

John Lydus, *De Mensibus* (Book 4)

[83]

FEBRUARY

25. The name of the month of February came from the goddess called *Februa*; and the Romans understood *Februa* as an overseer and purifier of things. But Anysius says in his work "On the Months" that *Februus* in the Etruscan language [means] "the underground [one]"—and that he is worshipped by the Luperci for the sake of the crops' increase. Labeo, however, says that February was named from "lamentation"—for among the Romans, lamentation is called *feber*¹—and in it, they would honor the departed. Yet in fact the pontifical books call the action of purifying *februare*, and [call] Pluto *Februs*. For the sublunar race of *daemons*² is divided into three parts, according to Iamblichus: The earthly [part] of it is punitive, the aerial [part] is purificatory, and the one near the orbit of the moon is salvific; we also know of this one as "heroic." It is said that this whole [race] is led by a certain very great *daemon*—and this would pretty clearly be Pluto [84], as Iamblichus likewise says.³

They judge that the month of February was rightly dedicated to Hera, on account of the fact that the natural [philosophers] think Hera to be the lower *aer*,⁴ and purification does precisely befit the *aer*. And in this month the temples and the sacred implements were purified. Similarly also in the case of private persons, everyone would take care of purificatory rites.

In February the drink-offerings for the departed were conducted—and for this reason, Numa cut [the month] short, judging it irreligious for the month connected to those who "cut short" everything⁵ to be honored equally with the others.

[The month] is not only called February [*Februarius*], but also *Februatus*, because its overseer is referred to in the rites as both *Februata* and *Februalis*.⁶

26. Those of the Romans who write natural history say that when seed is cast into the womb, on the third day it is transformed into blood and "paints"⁷ the heart, which is said to be formed first and to die last.⁸ For if three is the beginning / ruling principle⁹ of numbers, and is an

¹ This is unattested elsewhere. Wunsch cites Kahl, "Cornelius Labeo," *Philologus* Suppl. 5 (1889), p. 732, for further discussion; cf. also Mastandrea, *Cornelio Labeone*, p. 44: *feber* might possibly be an alternative form of *febris* ("fever"); or there may be textual corruption.

² Gk. δαίμων was originally used for all sorts of deities, but in Platonic philosophy especially it ended up referring primarily to supernatural forces intermediate between gods [θεοί] and humans. In Christian usage it normally has the specifically evil connotation of the English derivative *demon*.

³ While the specifics of John's references here to Iamblichus are not attested, Clarke et al., *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries* (Atlanta, 2003), p. 97 n. 131, cite this passage as roughly parallel to the thinking of *De Mysteriis* 2.5. Cf., however, John's citation of Hermes (Trismegistus) below, §32.

⁴ *Aer* (Gk. αἴρ) in Greek thought refers to the atmosphere close to the earth—moist, dense and cloudy, by contrast with the more lofty *aether* (Gk. αιθήρ). The English words "air" and "ether" are derived from these two terms. The connection of Hera with *aer* was fostered by etymological play: Hera (HPA) and *aer* (AHP) are anagrams in Greek.

⁵ I.e., underworld spirits connected to death.

⁶ The form John actually uses for the latter here is *Februalem* [Lat. acc. form]. On Juno Februata / Februalis, see Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, s.v. "Juno" [<http://www.ancientlibrary.com/smith-bio/1766.html>].

⁷ Gk. διαζωγραφεῖν.

⁸ It was Aristotle's view that the heart was the first organ to develop, observable on the third day in chick embryos (*On the Parts of Animals* 3.4 [665a-667b]).

⁹ Gk. ἀρχή.

odd number, then consequently the beginning / ruling principle of birth [comes] from it.¹⁰ And on the ninth [day], it congeals and coagulates to form flesh and marrow; and on the 40th [day it is said] to be completed as a comprehensive form of configuration—to put it simply, a complete human being. [85]

Something similar to [these properties of] the days [holds true] in the case of the months. In the third month, [the fetus] held in the womb begins to move; and in the ninth month it is completely finished and hastens to come out. And if it is female, [this happens] in the ninth month, while if it is stronger [i.e., male], at the beginning of the tenth [month], because the number nine, being female and properly belonging to the moon [*Selênê*], is carried along toward matter, while ten is perfect and male. But female and male come into being in keeping with the prevalence of heat: When the heat is plentiful for the seed, since the solidification happens quickly, it is masculinized and transformed quickly; but when [the solidification] is impaired, it is overpowered by the influx [of liquids] and in the struggle it is feminized; it solidifies more slowly, and takes shape more slowly. And the account is true [which states] that male [fetuses] that miscarry even within 40 days come out already formed, while female [fetuses] even after 40 days are fleshy and unformed.¹¹

After the pregnancy, they say that the newborn child is wrapped in swaddling clothes on the third [day], and that on the ninth [day] it becomes stronger and tolerates being touched; and on the 40th [day] it acquires the ability to laugh and it begins to recognize its mother.

