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Edited by Julius Charles Hare and Connop Thirlwall

Excerpt

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ON THE NAMES OF THE DAYS OF THE WEEK.

WHAT is the origin and meaning of the names we are in the habit of giving to the days of the week? There are very few words we so frequently make use of: one or other of them is perpetually on our lips: and yet, were such a question put to us, we should be at a loss for a clear and satisfactory answer. Sunday and Monday, we should say, are called after the Sun and Moon; Tuesday after some northern god or other; Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday after Woden, Thor, and Freya; Saturday after Saturn. If the principle which regulated this arrangement, and led to the assigning of each day to its particular deity, were demanded, we should probably reply, that our ancestors lookt about among the personages of the northern mythology for such as nearest corresponded to those gods whose names were given to the days of the week in the later Roman calendar. Still two questions remain, both of considerable curiosity: how came the Romans to arrange those names, which we immediately perceive to be the names of what the ancients held to be the seven planets, in the particular order adopted? and by what analogy were our ancestors guided in the substitution of their national gods for the Roman? Both these questions involve sundry others, several of which are of no little importance and obscurity; and it may perhaps be impossible to answer them with anything like absolute certainty. Still in every province of inquiry it is of great use clearly to mark out the boundary between knowledge and ignorance, setting forth how much has actually been made out, and how much yet remains indeterminate calling for future researches. In the physical sciences this is ascertained with a good deal of accuracy; and hence they are continually progressive, and far less of the labour employed on them is thrown away. But in the various

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departments of philology there is mostly a lamentable uncertainty as to what has already been done, and what is still left to be done; and owing to this many scholars waste much of their time in trying to find out a path over ground that has long since been explored and opened. So that no slight good would be effected by any one who should carefully collect and critically digest the amount of information at present possess in any one wide field of philological investigation, thereby paving the way for such as come after him to get more rapidly to the limits of our present knowledge, and pointing out the quarters in which they are to push forward in order to enlarge it. If the present article does no more than bring together the scattered remarks that may be found in divers books concerning its subject, it may still not be utterly useless.

With regard to the former of the two questions proposed above we are fortunately enabled to speak with a tolerable degree of certainty, by an author whose diligence and sound sense raise him far above most of his contemporaries, and to a level with many of the good writers of earlier times: and though we have but one passage of value treating of the point, it is pretty nearly as full as can be wisht. “The practice of referring the days of the week to the seven stars, called planets (says Dion Cassius, xxxvii. 18), arose among the Egyptians, and has already spread through every people, though it is not long, so to say, since it began. The ancient Greeks, so far as I know, were totally ignorant of it: but inasmuch as it is now adopted not only by all other nations, but even by the Romans, with whom it is already in a manner become a national custom, I shall say a few words on the arrangement of the names, and on the principles that determined it. Now I have heard two explanations, neither of them difficult to be understood, except so far as they involve certain speculative notions. For if any one were to apply that proportion which is termed *διὰ τεσσάρων*—which proportion is moreover held to constitute the groundwork of all musical harmony—to those stars among which the whole sphere of the heavens is divided, according to the order of their revolution, and beginning with the outermost circle, the one allotted to Saturn, were to pass over the next two and

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take the lord of the fourth circle, and then passing over two more to go to the seventh,—if, I say, going round in this manner he were to assign the names of the gods presiding over the several circles to the days of the week in succession, he would find that there is a sort of musical agreement between those days and the distribution of the heavens. This is one of the accounts that is given: the other is as follows. Go through the hours of the day and night, beginning with the first, and assigning that to Saturn, the next to Jupiter, the third to Mars, the fourth to the Sun, the fifth to Venus, the sixth to Mercury, the seventh to the Moon, according to what the Egyptians regard as the order of their orbits, (where Reimar would perhaps have done better in retaining *τοιούτην*, omitting *καθ'*, and reading *κατὰ τὴν τάξιν τῶν κύκλων ἣν οἱ Ἀιγύπτιοι τοιούτην νομίζουσι*); and having done this again and again till you come to the end of the twenty-four hours, you will find that the first hour of the following day falls to the Sun. When you have gone through the twenty-four hours of that day in the same manner, the first hour of the third day will be assigned to the Moon: and if you proceed on this plan through the remaining days, each will receive its appropriate deity."

