

Socrates' Fable

By Duncan Speakman

At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth. He was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice. But his great discovery was the use of letters.

Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt. To the king came Theuth and showed his inventions. King Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them.

Then they came to letters.

Theuth said:

Using letters will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories. It is a specific both for the memory and for the wit.

King Thamus replied:

O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have.

For this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories. They will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves.

The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence. You give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth.

They will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing
They will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing
They will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality

Source: Plato (360 BC) Phaedrus (translated by Benjamin Jowett).