And in [the body's] decomposition, they say, nature rounds the turning post and observes precisely the same numbers again, and falls apart by the same [numbers] by which it came together. Indeed, after one has died, on the third day the body is altered completely and its appearance / face¹² can no longer be recognized. On the ninth [day], everything dissolves in liquidity,¹³ although the heart is still preserved. And on the 40th [day], this too disintegrates along with the rest. For this reason, in the case of the dead, those who make offerings to them observe the third, ninth, and 40th [days], being mindful of its formation at first, its growth after that, and finally its dissolution.

27. When the Gauls took Rome, Camillus brought together a large number [of soldiers] and fell upon the enemy. A mighty battle ensued, and when their swords were broken as well as their armor—for the Romans did not yet use iron breastplates, but only bronze ones in keeping with the ancient times—for the rest [of the fight] they resorted to their hands; and they dragged each other by the crests of their helmets and even by the very hair of their beards. Finally, he [i.e., Camillus] drove out the barbarians and saved Rome, and was called a "second Romulus." And thus, they were ordered to shave their beards on the end [of their chins], and to have helmets without crests.¹⁴

¹⁰ For 3 as the first "real" number in Pythagorean thought, see Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, pp. 35, 41; Ps.-Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetic* (tr. Waterfield), p. 50: "...the triad causes the potential of the monad to advance into actuality and extension." The other numbers that come into the account are also numerologically significant: 9 is the square of 3; and $40 = 4 \times (1 + 2 + 3 + 4)$ —cf. Hopper, pp. 44-45. Further on John Lydus' numerical material, see Robbins, "The Tradition of Greek Arithmology," *Classical Philology* 16 (1921) 97-123.

¹¹ For reference to similar views regarding fetal development, see A. E. Hanson, "The Gradualist View of Fetal Development," in Brisson et al. (eds.), *L'embryon: Formation et animation* (Paris, 2008), pp. 95-108.

¹² Gk. ὄψις.

¹³ The whole phrase is an attempt to represent Gk. διαρρεῖ.

¹⁴ Elsewhere, the story is told that Alexander the Great had his soldiers shave their beards for this reason (Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 5). The relevance of telling this story about the Gauls' sack of Rome is unclear, but John Malalas

28. ...in the *oratio* (or address) to the people. [87] The bodyguard is a *spatharios*; and the weapon-crafters are *phaurikisioi*.¹⁵

29. On the Ides of February.¹⁶ From this day, from the sixth hour, they would make the sacred things secure by means of drink-offerings for the deceased, and the magistrates would go out in the guise of private persons, until the eighth day before the Kalends of March.¹⁷

And the modest women (the Romans call them *matronae*, while the Greeks [call them] "mistresses of households") were so concerned about their modesty that they would not associate with the majority of women, but even set apart for themselves quiet places, apart from the crowds, in the baths, which they call *matronicia* to this day. Now then, these modest women made offerings to the shades¹⁸ of Brutus, for the following reason: Lucretia, a certain Roman woman who was exceedingly beautiful and modest, is said to have once been raped by Tarquin, the last of the kings, or by his son. And history calls him "Superbus"—that is, "arrogant." For he was the first inventor of instruments of punishment [i.e., torture] and the mines [as a form of punishment];¹⁹ and, so that he would not be weakened by the torments of those being punished, he would administer to them a plant which provoked incongruous laughter in those who were suffering. (And this sort of plant still grows on the island of Sardinia; hence they call [this] "sardonic" laughter.)²⁰ For this reason, they called Tarquin "Superbus"—meaning, "harsh and savage." But nothing could produce hatred like this [behavior]. That woman, then, Lucretia, considering her modesty more important than a royal "association" [88]—and not only that, but even [more important] than her very life—sent for her [relatives] and after telling about the sin that could have lain hidden if she wished it, killed herself in the presence of the witnesses to her modesty. So then, the nation was moved at this, hatred of the tyrant increased.... who, grasping the opportunity, became a leader of the Roman people and expelled Tarquin from the kingship.²¹ Therefore, Brutus was honored by the Roman women, as I have said, with public lamentation after his death, as an avenger of modesty.²² And they thought it fitting that they be called "Brutae" in honor of Brutus.

