

Ancient Clocks

I have been fascinated with ancient clocks for a long time. Nowadays, we take time for granted, but the situation has not always been like this. I always wonder about what it was like when time wasn't measured. How would it have been to live in a day and age where there was no way to measure the passage of time except for the movement of the sun in the sky and the moon and night? Did time matter to people in the same way? Were they even aware of it? How did they get the first idea to make ancient clocks?

When I was a kid, I had what I thought was an ancient clock. It wasn't ancient at all in fact, but instead a cleverly crafted souvenir. It had visible clockwork in back and a miniature cuckoo that would come out when the hour struck. To me it seemed fantastic. By that time, we were already using quartz watches, so mechanical timepieces were somewhat of a novelty in families which didn't have heirloom grandfather clocks. I would stare at the clockwork, marveling at the mechanical precision with which each second was ticked off in turn. It was a fascinating thing in a way that my quartz watch never was.

When I started studying up on real ancient clocks, I was at first a little bit disappointed. I found out that the first clock was probably the sundial, a design which seemed sort of obvious and inelegant to me. It was years before I could appreciate the ingenuity of creating a sundial. Before the sundial, no one had probably thought about measuring the passage of the sun in the sky. It was something you could estimate by eye, but it was not related to any units of time. Once it was actually being measured with a stake and lines, however, people could start thinking about time as something that can be quantified and divided. It was the start of a whole new paradigm.

After the sundial, ancient clocks got pretty complicated pretty quickly. There were simple ancient water clocks used by the Greeks and other civilizations which measure the passage of time by the seeping of water into a bowl, but these gave way to more complicated devices involving huge towers and constant streams of water to keep the time. Studying schematics of these ancient clocks is always fascinating, but it does make me feel grateful for modern timekeeping technology. After all, who wouldn't rather simply look at a watch?