

**John Lydus, *De Mensibus* (Book 4)**

[126]

MAY

76. We have shown that among numbers the power of the *tetrad* is not small—one might also call it *tetractys* and *pyramid*: *tetractys*, in accordance with the definition of the elements; *pyramid*, in accordance with theoretical reason. For the pyramid is the only shape enclosed by four sides and four corners, and the first one extended in three dimensions, based on the most elementary plane, the triangle, as Plato [127] says in the *Timaeus*,<sup>1</sup> and displays by way of similitude the arrangement that holds together the universe.

There remains the fifth [month]—the Romans call it May. And because, according to Hesiod,<sup>2</sup> the number of the *pentad* is separated from the more divine [things], it was natural for it to have been allotted to the departed. The *pentad*, you see, is dedicated to perceptible nature; for it is a sphere. As often as one multiplies the number 5, it will return into itself.<sup>3</sup> For indeed, [the number] 5, as it accompanies the numbers in quantity, ends with the same magnitude even when it is multiplied. In another way too the number totalling five has a certain natural power: Just as things in [the realm of] coming to be are composed of even and odd [number], so it is naturally the same, being assembled from the *triad* and the *dyad*.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, the Romans thus gave the month over to the honors for the ancestors, honoring the departed with the even [number], those still surviving with the odd—for after the gods, the ancients offered no less honor to their ancestors. And since they called the ancestors "*maiores*" in their native language, they named the month "*Maius*" on account of the honors [paid] to those [ancestors].

But others, thinking that it was from Maia the [daughter] of Atlas and <mother> of Hermes [128] that May was named, say this with other considerations in mind, yet also because of her temple, since it is said to have been consecrated in this month. Concerning <her>, Proclus speaks as follows:<sup>5</sup>

Maia is the one who brings forth what is hidden in invisibility into visibility, in very similar fashion to the midwives [*maiai*] here; and Hermes, her child, is the reason [*logos*] pervading all things, which firstly and eternally of [all] reasons [*logoi*] shows forth in dimensionality and providence the extent of the things in the invisible—bringing about sequence and continuity and conjunction, as being revelatory of all the unseen passions of the soul in us.

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<sup>1</sup> 54e-55a.

<sup>2</sup> *Works and Days* 802.

<sup>3</sup> That is to say, all the mathematical *powers* (square, cube, etc.) of 5 end with a '5': 25, 125, etc. For this as a property of "spherical" numbers, see Waterfield's comment in his translation of Ps.-Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetic*, p. 68 n. 9 and p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> See Ps.-Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetic*, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Proclus, *Commentary on Alcibiades I*, §187 (p. 127 of W. O'Neill's translation, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [The Hague, 1971]), where Proclus refers to Maia the mother of Hermes as the one "with whom inquiry lies hid"—but beyond this general connection, John's quotation is not extant in Proclus' works.

And Aquilinus<sup>6</sup> in his commentary on the numbers speaks thus:

Maia is equivalent to the pathway into visibility of (on the one hand) sovereign reason [*logos*] which by its nature pervades the universe and orders all things; hence they say she is the mother of Hermes. And intelligible matter<sup>7</sup> is of this kind: to set in order the pathway into visibility and to effectuate the coming-to-be of existent things. For things [are made] from matter and form.

Thus runs the account of *theology*; but by the methods of natural philosophy, the majority assert that Maia is *water*. Indeed, among the Syrians who do not speak Greek<sup>8</sup> water is still to this day called that, so that also water-vessels<sup>9</sup> are termed *mêiouri*.<sup>10</sup> And it was not without reason that Varro manifestly dedicated the month to her.<sup>11</sup> [129] For, as it appears to the philosophers, "tossing" occurs through the movement of the water beneath the surface. And the first festival of May among the Romans [is / was] the supplications regarding earthquakes. For in this way the mythographers represent Maia, the child of Atlas; and we learn that Hermes is guardian of the waters, and it is for this reason that in his [shrines] springs are dedicated or wells are dug.<sup>12</sup>