(7.10-12) and some other late sources connect the naming of the month of February with a senator named "Februarius" supposedly active at that time.

¹⁵ This appears to be a garbled reflection of Lat. *Fabricii*—a Roman family whose name does indeed appear to be derived from *faber*, "craftsman"—or some related word.

¹⁶ 13 Feb.

¹⁷ 22 Feb. (*Cara Cognatio*)—Ovid (*Fasti* 2.33-34), by contrast, thinks these *dies parentales* end with 21 Feb. (*Feralia*).

¹⁸ Lit., *daimones*, but presumably reflecting Lat. *Di Manes*.

¹⁹ For Tarquinius Superbus as the inventor of torments, cf. Suda s.v. "Superbus."

²⁰ The plant's association with Tarquinius Superbus is not otherwise attested, but "sardonic" laughter / smile is attested already in Homer (*Odyssey* 20.302); cf. LSJ s.v. σαρδάνιος.

²¹ The expulsion of the monarchy, celebrated on 24 Feb. (*Regifugium*), seems to be the warrant for the story here—note, however, that the honors for the dead Brutus tie it to the prior rites for the dead in this month.

²² Livy 2.7 only mentions that they mourned Brutus for an entire year, not that they commemorated his death thereafter.

30. The Romans call the public slave a *vernaclus*.²³ Because the Roman people was divided into three [*treis*] parts, they called the "tribe" [*phylê*] a *tribus*, and the leaders of the commoners tribunes [*tribuni*]. And they were concerned with chariot-racing²⁴—that it should be carried out in a fitting way—and therefore, even now a tribune takes the lead in the *voluptates*, meaning "pleasures." Since the place is called *agôn* and *agônia*²⁵ on account of its being round—because it has no corner [*gônia*]—in accordance with this shape, circular garlands used to be placed on the winners. And the three columns²⁶ make manifest three elements²⁷ of nature: water, fire, and earth. For over these alone death exercises its power, and hence myth gives Pluto a dog with three heads, meaning [89] "with three elements."²⁸ The air, you see, is *life-giving*. So then, through the columns it becomes clear that they celebrated the *agônia*²⁹ in honor of those who died on behalf of their country, as three—not four—chariots competed in the chariot-racing. The one [team is] the *russati*, or "reds," the next the *albati*, or "whites," the next the *virides*, or "flourishing ones" (but now they call them "greens").³⁰ And the *russati* thought they belonged to Ares, the "whites" to Zeus, and the "flourishing ones" to Aphrodite. Later on, [there was] also the blue [team]; they call them the "blues" [*benetoi / veneti*] in the local [language]—[meaning] ferruginous³¹—from the *Heneti* [= *Veneti*] around the Adriatic who wear clothing of that [color]. But the Romans call "blue" [*beneton / venetum*] the color we call "blue-green" [*kalainon*]. Well then, the Gauls were filling a certain place of their own as they watched in the hippodrome; and they called them *Veneti* on the basis of their clothing—and [called] their country *Venetia* because no one there ever had an abundance of garments. And because of the four elements, they made the contests four in number. The "flourishing" is equivalent to fire, in

²³ I.e., a syncopated version of *vernaclus*, from *verna*. The reason for this reference is clarified by *De magistratibus* 1.44, where John Lydus says that the tribunes were served by public slaves called *vernacli*.

²⁴ 27 Feb. was *Equirria*, a festival involving horse-racing. This may be the rationale for the discussion of chariot-races at this point in John's text.

²⁵ These Greek terms literally mean "contest" or "place of contest."

