

Time's Wingèd Chariot

Never having been stinking rich, or, for that matter, even sweet-smelling rich, I have never been tempted to splurge large sums of money on "luxury goods", which usually means a gadget or device whose ludicrous cost far outweighs any practical use or value. As Christmas approaches the posher newspapers and magazines have the usual glossy ads for luxury watches. The male market is enticed by former James Bonds, whilst blondes with very long legs hint that ladies should expect, at the very least, a new designer watch in their Christmas stocking. Nowhere in these ads do you find any indication of price. This is not surprising once you have visited the website of some of these luxury watch providers. One famous name seems to have an entry-level, bargain basement price of around £20,000, rising to much more than the value of the house in which most of us live. It is astonishing what people are prepared to pay for a wrist watch. And just what do these so expensive watches do? You've guessed it. They tell the time, just like the very reliable £4.99 watch, which I bought from Lidl. But is there a difference? Would I get a better quality of time passing from the expensive watch than from Lidl's cheapo?? I shall take some convincing. And what of the stress level created by walking around with £20 000 plus strapped to the wrist? Does the wearer live in constant fear of the new generation of moped highwaymen or the gangs of East European pickpockets who infest our streets? Or of leaving it behind in the changing room of the swimming baths never to be seen again, except perhaps for sale on eBay?

The social structure we have created makes us obsessed with time and time-keeping. For many of us our every waking minute, from the moment the alarm goes off, is time-tabled. To survive we need constantly to have a reliable source of accurate time, which the clock or watch, expensive or cheap, provides. A time-free existence is unthinkable.

It will not come as a surprise to members of the HDAS that it is to the Romans that we owe our basic time structure. Our word "hour" is derived from the Latin "hora", and the Romans divided the day into the familiar 24 hours, but in two blocks of twelve hours, one block for the night the other for the day. However the length of the Roman hour could be flexible, longer or shorter depending on the amount of daylight at different times of the year. The basic machine for measuring the passage of time was the sundial, which was often linked to a water clock, whose function was similar to that of the more recent hour glass or even egg timer. Though not as accurate as our modern means of time-keeping, it remained the most reliable measurement of time until the invention of the pendulum clock in the 17th century. Using the water clock the day could be divided up into hours, which was probably the nearest and most convenient way of organising the Roman day. Luckily, the Romans did not share our modern obsession with pinning down time to the nearest minute or even second, which causes us so much stress today. If our train to Manchester is ten minutes late our blood pressure starts to rise and we feel let down by the system, even though arriving in Manchester ten minutes later than expected is hardly a catastrophe, unless, of course, we needed to make a timed connection. Oh dear!

"Mors certa, hora incerta" Latin Proverb

p.s. I remember once reading a criticism of some Hollywood Roman epic where one of the "legionaries" could be seen wearing a wrist watch. Don't tell Julius Caesar or he will want one!

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