



Three as a Magic Number in Latin Literature

Author(s): Eugene Tavenner

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X. — *Three as a Magic Number in Latin Literature*

BY PROFESSOR EUGENE TAVENNER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE NORMAL SCHOOL

To one who is investigating the subject of magic among the Romans few references to magical details seem so persistently repeated as those concerning the number three. It is my desire, therefore, to present in this paper all the passages referring to three as a magic number that I have been able to find in the literature of Rome up to the beginning of the fourth century of our era, with some additional illustrative material drawn from a later date.¹

Since, however, magic is so easily confused with superstition, astrology, and religion, it will be useful, for the purpose of differentiation, to define magic as the art, or pretended art, of controlling natural phenomena by preternatural means. We are, then, to inquire to what extent the Romans believed it possible to control various natural phenomena by the use of preternatural means involving the number three; directing our attention to their farm practice, the control of noxious animals, the averting of the evil eye, love magic, and the prevention and cure of disease.

I. FARM PRACTICES

How closely Roman farm practices were joined to magic may be judged from the following directions of Columella for ridding one's trees of caterpillars:²

¹ This material, drawn mainly from Marcellus Empiricus, Codex Sangallensis 751, and the *Anecdota Latina Piechottae*, is a valuable index to later Roman beliefs, which I should be glad to incorporate in this paper, if space permitted. For lack of space it has also been found impossible to draw upon the very interesting material found in the fields of archaeology and religion. The latter field has, indeed, been very thoroughly investigated by H. Usener, *Rh. Mus.* LVIII (1903), 1-47; 161-208; 322-362. Concerning seven and other odd numbers I shall also be compelled to omit all discussion; though I shall, of course, consider the multiples of three itself.

² *R.R.* x, 357-366:

At si nulla valet medicina repellere pestem,
Dardaniae veniant artes, nudataque plantas

But if science hath failed to drive the pest from thy acres,
 Bring Dardanian arts to thine aid: a barefooted woman
 Who, at nature's command, her monthly season endureth,
 Lead thou with looséd garments, her hair, too, sadly disheveled,
 Three times around thy fields, and thrice round the fence of
 thy garden.³

When her encircling path hath traversed the bounds of the
 farmstead,

Quickly as when a tree is shaken by wind and by rainstorm —
 Be it of smooth, round apple or of nut covered over with rough
 bark —

Down to the earth fall the pests, their bodies fearfully twisted.

But the Roman farmer had to combat orchard troubles other than those arising from insect pests. Sometimes his pomegranates burst their skins while still on the tree—a misfortune which might be avoided, says Columella,⁴ if the farmer, when planting his trees, would only remember to place three stones at the root of each. It is also reported by Pliny,⁵ as a common belief, that fruit might be protected from the effects of frost (*carbunculus*) by burning three live crabs in the orchard.

Magic offered also a cheap substitute for expensive drain-

Femina, quae iustis tum demum operata iuventae
 Legibus, obscoeno manat pudibunda cruore,
 Sed resoluta sinus, resoluta maesta capillo,
 Ter circum areolas, et sepe ducitur horti.
 Quae cum lustravit gradiens (mirabile visu),
 Non aliter quam decussa pluit arbore nimbus
 Vel teretis mali, vel tectae cortice glandis,
 Volvitur ad terram distorto corpore campae.

For the source of this bit of magic cf. Col. xi, 3, 64: Sed Democritus in eo libro qui Graece inscribitur *περὶ ἀντιπαθῶν* affirmat has ipsas bestiolas enecari, si mulier, quae in menstruis est, solutis crinibus et nudo pede, unamquamque aream ter circumeat: post hoc enim decidere omnes vermiculos, et ita emori.

³ Cf. with this the threefold circumambulation and the threefold sacrifice of the *lustratio* (Cambridge *Companion to Latin Studies*, p. 158).

⁴ *De Arboribus*, 23, 2: Mala Punica ne rumpantur in arbore, remedio sunt lapides tres, si, cum seres arborem ad radicem ipsum collocaveris.

⁵ *N.H.* xviii, 293: Quidam tres caneros vivos cremari iubent in arbustis ut carbunculus ne noceat.

age operations. For Columella writes⁶ that ill-drained land could be reclaimed by the simple expedient of covering a three-peck measure from which the farmer sowed his seed with the skin of a hyena.