I have quoted this passage at length, because, added to the light it throws on the origin of the names given to the days of the week, and on the time of their general reception, at least in Europe, it is likewise interesting as containing so early a record of that belief in planetary influences which formed such a prominent article in the superstitious creed of afterages. In Chaucer's *Knights Tale*, to take a single instance, we find a passage in understanding which we may be materially aided by the foregoing extract; and which moreover shews that the practice in his time was still to begin the day, at least the astrological day, at sunrise. Just before the combat, on "the Sunday night or day began to spring, although it n'ere not day by houres two, Palamon rose to wenden on his pilgrimage to Venus, *in hire houre*," (2211–2219): that is, according to the calculation explained above, the twenty-second hour on the Sunday belonged to the Sun, the twenty-third, or the second before sunrise to Venus. On the third hour after, that is, the first of the following day, "Up

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rose the sonne, and up rose Emelie," and, this being the Moon's hour, went to the temple of Diana. Thus the extract from Dion presents us with a striking instance of the manner in which the relics of forgotten opinions and extinct systems are preserved and embalmed in language: so strange indeed are the combinations which sometimes take place in it, that we here find the mythology of Scandinavia and the astrology of Egypt, or of Chaldea, meeting together in giving names to the days of our week, while the link of union between them is formed by the mythology of Rome.

For of the two explanations given by Dion, the second seems to carry a greater air of truth with it; and accordingly it is adopted by the best and soundest modern scholars, for instance by Ideler in his *Handbuch der Chronologie*, I. 179, II. 177, and by Lobeck in his *Aglaophamus*, p. 942: though Politian, after quoting Dion's remarks (*Miscell. c. 8*), calls them *festiva nimis et arguta*; and though Scaliger and Selden were not satisfied with them. Yet this explanation is grounded on an opinion which we know from other sources to have been prevalent in early times; and when the notion of planetary ascendancy had once been adopted, it was natural enough that each day should be named after the lord of its first hour. Whereas the arithmetical proportion introduced in Dion's other solution is something totally arbitrary and extraneous. It is true, the idea that the motions of the planets were regulated by the laws of musical harmony, was a favorite tenet with some of the Greek schools of philosophy; and it was probably by one of the Alexandrian Platonists that this solution was devised: but the coarser nature of astrology rendered it much fitter for begetting a set of words for popular use. Besides the coincidence between the order of the planetary hours and that of the planetary days, is at least a sort of presumption that one of the two was constructed after the other; which can hardly have been the case with the former, depending, as it did, on the order of the planets.

The same objections apply with much greater force to the explanation, founded upon certain cabbalistical properties of numbers and fantastic mystical analogies, with which Baptista Egnatius closed his *Racemationes*, after traversing, as

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he boasts, the whole field of literature, to the great benefit of his readers, in a couple of score of pages. He professes to have derived it mainly from a Greek treatise of Maximus Planudes; as does Parrhasius, who gives it more briefly, Epist. LXIII. But on comparing these two statements with the treatise of Lydus de Mensibus, II. 3–11, it appears that Planudes himself must have taken it from that work; from which we know that, after the fashion of the Byzantines in literature as well as in policy and religion to mistake the caput mortuum for the essence, he made a collection of extracts; though in the present instance he did not do much harm, having little else than what was already a caput mortuum to deal with. According to this trifling the first day was assigned to the Sun, because he stands alone in the heavens, and is called *Sol*, as Cicero says (de Nat. Deor. II. 27), *quia obscuratis omnibus stellis solus luceat*, the second *Lunae, ut materiei totius auctori, quam materiem Pythagoras δνάδα vocavit*; the sixth *Veneri, quod numerus senarius ad procreationem accommodatus est, veluti par impar, quorum hic efficax ad agendum quasi mas est, ille materiae vicem praestat, ut foemina*. This is a mere sample of absurdities which in Lydus fill twenty pages; and the main part of which he must have drawn from the new Platonists: for several of the tenets brought forward he expressly ascribes to the Pythagoreans; and the one just cited belonged to the same school, as we are told by Proclus on the Parmenides (Vol. IV. p. 203. ed. Cousin): *ἡ ἐξὰς Ἀφροδίτης ἐστὶν ἱερὰ, φασὶ Πυθαγορείων παῖδες*. There is nothing in the world that may not be explained in this way, if confounding a question can be called explaining it; and such an explanation has the happy elastic property that it would have fitted any other arrangement every bit as well as the present: not making the slightest attempt to account for, what it is scarcely possible should be matter of accident, the symmetrical order in which the planetary names occur.

The last charge cannot be brought against the solution suggested by Bede (De Temporum Ratione c. 6, Opp. II. 65): which, supposing, as was probably the case, that he was unacquainted with Dion's, is ingenious and plausible enough. The first day, he says, was consecrated to the Sun, as the

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greatest luminary; the second to the Moon, as the next in size; the third to the planet next in order to the Sun; the fourth to that next the Moon; the fifth to that next but one to the Sun, and so on. Yet here again the procedure seems to be totally arbitrary, with still less that could have led to it, than to that under Dion's first method: to which it is also inferior from its want of unity, the first two names being bestowed on quite a different principle from the others.