There are those who say that Hermes is the son of Zeus and Maia *allegorically*—hinting obscurely that Zeus is mind, Maia wisdom, and Hermes, the child [born] from both of them, is one who relates to *reason* [*logios*]. And they made him the youngest of all [gods], inasmuch as *reason* never grows old. And furthermore, they have made him very swift—equipping his feet with wings, hinting by this sort of craft<sup>13</sup> at the swiftness of mind and the quickness of reason. The poet, at any rate, says "winged words"<sup>14</sup> and "[swift] as a wing or a thought"<sup>15</sup> And then the

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<sup>6</sup> For this figure, possibly a contemporary of Porphyry (cf. *Life of Plotinus* 16: "Aculinus" in Armstrong's LCL translation), see Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés* 1: 156; C. Elsas, *Neoplatonische und gnostische Weltablehnung in der Schule Plotins* (Berlin, 1975), 14ff.; and R. T. Wallis, "Soul and Nous in Plotinus, Numenius and Gnosticism," in Wallis and Bregman (eds.), *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (Albany, NY, 1992), pp. 462, 474 n. 10, and 478 n. 46.

<sup>7</sup> I.e., matter perceptible by the intellect as opposed to that perceptible by the senses.

<sup>8</sup> Gk. *barbarizousin*.

<sup>9</sup> Gk. *hydrophora*, that is, (neut.) "water-carriers." G. Greatrex and J. W. Watt, "One, Two or Three Feasts? They Brytae, the Maiuma and the May Festival at Edessa," *Oriens Christianus* 83 (1999), pp. 1-21, translate this as "aqueducts," which may agree better with a potential reconstruction of the Syriac word(s) involved (p. 11). The Greek word is attested as an *adjective* supporting either sense, but the neuter plural seems more likely to leave a noun like generic "vessels" (ἄγγεῖα) implied.

<sup>10</sup> This discussion seems to be connected with the material on the *Maioumas* festival below.

<sup>11</sup> This statement is not included in Cardauns' (1976) or Agahd's (1898) edition of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*. Censorinus, *De die natali* 22, however, asserts that Varro derived the name of the month from Maia. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.12.19-20, discussing the name and character of the month of May, refers generically to those who believe that the name is derived from Mercury's mother Maia, and those who believe (among these he names Cornelius Labeo) that this Maia is the same as the Earth (*terra*) and is also called "Great Mother" (*Mater Magna*); see Mastandrea, *Un neoplatonico Latino: Cornelio Labeone*, pp. 47ff., for extensive discussion of the connections between Macrobius and John Lydus here, and their sources, and H. Brouwer, *Bona Dea* (Leiden, 1989), p. 353-4 (also discussing Macrobius' statements), for Varro's openness to the identification of various goddesses with the Earth.

<sup>12</sup> The general connection is odd; but near the Porta Capena in Rome there was a fountain known as *Aqua Mercurii*, whose waters were used ceremonially (Ovid, *Fasti* 5.673ff.); also, a mountain in Arcadia called Trikrêna ["three springs"] was associated with Hermes' birth (Pausanias 8.16.1), and at Pharae in Achaëa an oracular image of Hermes with water sacred to the god is attested (Pausanias 7.22.2).

<sup>13</sup> I.e., by this form of artistic representation of the god.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., *Iliad* 1.201.

<sup>15</sup> *Od.* 7.36.

