

THE ANCIENT PATRONS OF WRITING



This article explores the idea that almost every society and culture in human history has given writing a patron saint or a god: many have claimed that writing is a gift of the gods, or that it is 'divinely inspired'.

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Writing is a form of representation. So we are often concerned with issues to do with language, the human development of language and speech, the history of the alphabet, the growth and development of writing, the human mind and the idea that language and literature somehow 'represent' (and misrepresent) the world to us.

One of many aspects of the subject is how we view writing: we know writing went through a long history of development, but for ancient peoples it was mysterious, arcane and magical. And many judged it to be so powerful they thought it must have derived from the gods.

This article explores the idea that almost every society and culture in human history has given writing a patron saint or a god: many have claimed that writing is a gift of the gods, or that it is 'divinely inspired'. This article explores the idea that almost every society and culture has given writing a sacred origin through a patron saint or deity. The writing of ancient Egyptians is referred to as hieroglyphs, which means literally 'the signs of the Gods'. For most of human history Language itself – particularly Hebrew - has been seen as a gift from above rather than an entity that has a long history of change and development, and this idea only began to change with the early development of the science of Linguistics in Germany the 1770s.¹

Writers, though powerful in some ways, have always felt it wise to seek the patronage and protection of the Gods and Saints. The Hindus, Egyptians, Babylonians and ancient Celts all had gods and goddesses of writing; the ancient Hebrews had a Patron of Writing and even Christianity has a Patron Saint of Writers

From the very earliest times people have been uneasy about writers and writing: it has been regarded as something of a mystery. Writing has been linked to political and religious power, ideas of responsibility, keeping records, rendering an account, setting down a record: writing has also been linked to centres of power, to narratives that legitimise power and which are said in some way to 'remember' the past. In short, writing is not only linked to the idea of ourselves as we would prefer to be remembered, but with the search for truth and the fallibility of humans.

The Hindu Goddess of Writing

Vac, whose name in Sanskrit means 'speech', is the Vedic Hindu goddess of language, writing, the voice and spoken word. Sometimes it is said she is the 'queen of the gods': she personifies truth and sustains vision and immortality. This Hindu goddess was a folk-divinity who became important due to the early reliance on sacred oral teachings 'heard' and repeated by the *rishis* (holy men). The word 'Vac' is like the Greek the word 'logos', the source of creation. She is regarded as the mother of the and in Tantric tradition is celebrated as Para-vac, meaning transcendental speech, the mother of all sacred mantras. She is associated with the river goddess Sarasvati, and on the banks of the sacred river of this name Brahmin culture developed. Vac, although prominent in the *Rig Veda*, almost completely disappeared from Hindu mythology in later years when

¹ A. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin), 135-6.

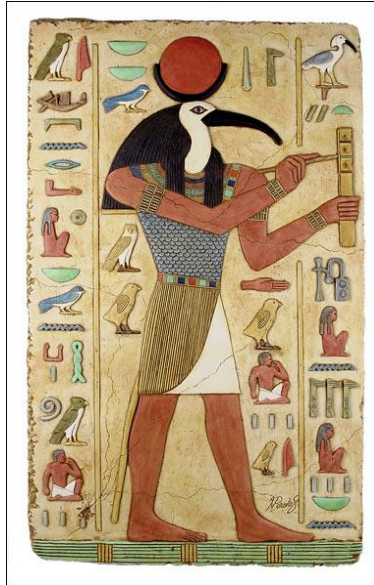
she was merged into the figure of Sarasvati. She is generally depicted as an elegant womanly figure, dressed in gold, but in her secondary capacity as a mother goddess she is also represented as a cow.



The Ancient Egyptian God of Writing

According to Egyptian legend Thoth, one of the original gods of creation, called himself and his consort Ma'at into being at the very beginning of time through the sound of his own voice. In ancient Egyptian Thoth was probably pronounced *Dihauty*, or *Djehuty* written with the signs for *d h w t y*. This was one of the oldest names for the ibis (*dhw*), plus the word for *like* (*ty*), thus the meaning of his name was *ibis-like*. Over many years the name came to signify both 'Truth' and 'Time'. Thoth was often depicted wearing a crescent moon on his headdress, and he was usually depicted as an ibis headed man or a baboon. The ibis has a crescent shaped beak, and this is thought to have linked it to the idea of the moon and hence the passage of time and the seasons. The baboon was thought to greet the sun with chattering noises each morning just as Thoth, the moon god, would greet Ra, the sun god, as he rose.

In keeping with his many attributes, Thoth was depicted with a variety of symbols. In the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* he was shown holding a writing palette and reed pen to record the deeds of the dead. Thoth was the scribe to the gods and kept a great library of scrolls and spells, over which one of his wives, Seshat (the goddess of libraries) was thought to be mistress. Thoth was the wisest of the Egyptian gods and was associated with all learning and speech. Thoth, as god of learning, was credited with inventing astronomy, astrology, engineering, botany, geometry, land surveying, numbers, arithmetic, languages, writing, soothsaying, magic, medicine, surgery, music and wind and string instruments and drawing. As the inventor of hieroglyphs he was known as 'Lord of the Holy Words', and was said to have taught writing to mankind. It is thought that Egyptian scribes kept a picture of Thoth on the wall of their workspace.