To obviate this last objection Selden, who discusses the whole subject at great length and with his wonted learning and ability, so as very nearly to exhaust all that can be said upon it, and who brings forward a modification of Bede's hypothesis, supposes that the Sun and Moon were selected to head the week from their manifest superiority to the other five stars, and that the interval between the Sun and Moon as they stood in the *heptaxonomum* was taken as the type for the arrangement of the rest: De Jure Nat. III. 21. Of all the modern solutions this seems to be the most satisfactory, and, if we were compelled to abandon Dion's second, might lay claim to be generally received. After all however the belief in planetary hours furnishes so natural an occasion for the assignment of planetary names to days, that, unless there be some strong objection to this explanation, one feels loth to exchange it for any other: more especially as, if astrology be left out of the question, one can hardly see why the days of the week should have been thus associated with the planets, except because there were seven of each: and in that case the regular order would probably have been followed.

A different method of accounting for the deviation from this order is suggested by Des-Vignoles, *Chronologie de l' Histoire Sainte*, Vol. II. p. 692. The ancient Egyptian year, according to his notion, consisted of 360 days, that is, of 51 weeks and three days: so that, if we suppose that in the original weeks the planets stood in what was held to be their natural order, the same day of the year in seven successive years would belong to the planets following each other at the interval of a fourth, that is, in the exact order of the planetary week. Hence an immovable festival, celebrated

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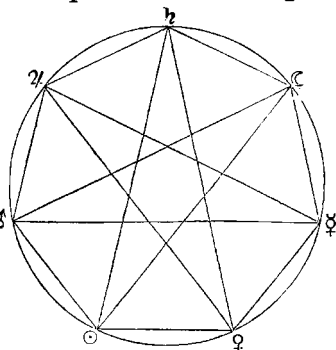
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in one year on the day of Saturn, would fall the next year on the day of the Sun, the next on that of the Moon, and so on. Now when the Egyptians reformed their calendar, and adopted a year of 365 days, he further supposes that they retained the planetary cycle by which they had been accustomed to denote the succession of their festivals: but as the year now consisted of only one day above the 52 weeks, the planetary cycle which had previously corresponded exactly with the hebdomadal, now only corresponded with it at the regular interval of a fourth. Of all the explanations I have met with, this with all its ingenuity, is the most artificial and complicated, and rests on the greatest number of indemonstrable assumptions. It has a look too about it which leads one to suspect that it was suggested by a recollection of the methods adopted by chronologers, to determine the time of Easter. Wherever symmetry of this kind prevails, a number of ways may be devised to account for it; and every way that enables us to take the first step, will probably carry us through all the rest: so that though in many cases of complicated problems the aptness of a hypothesis to solve them may afford some degree of presumption in favour of its truth, it is not so here; and in order to guide our judgement concerning such a hypothesis, when we have no authentic information, we are bound to consider the likelihood of the train of thought which it involves.

If we look at Scaliger's geometrical explanation in this light, we can hardly hesitate to reject it. He supposes (*De Emendat. Temp.* i. p. 8) that the seven planets were arranged in order at equal intervals round a circle, as in the adjoining figure, and that seven isosceles triangles were erected on the chords of the arcs intercepted between every two. In these triangles the star at the right basal angle is the first star of each triangle, that at the vertex the second, that at the left basal angle the third; and this is the order in which they are opposite to one another. Thus if we begin with the Sun, the Moon is



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opposite to him, Mars to her; the opposite to Mars in the next triangle is Mercury; the opposite to Mercury, Jupiter; then passing to the third triangle, Venus stands opposite to Jupiter, Saturn to Venus: so that, if we take the planets in the order of their opposition, we get the exact order in which they stand among the days of the week. Now this solution is extremely simple and neat; but it leaves us totally at a loss to imagine how any people came to hit on such an odd method of giving names to the days of the week. In a subsequent passage (p. 135) Scaliger in support of this explanation, and with a tacit reference to Dion, states his belief that the planetary names of the days are older than the division of the day into twenty-four hours: and in his *Prolegomena*, p. XLVI, he repeats: *Ea appellatio longe antiquior horis. Quare non ab horis planetariis nomina diebus septimanae imposita, sed potius superstitione appellationis dierum in horas derivata.*

Now there is always a good deal of risk in controverting an assertion made by Scaliger: for he deviates from the practice of ordinary scholars, whose wont is to display all their forces in front, and who often care little about the strength of their line, if they can but make it long enough, filling it up not seldom with men of straw, or with such as are sure to desert at the first attack: Scaliger frequently keeps his main arguments in the background; and many of his conclusions rest not immediately on any express authorities, but on profound and subtle combinations of the materials with which his boundless learning supplied him. In the present instance however the arguments he has put forward are so weak, that one is tempted to doubt whether he had any much more powerful to back them with. To prove the antiquity of the planetary names for the days of the week, he refers to two passages. The first is an oracle given by Porphyry in his treatise *Περὶ τῆς ἐκ λογίων φιλοσοφίας*, of which so many fragments are found in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius. “The gods (says Porphyry in Euseb. *Praep. Ev.* v. 14) frequently make it manifest by foreshewing their decrees, that from knowing the conditions under which each individual is born they are, if one may so say, consummate diviners and casters of nativities. Apollo too in an oracle has specially enjoined