Greeks fashion this [god] in a square [*tetragônos*] shape, supplying the greatest proof that he is reason [*logos*], and indeed *true reason*. For in fact there are [different] forms of reason: false reason, on the one hand . . . , and deceitful [reason] more polygonal;<sup>16</sup> [130] but true reason [is] equal to itself in all its parts—and however it turns, on any of its sides it stands firm without limit; and that is the form of a square. If, therefore, he has been demonstrated to be mind and reason, [not surprisingly] the Egyptians form the image of an *ape*<sup>17</sup> for him, because it is more intelligent than all [other] animals, and is able to receive understanding and knowledge. We also know, however, that the Egyptian *ibis* (the bird) is dedicated to him. For it is similar to the heart—with a white body, but blackening on either side—which is an image of the reason / speech [*logos*] in [the process of] thought: Before being spoken it is dark, while being spoken it becomes light, and after being uttered it goes off into invisibility. And this animal feeds by the water, just as the heart in us derives its power from moist material. And the ibis alone of all birds does not know how to swim, and is completely helpless when dragged out into deeper water. The same thing is to be observed in the case of the heart: When liquids are drunk in a moderate way, it is naturally strengthened and made firm in its reasoning, and is not displaced from its normal seat, which they call the *diaphragm* [*phrên*],<sup>18</sup> and is "sober"—but when quite soaked, by its palpitations it produces its own characteristic quaking motion throughout the body. People experience this on account of drunkenness, when they have paid more attention to unmixed wine than to their own strength.

It has also been inferred that the ibis and the ape are in sympathy with the moon. The ibis corresponds to it in its form—being darker at the extremities, but white in its mid-section, just like the moon high up in the sky.<sup>19</sup> For when there is no moon visible in the heavens, neither can the ibises *see*—they have their eyes closed during this time and persevere, without food, in waiting for the element that is akin to them. The ape, on the other hand, shows more obvious manifestations: When the moon waxes, their eye-circles widen, but when it wanes, the circumference of the eyes contracts.<sup>20</sup>

77. Aristotle mocked Callisthenes, saying that he had an extraordinary [*perissos*]<sup>21</sup> mind, but had lost his *human* mind.<sup>22</sup>

78. The Alpheius river is seen to descend [into the ground] in the Peloponnese, and to come up [again] in Sicily. And they say that the Tigris and the Lycus and some others experience the same thing.

79. Just as in our bodies there is some liquid circulation and also some gaseous circulation—liquid circulation in the blood, through the veins; gaseous in the breath,<sup>23</sup> through the arteries—in the same way also in the earth there is liquid and gaseous circulation in the waters and the winds, but when a blockage or an influx or a compression occurs, the earth trembles just as a man does. And Aristotle identifies the smoky and vaporous [exhalations] of

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<sup>16</sup> I.e., with more sides.

<sup>17</sup> Gk. *kerkôps*.

<sup>18</sup> Often translated "mind" because of its assumed function.

<sup>19</sup> Gk. *aitherios*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the same discussion at *De Mensibus* 3.11 (p. 51 Wuensch).

<sup>21</sup> The Greek word means "extraordinary" but also "superfluous" or "odd" (in the numerical sense).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *Alexander* 54.

<sup>23</sup> Gk. *pneuma*.

the earth as the cause<sup>24</sup>...if it should go favorably. But if not, it applies force to the earth. Tages, in his *Observations of Earthquakes*, says that if an earthquake happens to occur when [troops] are marching for wars, then those among whom it occurred are by all means the losing side. [132] And he also makes mention of other marvels, about which I will speak in a different work.<sup>25</sup>

80. On the first [day] of this <month> the high priest would proclaim that no one was to taste the feet or head of any sort of animal at all, for the whole month—to guard against joint disease.<sup>26</sup>

During this month also the festival of the *Rosalia* was celebrated among the Romans;<sup>27</sup> and the businessmen would pray to Maia and Hermes that their profits would be free of risk.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, all the profits grow in matter and out of the same, and in it, as it were "god-sends" [*Hermaia*] are found and distributed, they say, in accordance with merit.

But Numenius the Roman asserts that Hermes is the reason [*logos*] expressed in speech. For a baby, he says, will not make an utterance before it touches the earth, such that the many rightly understand Maia as the earth.<sup>29</sup> And also in accordance with another sacred discourse [*hieros logos*], Fonteius says that it is necessary to honor the earth on the Kalends of May, because the earth, boiling forth its inborn heat with a view to its manifestation, is moved to luxuriate and also leap up—and causes "quakings" in general throughout the month of May. Therefore in this month they honor Maia, [133] that is, by worshipping the earth.