But the greater part of Roman farm magic concerned itself with the prevention and cure of disease. So far as this relates to man it is impossible to differentiate rural practices from the medical magic of the cities, which we shall discuss later. It seems proper, however, to treat under the head of farm practices certain measures for the prevention or cure of diseases of farm animals which involve the number three.

Here we may cite from Cato a remarkable preventive for cattle diseases (*bubus medicamentum*), which runs:⁷ "If you fear disease, give your cattle while they are well three grains of salt, three laurel leaves, three leek fibres, three heads of leek, three heads of garlic, three grains of frankincense, three savin plants, three leaves of rue, three stalks of *vitis alba*, three white beans, three glowing coals, three pints of wine. All these ingredients should be picked, ground, and administered by a person standing, who is at the same time fasting. Give this medicine daily for three days to each of the cattle, dividing the mass in such a way that when you have given three doses to each animal, there will be nothing left. Let both the cattle and the one who administers the medicine be standing upright at the time; and be sure to give the medicine from a wooden vessel." There were also magic cures for specific diseases of cattle. Pliny tells us,⁸ for instance, that a draft animal could be freed from worms by passing a ringdove three times around its middle parts; after which

⁶ *R.R.* II, 9, 9: Nonnulli pelle hyaenae satoriam trimodiam vestiunt atque ita ex ea . . . iaciunt, non dubitantes proventura, quae sic sata sint.

⁷ *R.R.* 70: Bubus medicamentum. si morbum metues, sanis dato salis micas III, folia laurea III, porri fibras III, ulpici spicas III, alii spicas III, turis grana III, herbae sabinae plantas III, rutae folia III, vitis albae caules III, fabulos albos III, carbones vivos III, vini s. III. haec omnia sublimer legi, teri, darique oportet. ieiunus siet qui dabit. per triduum de ea potione uni cuique bovi dato. ita dividito, cum ter uni cuique dederis omnem abumas; bosque ipse et qui dabit facito ut uterque sublimer stent. vaso ligneo dato.

⁸ *N.H.* 30, 144: Verminatio (*sc. finitur*) ter circumlato mediis palumbe. mirum dictu, palumbis emissus moritur iumentumque liberatur confestim.

the dove, upon being released, died, whereas the draft animal immediately became well. Many similar passages are to be found in the Codex Sangallensis 751, having been inserted therein as later interpolations in the manuscript of the *Medicina Plinii*; ⁹ but as these later instances fall beyond the chronological limit set to this paper, I shall content myself with presenting a typical case. We are told ¹⁰ that if a horse or a bullock or an ass is choking, one may relieve the beast by repeating three times the charm: "Hercules and Queen Juno, come to the aid of this horse," substituting the word *bullock* or *ass*, in case these animals are to be relieved. Among these late writers none is so important for our investigation as Marcellus Empiricus, who wrote in the first half of the fifth century of our era. For the cure of a wasting disease among cattle called *rosus* he gives four remedies, all of them employing triple incantations. Of these I shall give only the most striking: ¹¹ "Press the thumb of your left hand," he directs, "over the belly of the beast and say: '*adam bedam alam betur alam botum.*' When you have said this nine times, touch the earth with the same thumb and spit; and again, and also a third time, say the charm nine times, and with each one of the nine repetitions touch the earth and spit."

II. NOXIOUS ANIMALS

We have already seen ¹² how caterpillars were thought to be controlled by magic. Higher forms of animal life, too, were believed to be subject to the power of the number three. Why did the Romans believe, as Pliny tells us, ¹³ that

⁹ Cf. Valentin Rose in *Herm.* VIII, 48 ff.; R. Heim, "Incantamenta magica Graeca Latina," in *Jahrb. f. Phil. u. Päd.* Suppl. XIX (1893), 555 ff.

¹⁰ Cod. Sang. 751, p. 202, l. 21: Travoratum equis bobus asinis: 'Hercules et Iuno regina, adveniatis huic caballo, bovi vel asino qui est travoratus.' The author has previously directed that the *incantamentum* be repeated three times.

¹¹ 28, 72: Manus sinistrae pollicem supra ventrem premes et dices: 'adam bedam alam betur alam botum.' hoc cum novies dixeris, terram eodem pollice tanges et spues rursumque novies et iterum tertium novies dices, et per novenas vices terram continges et expues. Similar passages are 28, 16. 73. 74.

