

CHAPTER 5

The Planetary Week in Rome

THE monuments of the planetary week in the Roman Empire are many, and it is from them that we get most of our information concerning it. By the dated records we know that the planetary week was in use among the Romans before the Christian church was established, as will be especially noted in the following chapter. Here we shall note some of the most interesting undated monuments of the Roman Empire, among which are calendar fragments and astrological tables.

A Marble Piece From Potenza

Theo. Mommsen, in his treatise on the Roman calendars, presents a drawing of a stone fragment of a Roman astrological table that was used for tabulating the planetary hours of the day.¹ It is a piece of marble found in 1830 in the ruins of an old town at the mouth of the river of Potenza, in the Apennines, about one hundred miles east by south from Naples. To the left of each name of the planetary gods is a hole into which a peg was inserted for marking the hour belonging to him. To the right of each name appears one of the three letters B (*bonus*), C (*communis*), and N (*nefastus*), which served to indicate, in planetary calendars, whether a day or an hour was *good, ordinary, or bad* for events and undertakings. Saturn's hour and his day were invariably regarded by the heathen as unlucky (*nefastus*), and this contributed much to their dislike of the Sabbath, the seventh day, which the Holy Scriptures declare to be sacred. The hours and the days of Mars were generally regarded by the heathen as unlucky, too, because this god was the lord of war and bloodshed.

¹ Theo. Mommsen, in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, p. 293.

Peiresc's Puzzle

An object illustrating the astrological plan of the planetary gods ruling over the hours of the day, may be seen in a fragment collected by Nicolas Claude F. de Peiresc. This celebrated numismatist and scholar of the seventeenth century was the abbot of the Abbey of Notre Dame at Guitres (France) between 1624 and 1637.

The object alluded to has long been a puzzle to many, although it generally has been recognized as having some relation to the planetary week. It is described by Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741), who found it depicted in a manuscript that belonged to Peiresc, in which were described numerous objects of antiquity that he had collected. Montfaucon says that the manuscript "is now in the Library of St. Victor." He describes the fragment by saying:

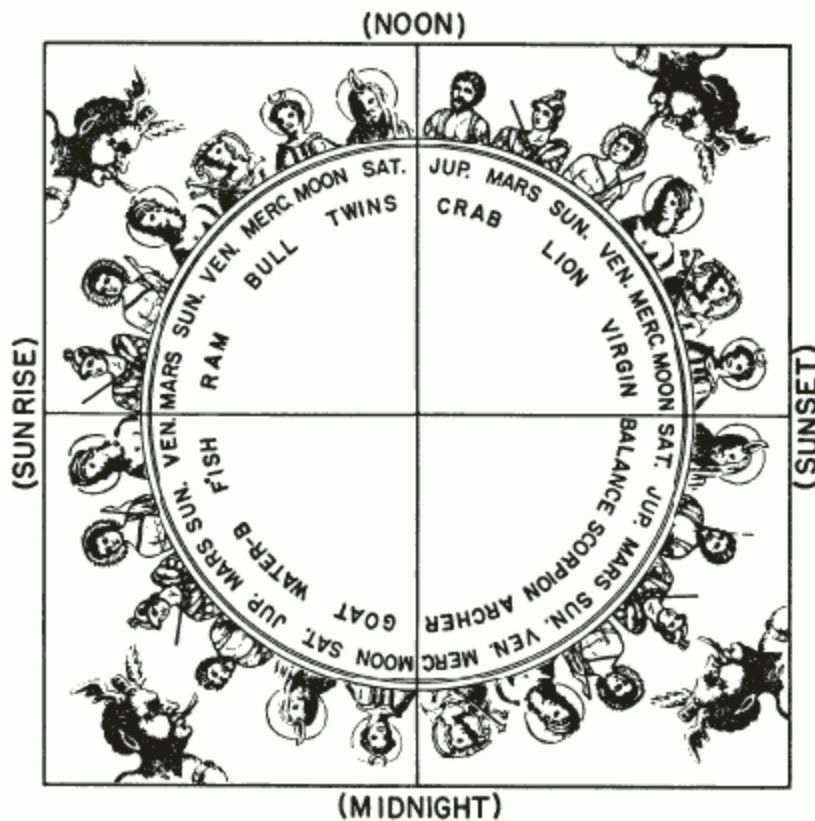
“‘Twas a fragment of stone, on the four corners of which were engraved the Four Winds; there is only one corner of the fragment remaining. The Wind is represented by a head with the ears of

