

ONCE UPON

So the story unfolds, that a long time ago, there was no such concept as 'time', nor a need for it. It was only after the emergence of societies that people found a necessity to organise their lives more efficiently. Today, terms like 'time is of the essence' or 'time is money' are intrinsic to our lifestyles. By **Valerie Chew.**

- The first attempt at measuring time is said to have originated from Sumer, the earliest known civilisation discovered in south-eastern Iraq. The Sumerian Sexagesimal System is a system that revolves around the number 60. Hence, the notion of 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour.
- After the Sumerians, the Egyptians were the next to formally divide their day into parts, now known as hours. They did this using the obelisk – a slender, tapering, four-sided monument whose moving shadow enabled people to divide the day into morning and afternoon. Additional markers around the base of the monument indicated further sub-divisions of time. Obelisks were built as early as 3,500 BC.
- The English word 'clock' is collectively derived from Latin, French and German words that mean 'bell'. In the past, hours at sea were signalled by the ringing of bells.
- The Chinese developed mechanised clocks from AD 200 to 1,300. Third Century Chinese clepsydras – devices that measured time using the regulated flow of water through small apertures – drove mechanisms that depicted astronomical events. Chinese inventor Su Sung and his team built one of the most elaborate clock towers: 30 feet tall, it had a water-driven escapement, a power-driven sphere for observations, an automatically rotating celestial globe, and five front panels with doors that showed mannequins which rang gongs and held tablets showing the hour of the day.
- A whopping US\$11 million is the price tag for the most expensive watch sold, according to Forbes.com. A 1933 gold Patek Philippe with 24 complications was auctioned off at Sotheby's in 1999. The timepiece was highly valued for having the most elaborate complications – these include a calendar with phases and age of the moon, indication of sunrise and sunset, and even a celestial chart depicting the constellation of stars in the sky.

- The ancient methods of keeping time relied heavily on the sun, but what about measuring time when it was night? *Merkhet*, the oldest known astronomical tool, was an Egyptian development of around 600 B.C. which measured time at night. A pair of *merkhets* was used to establish a north-south line (or meridian) through alignment with the Pole Star. The hours at night were then determined when certain stars crossed the meridian.

- “The only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once,” said Albert Einstein. Still, Newton claimed that time is absolute while Einstein proved that time is relative. Take space travel for example, a person is able to experience several days while another person simultaneously experiences only a few hours within the same period. The faster the person in space travels, the slower the time passes relative to someone on Earth.

- Egyptians were also one of the first to come up with the calendar. It was initially based on the cycles of the moon until the discovery that Sirius or the ‘Dog Star’ in Canis Major, rose next to the sun every 365 days. This was also the time when the river Nile floods. Since then, the Egyptians devised a 365 day calendar that begun around 3,100 BC, which we continue to use today.

- Perhaps British actor Jeremy Irons put the best contemporary spin on the concept of time. He once said: “We all have our time machines. Some take us back, they’re called memories. Some take us forward, they’re called dreams.”

- With globalisation came the need for ‘world time’ – time coordinated at an international level. GMT or Greenwich Mean Time, which is based on the earth’s movement, is a recognised time reference across the globe. It started as a railway standard time for all of England, Scotland, and Wales in the 1840s. GMT is sometimes called “Universal Time” (UT), which refers to the times of various events, particularly astronomical and weather phenomena. UT also refers to a time scale called “Coordinated Universal Time” (UTC), which is the basis for the worldwide system of time. This time scale is kept by time laboratories around the world, and is determined using highly precise atomic clocks.

- Time and tide waits for no man – how did this phrase come about? Implying that no one can stop time, the phrase is said to have stemmed from the times of King Canute, Viking King of England, Norway, Denmark and some of Sweden, circa 1020. To prove his detractors wrong, he had his throne carried to the seashore and sat on it as the tide came in, commanding the waves to stop. When waves came lapping at his feet, he said, “Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy but God, whom heaven, earth and sea obey.” In the original expression of the phrase, tide also referred to a period of time, such as the phrase ‘good tidings’, which implied ‘good events’.

A TIME