¹² *Supra*, pp. 117-118.

¹³ *N.H.* XX, 171: Foliis tribus (*sc.* cunilae) ex oleo peruncto homine fugari serpentes.

serpents fled from a man who was anointed with oil containing three leaves of *cunila*, or why did some people add just three drops of viper's fat to their anointing oil, in order to put all wild beasts to flight,¹⁴ unless some magic power was thought to reside in the number three itself? We are also informed by Pliny¹⁵ that any animal which the hyena has walked around three times, sticks in its tracks. Nay, even the dragon which guarded the golden fleece yielded to the potent thrice-repeated charm of Medea:¹⁶

Thrice-spoken words she uttered, of peaceful slumbers productive,
Words that have power to stay the sea or the turbulent rivers:
Sleep now came to the eyes that long had never endured it,
And the Aesonian prince of the golden fleece became master.

III. THE EVIL EYE

No less dangerous than noxious animals, from the Roman point of view, were persons who possessed the evil eye. But of the fairly numerous passages dealing with the means of combating this malign power, only one involves the number three. Pliny, in the midst of an elaborate recital of the virtues of human saliva, asks:¹⁷ "Why should we not think it a proper custom, that, if a stranger comes into the presence of an infant, or looks at it while it is asleep, the nurse shall spit three times in its face?"

¹⁴ Pliny, *N.H.* xxix, 70: Quidam purgatae (*sc.* viperae) . . . adipem cum olei sextario decocunt ad dimidias; ex eo, cum opus sit, ternis stillis additis in oleum perunguntur, ut omnes bestiae fugiant eos.

¹⁵ *N.H.* viii, 106: Quibusdam magicis artibus omne animal quod ter lustraverit (*sc.* hyaena) in vestigio haerere.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Met.* vii, 153-156:

Verbaque ter dixit placidos facientia somnos,
Quae mare turbatum, quae concita flumina sistunt:
Somnus in ignotos oculos sibi venit, et auro
Heros Aesonius potitur.

¹⁷ *N.H.* xxviii, 39: Cur non et haec credamus rite fieri, extranei interventu aut, si dormiens spectetur infans, a nutrice terna adspui in os? Cf. Theocr. 6, 39; 20, 11-13.

IV. LOVE

Roman love magic, too, recognized the value of the number three. In this connection we may cite two well-known passages from Vergil. In the eighth *Eclogue* the poet says:¹⁸

Triple these threads that I bind of triple color about thee;
Thrice too around the altar this image of thee do I carry —
Thrice, for the god, you must know, rejoices in numbers uneven.
Draw from the city, my charms, draw Daphnis home to his lover.
Twine, Amaryllis, for me three knots of thrice-varied colors;
Twine, Amaryllis, and say, "It is Venus' chains I am twining."
Draw from the city, my charms, draw Daphnis home to his lover.

Very similar to this is a passage in the *Ciris*.¹⁹ Here Carme, the nurse of Scylla, is seeking to compel Nisus by magic to do her bidding:

Meanwhile in broad earthen pot the nurse her sulphur was mixing,
Sweet-smelling herbs she burns of cinnamon and of narcissus;
Binding upon her wheel the threads of magic tricolored
Seven and twenty in number, and spake these words to the maiden:
"Thrice on thy breast with me," she said, "my child, do thou
spit now;
Thrice do thou spit, my child, for the god delights in odd numbers."

So Tibullus instructs his mistress:²⁰

Thrice do thou sing it and thrice spit when the charm thou hast
sung.

¹⁸ 73-79: Terna tibi haec primum triplici diversa colore
Licia circumdo, terque hanc altaria circum
Effigiem duco; numero deus impare gaudet.
Ducite ab urbe domum, mea carmina, ducite Daphnim.
Necte tribus nodis ternos, Amarylli, colores,
Necte, Amarylli, modo et 'Veneris' dic 'vincula necto.'
Ducite ab urbe domum, mea carmina, ducite Daphnim.

¹⁹ 369-373:
At nutrix patula componens sulphura testa,
Narcissum cassiamque herbae incendit olentes,
Terque novena ligans triplici diversa colore
Fila 'ter in gremium mecum,' inquit, 'despue virgo;
Despue ter, virgo: numero deus impare gaudet.'

