

John Lydus, *De Mensibus* (Book 4)

[141]

JULY

102. One would take the month of July as the fifth [month] of the civic [year], but the seventh of the priestly year. For counting from March—and that was the one instituted by Romulus as the beginning of the civic year—it is fifth, and hence it was formerly named Quintilis. [142] But [it is] seventh, counting from January; and this [is] the priestly [first month], in accordance with Numa. So then, Caesar, who was not only adorned with good fortune, but also with priesthood (indeed, he was *pontifex*, that is, "bridge-man,"¹ chief-priest or divine-worker,² on account of his lineage from Aphrodite), finding the month of Quintilis, changed its name—not only because of the perfection of the number, but also because he himself had been born on the fourth day before the Ides of this month.

He was named Caesar *not*, as the ancients say, from the fact that his mother Aurelia's womb was cut open³ (the claim being that she died while pregnant, and that when she had been cut open he was taken out).⁴ The truth determined by historians regarding this appellation of his is as follows: In the [2nd] Punic War, when Syphax was fighting with Hannibal, it is said that Gaius Rutilius—this man was an ancient ancestor of Caesar—while fighting in the front ranks, launched his spear against the Mauritanian with such force that he brought down the elephant on which his enemy was riding, and thus he took the nickname "Caesar," because among the Phoenicians the animal [known as] the elephant is called *kaisar*.⁵ And Valens, who himself also wrote about Caesar, says that he [143] was most excellent and most outstanding in size, and furthermore also long-haired.⁶ For in their ancestral language, the Romans call the hair "*caesaries*"—and he says that it was on account of the beauty [he derived] from it that he was named "Caesar." But his proper name was "Gaius"; "Julius" [was] indicative of nobility—from Iulus the [son] of Aeneas [the son] of Aphrodite; and "Caesar" [was indicative] of excellence.⁷

103. Theodosius the Younger, by way of innovating, removed the term "Olympiad" from chronological reckoning.

104. They say that Caesar came to have an epileptic attack from an unending winter;⁸ but later, he was treated by taking a decoction of the "Heracleian" plant with the rennet from a seal.⁹

¹ Gk. *gephyraios*. Cf. 1.15.

² Gk. *theourgos*.

³ I.e., explaining *Caesar* from Latin *caedere* [with perf. pass. ptc. *caesum*], "to cut."

⁴ Cf. Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* fragment [= Zonaras 10.11], for which see C. Pelling (tr.), *Plutarch: Caesar* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 77, with discussion on pp. 129-32. Pliny, *Natural History* 7.47, in reference to the "first of the Caesars."

⁵ Cf. *Historia Augusta, Life of Aelius* 2.3; Servius on *Aen.* 1.286. For more discussion see A. Alföldi, "Die Erklärung des Namens 'Caesar' in den spätrömischen Kompendien (zu v. Ael, 2, 3-5)," in *Caesariana* (Bonn, 1984), pp. 175-88.

⁶ Gk. *komêtês*.

⁷ Gk. *aretê*: alternatively, "virtue" or "courage."

⁸ The Greek term (*cheimôn*) can also mean "storm"—perhaps there has been some confusion on the basis of a translation from Latin *tempestas*, which means "storm" or "time."

And it is not surprising that Caesar was well-supplied with seal-rennet. But Aretas the leader of the Arab Scenitae, writing a letter to Claudius Caesar regarding medical treatment using [components from] birds, says that a vulture's liver, roasted with the blood, taken with honey three times a week frees [a patient] from epilepsy, and similarly also the vulture's heart, when it has been dried, taken with water in the same manner, has the same effect.¹⁰

105. The majority of historians say that Caesar was a seven-month baby, and that for this reason he changed the name of the seventh month of the priestly year [144] to his own.¹¹ And no one else played the man the way he did.

106. An oracle was given to the Romans by the Mother¹²—that throughout the month of July they should not engage in sexual activity at all, if they were to keep their bodies healthy.

107. When the sun is in Leo, the Nile rises.¹³ The Nile formerly had the name Ilas, then Aegyptus (from [king] Aegyptus), then Chrysorrhoeas,¹⁴ and thereafter, Nile (from the king so called). For the opinion of the grammarians sees that the Nile was named etymologically on the basis of the new *mud* [*ilys*]. Concerning the increase of its waters in the summer,¹⁵ Anaxagoras says that it is the snows of Ethiopia which melt and feed into the Nile. And of this opinion too are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. But the greatest of Roman philosophers, Seneca, speaks against this, insisting that Ethiopia <is very hot> (whence also the bodies of the Troglodytes are burnt through—since they cannot tolerate the sun, they dwell [145] under the ground; and the silver in that place detaches from lead [solder];¹⁶ and no material does not melt away). And besides, [he says], there are many rivers lying in the South, none of which we observe to rise in flood in the summer, even though mountains lie above them. But Euthymenes of Massilia says that he sailed through the Atlantic ocean and saw the Nile springing from that [ocean]—and that it was more swollen [with water] whenever the so-called Etesian [winds]

⁹ For this remedy, cf. [Aristotle], *De mirabilibus* 77 [835b32] (and Antigonus, *Mir.* 20, citing Aristotle = Aristotle fr. 370); Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum* 9.11.3—the closest parallel, with both components. Epilepsy was frequently referred to as "Heracles' disease."