They term the act of celebrating the festival *maioumizein*,<sup>30</sup> from which also [it is termed] *Maioumas*<sup>31</sup>—<for> [the relevant] festal celebration was held in Rome in the month of May. Those serving in the primary magistracies came to the coastal city called Ostia and brought themselves to take their pleasure throwing each other in the waters of the sea. Hence also the time of this sort of festival was called *Maioumas*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Meteorologica* 2.8 (365b-369a), explaining earthquakes by reference to winds (*pneumata*), and also drawing a parallel between the earth and the human body as John does here; Wuensch cites *Meteor.* 3.6 (378a), which identifies the smoky and vaporous "exhalations."

<sup>25</sup> For Tages, cf. *De Ostentis* 27-38, where John cites Tages through the intermediary of Nigidius Figulus; at 55-58, he cites Tages' interpretations of the significance of earthquakes *via* Vicellius. On these sources, see now J. M. Turfa, *Divining the Etruscan World: The Brontoscopic Calendar and Religious Practice* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Gk. *arthritis*.

<sup>27</sup> *Rosalia* was a term for a "rose-festival" often conducted in memory of the dead and / or as a spring celebration, perhaps more institutionalized in the late Empire. There seems to be an indication of such a festival on 23 May on the Calendar of Philocalus; the festal calendar of Dura-Europus designated 10 May and 31 May as *rosaliae*. For further detail see A. S. Hoey, "Rosaliae Signorum," *Harvard Theological Review* 30 (1937), pp. 15-35.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.12.19; Ovid, *Fasti* 5.663-92, attests merchants' prayers to Mercury on 15 May.

<sup>29</sup> Numenius fr. 57 (Des Places).

<sup>30</sup> I.e., "doing the *Maioumas*."

<sup>31</sup> The logical connection here is obscure; possibly, "ever since [they] also [called the festival] *Maioumas*," or, "on the basis of [the same reason they] also [call the festival] *Maioumas*." This last translation correlates best with the word "for" (added by Wuensch) in the following clause, but is not the most obvious otherwise.

<sup>32</sup> For the *Maioumas* / *Maiuma* festival(s) variously attested especially from the area of Syria in Late Antiquity, see Greatrex and Watt; also, N. Belayche, "Pagan Festivals in Fourth-Century Gaza," in Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky (eds.), *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 14-19. R. M. Good, "The Carthaginian *Mayumas*," *Studi epigrafici e linguistici* 3 (1986), pp. 100-102, argues that the term is a Semitic calque from Greek *hydrophoria* subsequently borrowed back into Greek as a technical term. [Note that A. Annus, *The Melammu Project*,

The moon is the first principle of birth.

81.<sup>33</sup> Empedocles judged that the substance of Necessity is a cause making use of the principles and the elements. But Democritus [argued that] resistance, impact, and motion of matter [were the cause of necessity]. Plato, however, attributes some things to Providence, others to Necessity, as he makes matter on the one hand, the attitude of the creator on the other hand, the cause. Heraclitus claims that Fate and Necessity are the same, but Plato also adds the cause that is with us [i.e., free will]. Now then, the Stoics say that Necessity is immutable, while Fate is an interweaving of causes that have been appointed—and in this "interweaving" [they include] free will<sup>34</sup>—such that some things are fated, others co-fated. Heraclitus judged that the substance of Fate is the reason [*logos*] that pervades the universe; but Chrysippus [thinks it is] the arrangement of the whole, or the reason / system [*logos*] of the things that are [providentially] managed. Poseidonius, however, advances a third explanation—first is Zeus, second, [134] nature, and third, Fate. But Plato [argues for] the eternal reason [*logos*] of the nature of the universe.