²⁰ 1, 2, 54: Ter cane, ter dictis despue carminibus.

Of Circe we read²¹ that when she was about to transform Scylla into a monster,

Thrice nine times doth she murmur her charm with a mouth
trained to magic,

and, as she turned Picus into a woodpecker,²²

Thrice with her wand did she touch the youth, three charms then
she uttered.

V. MEDICAL MAGIC

It was, however, in the prevention and cure of disease by magic that the number three proved especially useful to the Romans.²³ We know of nearly forty afflictions which they thought could be either prevented or cured in this way. These bits of medical magic are found in authors ranging in time from Cato to the latest period of Latin literature.

Concerning magic prophylaxis we read in Pliny²⁴ that, according to common belief, all afflictions of the eyes, especially *lippitudo*, could be prevented by touching the eyes three times with water left from bathing the feet. Or one might avoid pain in the eyes for a whole year, if we may believe Marcellus,²⁵ by wearing around one's neck as an amulet three bored cherry seeds strung upon a linen thread. Turning again to Pliny, we find that the teeth could be insured against disease by the following magic acts:²⁶ Dig up the

²¹ Ovid, *Met.* XIV, 58: Ter noviens carmen magico demurmurat ore.

²² *Ib.* 387: Ter iuvenem baculo tetigit, tria carmina dixit.

²³ For magic prophylaxis among the Romans see the author's *Studies in Magic from Latin Literature* (New York, 1916), 61-123.

²⁴ *N.H.* XXVIII, 44: Oculorum vitia fieri negant nec lippire eos qui, cum pedes lavent, aqua inde ter oculos tanguant. These directions are repeated with more elaborate detail by Marc. (8, 31): Expertum remedium ad lippitudinem, ne umquam temptetur, si quis observet sine intermissione aut oblivione, ut quotiens laverit, deducta utrisque manibus ad pedes infimos aqua statim manus ambas ad oculos referat atque ad angulos eorum utraque manu perfricet, et hoc ter facere debebis.

²⁵ 8, 27: Dolorem oculorum ut anno integro non patiaris . . . de tribus cerasiis lapillos pertundes et Gaditano lino inserto prophylacterio uteris.

²⁶ *N.H.* XXV, 167: Hanc (*sc.* erigeronta) si ferro circumscripam effodiat aliquis tangatque ea dentem et alternis ter despuat ac reponat in eundem locum ita ut vivat herba, aiunt dentem eum postea non doliturum.

plant *erigeron* with an iron implement; touch your tooth with it; spit alternately to your right and left three times; finally, replace the plant in such a way that it grows. "They say," reports Pliny, "that after that your tooth will never ache." Even quartan fever need never be feared by any one who took the precaution of eating a hyena's liver three separate times;²⁷ and you may prevent hydrophobia, according to the same authority,²⁸ by carrying a little worm which may be found on a dog's tongue three times around a fire before giving it to the person who has been bitten.

In the field of curative medicine the number three was much more prominent as a magic element. Pliny even goes so far as to say²⁹ that to spit and to utter certain charms three times was a customary adjunct to all medicine. In fact, the Roman populace, and perhaps many of the more cultivated, never ceased to believe that practically every disease of the human body could be cured by such magic.

Taking these up in detail we find that diseases of the head, throat, and respiratory tract were quite generally believed to be cured by magic. Marcellus³⁰ gives a headache salve composed of twenty-one (*i.e.* three times seven) grains of pepper, twenty-one pellets of mouse dung, and as much mustard as one could hold in three fingers. Magic remedies for dandruff,³¹

²⁷ *N.H.* XXVIII, 96: *Febribus quartanis iocur (sc. hyaenae) degustatum ter ante accessiones . . . prodesse.*

²⁸ *N.H.* XXIX, 100: *Idem (i.e. vermiculus qui in lingua canis reperitur) ter igni circumlatus datur morsis a rabioso, ne rabidi fiant.* For a similar method of prevention employing a triple incantation cf. *Cod. Sang.* 751, p. 278, 27: *Item (sc. ad canis morsum) praecantatio. priusquam tangas dicis: 'canis mordet et stupet, non dolet.' ter dicito et ter expuito et ter terram mingito.*

²⁹ *N.H.* XXVIII, 36: *Et iam eadem ratione terna despuere precatione in omni medicina mos est.*

³⁰ 2, 8: *Piperis grana XXI, murini fimi pilulas XXI, sinapis quantum tribus digitis possis tollere.* Other cures for headache consisted of the urine of a young girl applied to the forehead with three fingers (*Cod. Sang.* 751, p. 186, 1); or of nine leaves of ivy worked into a salve. In all these cures the proportion of ingredients seems to have had nothing to do with the choice of the numbers twenty-one and nine.