¹⁰ Cf. F. Cumont, "Le sage Bothros ou le phylarque Arétas?" *Revue de philologie* 50 (1926), pp. 13-33; R. Möhler, *Epistula de vulture*' (1990), esp. pp. 63-5. For more general discussion, see L. C. MacKinney, "The Vulture in Ancient Medical Lore," *Ciba Symposia* 4 (1942), pp. 1257-71.

¹¹ The name of the month in Latin is *Julius*.

¹² I.e., the Magna Mater.

¹³ For an exhaustive discussion of the various ancient theories explaining the annual Nile flood, see D. Bonneau, *La crue du Nil: Divinité Égyptienne à travers mille ans d'histoire* (Paris, 1964), pp. 135-214; cf. also P. Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile* (Berkeley, 2001), pp. 275-82; J. Priestley, *Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 118-37.

¹⁴ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 66.1, and some later chroniclers, likewise give Chrysorrhoeas as an alternate name for the Nile. Cf. also Athenaeus 5.36 [203c], where the Nile is described as "truly 'gold-streaming' [*chrysorrhoeas*]." "Ilas," by contrast, appears to be unattested elsewhere.

¹⁵ From here through the report of the views of Diogenes of Apollonia, John's discussion closely parallels selected portions of the extant remains of Seneca's treatment of the Nile floods (*Quaestiones Naturales* 4.2.17-30). For analysis and reconstruction of this section of Seneca's text, see G. Williams, "Reading the Waters: Seneca on the Nile in 'Natural Questions,' Book 4A," *Classical Quarterly* 58 (2008), pp. 218-42.

¹⁶ The verb is *apomolyboô*, for which in this passage LSJ suggest "turn into lead"; but the equivalent phrase in Seneca is *argentum replumbatur*, meaning "silver is detached from lead / solder" (in keeping with the alternate meaning offered by LSJ); it may be, however, that John is not correctly understanding Seneca's wording, and is simply constructing an etymological calque of the Latin verb.

blow. For at that time, he says, the ocean is pushed outward by the winds, but when these die down it is at rest. And the water of the Atlantic ocean is nearly fresh; and the wild creatures in it are similar to those in the Nile. But Seneca speaks against this too, insisting that the fresh and light water is snatched up by the sun, and that the whole sea is in all ways salty—and that this [allegation] is not at all true. For if this were the case, then the Nile would swell also in winter, and indeed more so, the more the movement of the winds is more forceful [then]. And furthermore, it also appears rather muddy and dark blue, which is unlike the waters of the sea. After him, Diogenes of Apollonia says that as the sun takes away the moisture, the Nile is drawn out of the sea by the dryness; for [the land] being by nature porous and cut through with holes, it draws the wet liquid to itself—and the drier the land of Egypt is [146], the more it draws the moisture to itself, just as olive oil in lamps rushes more to the place where it is being consumed by the fire.¹⁷ But Herodotus says that the sun draws the moisture from all rivers as it passes through the southerly zone close to the earth, and that, turning off toward the north in summer, the Nile is summoned forth—and for this reason it floods in the summer. But the Egyptians say that the Etesian [winds] push all the clouds above away toward the south, and as heavy rain comes down from them, the Nile gushes forth. Yet Ephorus of Cyme, nevertheless, says in the first [book] of his *Histories* that Egypt is loose-packed by nature, and that it is silted up by the Nile as the mud accumulates year by year, and that the river, just like sweat, flows down at the time of burning [summer] heat toward the [parts] that are lighter and looser. But Thrasyalces of Thasos also says that the Etesian [winds] push the Nile outward; for since Ethiopia is girdled by mountains higher than ours, as it receives the clouds that are driven by the Etesian [winds], the Nile swells. As Callisthenes the Peripatetic also says in the fourth book of his *Hellenica* that he campaigned with Alexander the Macedonian, and when he was in Ethiopia he found that the Nile is driven down by the endless rain-storms that take place [147] in that [area]. But Dicaearchus also, in [his] *Circuit of the World*, asserts that the Nile floods because of the Atlantic ocean. So then, the opinions about it are diverse, but the truth so far is nowhere, as far as human beings [can judge]. For according to the oracle,