a satyr, and wings over its forehead: the cheeks are puffed up, and it blows upon the head of Venus. In this square table was a great circle, in which were contained the twelve signs of the zodiac, of which *Gemini* [Twins] and the head of *Taurus* [Bull] now only remain. It cannot be so much as guessed at what was contained in the great circle, on the border of which the signs of the zodiac were represented.... On the upper part of this circle four busts are seen of four gods, which denote four days of the week: they are not placed here in order, but alternately; Saturn, Luna, Mercury, and Venus, i. e., Saturday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.... 'Tis most difficult to guess why those four days of the week are here placed alternately. The table, if it had been entire, would have informed us thereof.”²

² Bernerd de Montfaucon, *Antiquity Explained*, Vol. 6 (Supplement, Vol. 1), p. 27.



This fragment of an old Roman astrological tablet preserved by Peiresc, has long puzzled the students of antiquity. It shows from left to right, Venus, Mercury, Moon, and Saturn. Under Saturn and the Moon are shown the Twins, one of the signs of the zodiac, while under Mercury and Venus is shown the Bull.



Here is a restoration of Peiresc's fragment. The seven planetary gods are distributed over the twenty-four hours of the day. Mars takes the first hour of the day, making it Tuesday.

The Puzzle Explained

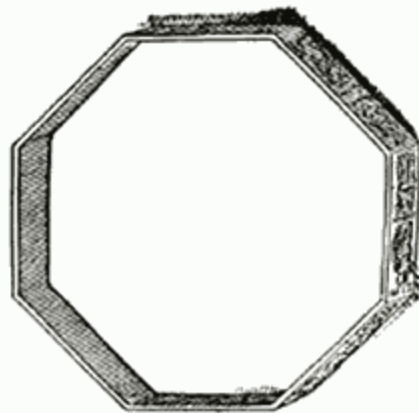
Montfaucon was presenting data which he had gathered on the origin of the week of days dedicated to the planetary gods, and for this reason he discussed this particular object. In the light of the abundant archaeological data at hand now on the subject, we can offer an explanation of this puzzling object found by Peiresc.

The error of Montfaucon lies chiefly in the fact that he did not know that the planetary deities depicted on this astrological table represent their lordship over the twenty-four hours of the day. Therefore it must not be expected that the planets would occur in the same order as they do in the names of the seven days of the weekly cycle. In listing the planets according to the hours of the day, their order is the same as that they were supposed to have in their revolutions in the heavens: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon.

The celestial sphere of the fixed stars and the seven planetary gods were supposed to revolve around the earth once each day. The path of the planets lies along the circle in the celestial equator that is marked out by the twelve constellations or signs of the zodiac. These zodiacal signs divide the path of the planetary gods into twelve sections, which played a large part in the astrology of the ancients.

It should be noted that on this particular astrological table there are two planetary stations allotted to each sign of the zodiac. For Taurus we see the gods Venus and Mercury; for Gemini appear the Moon and Saturn. Allowing two planetary stations for each of the twelve signs of the zodiac, we have a total of twenty-four. These twenty-four planetary stations correspond to the twenty-four hours of the day, which hours were assigned to the seven planets in the order of their revolutions in the heavens. Had Montfaucon read off the planets from left to right in this fragment, he might have seen at once their significance.

They fit into the picture thus: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, VENUS, MERCURY, MOON, SATURN, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, etc.



