

This is a page from the Philocalian Almanac, showing the planetary god Saturn as the lord of the day named in his honor. Note that his is the first hour of the day—the sunrise hour—as indicated at the top of the column on the right. (See Joseph Strzygowski, *Die Calenderbilder des Chronographen vom Jahre 354*, plates 10-14.)

CHAPTER 15

The Planetary Week in the Philocalian Almanac

ONE of the most interesting pagan civil calendars of the Roman Empire is that which was included in a collection of chronological data compiled by a certain Philocalus of the fourth century. The original manuscript, which was “acquired by Peiresc, has disappeared,” it is said, “but the copies at Brussels, Vienna and the Barberini Library evidence a work of a purity thoroughly antique.”¹ The same authority says: “It is, in fact, no more than the commonplace book of a certain Furius Dionysius Philocalus, who seems to have been a Christian interested in all kinds of chronological information and to have compiled this book in A. D. 354. There is indeed a calendar in his volume, but this is a table of purely secular and pagan celebrations containing no Christian references of any kind.”²

¹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 9, p. 621, art. “Manuscripts.”

² *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 161, art. “Calendar.”

Nevertheless, this Philocalus was not an obscure and ignorant person. He was a Roman Catholic and an able servant of the Roman bishop. We are told that in the sepulchral chapel of Eusebius, bishop of Rome (309 or 310 A. D.), “may still be seen the epitaph put up by Damasus, and from which monument alone we learn of an unhappy schism that then devastated the Roman Church. On either side are sculptured perpendicularly the words: ‘Furius Dionysius Philocalus, Damasis pappae cultor atque amator,’ i. e., the name of the pope’s famous calligrapher, also his friend and admirer.”³

³ *Ibid.*, p. 514, art. “Cemetery.”



This is another page from the Philocalian Almanac, showing the Sun as lord of Sunday in the ancient planetary week. Note that the lordship of each hour of the day is in accordance with the second explanation which Dio Cassius declared to be the basis of the planetary week.

The Date of the Original

Although Philocalus is believed to have compiled his work in 354 A. D., it is generally affirmed that the heathen calendar which he incorporated into his book was of the year 336.⁴ The evidence for this conclusion is ably set forth in the following statement from a well-known religious encyclopedia:

“In the chronological collections of Filocalus (Th. Mommsen, *‘Ueber dem Chronographen vom Jahr 354,’* *ASG* for 1850, and also published separately) there is a list of bishops of Rome, ending with Liberius (of whom only the date of accession is given, so that he was still alive), followed by a *Depositio Martyrum*,⁵ arranged according to their place in the calendar. As Liberius is mentioned, but nothing is said of his banishment, it is clear that this list belongs to the year 354. But it is also plain that there is behind this an earlier list ending with Sylvester (died 335), because all the bishops down to him are given according to their place in the calendar, but the next three—Marcus (died 7th Oct. 336), Julius (died 352), and Liberius—are added at the end of the list.”⁶

⁵ See *ibid.*, Vol. 8, P. 561, art. “Julius I.”

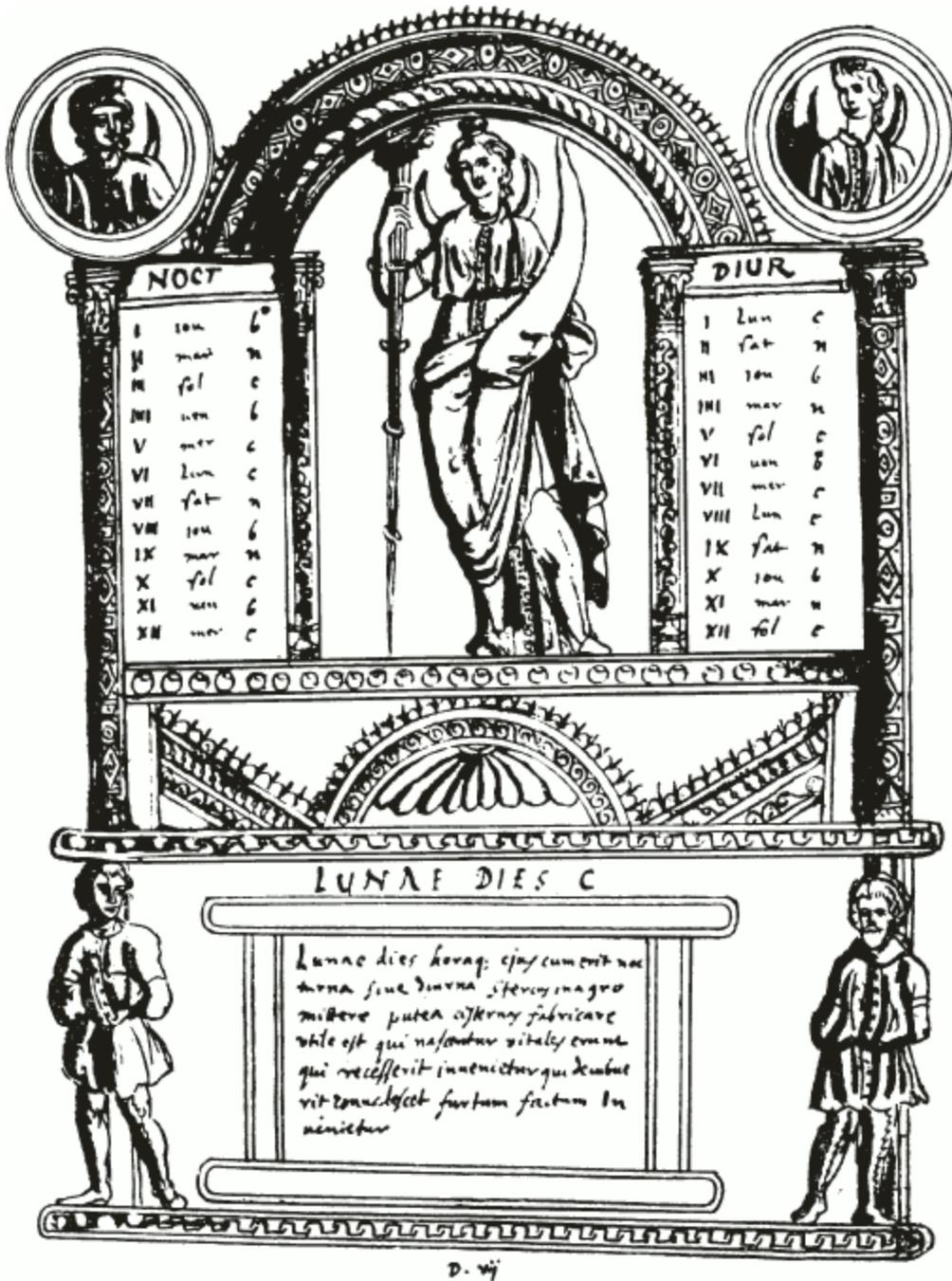
The Philocalan Calendar is said to be “a compilation of chronological documents of the date A. D. 354—itsself a republication of an edition of 336. The title page is inscribed ‘Furius Oionysius Filocalus titulavit.’ The name of this calligrapher is found in two inscriptions in Rome, in one of which he describes himself as ‘Damasi Papae cultor atque amator.’”—J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, p. 84, art. “Calendar (Christian).”

