



The
**GREATEST
INVENTIONS**
of the
PAST
2,000 YEARS

*Today's Leading Thinkers Choose the
Creations That Shaped Our World*



Edited by

JOHN BROCKMAN

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AS AUTHOR

By the Late John Brockman

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AS EDITOR

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AS CO-EDITOR

How Things Are

THE
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EDITED BY

John Brockman

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EBERHARD ZANGGER

Nothing Worth Mentioning

The tricky part of the question is not what the most important invention is, but the qualifier “in the past two thousand years.” Technological innovations alter the frontier between humans and their natural habitat. Because of the insuperable importance of the environment and its resources, humans have always sought to maximize whatever advantages they can wrest from the laws of nature. As a consequence, truly fundamental innovations date back to many thousands of years ago. The most outstanding innovation of all time was probably the domestication of animals, followed by that of plants. Life in permanent homes, villages, and cities; the wheel; the sailing ship; engineering; script; conceptual achievements such as nations, democracy, religion, music and songs; even taxes, interest, and inflation—all these date back well before the beginning of the Common Era. Several innovations suggested in this forum were actually part of the everyday routines of Bronze Age people—including (for instance) language, steel, paper, and reading glasses. The scientific method must also have existed in some form, since fourteenth-century B.C. hydraulic installations in Greece perfectly meet the parameters of the given environment. Even movable type was known by 1600 B.C., as the Discos of Phaistos from Minoan Crete shows. Finally, heliocentricity was first discovered by the astronomer Aristarchos of Samos during the third century B.C.—but the concept failed peer review, and its acceptance was thus delayed by eighteen hundred

years. Since the principal factors controlling people's lives today already existed two thousand years ago, the skeptic in me would intuitively vote for: Nothing Worth Mentioning.

If we were to take a stroll through a Roman town two thousand years ago—and ancient Pompeii provides a good example of a city frozen in a moment of everyday life—we would find a city containing factories (including one for fish sauce), public baths, athletic stadiums, theaters, plastered roads, proper sidewalks, pubs, homes with under-floor heating systems, and (inevitably) brothels—facilities for people who were, for the most part, in better physical shape than we are. The Roman dominion over the Western world lasted for about a thousand years, and we might still be living in the Roman era had there not been what I consider the biggest conceptualization of the past two thousand years: Jesus Christ. Fabricated for the most part—if not entirely—by the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and the letters of Paul, the invention of Christianity provided a common denominator uniting the many tribes suppressed by imperial control. It also formed the fountainhead of a religion that today claims more than a third of the world's population. After all, it is only because of this invention that we commemorate Y2K. Disregarding the conceptual realization of Christianity and turning toward more mundane inventions, what else distinguishes a modern city from its Roman predecessor? I think primarily electricity. Only through the invention of electricity is it possible to operate laundry machines and subnotebook computers—two inventions I personally cherish the most—as well as many of the other items suggested in this forum.

However, I recall enjoying a particularly romantic evening in the usually overcrowded, noisy Cretan tourist resort of Elounda. Some time passed before I realized what made this evening so special: a power outage had knocked out all the fluorescent lighting and the loudspeakers. Kitchen stoves and gas lanterns still worked.

This brings me back to my original response to the question: What is the most important invention in the past two thousand years? Nothing Worth Mentioning.

EBERHARD ZANGGER found out that Atlantis equals Troy. He is a geoarchaeologist and works as chief physical scientist on many archaeological field projects in Mediterranean countries. He is the author of *The Flood from Heaven: Deciphering the Atlantis Legend* and *The Future of the Past: Archaeology in the 21st Century*.