This golden bracelet, found in Syria, is thought to belong to the latter part of the third or the early part of the fourth century A. D. The first figure is of the goddess of good luck, whose name in Greek is *Tuche*. Then follow the seven planetary gods in the order of the days of the pagan week: *Kronos* (Saturn), *Helios* (Sun), *Selene* (Moon), *Ares* (Mars), *Hermes* (Mercury), *Zeus* (Jupiter), *Aphrodite* (Venus). (See Victor Duruy, *Histoire des Romains*, Vol. 7, p. 53. Paris, 1885.)

The Chaldeans anciently divided the day into twelve hours, one for each sign of the zodiac.³ Herodotus tells us that the Greeks anciently borrowed the same system from them, saying: “The sun clock and the sundial, and the twelve divisions of the day, came to Hellas not from Egypt but from Babylonia.”⁴ By watching the rising and setting of the constellations during the night, the ancients could tell the hours fairly well when the sky was cloudless, and in the daytime the sundial marked off the hours.

³ *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 3, p. 239, footnote; *The Historians' History of the World*, Vol. 1, p. 570.

⁴ Herodotus, *History*, book 2, chap. 109, in Loeb Classical Library, *Herodotus*, Vol. 1, p. 399.

It may be that here we have an explanation of the origin of the twenty-four-hour division of the day. The assignment of planetary stations, two to each sign, over the twelve constellations of the zodiac may have given rise to the substitution of the twenty-four-hour day for the twelve-hour one.

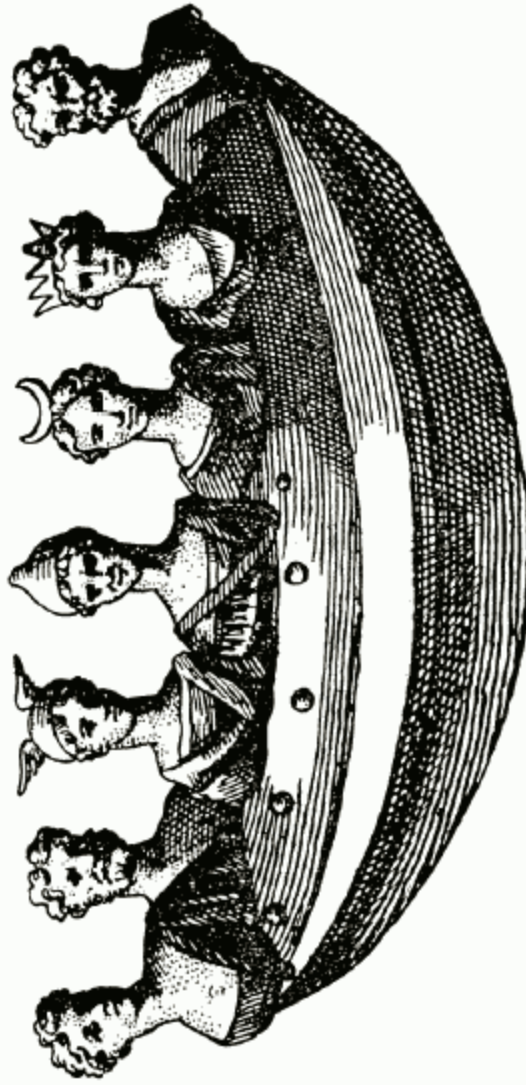
A Golden Bracelet

Another item is a golden bracelet found in Syria, and said to be preserved in the British Museum. In this case we have the names of the planetary gods in Greek, together with their likenesses, in the exact order as they occur in the pagan week. Victor Duruy describes it:

“This little bracelet is only two and a third inches in diameter, and the engraved figures are but two fifths of an inch. The careless workmanship marks the period as near the close of the third or the beginning of the fourth century. On the eight faces of the octagon are engraved the seven gods or goddesses of the week, and Fortune, ΤΥΧΗ [TUCHE], which opens the series. She holds in the right hand a cornucopia, and rests the left hand upon a rudder. Saturn, ΚΡΟΝΟΣ [KRONOS], comes next in order. He is clad in a long garment, and with the left hand holds a scarf which is floating above his head. The third place is occupied by the Sun, ΗΑΙΟΣ [HELIOS], radiate, and standing in a chariot with two horses. He holds in the right hand a whip, and in the left a globe. The Moon, ΣΕΛΗΝΗ [SELENE], is the fourth figure. She wears a double tunic, a double crescent is on her head, and a veil, puffed out by the wind; she holds a lighted torch in her right hand. After the Moon comes Mars, ΑΡΗΣ [ARES], naked helmeted, carrying his buckler. The sixth figure is Mercury, [HERMES], also naked, with wings on his feet: and on his cap, and holding a money-bag and the caduceus. The seventh is Jupiter, ΖΕΥΣ [ZEUS], bearded, armed with the thunderbolt, and leaning on a long sceptre. The series ends with Venus,—a nude figure in the pose of the Venus de' Medici.”⁵

⁵ Victor Duruy, *History of Rome*, Vol. 7, sec. 2, pp. 488, 489.

The date suggested by Duruy is not certain, for which reason we include it here among the undated monuments.



This small bronze boat of Roman times was discovered at Montpellier, France, and has been preserved in the collection of antiquities gathered by M. Bon, first president of the French Republic. It shows the planetary gods in the order of the days of the astrological week (from right to left): Saturn, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus. (See Bernard de Montfaucon, *Antiquity Explained*, Vol. 6, Supplement, Vol. 1, pp. 22, 23.)

The Planetary Gods in a Boat

A small bronze boat of the Roman period was discovered in Montpellier, France, and it is shown carrying the busts of the seven gods of the planetary week in their correct order. Bernard de Montfaucon, already mentioned, gives the following description of this object:

“An antique brass monument in M. Bon’s cabinet, is the only curiosity I have yet seen, where the week is represented in emblem. The gods, which preside over the seven days of the week, and from whom they derived their names, are there arranged in order, as in a boat. There Saturn has the first place, agreeable to what Macrobius says in Scipio’s dream, that Saturn’s is the first of the seven spheres.... His visage looks old, and he is, as Cicero observes, sated with years. Next to him is Sol or the Sun, which passed in later ages for Apollo. He wears such a radiant crown, as we frequently meet in his figures. ‘Twas the Sun’s day, which we have since, in respect of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the true Sun of righteousness, called the Lord’s day.... Monday is exhibited by Diana Luna, who has a crescent upon her head, the usual ornament of Diana, for whom the ancients mistook Luna, as Apollo for Sol.... Mars is placed in the middle of the group, and would scarce be known without difficulty, if he were elsewhere met with, so habited. His helmet you would suppose a cap, the summit of which terminates in a twisted point, instead of a tuft. Mercury with his winged *pelasus* [hat] is distinguished at first sight. After him comes Jupiter, and Venus closes the company.”⁶

A Vessel or Vase

There is said to be in the Museum of Lyon, France, a vase or vessel with incrustations of silver, which belongs to the Roman epoch, and on it appear engraved the figures of the seven planetary gods in the order of the days of the week.⁷

⁶ Bernard de Montfaucon, *Antiquity Explained*, Vol. 6 (Supplement, Vol. 1), pp. 22, 23.

⁷ J. de Witte has described in detail nineteen different Roman monuments of the planetary week among which are those mentioned here. See *Gazette Archéologique* (Paris, 1877), Vol. 3, pp. 50-57, 77-85; (Paris, 1879) Vol. 5, p. 1-6; and *Encyclopedia Universal Illustrada*, Vol. 18, p. 781, art. “Dia.”

Several Altars

In the Museum of Metz, Germany, there is preserved an octagonal altar of the Roman period, on which are sculptured the figures of the gods of the planetary week.⁸ And one authority⁹ says that on the banks of the Rhine there have been found eight altars of Roman times, on which appear in bas-relief the figures of the entire bodies of the gods of the days of the week, and that they may be easily recognized by their distinguishing attributes.