²⁶ Gk. ὄβελοι. John is referring either to the sets of three conical turning-point markers on either end of the *spina* of a Roman hippodrome (referred to as bronze ὄβελίσκοι by Hesychius, *Patria* 37 [Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitarum*, 1: 16]), or to the three columns adorning the *spina* of the Constantinople Hippodrome: the obelisk of Theodosius, the "Serpent Column," and (most likely) the original column standing in the central position now occupied by the "walled obelisk," whose inscription attests that it was repaired by Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Cf. B. Ward-Perkins, "Old and New Rome Compared," in Grig and Kelly (eds.), *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 59-60; Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 324-5; and Jona Lendering's comments on the columns adorning the Hippodrome: http://www.livius.org/cn/cs/constantinople/constantinople_hippodrome_4.html.

²⁷ The Greek term τριστοιχος normally means "in three rows" or "threefold"—but John here (presumably because of the association with στοιχεῖον, "element") seems to be assuming the meaning "of three elements."

²⁸ The association with death (perhaps significantly at the dangerous turning-post area) shows a connection to the theme of February as a month for memorializing the dead. The hippodrome's ties to the chthonic Consus (Humphrey, *Roman Circuses*, pp. 60-61) and a curious mocking ritual of reverence performed in the Constantinople hippodrome by the chariot-drivers to a white-robed figure known as the "ruler of the underground [spirits]" (Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitarum*, 1:80-81; Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, p. 338) reinforce this reminder of mortality.

²⁹ I.e., the contest.

³⁰ The symbolism seen in the colors associated with the circus teams / factions is paralleled in many points by various writers; for extensive documentation, see Wuillemier, "Cirque et astrologie," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 44 (1927), pp. 191-4; Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 330-338. Cf. also further details offered by John Lydus in *De Mensibus* 1.12.

³¹ Gk. σιδηρόβαφος—etymologically, "iron-dyed" or "iron-tempered."

honor of Rome—and they call it Flora, just as we say "Anthusa" ["flowering"].³² Second is the "white," on account of the air; the third group [is dedicated to] Ares; and the fourth, now attached to Cronus or Poseidon—for deep blue is attributed to both. The reds are dedicated to fire [90] on account of the color; similarly the greens to earth on account of the flowers, the blues to Hera, the whites to water. But others say that green [represents] the spring, red the summer, blue the autumn, and white the winter. And so, they considered it an omen of misfortune for the "flourishing" [team] to suffer a loss—as though Rome itself had been defeated. For because the western "cardinal point"³³ was attributed to the element of earth, it was reasonable for them to be concerned about it.³⁴ For this reason too the Romans, it is clear, honored Hestia before all [others], just as the Persians [honor] the rock-born Mithras on account of the cardinal point of fire; and those under the Bear [honor] the moist nature on account of the cardinal point of water; and the Egyptians [honor] Isis, the equivalent of Selene, the overseer of all the air.

31. Just as the baby, when it is in the womb, does not need any other sustenance, but is nourished from pure blood—in the same way, they did not pour offerings for those who died in the previous year (as I have said), who lie hidden in "nature"³⁵ as though in the womb. For the drink-offerings were offered as a kind of refreshment for the phantoms of those who had died: milk, blood and wine, and fine flour, and conch,³⁶ and some other things. And they called them "pourings" [*choai*] from the fact that they were poured out over the graves. Even now, a trace [of this custom] is preserved: In the sacred rites we offer bread and wine.³⁷

32. The Egyptian Hermes, in what is called his [91] "Perfect Discourse"³⁸ says that the punitive *daemons*, being present in matter, exact vengeance from humanity in accordance with our deserts. The purificatory [*daemons*], being fixed in the air, purify the souls which are attempting after death to ascend, around the hail-filled and fiery zones of the air—which the poets (and Plato himself in the *Phaedo*) call Tartarus and Pyriphlegethon.³⁹ And the salvific [*daemons*], being arrayed near the moon's region, save souls.

³² For "Anthusa" as an alternate name for Constantinople, cf. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, p. 612.

³³ I.e., the Spring equinox.

³⁴ In Greek, the pronoun is feminine; it is not clear whether it refers to the "earth" or to "Rome," but the logic of the context seem to favor the latter.

³⁵ I.e., in the earth.

³⁶ That is, perhaps, mussels (?).

³⁷ This appears to be a reference to Christian use of bread and wine in the Eucharist.

³⁸ Although the material John here attributes to Hermes is not a close equivalent of anything in the extant *Asclepius* (also known as the "Perfect Discourse"), editors of the corpus have judged that it may correspond to something in the original Greek of the piece: Nock-Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 2: 334; Scott-Ferguson, *Hermetica* 1: 368.

³⁹ Cf. *Phaedo* 112-114.