

HEAVENLY NEWS: “What’s in a Week?”

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Ever wondered why there are seven days in a week? Or what our days of the week are named for? The answer, as they say, lies in the stars – or more appropriately – lies with the planets. Understanding the connection first requires a little historical perspective and a little mathematical.

The word “planet” comes from the Greek word *planeti*, which means “a wanderer.” When one gazes at the night sky there are thousands of points of light, yet only a handful of them actually change position on a monthly basis with respect to background stars. These bright objects in motion are the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; they are the only planets visible with the naked eye. The other two planets Uranus and Neptune cannot be seen without optical assistance. This is an important distinction considering our ancestors never had the viewing benefit of a telescope until the early 17th century.

It was Galileo Galilei who modified the optics of the first telescope design, decided to point one to the heavens, and revolutionized science forever. Uranus wasn’t discovered until 1781 when William Herschel catalogued its wandering motion by means of a telescope. So before the dawn of science, these wanderers in the night sky remained enigmas.

These planets coupled with the rather dominant other two celestial objects with apparent motion – The Sun and the Moon – add up to the mystical number seven. These seven entities in motion against a backdrop of tranquility inspired mythology from almost every culture in history. This number held special meaning to the ancients of many nationalities for this reason.

Given that basis, consider as well the lunar cycle from full moon-to-full moon is about a 28-day cycle. Also the moon has four distinct phases during that cycle: 1st and 3rd quarters, and full and new moon. So if you take 28 days and divide it by four phases you get seven. Whoa! This phenomenon was more than cosmic coincidence to our Roman ancestors, as if the Gods made it so. While the modern Gregorian calendar we use today was still more than a thousand years from being perfected, the names of the days of the week still remain embedded in our dialogue, provided you speak a Latin-based language.

We’ve all said the word “Sunday,” right? You guessed it. The name “Monday” is just a modification of *Moon-day*. While the rest of the days in English are named for Saxon gods (see Thursday as literally *Thor’s Day*), French and Spanish still carry the planetary names. The days of the week Monday-Friday in French are as follows: Lundi (Moon), Mardi (Mars), Mercredi (Mercury), Jeudi (Jupiter), and Vendredi (Venus). In Spanish they are Lunes, Martes, Miercoles, Jueves, and Viernes, Notice the pattern? Apparently only the English day of Saturday directly means “Saturn-day,” perhaps as a holdout from the Roman occupation of the British Isles less than two thousand years ago.

So keep this knowledge in mind the next time you visit the observatory. You just might see the wandering planet of whatever day it may named for through a telescope – better visibility than our ancestors ever thought possible. The Community Observatory is open to the public on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 8:30 PM - 10:30 PM (weather permitting) and by appointment on weekday evenings. To find out more about the Community Observatory and for driving directions go to www.communityobservatory.com