

# Notes on Quiz #9

*History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022*

## 1. According to the reading, what are some of the “consequences of literacy” in relation to ancient religion?

One aspect has to do with memory. In a nonliterate tradition, myths and traditions are remembered if there is a need for them to be remembered; if there is no need for them, they are forgotten and left behind by the community’s collective consciousness (a process called “social amnesia”). This causes tradition (“the ways of our ancestors”) to be organic and develop with the community. With a written tradition, the stories and rules become fixed, earlier customs become fixed and preserved, and as a community changes a dissonance develops between adhering to tradition as stated in the text, and the needs of the current society.

Writing begets writing. The existence of a written tradition leads to writing about that tradition, some of it in support and explanation, some skeptical or hostile. The hostile strand also persists and remains as a potential focus for counterculture and, in monotheistic religions, heresy.

Writing also allows for greater social complexity, as preserving information makes possible more elaborate and far-flung institutions.

## 2. What was the *disciplina Etrusca*? How did the Etruscans believe it came about?

According to Etruscan legend, the wise infant Tages emerged from the furrow of a plowed field in Tarquinia. He taught the techniques of divination to the Etruscans, which were recorded in a set of books that were called the *disciplina Etrusca* by the Romans. There were three books: one on haruspicia, the consultation of animal entrails after a sacrifice; one on the religious interpretation of lightning; and one containing the details religious ceremonies. The books did not survive and are now known only from fragments quoted elsewhere.

## 3. What does the author mean when she talks about religious writing with “symbolic,” rather than just utilitarian, function? What are some examples?

In contrast with utilitarian writing, which is only about recording information, in this case symbolic writing refers to writing where the written word has religious function as an object, apart from its content. This includes writing that is meant to act as a memorial, or to reify (make physical) a set of words as a focal point of religious attention. Examples might include the Jewish Ark of the Covenant, or spells or curses written on papyrus that are thought to physically preserve the power of the spell.

### EC1. The few surviving examples of Etruscan writing include all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) Attributed names on reliefs, mirrors, and tomb paintings from excavated Etruscan cities and burial sites
- ✓ (b) A fragmentary poem purported to be from the goddess Aritmi to her lover Menvra
- (c) A 60-line religious text inscribed in a slab of tile discovered in Capua
- (d) The wrappings of a mummy made from strips of a linen book of Etruscan rituals

### EC2. What is the potential significance for the Romans of the story of Cn. Flavius “publishing” the sacred religious calendar by posting it in the Forum?

Religious information that was hitherto controlled by the Roman priests, including various legal rules and details about days on which cases could be brought) was made available to the public, to be shared by those who could read with those who could not. This constituted a (metaphorical) revolutionary act against the governing priestly class, as performed by a freedman’s son on behalf of the common people.