82. On the eighth day before the Ides of May,<sup>35</sup> the Romans used to celebrate the festival called Lemuria, that is, honors for images or apparitions or *daemons* endowed with emotions, which the philosophers say are in-born guardians of bodies, and for this reason they take pleasure in tombs.<sup>36</sup>

83.<sup>37</sup> Aristotle and Heraclides say that as the sun moves most of the winds and causes them to circulate, and these push out and are thrust forward, the Atlantic ocean swells up and produces the flood tide; and then on the other hand, when [the winds] die down, [the Atlantic] draws away and goes down, and thus the ebb tides occur. But Pytheas of Massilia asserts that the flood tides occur by the waxing of the moon, the ebb tides by its waning. The philosophers among the Romans [say] the same thing, but Plato makes the oscillation of the waters the cause—for there is a certain natural oscillation that brings around <a backward flow> through a certain aperture [or] opening, and thereby the seas surge back.

84.<sup>38</sup> Plato says that monstrous births take place in accordance with addition or removal or transposition or evaporation, [135] while Empedocles makes the cause out to be the deficiency or excess of breath / spirit [*pneuma*].

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[http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/database/gen\\_html/a0000295.php](http://www.aakkl.helsinki.fi/melammu/database/gen_html/a0000295.php) etc., reprints the translations of relevant texts from Greatrex and Watt.]

<sup>33</sup> The views of the philosophers in this paragraph all appear nearly verbatim in Ps.-Plutarch, *Placita* 1.26-28 (based on Aëtius' *Placita*). Cf. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, pp. 321-323.

<sup>34</sup> Lit., "that (which is) with us."

<sup>35</sup> 8 May.

<sup>36</sup> For the Lemuria, see Warde-Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, pp. 106ff. It was celebrated on 9, 11 and 13 May—the 7<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> days before the Ides; one wonders whether John's date might have arisen from a misreading or corruption of the last of these [V and III].

<sup>37</sup> The views described in this paragraph all appear nearly verbatim in Ps.-Plutarch, *Placita* 3.17 (based on Aëtius' *Placita*). Cf. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, pp. 382-3.

<sup>38</sup> The views described here closely parallel those in Ps.-Plutarch, *Placita* 5.8 (based on Aëtius' *Placita*)—except that instead of Plato, the first view is attributed to *Strato*. Cf. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, pp. 420-21.

85. Amelius says: "The Muses are the souls of the [celestial] spheres, who put forth the operations of the powers and substances of the whole universe and at the same time bring them together into a single harmony—the one ordained by the creator."

86. [There are] four Hephaesti:<sup>39</sup> First, [the son] of Heaven [*Ouranos*] and Day [*Hêmera*], the father of Apollo who is the Athenians' founder; second, Nilus' child, whom the Egyptians call Phtha; third, the [son] of Cronus and Hera, the Lemnian, the smith; fourth [is] Hephaestus son of Manto, the Sicilian, from whom [came] the Hephaestiades islands. Hephaestus, as Numenius says, is generative fire—the life-generating heat of the sun. Hence indeed they represent Hephaestus as limping, inasmuch as the nature of fire "limps" [when] by itself, when it has not been brought together with other [matter].<sup>40</sup> And Cincius among the Romans says that Hephaestus is understood as lame in both feet on account of the uneven circuit of the sun. But the Chaeronean [i.e., Plutarch]<sup>41</sup> says that, addressing the power of the fire as Hephaestus, they made an anthropomorphic representation of him, but they put on him a dark-blue felt cap as a symbol of the revolution of the heavens—where [exists] the fire's elemental [136] and purest [nature].

But as regards history, Manetho, in the third volume of his *Egyptian Commentaries*, says that of all men Hephaestus first ruled as king among the Egyptians—he who also discovered fire for them. From him [came] Helios, from whom [came] Cronus, after which [was] Osiris, then Typhon, Osiris' brother.<sup>42</sup>

87. But you should know that Manetho, in his [work] *On Festivals*, says that a solar eclipse brings a harmful influx upon human beings around the head and the stomach.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 3.22[55].

<sup>40</sup> Numenius fr. 58 (Des Places).

<sup>41</sup> Wuensch cites *De aud. poet.* 6 [*Moralia* 23b], which is an example of a poet (Archilochus) using the name Hephaestus to refer to *fire*.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Manetho fr. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Or "throat" [Gk. *stomachos*]. This passage is fr. 82a Müller (fr. 84 LCL).