“Joseph Fuchs, *Gesch. von Mainz* 2, 27 seq. (Kupfert 4, No. 7),” says Jacob Grimm, “describes a Roman round altar, probably of the third or fourth century, on which are carved the seven gods of the week (1 Saturn, 2 Apollo, 3 Diana, 4 Mars, 5 Mercury, 6 Jupiter, 7 Venus), and in the eighth place a genius.”¹⁰ This altar was found in Swabia, Germany.

Another Object

In the British Museum, in London, there is said to be a small figure of silver with the busts of the seven planetary gods of the week between its wings.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1, p. 127, footnote. See also Lersch in *Jahrbücher des Vereines von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande*, Band 4, p. 183; Band 5, pp. 299,314.

¹¹ See footnote 7.

A Curious Disk

In the Museum of Dijon, France, there is preserved a curious brass disk of the Roman period. It was found in the province of Lyon. On it appear twice the series of the Latin names of the planetary gods according to the order of the days of the week. It is said that “the names of the seven planets are twice engraved opposite each tooth.... That kind of week indicator was probably arranged in a way that only one name was visible at a time, and could be replaced by another by making the disk turn upon its axis.”¹²

¹² *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 13, part 1 (1), p. 438, No. 2869.

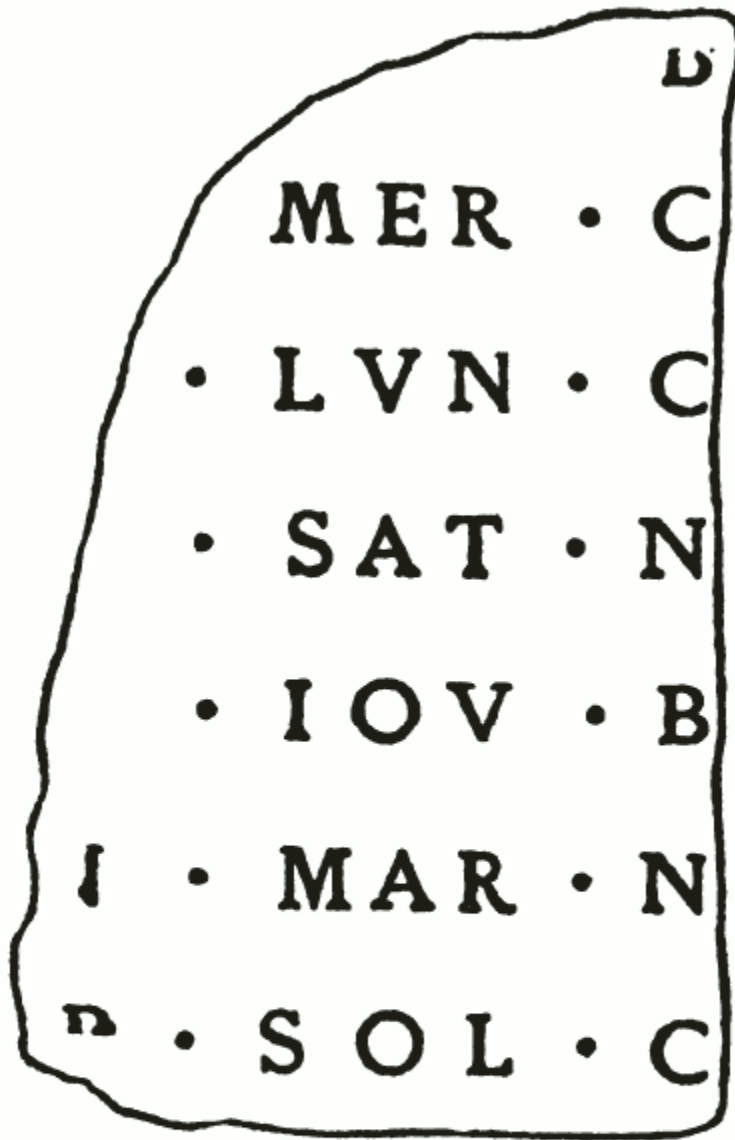
A Stick Calendar

At Pausilypum, near Puteoli (in Italy), there was found in 1891 a tomb which was partly covered by a large flat stone of marble that once was part of a nundinal calendar on which the days of the week, after the pagan style, played a part.¹³ The top line of the fragment gives the Latin of the planetary names of the days in their genitive forms: “*Saturni, Solis, Lunae, Martis.*” The names *Mercurii, Iovis*, and *Veneris* were broken off. Below the line of the names of the days of the week appear the names of Roman cities where the markets were held in turn, three of which are broken off.