³¹ *Marc.* 4, 27: *Porriginem potentissime hac potione purgabis: rosmarinum teres sucumque eius vino vel aqua scripulis tribus dabis potui, sed qui sumit supra limen adsistat idque triduo faciat.*

blear-eye,^{31a} and sties³² are found in considerable number, but as they all occur in late Latin authors, we shall content ourselves with a typical cure for sties drawn from Marcellus.³³ "Remove your rings from your fingers," he writes, "and hold them with three fingers of the left hand around the afflicted eye, spit three times, and say three times the charm: '*rica rica soro.*'" One might remove foreign bodies from the eye, according to the same author,³⁴ by moving the eyeball around

^{31a} Marc. 8, 24: Gramen quod in summo trisulcum habebit decrescente luna radicitus sublatum quam plurimum repone; deinde ex multis unum, auspicante lippitudine, ad collum subliga: celeriter incumbentem epiphoram discuties. Cf. *Id.* 8, 64: Cui crebro lippitudinis vitio laborabit milefolium herbam radicitus vellat, et ex ea circulum faciat, ut per illum adspiciat et dicat ter: 'excicum acrisos,' et totiens ad os sibi circulum illum admoveat et per medium expuat et herbam rursus plantet. quae si revixerit, numquam is qui remedium fecerit vexabitur oculorum dolore. Of a different kind is the remedy suggested in the *Cod. Sang.* 751, p. 190, 23: Erat quidam qui hoc remedio ad certissimam sanitatem perfruebatur. salis tribus micis sumptis cum ad puteum aquae venisset et singulas in puteum deiecisset, ita precabatur ut, 'quemadmodum hic sal seritur et ad nihilum reducitur, sic mea lippitudo coalescat.'

³² Marc. 8, 191: Si in dextro oculo varulus erit natus, manu dextra digitis tribus sub divo orientem spectans varulum tenebis et dices: 'nec mula parit nec lapis lanam fert nec huic morbo caput crescat aut si creverit, tabescat.' cum haec dixeris, isdem tribus digitis terram tanges et despues idque ter facies. This passage is found, somewhat altered, in the *Anecd. Piech.* no. 170. Cf. also Marc. 8, 193: Hoc remedium efficax: grana novem hordei sumes et de eorum acumine varulum punges, et per punctorum singulas vices carmen hoc dices: 'φεῦγε, φεῦγε, κρεῖων σε διώκει.' (The charm, according to Heim, "Incan. mag. Gr. Lat." 480, should probably be read: 'φεῦγε, φεῦγε κρήνη, κρεῖων σε διώκει.') In the same paragraph Marcellus continues: Item digito medicinali varum contingens dices ter: 'vigaria gasaria.' The magic intent of Pliny, *N.H.* xxix, 131, seems to be very doubtful, at least so far as concerns the number three.

³³ 8, 190: Varulis, id est hordioli oculorum, remedium tale facies: anulos digitis eximes et sinistrae manus digitis tribus oculum circum tenebis et ter despues terque dices: 'rica rica soro.'

³⁴ 8, 170 f.: Digitis quinque manus eiusdem, cuius partis oculum sordicula aliqua fuerit ingressa, percurrans et pertractans oculum ter dices: 'tetunc resonco bregan gresso.' ter deinde spues terque facies. item ipso oculo clauso, qui carminatus erit, patentem perfricabis et ter carmen hoc dices et totiens spues: 'in mon dercomarcos axatison.' Cf. *Id.* 8, 172: Si arista vel quaelibet sordicula oculum fuerit ingressa . . . ter per singula despuens dices: 'os Gorgonis basio.' Hoc idem carmen si ter novies dicatur, etiam de faucibus hominis vel iumentum os aut si quid aliud haeserit, potenter eximuit. Of similar nature is a passage in the *Anecd. Piech.* 170: Si quod vulnus in oculos nascitur. pollice

with the fingers and saying three times, '*tetunc resonco bregan gresso*,' or else, '*in mon dercomarcos axatison*,' spitting after each repetition of the charm.