⁶ A list of the feast days in honor of various famous martyrs.

⁷ J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, pp. 601, 602, art. “Christmas.”

Includes the Pagan Week

While the *Depositio Martyrum* is a compilation of data relative to the dates of the deaths of various noted martyrs, the civil calendar proper is purely pagan, probably being a copy of the official calendar in use in Rome at that time. Sylvester died on December 31, 335 A. D., and this civil calendar was compiled, it is said, during the following year.



This page, taken from the Philocalian Almanac, shows the Moon as the ruler of her day in the planetary week. Note that each hour is indicated as astrologically unlucky, good, or common, by the letters *N*, *B*, and *C*, respectively.

One interesting feature of this complete Roman civil calendar is that it includes the planetary week from January 1 to December 31. The weekly cycle of the seven days is indicated by the letters *A* to *G*, while the nundinal period is denoted by the letters *A* to *H*. It should be noted that January 1 fell on the first day of the pagan week, which is indicated by the letter *A*. The first day of the heathen week is the day of Saturn. Although the calendar of Philocalus may have been compiled in 336 A. D., it was not for use in that year, because January of that year began on

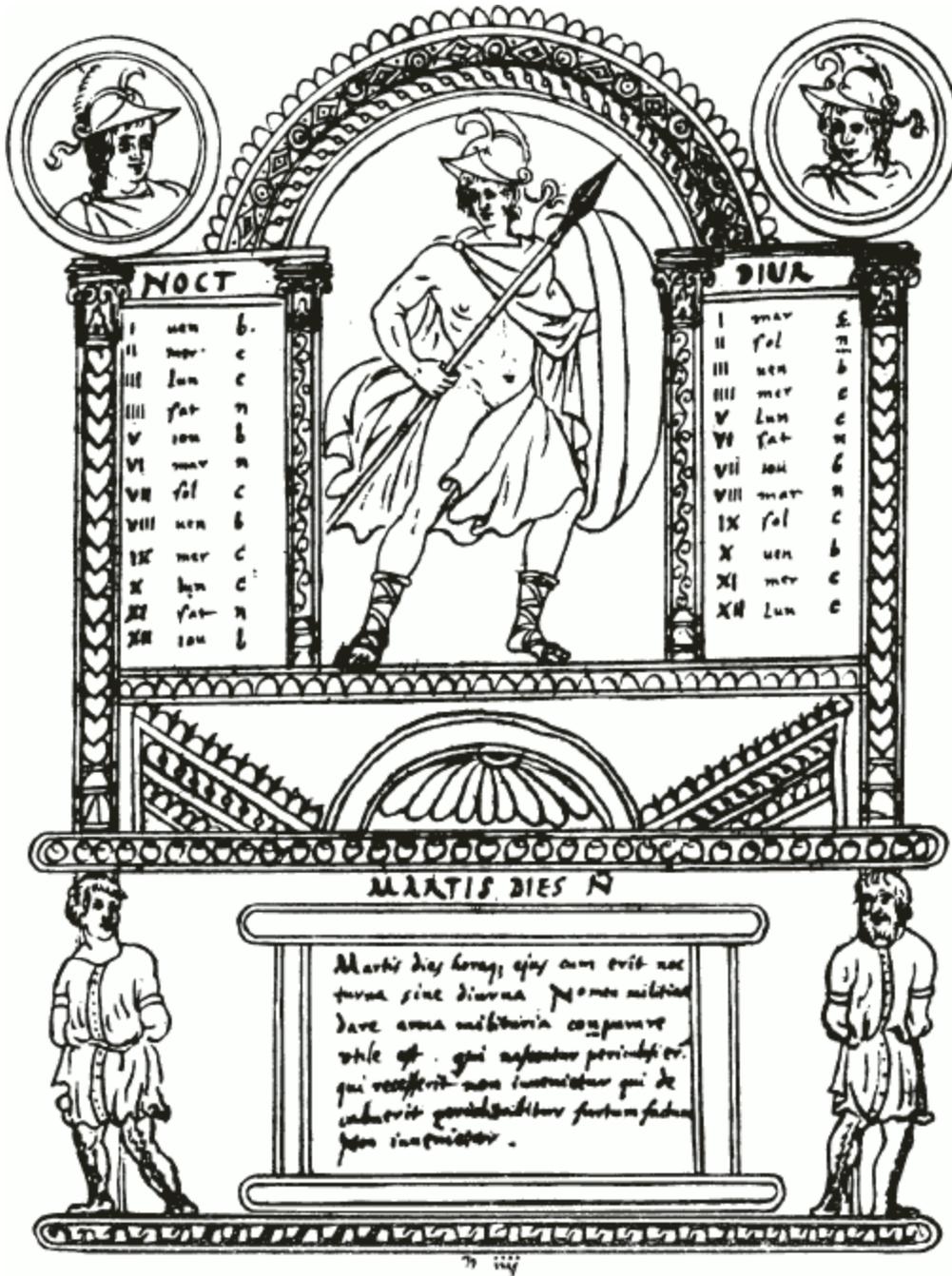
Thursday and the month of February had 29 days. February in the Philocalian Calendar had only 28 days. Moreover, because Sylvester died on December 31, 335 A. D., it is not to be expected that his death would be noted in a calendar compiled for use beginning the very next day, January 1. Doubtless it was compiled in 336 for use in 337, which was not a leap year, and which began on Saturday, the first day of the pagan week. The year 354 also began on Saturday.⁷ Thus the calendar served for both years (337 and 354).

