

Twelve

In 1602 The Bard of Stratford's comedy *Twelfth Night*, was performed for the first time at Candlemas on 2nd February, celebrating the last of the *Twelve Days of Christmas* – the traditional practice of extending the pre-Christian Yuletide celebrations from Christmas Day to the eve of Epiphany (5th January).

In 1674 the second edition of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* was published, increasing the books from 10 to 12; thus echoing the 12 books of Virgil's first century BC epic *The Aeneid*.

Twelve (12) is a ubiquitous word, which is found in all ages, all countries, all disciplines and all religions. In 1687 Joshua Jordaine published his *Duodecimal Arithmetick* suggesting the adoption of a system of counting based on 12. It was also championed by the Victorian social theorist Herbert Spencer, and later by Sir Isaac Pitman. In fact you may not know this, but there is a Dozenal Society of Great Britain, and in USA, devoted to the adoption of the base 12 system; a dozen being 12. Well the Troy weight system for precious metals has 12 ounces to the pound, we used to have 12 pence to the shilling and we still, although we shouldn't, have 12 inches in a foot.

In Greek mythology Heracles labours were increased from 10 to 12. The 12 Olympians were the principal gods of the pantheon, and 12 cities made up the dodecapolis. King Arthur had 12 knights at his round table, having subdued 12 rebels and won 12 battles against Saxon invaders. The day is divided into two sets of 12 hours, *ante meridiem* (a.m.), and *post meridiem* (p.m.) Most calendar systems now divide the year into 12 months, and both the Western and the Chinese Zodiac have 12 signs. Indeed the Chinese have a 12 year cycle called the *Earthly Branches*. The Beaufort wind force scale has 12 forces; the human body has 12 pairs of ribs and 12 cranial nerves; 12 people sit on a jury. Arnold Schoenberg first devised the 12-tone music system for composition; Alcoholics Anonymous has 12 steps, 12 traditions and 12 concepts, and The Church of the Latter Day Saints has a Quorum of 12 Apostles.

... not to mention the *dozens* of books, films, television programmes, plays and pop groups, with 12 in the title.

In the Bible, 12 is mentioned 34 times in the Old Testament: God renamed Jacob, calling him Israel (Gen 35/10), and Israel had 12 sons who were the progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel. Moses brought the thirsty Israelites to Elim, where they found 12 wells. There is mention of 12 years, 12 months, 12 precious stones, 12 silver bowls, 12 spoons ... similarly, men, princes, officers, chief priests, 12 of Benjamin and 12 of the servants of David. 12 oxen, chargers, bullocks, brazen bulls, rams, lambs, lions and goats. Elijah built an altar of 12 stones; and the altar in Ezekiel was to be 12 cubits square.

And in the New Testament, 12 is mentioned 27 times: Jesus was just 12, when his parents left him behind in the temple (Luke 2/42). Jesus chose 12 disciples, known as the 12 Apostles (Matt 10/2), Judas being replaced by Matthias to maintain the number 12 (Acts 1/26). Jesus healed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years (Matt 9/20). He also healed the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue; she was 12 years old. (Mark 5/42). Following the feeding of the 5000, 12 baskets of left-overs were collected (Matt 14/20). When Paul arrived at Ephesus, he baptised 12 disciples (Acts 19/7).

... and we end with the Book of Revelations: “... *the great city, the holy Jerusalem ...*” had 12 gates, which *were* 12 pearls, (Rev 21/21) and 12 angels and 12 foundations “... and in them the names of the 12 Apostles” (Rev 21/12&14). “... and on either side of the river was the Tree of Life bearing 12 different fruits” (Rev 22/2).

Then “*There appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of 12 stars.*” (Acts 12/1). This has been interpreted as the Blessed Virgin Mary wearing a crown, representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

So we come full-circle.

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