Above the name of each day of the week there is a hole drilled into the marble slab, for the insertion of a brass peg for marking the days. Also a hole appears above each city where the market was held, for distinguishing them by the use of a peg. The archaeologists report that in these holes they have discovered stains of oxidized brass, and that these vestiges indicate that pegs of this material were used for insertion in the holes. Therefore this type of register is known as a “stick calendar.”

Another Stick Calendar

Another interesting fragment of a Roman stick calendar which served to indicate the days of the week after the pagan mode, is that found a long time ago by Fulvius Ursinus, and is now said to be preserved in the Museum of Naples (Italy). The very name of Rome is listed among the cities where the markets were held. At the top may be seen the names of the last three days of the pagan week, which were inscribed thus: (SATURNI, SOLIS, LUNAE, MARTIS, MERC)UR, IOVIS, VENER. The first four and part of the fifth are broken off.



This is a drawing of a stone fragment of a Roman astrological tablet, probably a calendar, showing the lordship of planets over the hours of the day. At the left of each name is a hole drilled into the stone for the insertion of a peg to mark the hour, while at the right a single capital letter indicates the astrological rating of the hour. If it is marked *N*, it is unlucky (*nefasta*); if indicated as *B*, it is good (*bona*); and if designated by *C*, it is common (*communis*). (See *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1863 ed., Vol. 1, part 2, p. 293.)

The four seasons of the year (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) are indicated, and also the length of each. Summer is given as from April 21 to July 23, having ninety-four days. Winter is shown to be from October 23 to January 19, having eighty-nine days. Knowing this, it is easy to compute the rest; autumn being from July 24 to October 22, lasting ninety-one days; and spring being from January 20 to April 20, lasting ninety-one days.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 1893 ed., Vol. 1, p. 218; J. G. Graevius, *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Romanarum*, Vol. 8, cols. 682-685.

The curious arrangement of the circles is for indicating the days of the lunar month. This also can be reconstructed from data now in hand, and the numbers of the days appear in seven lines, which are read from left to right as follows:

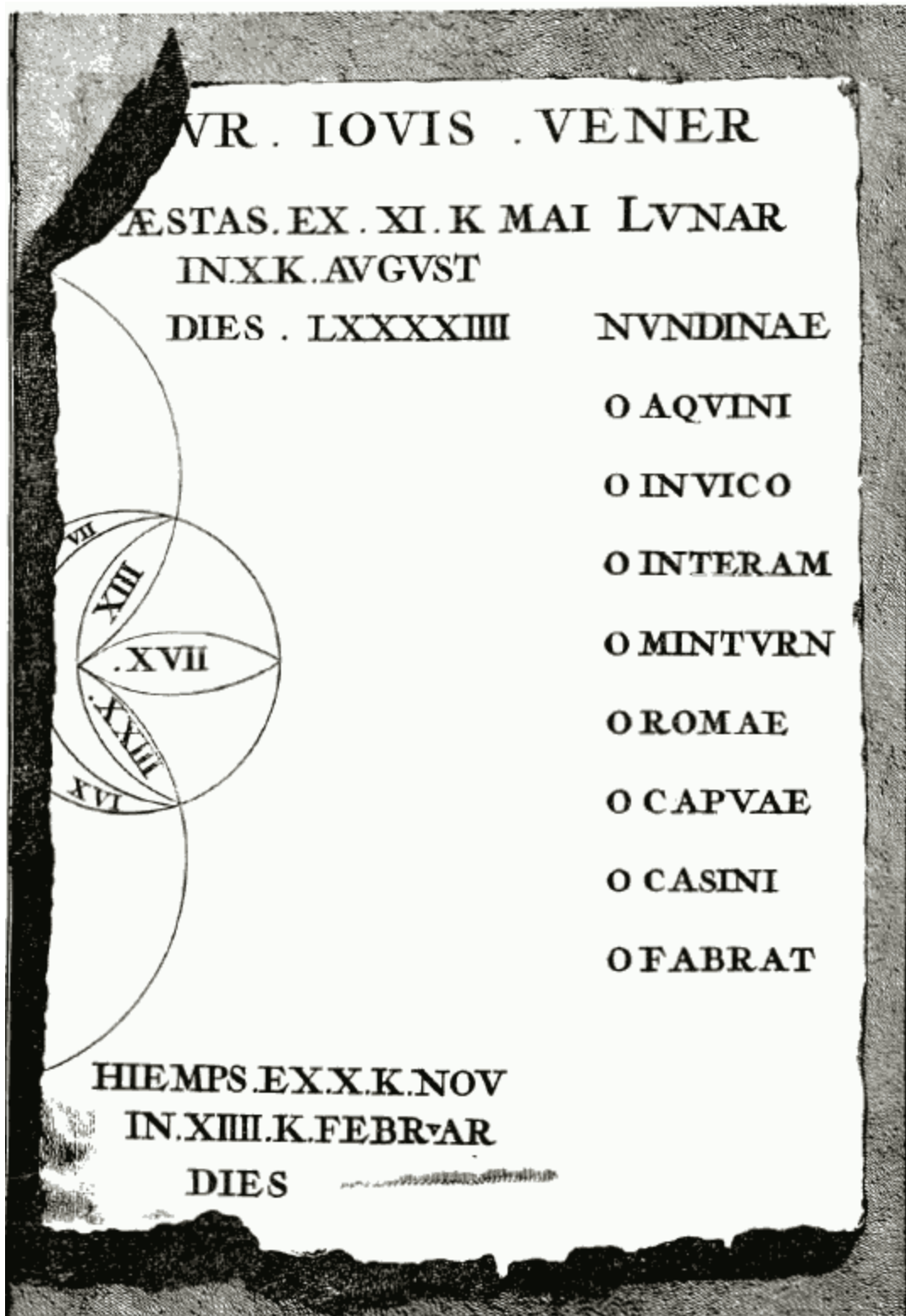
1 2 3 4
 5 6 7
 8 9 10 11 12 13
 14 15 16 17
 18 19 20 21 22 23
 24 25 26
 27 28 29 30

By each day of the week, by each city where the markets were held, and by each day of the month there appears a hole wherein a peg could be inserted for marking the days.