Exactitude is in depth.¹⁸

And Chrestus the Roman¹⁹ says:

In the west there are very large and tall mountains, which separate Libya from Ethiopia; falling upon the furthest roots of these [mountains], [is] the Atlantic sea, from which point Ethiopia begins toward the west. Now then, under these mountains²⁰ there are pools spreading out to an unlimited width; beside them dwell the race of human beings called the Ichthyophagi, who spend their time, from the first hour until sunset, in the water, and feed on the fish. Neighboring these are the so-called Anthropophagi, a most courageous race of human beings, endowed with rounded noses,²¹ curved faces, and nails

¹⁷ At this point, the extant part of Seneca's discussion breaks off; but John's material probably reflects the lost part—e.g., Hine's translation, *Seneca: Natural Questions* (Chicago, 2010), pp. 63-64, includes a translation of portions of John's discussion to fill out the missing parts of Seneca's text.

¹⁸ *Chaldaean Oracles* fr. 183 Des Places. Hine (p. 64) includes this sentence, translating *logion* as "proverb" rather than "oracle," but if it really is a Chaldaean fragment, it would post-date Seneca.

¹⁹ For the near-unknown Chrestus (possibly a contemporary of Cassius Dio), see Bonneau, pp. 148-9, 156.

²⁰ I.e., at their feet, presumably.

²¹ Or "nostrils"?

almost like the [claws] of lions. From those pools, then, the river takes its origins; for the streams, as they flow out of them, thickly cover [the ground]. Now, from these pools, which those people call *Chaae*, flows a kind of stream, very thin and barely seen, which, as it descends into narrow places and little by little, from various directions, comes down into its own particular river-bed, takes on the appearance of a river. And this would be the Nile, which twists around over various regions and comes [148] through rough and trackless places, of which the ... from there it flows out onto level ground and comes together again into a river-bed—and then goes along through the uninhabited parts of the south as a navigable [river] to Meroe, and as it flows around this [place] it makes an island. (For all [this area] is level.) Now then, from there the whole [river], being confined, turns toward the east and toward Egypt—and from there into the sea, with a rather powerful wind blowing over it. On account of the force of the north wind, you see, as has been said, the river is pushed back or rather is made to flow back, and floods all of Egypt. But when the east wind blows from the east against the Etesian [winds], or the south wind pushes the Nile out from the south, with the north wind gently abating, naturally the river rushes down to the sea. And that is evidence that it does not swell from the melting of snows (because it is not cold, but hot)—and for this reason, when the water settles back, there are found in the mud certain living creatures partially formed and partially monstrous. These sorts of creatures are naturally generated by heat and moisture, which is not true in the case of other bodies of water. For they only have fish. Others speak by guesswork, but I (says Chrestus) have actually been at the furthest point of Mauretania, at the mouth of the Ocean.

108. Wherever the "pasturage"²² of fire burns, of necessity [149] the earth deep-down is sponge-like, from which cause [arise] hot springs. Hence also the nature of this sort of waters is slimy, because [they are] sea-[waters]. By means of the fire, it [i.e., the earth (?)] changes the salty to something disgusting and becomes bituminous and full of alum and sulfur. †It does not purify, rather drying out somewhat as the vapors of the bitumen sink down deeper by virtue of the greater moisture of the waters.

109. Cestius the proconsul, being in charge of Jerusalem, set up the image of Nero by night in the temple of the Hebrews, so as to have Nero partake in the honor [paid] to God. But they became angry and did away with both Cestius himself and all the Romans that were found in the East—and gave the rulers a clear declaration of war.²³

110. The Romans call vagabonds and wanderers *errusali*. But the commoners say "*erruli*" out of ignorance.²⁴

²² Gk. *nomê*. This could be a reference to the material on which the fire "grazes"; alternatively, it can refer to the *spread* of a fire (LSJ s.v. A3b)—in which case, the phrase could be translated, "Wherever a spreading fire continues to burn..." But regardless of the precise meaning of this opening phrase, John clearly is meaning to identify a certain kind of terrain.

²³ This note seems to confuse the beginnings of the Jewish War with an incident from the reign of Caligula. See S. J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome* (Leiden, 1979), p. 253.

²⁴ The latter seems perhaps to be meant as a reference to the *Heruli* (a Germanic tribe), attempting to connect them to the Latin verb root *err-*. The former is quite opaque; could an association with *Jerusalem* (mentioned in the previous section) be envisioned?