.25

Aeons ago, before we discovered the need to quantify time in specific units, the world around us supplied our measurements. The earth's position and its rotation around the sun paced out day and night and brought about the seasons; the interaction of the gravity of sun and moon caused the tides to rise and fall.

When we started to give names to the concepts of time and to the measurements that most of us use, it was again the world around us that provided them. The word time, and its German counterpart, "Zeit," are both related to the root word for tide. We preserve the temporal sense of tide in words such as noontide and Eastertide. And a tiding is an occurrence, or an announcement of something that has occurred.

Our cultivation of the land is synchronized with the different seasons, and hence it's no surprise that season derives from the Latin "satio," sowing, which eventually came to mean the time of sowing. In Greek mythology, the seasons were under the protection of three goddesses, whose collective name was translated by the ancient Romans as "Horae." However, the name for these goddesses referred not only to a time of year – the season – but also to a time of day. It's the source of our word hour.

By the end of the 16th century, the hour had been divided into 60 minutes, using the Babylonian sexagesimal numbering system. The word minute derives from the Latin "minutus," signifying made small. A minute consists of 60 seconds, a word based on the Latin "secundus," which means following. In other words, dividing the minute into 60 seconds is the operation that follows the division of the hour into 60 minutes.

We use the word clock as a noun referring to the timepiece, but also as an adverb – o'clock – specifying the hour. Clock comes from the Latin "clocca," meaning bell, because once upon a time the hours were marked by the tolling of bells.

The counting of the hours – whether starting at midnight (as we do today), or sunrise or sunset – varied from place to place. Not even the precise significance of day and night was the same everywhere. The ancient Germans, for instance, reckoned by nights not days. Their word for day, "Tag," referred only to daytime; the entire 24 hours, which we call a day, they called "Nacht," night. This usage has survived in the English words fortnight (14 days) and sennight (7 days).

Eternity is a period beyond measure. The word is from the Latin "aeternus," meaning without beginning or end. For me, the other extreme of eternity is one-sixtieth of a minute, the second. However, I'm told that currently the smallest measurable unit of time is the yoctosecond, which is one-septillionth of a second. Interesting – but I can't relate to it at all. Just pronouncing the word probably takes zillions of yoctoseconds. I'll stay with simple seconds, which I can count without even looking at a clock. They taught me how in elementary school: you say Mississippi followed by the number, and that's the length of time of one second. Mississippi one, Mississippi two, Mississippi three. It works like a charm.