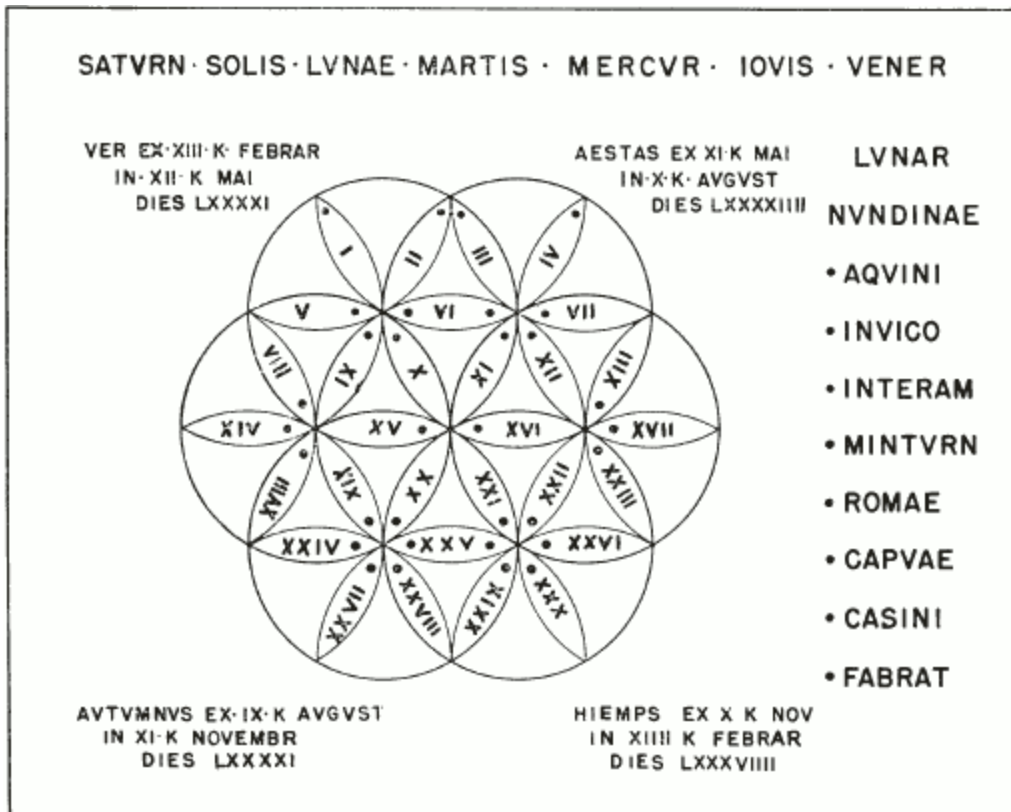
An Engraved Stone

Victor Duruy, the French historian, has described an engraved stone of the Roman period, which shows the seven planetary gods in the exact order as they appear in the pagan week. Each of them is designated by the initial letter of his name in Latin. Duruy speaks of it as an “engraved stone in the collection of Mr. Maxwell Sommerville. The gods which preside over the days of the week, walking to the right, have over their heads inscribed the initial letters of each one’s name (Saturnus, Elios, Luna or Diana, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter Venus). Saturn is veiled like a priest, the Sun has the radiate crown, Diana has the curved veil above her head, Mars is armed and helmeted, Mercury wears the winged cap, Jupiter holds the scepter, and Venus the apple.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Victor Duruy, *History of Rome*, Vol. 7, sec. 2, p. 488.



This stone fragment of a Roman calendar found by Fulvius Ursinus is preserved in the Museum of Naples. At the top are shown the names of the days of Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus. (See J. C. Graevius, *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Romanarum*, Vol 8, p. 31.)



This is an almost complete restoration of the Roman calendar fragment found by Fulvius Urinus.

Miscellaneous Items

Many other objects of a similar nature have been found, belonging to the Roman period, on which the planetary gods, in the order of the days of the pagan week, are depicted or listed by names.¹⁶ Mention is made of giant pillars, buildings, wall drawings, mosaic decorations, coins, bas-reliefs, a ladle, a drinking dipper; some bronze tongs, an earthen lamp, small bronze boxes, a silver can, a brass pitcher, and other things. A people living under the astrological superstition of paganism doubtless held in great awe those planetary gods who were supposed to determine all the good and bad fortune which it is the lot of men to have.

¹⁶ See L. Lersch, "Der Planetarische Götterkreis" in *Jahrbücher des Vereines von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande* (1844), Band 4, pp. 147-176; *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Band 2, col. 2776, art. "Hebdomas"; and E. Schürer, "Die Siebtägige Woche im Gebrauche der Christlichen Kirche der ersten Jahrhunderte," in *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1905.