⁷ This Roman civil calendar preserved by Philocalus may be seen reproduced in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, pp. 334.337; and in J. G. Graevius, *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Romanarum*, Vol. 8, cols. 95.124. J. Bapt. de Rossi, a noted authority on Roman inscriptions, also holds that the letter A indicating the first day of the pagan week in the Philocalian civil calendar, represents the day of Saturn. *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae*, Vol. 1, Prolegomena, p. LXXVI.

A List of Roman Consuls

included in the work of Philocalus is a list of the Roman consuls (*Fasti Consulares*) from A. U. C. 245 (509 B. C.) to A. U. C. 1107 (354 A. D.).⁸ The consuls of Rome generally took their office on January 1. In this list the author gives the names of the two consuls for each year, and also tells what day of the lunar month, and what day of the week it was on which January 1 fell in each case. The names of the days given are those of the planetary gods after which the days were called by the pagans. For example, the last entry is for A. U. C. 1107 (354 A. D.), and reads thus: “Constantio VII et Constantio III Sat. xxii.” This indicates that the two Roman consuls took their office on January 1, 354 A. D., which fell on the day of Saturn and on the 22d day of the lunar month.

⁸ The tables are published as the *Fasti Consulares* by Theo. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, Vol. 1, pp. 50-61, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica I, Auctores Antiquissimi*, Vol. 9.



This page from the Philocalian Almanac shows Mars as the lord of the day dedicated to him in the planetary week. Because he was the pagan god of war, his hours were generally considered unlucky for events and undertakings. Saturn's day and his hours, too, are invariably marked as of ill omen, and this undoubtedly caused the pagans to have a strong dislike for the Biblical Sabbath.

The Gods of the Days

Of further interest is the fact that Philocalus has preserved some astrological tables with very useful information about the popular mode of reckoning the days according to the pagan planetary week. These five tables show the gods of the first five days of the heathen week—

Saturn, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury. Those of Jupiter and Venus—the last two—have perished, but the data relative to the order of their hours are preserved.⁹