Charms for removing obstructions from the throat often employed the number three; but since all mention of these magic cures is in authors decidedly post-classical,³⁵ we shall not dwell upon them here. Of other diseases of the throat and neck only quinsy and foul breath seem to have owed their cure in part at least to the magic effect of the number three. The former, so Pliny informs us,³⁶ could be cured by tying a shoestring made of dog's hide three times around the neck; while the latter could be remedied by moving the dried palate of a hyena which had been heated with Egyptian alum from one side of the mouth to the other three times. At least, so the Magi taught.³⁷ Marcellus is a more generous source of information. From him we learn that the Romans of the fifth century of our era sought to cure uvular complaints,³⁸

cum digito medicinali ter noviaes circumducis et sic dicis: 'quod mula non parit (et expues), nec cantarus aqua vibet (et expues), nec palumba dentes habet (et expues); sic mihi dentes non doleant (et expues).'

³⁵ Marc. 15, 103: Si os aut arista haeserit gulae, vel ipse cui acciderit, vel alius confestim ad focum adcurrat et titionem verset, ita ut pars eius, quae ardebat, forinsecus emineat, illa vero, quae igni carebat, flammae inseratur; convertens vero titionem ter dices remedii gratia te facere, ut illud quod haeserit in faucibus tuis vel illius, quem peperit illa, sine mora et molestia eximatur. Cf. *Id.* 15, 105: Omnia quae haeserint faucibus hoc carmen expellet: 'heilen prosaggeri vome si polla nabuliet odonien i den eliton.' hoc ter dices et ad singulas expues. The *Anecd. Piech.* 172 has: Ad devoratum. digitis duobus, pollice et medicinali digito gurgulionem deducens dicis: 'порка cucinaon.' ter dices et ter expues. Similar charms are to be found in the Cod. Sang. 751, p. 202, 21, the text of which is found in Heim, *op. cit.* 557.

³⁶ *N.H.* xxx, 35: Et corrigiam caninam ter collo circumdatam (*sc.* esse remedio anginae tradunt). The passage is repeated by Marc. (15, 71): Caninae cutis corrigium ter collo circumdatum mire anginam relevat.

³⁷ Pliny, *N.H.* xxviii, 100: Palato eiusdem (*sc.* hyaenae) arefacto et cum alumine Aegyptio calefacto ac ter in ore permutato faecores et ulcera oris emendari.

³⁸ 14, 26: De uva passa eliges granum, quod unum intrinsecus nucleum habeat, eumque in phoenicio alligabis, et faucibus, id est in regione uvae, inseres et tenebis et dices: 'uva uvam emendat'; mox ipsum phoenicium supra verticem eius tenebis et idem dices cumque ter ipsum feceris et carminaveris, collo dolentis subligabis. Cf. *Id.* 14, 68.

parotitis,³⁹ tonsillitis,⁴⁰ and pains in the neck⁴¹ by means of the magic number three. For the relief of asthma Pliny suggests⁴² that we mix thrice seven multipeps in Attic honey; while a later age believed that to cure a cough one had only to use a thrice-repeated charm.⁴³

Even a Roman dyspeptic⁴⁴ might hope to find relief through the magic power of three. The Magi, says Pliny,⁴⁵ believe that if the person so afflicted could bring himself to take three swallows of water that had been left from bathing his feet, he would find relief. Later cures for digestive disorders consisted of the ivy blossom plucked with three fingers,⁴⁶ three laurel berries mixed with three spoonfuls of periwinkle in three measures of wine,⁴⁷ an incantation with a triple refrain,⁴⁸ and the familiar thrice-repeated charm.⁴⁹

³⁹ 15, 47: Hunc (*i.e.* murem araneum) . . . argilla aut linteo aut phoenicio involve, et ex eo ter circumscribe parotidas . . .; mira celeritate sanabis.

⁴⁰ 15, 101: Carmen mirum ad glandulas sic: 'albula glandula, nec doleas, nec noceas, nec paniculas facias, sed liquescas tamquam salis in aqua.' hoc ter noviens dicens spues ad terram et glandulas ipsas pollice et digito medicinali perduces, dum carmen dicis.