In some versions of his myth Thoth is thought of as the oldest son of the god Ra, but he is generally known rather as the faithful vizier and scribe for the god Osiris. When his master was murdered Thoth remained loyal and was a powerful help in getting Osiris resurrected, using the restorative power of his voice and secret incantations. After Osiris he was vizier to the god Horus, and after Horus, Thoth himself reigned for 3,226 years as a model, peaceful ruler, after which he ascended to the skies to fulfil various tasks for the gods.²

Thoth was central to order and to equilibrium. He was also responsible for measuring the passage of time and was thus the god of the Egyptian lunar and solar calendars, which he had reformed: the first month of the year had his name. Pictures often show Thoth holding scales as the 'Master of the Balance' to indicate that he was associated with the equinoxes - the time when the day and the night were balanced. In his role as the personification of order, he also weighed the souls of the dead against an ostrich feather given by his wife to see if they could enter the after-world, or whether they should be ripped to pieces by the dog-God Anubis, a creature of the underworld, who lurks at his heels. In his role as scribe, Thoth recorded the results of each judgment. He was endowed with complete knowledge and wisdom.

The first references to Thoth are to be found in the *Pyramid Texts* of ancient Egypt. These were a collection of mortuary prayers, hymns and spells intended to protect a dead king or queen and ensure life and sustenance in the hereafter. The texts dating from c2686-2160BC, inscribed on the walls of the inner chambers at Saqqara in several 5th and 6th-dynasty pyramids, constitute the oldest surviving body of Egyptian writings available to modern scholars.

² R. Graves (ed.), *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (Hamlyn: London, 1970), 27-8.

The ancient Greeks knew of Thoth. They sometimes referred to him as *Theut* and thought of him as equivalent to their god Hermes Tresmegistus (Hermes three times great), originally a god mainly concerned with protecting flocks and travellers, but who developed to become Logios, god of eloquence, and who was also the messenger of the Zeus, continually running between the gods and humans on delicate missions, and responsible for summoning and conducting souls to the underworld.³

Plato (427-347BC) not only knew of Thoth, but used him to voice his unease about writers and writing. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Thoth shows his invention of writing to the king of Egypt. The king agrees that Thoth's previous inventions have all been very useful, but when Thoth tries to explain writing as an aid to memory and a record of wisdom, the king will have none of it. He says that Thoth is very much mistaken. Writing, says the king, far from being an aid to memory, will simply produce forgetfulness. And rather than record wisdom, it will help people to find information without actually knowing anything. It will, says the king, allow people to remain ignorant: 'You offer an elixir of reminding, not of memory; you offer the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom...' Writing, Plato warns, changes everything.

The Ancient Babylonian God of writing



In Babylon and Assyria the god of writing and wisdom was Nabu. It is thought that his cult was introduced into Babylon from the western Semitic areas probably Ebla, c 2,000BC. His cult became one of the principal religious expressions in Babylon and Assyria and many prayers addressed to him have been discovered. They also named children after him. As god of writing his task was mainly that of Keeper of the Tablets on

³ Mercury performed these tasks for the Romans. The Celts were favourably disposed to Mercury, probably because they saw in him their own god Ogma Grianainech (Sun / smiley-face), a god of sun, healing, fertility, storytelling, prophecy and fertility, who was also said to have invented letters. R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (Faber: London, 1999), 128.

which was written the destiny of the whole of mankind, but also the destiny of each individual. The etymology of his name is disputed: it might derive from *nb* meaning to call or announce, 'He who has Called', or it could be from *ne-abu*, meaning shining or brilliant. On the other hand it may be derived from a different and as yet unknown ancient Syrian root. Nabu's power over human existence was thought to be enormous as he not only engraved the destiny of each person on the tablets of sacred record, he also had the power to increase or diminish the length of human life. His symbols were the clay/stone tablet with the writing stylus, and his sacred animal was the winged dragon. He was often shown wearing a horned cap, standing with hands clasped, in the ancient gesture of priesthood.

Hebrew Patron of Writing



Esdras (Ezra) 450-325BC, sometimes known as Malachi (not to be confused with the later Christian Saint Malachi of Armagh), is thought to be the major patron of writing in ancient Jewish culture. He was a priest at the temple in Jerusalem and was a very important figure in the restoration of Jewish life after the return from exile in Babylon. His writings mainly concerned Jewish Law and the proper forms of worship at the temple. There is great confusion and controversy about what exactly he wrote and some of his surviving work is not included in the Bible. However, he is particularly famous for his very hard-line instructions that Jews returning from exile should abandon 'mixed marriages' and should 'put away' foreign wives and those who were not of the Jewish faith.