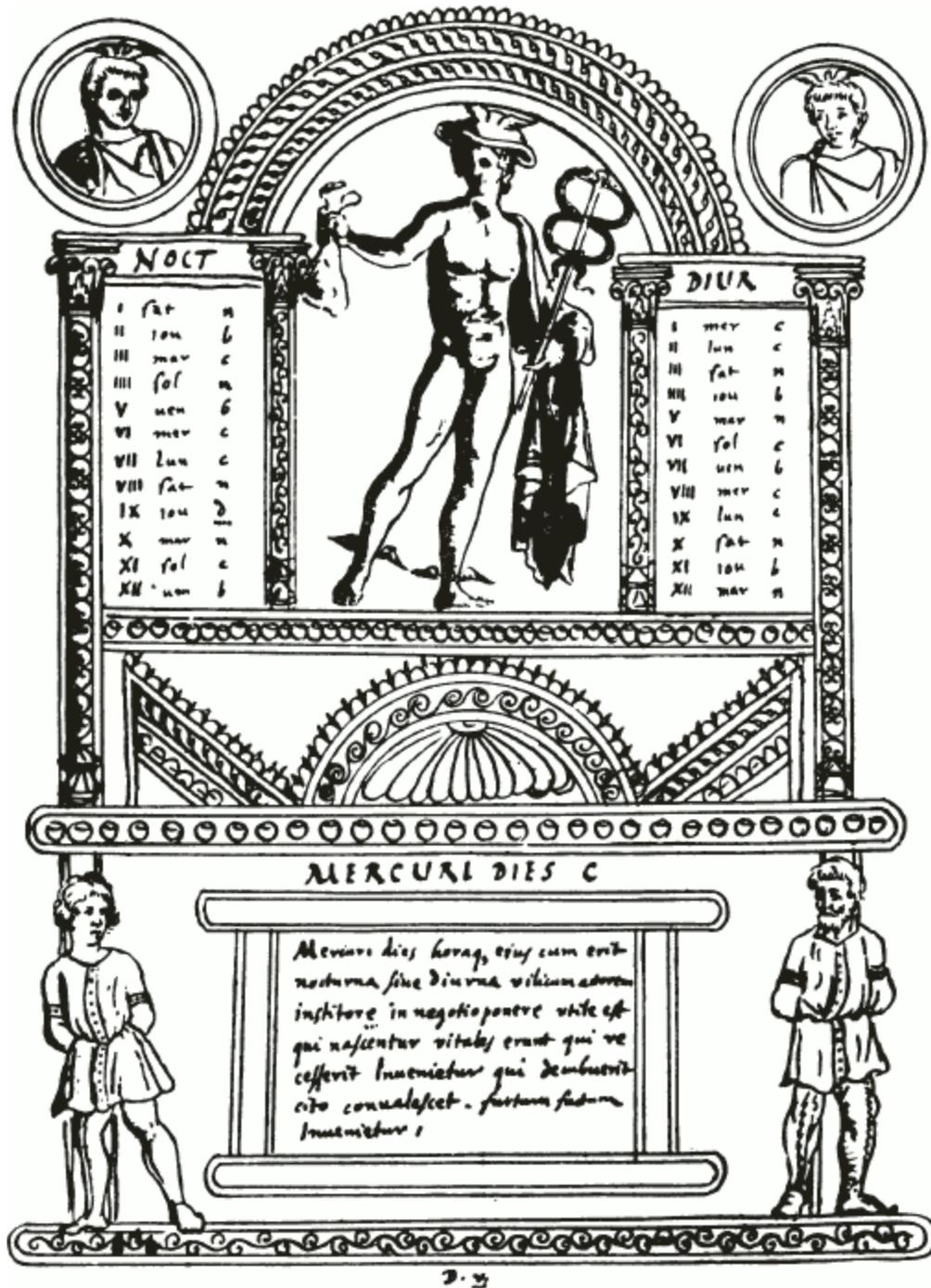
⁹ Joseph Strzygowski, *Die Calenderbilder des Chronographien von Jahre 354*, in *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts*, Ergänzungsheft 1, 1888, plates 10.14; Theo Mommsen, *Chronica Minora Saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, Vol. 1, pp. 42-46, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica I, Auctores Antiquissimi*, Vol. 9.

The planets are distributed over the 24 hours after the following order: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon. The letters N (*efastus*), B (*onus*) and C (*ommunis*) indicate whether the day or the hour was considered astrologically unlucky, good, or common.

The day and the hours corresponding to Saturn are invariably marked with the letter N. Those of Mars were generally marked the same, because he was the god of war and bloodshed. In this we have another evidence of the Chaldean origin of the pagan week. Plutarch, writing in the first half of the second century A. D., says: “The Chaldeans declare that of the planets, which they call tutelary gods, two are beneficent, two maleficent, and the other three are median and partake of both qualities.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, chap. 48, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. 5, p. 117.

Venus and Jupiter were generally regarded as being astrologically beneficent; Saturn and Mars, as malefic; and the Sun, Moon, and Mercury, as common and ordinary in matters of luck.



This page from the Philocalian Almanac shows Mercury as the lord of the day dedicated to him in the planetary week. The pictures of Jupiter and Venus in this astrological almanac of Roman times have been destroyed, but the explanatory text pertaining to them has been preserved.

The Beginning of the Day

The most curious fact presented by these tables of Philocalus is perhaps the mode of beginning the day. Take for example the day of Saturn, and it will be seen that in the Philocalian tables the

planet does not have lordship over the first hour of the dark part of the day, but over the first hour of the light part of it. The same is true in the case of the other days shown. The Roman civil day began at midnight,¹¹ but in no case do we find in these Philocalian astrological tables that the planetary god ruling the day is shown to preside over the first hour after midnight. Why is this?

¹¹ Pliny, *Natural History*, book 2, chap. 79, in Loeb Classical Library, *Pliny's Natural History*, Vol. 1, pp. 319, 321.

Dio Cassius, in his explanation of the distribution of the hours of the day according to the order of the planetary gods, did not state just what hour of the day or night was the one taken for a starting point. But he does specifically say that the god presiding over the first hour of the day is also lord of that day.¹²

¹² Dio Cassius' full statement has already been presented in chapter 9 of this work.

Now in the case of the Philocalian astrological tables, three facts are apparent: (1) that the day is reckoned from sunset to sunset, for the tables show that the first hour starts with the beginning of the night; (2) the first hour after midnight, which begins the civil day, does not correspond to the planetary lord of the day; (3) but the planetary deity ruling over the day is the one presiding over the first hour of the light part of the day, the one corresponding nearly to sunrise. How can this be explained?