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Κληΐζειν Ἑρμῆν, ἠδ' ἥλιον κατὰ ταῦτα
 Ἡμέρη ἡελίου· μῆνην δ', ὅτε τῆσδε παρείη
 Ἡμέρη, ἠδὲ Κρόνον, ἠδ' ἐξείης Ἀφροδίτην,
 Κλησέσιν ἀφθέγκτοις, ἃς εὔρε μάγων ὄχ' ἄριστος,
 Τῆς ἐπταφθόγγου βασιλεὺς, ὃν πάντες ἴσασι·

and when the hearers said, *you mean Ostanes*, he added :

Καὶ σφόδρα καὶ καθ' ἕκαστον αἰεὶ θεὸν ἐπτακιφώνην.”

Now the meaning of this passage is so obscure, and its age so indeterminate, that it is utterly impossible to found any historical conclusions upon it. If the days spoken of in the first three lines are, as they rather seem to be, and as Porphyry, from connecting them with the casting of nati- vities, must have understood them to be, those of the week, and not those of the month,—of which the fourth was consecrated to Hermes, the first and seventh to Apollo, the fourth or, according to others, the sixth to Aphrodite (see Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* pp. 430–433)—one may boldly pronounce that the oracle is a fabrication of a very recent date. The negative evidence against the prevalence of a division of time into weeks in ancient Greece is so ample and strong, that it may safely be deemed absolutely conclusive: at least it would require the most explicit and incontrovertible positive evidence to outweigh it. No allusion to anything of the sort is to be found in the comic writers, none in the antiquarians: though the days of the month consecrated to particular gods are often spoken of, no days of the week are ever mentioned as in like manner sacred. And we may rely upon it that Apollo never ordained what was at variance with all the institutions of his worshipers. Besides, if Porphyry's inter- pretation of the latter lines be correct, it must assuredly have been in a very late age, if ever, that Apollo recom- mended the adoption of Magian rites, and spoke in such terms of a Magian: the gods had not such short memories, that the attack of Xerxes on the Delphic oracle should soon be forgotten. Scaliger says, *βασιλεὺς τῆς ἐπταφθόγγου* means Ostanes, king of Babylon; because *Βαβυλων* has seven letters in it. But this is a very forced interpretation of *ἐπτάφθογ- γος*: nor is it apparent in what sense Ostanes could be called *the king of Babylon*. His name indeed at one time was in great renown; but our information concerning him is singularly

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vague. According to Pliny (xxx. 2) “the oldest treatise on magic extant in his time was written by Osthanes, who accompanied Xerxes on his expedition into Greece, spreading as it were the seeds of divination, and inoculating the world with it wherever he went. There is no doubt that he inflamed the nations of Greece not merely with a desire but a rage for that knowledge.—The same sect acquired no slight increase of influence in the time of Alexander the Great from a second Osthanes, who was admitted among his companions, and unquestionably traversed the whole surface of the earth.” Shortly after (xxx. 5) he adds: “according to the account of Osthanes there are several kinds of magic: for he promises to divine by means of water, and of globes, and of air, and of the stars, and of lanterns, and of vessels, and of axes, and in many other ways, and moreover to procure answers from ghosts and demons.” In other places (xxviii. 19, 87, 90) Pliny speaks of certain charms recommended by Osthanes, doubtless in the magical treatise just mentioned: which may perhaps have been the *Ὀκτάτευχος* cited by Eusebius at the end of the first book of the *Praeparatio Evangelica*. The same *Ὀκτάτευχος* was probably the work on the strength of which Cyprian (*De Idolorum Vanitate* p. 226. ed. Baluz.) stated that the chief of the Magians, Hostanes, had asserted the invisibility of the true God, and that the angels stand around his throne; a statement copied from Cyprian by Augustin at the end of his sixth book on Baptism against the Donatists: perhaps too Cyprian himself merely took his account from Minucius Felix, who gives a similar view of the doctrines inculcated by Osthanes: Octavius p. 246. ed. Ouzel. Doubtless too it was from the same work that Lutatius (on the *Thebais* of Statius, i. 710) learnt that *Mytra* was the Persian name for the sun. As the *Ὀκτάτευχος* seems to have been in Greek, it must not be carried back beyond the age of Alexander: but it is not absolutely impossible that it should have been by the person whom Pliny calls the second Osthanes; for the instances of Manetho and Berosus prove that soon after the establishment of the Greek empire over Asia members of the Eastern and Egyptian priesthood took to writing in the universal language.