



A long-ago link to the gods makes the days of our lives less ordinary



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THE WORD “etymology” is based on a Greek root meaning “true”. Just what is true is not necessarily clear. These days, etymology is the study of the (true) origins of words.

But at an earlier stage it seems to have meant the search for the true meanings of words. The idea seems to have been that words get debased in usage, and only by going back through history can we find out what the word really means. The “really” in the last sentence is problematical. We might find out what the word really meant at some earlier period of history, but we do not necessarily find out what it really means in our own time by this method.

One widely cited example is the word “nice”. We can trace this back through earlier stages of English and Old French to the Latin word “nescius”, meaning ignorant. But it does not follow that nice really means ignorant in modern English – indeed, anyone who interpreted the phrase “a nice person” as meaning “an ignorant person” would themselves be thought ignorant.

This shows the difficulty with etymological study. Sometimes the origin of the word can give a clue to the current meaning, but sometimes knowing the origins of a word can be very misleading about the present meaning.

SOMETIMES the origin just provides us with some fun. For example, it might be helpful to know that “cereal” is related to Ceres, the Roman goddess of the harvest. It is probably less useful to be able to relate “jovial” to Jove or Jupiter, whose personality most of us are unfamiliar with these days. The link between “aphrodisiac” and Aphrodite is rather more useful, but only if we realise that Aphrodite is specifically the goddess of sexual love. The Greek and Roman gods have given us a host of words including bacchanal (from Bacchus, god of wine), chronic (from Chronos, the Greek god of time), mercurial (from Mercury, the Roman messenger of the gods, and god of eloquence), morphine (from Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams), panic (from

Pan, the Greek god of the woods), saturnine (from Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture), venereal (from Venus, the Roman equivalent of Aphrodite).

The days of the week are mostly named after Norse gods. Tuesday is named after Tiw, the Norse god of war (compare Mars, the Roman god of war, after whom the French name the same day – mardi). Wednesday is named after Woden, the English name for the Norse Odin. Thursday is named after Thor, the Norse god of thunder.

When Jupiter was not busy being jovial, he also threw thunderbolts, and the French name for Thursday, jeudi, is derived from Jove. Similarly, Friday is named after Frig, the goddess of married love, considered equivalent to Venus, after whom the French vendredi is named. For some reason, English reverts to the Roman gods for Saturday (Saturn’s day). The Scandinavians all use a name which means “washing day” for Saturday.

There are no doubt some nice stories here, but the meanings are not particularly helpful. In some other cases the original meaning is distinctly unhelpful.

CONSIDER the word “auspicious”, which we nearly always use in the phrase “auspicious occasion” in modern English. This is related to the Latin word for “bird”. You discovered whether a day was auspicious by watching the behaviour of birds, and making predictions based on that.

Those of you who read the current flurry of vampire novels may be familiar with another meaning of “auspex”, which is the Latin word for a person who makes predictions by watching birds.

The word “shibboleth”, which comes to us from the Bible – in which the Ephraimites could not say the “sh” sound and so gave themselves away as being enemies – meant “ear of corn”. The important thing was not what the word meant, but how you said it.

On the other hand, words such as phosphorous (bearing light), philosophy (loving wisdom) and egregious (standing



out of the flock, in modern usage usually for being particularly bad) are ones in which a little etymology can make life a little more picturesque. But confusing origins with meanings will lead you into trouble.

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