The solution is this: The Philocalian book is really an almanac compiled by a Roman Catholic, a scribe of Liberius and Damasus I, bishops of Rome from 352 to 384 A. D., for the use of those who belonged to that faith. This is shown by the following statement from a Roman Catholic authority which mentions this "ancient Roman Calendar, published between the years 334 and 356, written out and illustrated by a certain Furius Dionysius Philocalus. This calendar contains a list of the popes, known formerly as the 'Bucherian Catalogue,' from the name of its first editor, and the Liberian, from the pope (Liberius, 352-56) with whom it ends. The whole book is now usually known as the 'Chronographer of A. D. 354.' Besides this ancient papal catalogue, the book contains an official calendar, civil and astronomical, lunar cycles, and a Paschal table calculated to 412, a list of the prefects of Rome from 253 to 354 (the only continuous one known), a chronicle of Roman history, the 'Natalitia Caesarum,' and other useful contents, which have caused it to be styled 'the oldest Christian Almanac.' It contains numerous traces of having been drawn up for the use of the Roman Church, and hence the value of two of its documents for the cemeteries. They are, respectively, a list of the entombments of Roman bishops from Lucius to Sylvester (253-335), with the place of their burial, and a *Depositio Martyrum*, or list of the more solemn fixed feasts of the Roman Church, with indications of several famous martyrs and their cemeteries."¹³

¹³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, p. 511, art. "Cemetery."

In those days the ecclesiastical day began at sunset, just as it did in Biblical times.¹⁴ It was not until a later period that Christians adopted the Roman civil mode of reckoning the day from midnight to midnight.¹⁵ In this almanac we find used the Biblical day (which begins at sunset),

but the hours of the day show heathen astrological notions accommodated to Roman Catholic belief.

¹⁴ 14 Genesis 1:5,8, 13, 19, 23; Lev. 23: 32; Mark 1:32.

¹⁵ ii See *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, p. 336, art. "Sunday"; J. M'Clintock and J. Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 10, P. 18, art. "Sunday."

The practice of beginning the religious day at sunset was in vogue not only in England, but also in America in colonial times. Christmas Eve and Hallowe'en (Hallowed Evening) are relics of this usage. K. A. H. Kellner makes the following observation: "In conclusion, it is to be noticed that, in the Middle Ages, the rest from labor commenced, contrary to our present custom, with the vespers of Saturday. Pope Alexander III, however, decreed that local custom should retain its prescriptive right, and so it came to pass that the practice of reckoning the feast day from midnight to midnight became general."—*Heortology*, pp. 12, 13.

Of Babylonian Origin

Paganism in the form of astrology was practiced at the Vatican until the sixteenth century. "Emperors and popes became votaries of astrology—the Emperors Charles IV and V, and Popes Sixtus IV, Julius II, Leo X, and Paul III. When these rulers lived astrology was, so to say, the regulator of official life; it is a fact characteristic of the age, that at the papal and imperial courts ambassadors were not received in audience until the court astrologer had been consulted."¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, p. 22, art. "Astrology." Paul III died in 1549.

The fact that the planetary god having lordship over the day was the one presiding over the first hour of the light part of the day—the sunrise hour—is another evidence that the pagan planetary week was born of Chaldean astrology. Pliny the Elder, specifically stated in the first century that the Babylonians reckoned their day from sunrise to sunrise. He says: "The actual period of the day has been differently kept by different people: The Babylonians count the period between two sunrises, the Athenians that between two sunsets, the Umbrians from midday to midday, the common people everywhere from dawn to dark, the Roman priests and the authorilies who fixed the official day, and also the Egyptians and Hipparchus, the period from midnight to midnight."¹⁷

¹⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, book 2, chap. 79, in Loeb Classical Library, *Pliny's Natural History*, Vol. 1 pp. 319, 321. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. 4 p. 988, art. "Calendar," Sec. "Day"; Vol. 7, p. 876, art. "Day"; J. M'Clintock and J. Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 702, art. "Day."

"The Babylonians began the day with sunrise," declares a modern authority, who goes on to say that "in the horoscope of the hours, the planets became lords of the ascendant at sunrise."¹⁸ This doubtless explains also why the heathen prayed to the heavenly bodies at the rising of the Sun and with their faces toward the east. At the beginning of the astrological day—at sunrise—they sought the favor of the gods for good luck in all undertakings of the day.

¹⁸ J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 12, pp. 50, 51, art. "Sun, Moon, and Stars (Introductory)." The following statement contains useful information on this point: "The canon law followed the lines of Roman law.

The decrees of ecclesiastical councils on the subject have been numerous. Much of the law is contained in the Decretals of Gregory, book ii, tit. 9 (*De Feriis*), c. I of which (translated) runs thus: ‘We decree that all Sundays be observed from vespers to vespers (a vespers ad vesperam).’—*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. 26, p. 95, art. “Sunday.”

Plutarch states that the day was measured from midnight to midnight in his time (*The Roman Questions*, Ques. 84 in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch’s Moralia*, Vol. 4, p. 129), Aulus Gellius says, “Idarcus Varro, in that book of his *Human Antiquities* which he wrote *On Days*, says: ‘Persons who are born during the twenty-four hours between one midnight and the next midnight are considered to have been born on one and the same day.’”—*Attic Nights*, book 3, chap. 2, in Loeb Classical Library, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, Vol. 1, pp. 239, 241.