⁴¹ 18, 4: Ieiunus dextram manum saliva tange et dextrum poplitem perfrica, deinde sinistra manu sinistram, et hoc ter per singulos poplites facito; statim remediabis.

⁴² *N.H.* xxx, 47: Suspiriosis multipeda (*sc.* medetur), ut ter septenae in Attico melle diluantur et per harundinem bibantur.

⁴³ Cod. Sang. 751, p. 202, *sub textu* (quoted by Heim, *op. cit.* 557): Ad tusellas praecantas: 'Neptunus tusellas habebat, supra petram hic stabat, neminem habuit, qui curaret; ipse se curavit falce sua triplice'; hoc ter dicis.

⁴⁴ For digestive disorders among cattle see *supra*, pp. 119-120.

⁴⁵ *N.H.* xxx, 64: Si quis aquam ter pedes eluens haurire sustineat (*sc.* ventris morbo medetur).

⁴⁶ Marc. 27, 74: Flos hederæ tribus digitis sumptus . . . medetur.

⁴⁷ Marc. 28, 38: Bacas lauri tres cum herbae vincae coclearibus tribus pariter contundes et adicies vini calidi cyathis tribus.

⁴⁸ Pelagonius, 7: Ad dolorem ventris praecantatio: manu uncta oleo ventrem perfricato cum hac praecantatione: 'tres scrofae de caelo ceciderunt, invenit eas pastor, occidit eas sine ferro, coxit eas . . . sine dentibus. bene coxisti, bene coxisti, bene coxisti.'

⁴⁹ Marc. 20, 78: Ventrem tuum perfricans dices ter: 'lupus ibat per viam, per semitam; cruda vorabat, liquida bibebat.' Sometimes a magic word or group of letters was written three times on a gold plate with a gold stylus, and the plate was worn as an amulet, as in Marc. 29, 26-27: Ad coli dolorem scribere debes in lamina aurea de grafeo aureo infra scriptos characteres luna prima vigesima et

Pliny is our authority⁵⁰ for the statement that the Magi employed the following remedy for disease of the spleen: "Take the fresh spleen of a sheep and lay it over the spleen of the patient, at the same time uttering as a charm the statement that you are performing this act in order to cure a spleen disease. Then embed the sheep spleen in the ceiling of the patient's bedroom, sealing it thrice nine times with your ring, each time repeating the above-mentioned charm."

The Romans also possessed various magic cures for ailments appearing on the surface of the body, such as blisters,

laminam ipsam mittere intra tubulum aureum et desuper operire vel involvere tubulum ipsum pelle caprina et caprina corrigia ligare in pede dextro, si dextra pars corporis colo laborabit, aut in sinistra, si ibi causa fuerit, habere debebit. . . .
hi sunt characteres scribendi in aurea lamina: ΛΨΜΘΚΙΑ

ΛΨΜΘΚΙΑ

ΛΨΜΘΚΙΑ

Cf. also Marc. 29, 45: *Lacertum viridem . . . capies, perque eius oculos acum cupream cum liceo . . . traicies, perforatisque oculis eum ibidem loci, ubi ceperas, dimittes; ac tum filum praecantabis dicens: 'trebio potnia telapho.'* hoc ter dicens filum munditer recondes cumque dolor colici alicuius urget, praecinges eum totum supra umbilicum et ter dices carmen supra scriptum. Cf. Cod. Sang. 751, p. 232, 14; 236, 8. The only instance of the use of the number three in the magic cure of kidney disease seems to be from Cod. Sang. 751, p. 226, 30: *In balneo cum te despoliaris, antequam aquam tangas, accipies oleum in manu sinistra, dicens nomen hoc: φαρμακούς.* hoc ter dicens et manu fricas cum oleo; novies sic lavas.