The Christian Patron Saint of Writers

Christianity seems to have been rather ambivalent about allowing writers a patron saint, possibly because writers are inevitably an alternative source of authority and likely to voice dissent. While there are patron saints for Bookkeepers, Bookbinders, Booksellers, and even for the book trade, only Poets have a patron saint, and then they have a

choice - Brigid of Ireland, Cecilia, Columba or David. Among often cited possible candidates for patron saint of writers is Lucy of Syracuse, but why is a mystery because she is the patron saint of the blind. Another possible candidate is Theodore the Written-Upon, who had a 12-line verse cut into his forehead. The church seems to favour Francis de Sales, but he was a theological rather than creative writer and is credited with inventing sign language for the deaf. Another favoured candidate is Paul the Apostle; the reasons for this are not clear, but probably because he was the main theorist of Christianity and wrote so many epistles.



Saint John the Apostle, sometimes known as John the Divine, is probably the best contender for the post of patron saint of writers, editors, publishers and all those who work with words. He was originally a fisherman (good metaphor for trying to catch words) but then became a disciple of Jesus. He is credited with having written five books of the New Testament, the fourth Gospel - in which he wrote 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' - and three Epistles. However, although John was thought to have written the *Book of Revelation*, it is now fairly certain that this was written some years after John the Apostle's death and by a different John - St John of Patmos.

A traditional story told about St John of Patmos is that the Emperor Domitian had him brought from Ephesus to Rome, beaten, poisoned, and thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, but John failed to succumb to the beating or the poison and stepped from the cauldron unharmed. In frustration the Emperor banished him to Patmos. There he lived in a cave and heard the voice of God speak to him from a cleft riven in the rock by the sound of His voice. John did not write the *Book of Revelation* but dictated the words spoken to him to his pious disciple, Prokhorus, who is said to have taken them down while standing at a rocky ledge within the cave. John the Divine was probably exiled to

Patmos about AD95, but as Prokhorus is known to have lived several centuries after John the Divine it is quite possible that John the Divine is not John of Patmos and therefore is not the author of the *Book of Revelation*. The story is almost certainly a conflation of several characters into one. Prokhorus' hagiography *The Acts of Saint John* makes no mention of the *Book of Revelation*. *Revelation* was never accepted by the Orthodox Church and only appears in western Christianity as part of the *Apocrypha*. John the Divine is said to have died on October 9; his Feast day is May 8 Western Church, May 21 Orthodox Church.

The Celtic God of Writing

The Celts – particularly the Irish - attributed the eloquence of all Druids, poets, seers, healers and bards to a mysterious patron deity called Ogma who they said was the son of The Dagda, the Father of the gods, but in some versions he is the brother of The Dagda. He is usually associated with writing, poetry, rhetoric and persuasion and people were happy to hear him speak. He is thought to have led the chariot of the sun across the sky. In Gaul he was called Ogmios, in Ireland Ogma and in Britain Ogmia, but he was also called Ogham and Ogmios.



Ogma was credited with the invention of the Ogham script. In this he was similar in function to the Egyptian god Thoth, the god Roman Mercury (who was popular among the Celts of mainland Europe) and the god Greek Hercules, who was also the son of Zeus, the father of the gods. A piece of pottery found in Richborough shows him as having long curly hair and the rays of the sun shining from his head.

The Greek writer Lucian of Samosata described a picture of Ogmios which he saw in Celtic Gaul, when he was living in Gallia Narbonensis, near modern Marseille. In this picture, he wrote, Ogmios was depicted with the bow and club normally associated with

Hercules, but instead of the powerful god of Graeco-Roman mythology, Ogmios was portrayed as a smiling old man, wearing lion skins like Herakles, but bald and burnt by the sun. He drew behind him a happy band of men who were attached to him by thin gold chains linking their ears to the tip of his tongue. The original picture did not survive, but Albrecht Durer later reworked the idea. His image of the god of loquacity leading people by their ears is vivid and suitable for the power of the spoken word in a pre-literate society.

Islam and writing

Although a great deal of representational art work survives from early Islam, in contemporary Islam there is an absolute prohibition on visually representing the Prophet Mohammed or any other human figure. Islam, though it does not have a patron saint of writing, has specifically linked writing with the figure of the Prophet Mohammed and with 'the word' as an expression of divinity. It has developed a fantastically inventive approach to interpreting 'the Word of God' through calligraphy. Here for example is an 18th century Ottoman calligraphic interpretation of the phrase: 'In the name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious'.



Follow-up Work

- Look up the word *account* in a historical dictionary.
- Can you see any connection between an account of goods and stores and an account as a narrative?
- Do you think that, like Thoth, contemporary writers 'weigh souls', consider evidence, pass a kind of judgement and keep a record of how things are ordered?
- Do you think Plato's king in the *Phaedrus* had a valid point to make about writing?
- What do you think – does writing record wisdom, or is it just a litany of folly?
- Does the connection to the ancient Egyptian god Thoth – or any of the other ancient figures of religion - give you cause for concern as a writer?
- What reflections on the nature and act of writing might the figure of Thoth give rise to in a contemporary writer?
- 'All writing is intended to be read by someone.' Is that how you see writing? Is that how you see your writing?
- Writing is a private act with public consequences. What do you think might be the consequences of your work being published?
- Writing is designed to take an idea and make an intervention in public life. So, can you suggest why there might be consequences?
- In what ways are these ideas linked to questions of Representation?