Aulus Gellius also remarks: “However, Varro also wrote in that same book that the Athenians reckon differently, and that they regard all the intervening time from one sunset to the next as one single day. That the Babylonians counted still differently; for they called by the name of one day the whole space of time between sunrise and the beginning of the next sunrise; but that in the land of Umbria many said that from midday to the following midday was one and the same day....But it is shown by abundant evidence that the Roman people, as Varro said, reckoned each day from midnight to the next midnight.”—*Ibid.*, p. 241.

The Roman jurist Paulus, in a work *On Sabinus* (book XIII), makes this statement: “In accordance with the Roman custom, the day begins at midnight, and ends in the middle of the following night.”—*Digests [Pandectae] of Justinian*, book 2, tit. 12, chap. 8, in *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, Vol. 1, p. 78.

Marcus Varro lived between 116 and 27 B. C.; Plutarch between 46 and 125 A. D. Aulus Gellius was born about 130 A. D., but the date of his death is not known. Paulus lived in the latter part of the second and in the first part of the third century.

MENSIS IANVARIVS

habet dies XXXI.

1	A	A	A	KAL · IAN	SENATVS · LEGITIMVS	
2	B	B		III · NON	DIES · AEGYPTIACVS	
3	C	C		III	LVD VOTORVM · NVNCVPATIO	
4	B	D	D	PRIDIE	LVDI	
5	E	E		NON	LVDI	
6	F	F		VIII · IDVS	DIES · AEGYPTIACVS	
7	C	G	G	VII	IANO · PATRI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
8	A	H		VI		
9	B	A		V	SENATVS · LEGITIMVS	
10	D	C	B	III		
11	D	C		III	DIES · CARMENTARIORVM	
12	E	D		PRIDIE		
13	E	F	E	IDIB	IOVI · STATORI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
14	G	F		XIX · KAL · FEB		
15	A	G		XVIII	CARMENTALIA	
16	F	B	H	XVII	DIES · AEGYPTIACVS	
17	C	A		XVI	LVDI · PALATINI	
18	D	B		XV	LVDI	
19	G	E	C	XIII	LVDI	
20	F	D		XIII	$\overline{\text{N}}$ · GORDIANI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
21	G	E		XII	LVDI	
22	H	A	F	XI	LVDI	
23	B	G		X	SENATVS · LEGITIMVS	SOL · AQVARIO
24	C	H		IX	$\overline{\text{N}}$ · D · HADRIANI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
25	I	D	A	VIII	$\overline{\text{N}}$ · CHARTIS	
26	E	B		VII		
27	F	C		VI		
28	K	G	D	V		
29	A	E		III		
30	B	F		III		
31	A	C	G	PRIDIE		

This table shows the month of January as it appears in the Philocalian Calendar. This Roman civil calendar is said to have been composed in 336 A. D., in the reign of Constantine the Great, and was incorporated into the Roman Catholic almanac compiled by Philocalus in 354 A. D. In it the days of the week are indicated by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, while the market days (of the nundinal cycle) are denoted by the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. It was doubtless made for use in 337 A. D., which year began on Saturday. (See *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, p. 236.)

It should be recalled also that in reference to the pagan astrological notions anciently adopted by the Jews in the matter of the Blessing of the Sun, mention was made of “the beginning of Wednesday eve when the planet Saturn is in the ascendency.”¹⁹ After an interval of twenty-eight

years, “then Saturn returns to its original position at the first hour of Wednesday eve, and a new cycle begins.”²⁰ As in the Philocalian astrological tables, the first (beginning with the night) of the twenty-four hours of the day of Mercury (Wednesday) belongs to Saturn. Hence we see that among the Jews addicted to heathen practices, astrological notions were accommodated to the Biblical mode of reckoning the day from sunset to sunset, just as it was in the case of the Roman Catholics of Philocalus’ time. The day in both cases began at sunset according to Biblical reckoning, but the hours of the day were placed under the lordship of the seven heathen planetary deities. This is another proof of the syncretism that took place between Jewish, Christian, and pagan practices in the early centuries.

²⁰ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, p. 590, art. “Sun, Blessing of the.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 591.

The Birthday of the Invincible Sun

In the Philocalian calendar the twenty-fifth of December (the eighth day before the Kalends of January) is shown to be the *N (atalis) Invicti*—“The Birthday of the Invincible One”—which is the Nativity of the Invincible Sun. Because so much has been said already about the coincidence of the ecclesiastical Christmas and the pagan birthday of Mithra being on the twenty-fifth of December, it is fitting that we consider this matter here.

First, it should be noted that in the Philocalian Calendar the Saturnalia, a popular Roman feast, began on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of January, which is the 17th of December. Plutarch says of December: “This month has been consecrated to Saturn by the Romans.”²¹ The Saturnalia was a feast of thanksgiving for the fruits and blessings of the year, and was dedicated to Saturn, who was also among the Romans the god of the harvest. For this reason he carried a sickle. This feast was fixed so that it would terminate with the arrival of the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year.²²

²¹ Plutarch, *The Roman Questions*, Ques. 34, in Loeb Classical Library, *Plutarch’s Moralia*, Vol. 4, p. 59.

²² 2 At present the winter solstice falls about December 22. The reason for this difference in time, as may be easily verified by computation, is that the Gregorian calendar reform did not correct the Julian calendar for the whole period since the time Julius Caesar adopted it, but only as far back as 325 A. D., the year in which the Council of Nicaea and the emperor Constantine made their famous decrees respecting the date for the observance of Easter. The error from 45 B. C. to 325 A. D. amounts to about three days in the uncorrected portion of the Julian calendar. See *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, p. 168, art. “Calendar, Reform of the”; and J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, p. 63, art. “Calendar.”

MENSIS DECEMBER

habet dies XXXI.

1	D	F	G	KAL · DECEMB	SARMATICI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
2	G	H		III · NON	INITIVM · MVNERIS	
3	A	A		III	SENATVS · LEGITIMVS	
4	E	B	B	PRIDIE	MVNVS · ARCA	DIES · AEGYPTIACVS
5	C	C		NON	MVNVS · ARCA	
6	F	D	D	VIII · IDVS	MVNVS · ARCA	
7	E	E		VII		
8	F	F		VI	MVNVS KANDIDA	
9	G	G	G	V		
10	A	H		IIII		
11	B	A		III	SEPTIMONTIA	
12	H	C	B	PRIDIE	LVDI · LANCIONICI	
13	D	C		IDIB	LVDI	SENATVS · LEGITIMVS
14	E	D		XIX · KAL · IAN	LVDI	DIES · AEGYPTIACVS
15	I	F	E	XVIII	$\overline{\text{N}}$ · DIVI VERI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
16	G	F		XVII	LVDI	
17	A	G		XVI	LVDI	SATVRNALIA
18	K	B	H	XV	LANCIONICI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	SOL · CAPRICORNO
19	C	A		XIIII	MVNVS · ARCA	
20	D	B		XIII	MVNVS · KANDIDA	
21	A	E	C	XII	MVNVS · ARCA	
22	F	D		XI		
23	G	E		X	MVNVS · ARCA	
24	B	A	F	VIIII	MVNVS · CONSVMMAT	
25	B	G		VIII	N · INVICTI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXX	
26	C	H		VII		
27	C	D	A	VI		
28	E	B		V		
29	F	C		IIII		
30	D	G	D	III	$\overline{\text{N}}$ · DIVI TITI · $\overline{\text{CM}}$ · XXIII	
31	A	E		PRIDIE	MAGISTRATI · IVRANT	

This illustration shows the month of December as it is found in the Philocalian Calendar. Note that the 25th of December is the *Natalis Invicti* (the Birthday of the Invincible Sun).

Pliny the Elder said: "The winter solstice begins at the eighth degree of Capricorn, the eighth day before the Kalends²³ of January in general."²⁴ As may be seen in the month of December in the Philocalian Calendar, the eighth day before the Kalends of January is December 25. The

ancient method of reckoning was inclusive. What they here called the eighth day we would call the seventh.

²³ The Latin designation for the first day of a month.

²⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, book 18, chap. 59, in Bohn Library, *Pliny, Natural History*, Vol. 4, p. 76.

On December 25 the Sun turned north, and the days began to lengthen, which made it appear that the Sun was experiencing a rebirth. As a result of this, all nature seemed to be reborn as spring approached. For this reason that day was known in the Roman Empire as the Birthday of the Invincible Sun.

The Roman emperor known as Julian the Apostate, a nephew of Constantine the Great, was a devotee of Mithra, the Sun-god. While he was away from Rome on an expedition, the New Year festival drew nigh, and he wrote in Greek thus:

“Before the beginning of the year, at the end of the month which is called after Kronos [Saturn], we celebrate in honor of Helios [the Sun] the most splendid games, and we dedicate the festival to the Invincible Sun. And after this it is not lawful to perform any of the shows that belong to the last month, gloomy as they are, though necessary. But, in the cycle, immediately after the end of the Kronia [Saturnalia] follow the Heliaia [Festival of the Sun]. That festival may the ruling gods grant me to praise and to celebrate with sacrifice! And above all the others may Helios [the Sun] himself, the King of the All, grant me this.”²⁵

²⁵ Julian, *Hymn to King Helios*, in Loeb Classical Library, *Julian*, Vol. 1, p. 429

Its Adoption by the Roman Bishop

It is generally held now that the celebration of the twenty-fifth of December as the birthday of Christ was instituted by the bishop of Rome about 354 A. D. A well-known Roman Catholic authority, Charles Poulet, says: “The first trace of the celebration of Christmas at Rome takes us back to the year 354. The Nativity of Christ was commemorated on the twenty-fifth of December, with a view, perhaps, of counteracting the popular feast of the Sun-God Mithra.”²⁶

²⁶ Charles Poulet, *A History of the Catholic Church for the Use of Colleges, Seminaries, and Universities*, Vol. 1, p. 266.

Another learned scholar, L. Duchesne, Roman Catholic also, says: “A better explanation is that based on the festival of *Natalis Invicti*, which appears in the pagan calendar of the Philocalian collection under the 25th of December. The Invictus is the Sun, whose birth coincides with the winter solstice, that is, with the 25th day of December, according to the Roman calendar. The worship of Mithras, or, speaking more generally, of the Sun, was widespread and popular in the third and fourth centuries. One is inclined to believe that the Roman Catholic Church made choice of the 25th of December in order to enter into rivalry with Mithraism (see texts quoted by Mommsen, *Corp. Inscr. Lat.*, vol. 1, p. 140).”²⁷

²⁷ L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship*, p. 261.

Indeed, the Roman church teaches that she can take over and assimilate from paganism whatever she may deem fitting: “Even pagan feasts may be ‘baptized’: certainly our processions of 25 April are the Robigalia; the Rogation days may replace the Ambarualia the date of Christmas Day may be due to the same instinct which placed on 25 Dec., the Natalis Invicti of the solar cult.”²⁸

²⁸ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, p. 390, art. “Paganism.”

Many other modern writers²⁹ hold that Christmas celebration on December 25 is an institution borrowed from Roman Sun worship, being the old birthday of the Invincible Sun. However, Ellen G. White has fittingly remarked:

“The twenty-fifth of December is supposed to be the day of the birth of Jesus Christ, and its observance has become customary and popular. But yet there is no certainty that we are keeping the veritable day of our Saviour’s birth. History gives us no certain assurance of this. The Bible does not give us the precise time. Had the Lord deemed this knowledge essential to our salvation, He would have spoken through His prophets and apostles, that we might know all about the matter. But the silence of the Scriptures upon this point evidences to us that it is hidden from us for the wisest purposes.”³⁰

²⁹ See W. R. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, p. 301.

³⁰ E. G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 9, 1884; and Dec. 4, 1941.

Instituted About 354 A. D.

Early in this chapter it was shown that the Philocalian Calendar was originally composed about 336 A. D. With it there appeared a list of the Roman bishops compiled up to and including Sylvester, whose death was shown to be in 335 A. D. There was also a recension with the addition of three more popes, which brought the list up to 354. Commenting further on this matter to show how December 25 was made the festival of the birth of Christ, a modern authority says:

“Thus the original list of bishops was made in 336, and the recension of 354 is secondary (see Duchesne, *Bulletin Critique*, xi. 41ff.). The *Depositio Martyrum* begins: ‘VIII Kal. Jan. natus est Christus in Betleem Iudeae.’ The question then arises, whether this statement belongs to the ground document of 336 or to the recension of 354....It is also curious that the *Depositio* is arranged in months, each being headed ‘mense Januario,’ ‘mense Februario,’ and so on. But the Nativity, instead of coming under December, is inserted at the beginning. This cannot be because the writer of 336 regarded the ecclesiastical year as beginning with Dec. 25, for in the list of bishops he begins with January and goes on to Dec. 31, the date of Sylvester’s death in 335. These facts raise a suspicion that the reference to the Nativity belongs to 354 rather than to 336.

“This suspicion is confirmed by evidence contained in Ambrosius, *De Virginibus*, iii, I f., in which he quotes a sermon preached by Liberius (who became pope on 22d May or 21st June, 352 [see Lipsius, *Chronol. der röm. Bisch.*, 1869, p. 262]), on the occasion of Marcellina, Ambrose’s elder sister, becoming a nun....

“The date of this sermon of Liberius is not certain; but from references in it to the tender youth of Marcellina it must have been early in his career as pope. The earliest possible date is 353, and the latest possible date for the entry in the chronology of Filocalus is 354. Therefore, as the sermon implies that the Nativity was celebrated on Jan. 6, and the chronology (taken from the papal diptychon [?]) implies that it was, in 354, celebrated on Dec. 25, it follows that Marcellina must have become a nun on 6th Jan. 353, when the Nativity was celebrated, and that between this and 354 the date of the feast was changed by Pope Liberius to Dec. 25. If this be so, there remains uncertain only the minor point whether 25th Dec. of 353 or of 354 was the first Christmas in Rome.”³¹

³¹ J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, p. 602, art. “Christmas.”

Several ecclesiastics of the fourth and fifth centuries mention that the day celebrated as the nativity of Christ was popularly known as the birthday of the Sun.³² It was difficult to wean Roman Catholics away from the idea of worshiping the Sun on December 25 in those times. We find Leo the Great, bishop of Rome (440-461 A. D.), chiding some of his church members for that very thing, saying:

“Abide firm in the faith in which you are built; lest the same tempter whose tyranny over you Christ has already destroyed, win you back again with any of his wiles, and mar even the joys of the present festival by his deceitful art, misleading simpler souls with the pestilential notion of some to whom this our solemn feast day seems to derive its honor, not so much from the nativity of Christ as, according to them, from the rising of the new Sun. Such men’s hearts, are wrapped in total darkness, and have no growing perception of the true Light: for they are still drawn away by the foolish errors of heathendom, and because they cannot lift the eyes of their mind above that which their carnal sight beholds, they pay divine honor to the luminaries that minister to the world.”³³

³² See the quotations from Augustine, Chrysostom, and Ambrose as given by Theo. Mommsen, in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed, Vol. 1, part 2, Pp. 409, 410, “Dec. 25.”

³³ “Leo I (the Great), *Sermon 22*, chap. 6, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 12, PP. 131, 132.

He likewise denounces “the ungodly practice of certain foolish folk who worship the Sun as it rises at the beginning of daylight from elevated positions; even some Christians think it is so proper to do this that, before entering the blessed apostle Peter’s basilica, which is dedicated to the one living and true God, when they have mounted the steps which lead to the raised platform, they turn around and bow themselves towards the rising Sun, and with bent neck do homage to its brilliant orb.”³⁴

²⁴ Leo I, *Sermon 27*, chap. 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 12, p. 140.



The ruins of the famous temple of Sun worship in Baalbek, Syria, which was erected by Antoninus Pius in the second century A. D.