⁵⁰ *N.H.* xxx, 51: *Pecudis lien recens magicis praeceptis super dolentem lienem extenditur, dicente eo qui medeatur lieni se remedium facere. post hoc iubent in pariete dormitorii eius tectorio includi et obsignari anulo ter novies eademque dici. Marcellus tells us (23, 70) that the actual words uttered by the operator were 'lieni remedium facio,' and adds that if the whole magic act is repeated three times the patient will not only be cured of his present trouble, but will be rendered immune for the future. The passage, in full, runs: Si quis agnum recens natum confestim manibus divellat lienemque eius, ubi extraxerit, calidum super lienem dolentis inponat ac fascia liget et dicat adsidue: 'remedio lienis facio'; postera die sublatum de corpore eius parieti cubiculi, in quo lienosus dormire solitus est, luto prius inlito, ut haerere possit, inponat atque ipsum lutum viginti septem signaculis signet ad singula dicens: 'lieni remedium facio'; hoc tale remedium si ter fecerit, in omne tempus lienosum quamvis infirmum et periclitantem sanabit. For the more conservative, Marcellus offers the following remedy (23, 35): Ebuli radicem, quam sine ferro evellas, aridam contusam et pollinis modo cribratam repones, inde coctiaria tria ex vini cyathis tribus in limine stans contra orientem per triduum bibito ieiunus; sed omnino observa, ne ebulum ferro contingatur, aut ne ipse, dum remedium accipis, ferrum tecum habeas.*

boils, burns, itch, fistula, varicose veins, and warts. Many of these employ the number three. In order to introduce a belief very similar to one of our own, I shall overstep my chronological limit to quote again from Marcellus. "When blisters suddenly come on your tongue," he writes,⁵¹ . . . "touch the blister with the outer edge of the tunic you are wearing and repeat three times: 'So far away may he be who is slandering me.' Spit on the ground after each repetition of the charm; straightway you will be healed." From this it is apparent that the Romans believed such blisters to be caused by the fact that some one was slandering you.

Pliny, for some unknown reason, seems to have been especially interested in remedies for boils. Three of these remedies make use of the number three. "They say," he records,⁵² "that if you take nine grains of barley and move each one of them around a boil three times with your left hand, and then throw them all into the fire, you will be relieved forthwith." "It is helpful also," he says in another passage,⁵³ "when boils begin to appear, to mark the spot in advance three times with fasting saliva." Or, if you prefer,⁵⁴ "place a spider on the boil, and remove it after three days; or kill a shrewmouse in mid-air in such a way that it does not touch the ground, and move it around the boil three times, while both the healer and the patient spit three times." Similar cures for burns, itch, fistula, and warts are also found, but only in late authors.⁵⁵ I am tempted to give a remedy

⁵¹ 11, 25: Pusulae cum subito in lingua nascuntur, priusquam idem loquaris, extremae tunicae qua vestiris ora pusulam tanges et ter dices: 'tam extremus sit qui me male nominat.' et totiens spues ad terram; statim sanabere.

⁵² *N.H.* xxii, 135: Novem granis (*sc.* hordei) furunculum si quis circumducatur, singulis ter manu sinistra, et omnia in ignem abiciat, confestim sanari aiunt.

⁵³ *N.H.* xxviii, 36: Incipientes furunculos ter praesignare ieiuna saliva.

⁵⁴ *N.H.* xxx, 108: Furunculis mederi dicitur araneus, priusquam nominetur, inpositus et tertio die solutus; mus araneus pendens enecatus sic, ut terram ne postea attingat, ter circumlatus furunculo, totiens expuentibus medente et cui is medebitur.

⁵⁵ To cure felons we read (*Marc.* 18, 30): De paronychia parietem contingens et rursum digitum ducens dices ter: 'pu, pu, pu, numquam ego te videam per parietem repere.' Similarly, to cure burns (*Cod. Sang.* 751, p. 268): Praecantatio ad combustum; dicis haec: 'rangaruagaverbat.' ter dicito, et lingito ter,

for warts, however, because it will, I dare say, remind all of us of our childhood beliefs. "Touch the wart," advises Marcellus,⁵⁶ "with three beans, and then bury the beans in a dung pit. . . . The more quickly the beans decay, the more quickly will your warts disappear."

The number three was also effectively used in curing diseases of the nervous system. Among these we may include sciatica, paralysis, and epilepsy. For the first-mentioned disease our only remedy is found in the *Anecdotum Latinum Piechottae*,⁵⁷ a work of too late a date to be considered here. Concerning paralysis and rheumatism it is difficult to understand why the flesh of precisely three mud-turtles should be used as the basis of a cure, as Pliny writes,⁵⁸ unless some magic power was thought to reside in the number three. Pliny also repeats⁵⁹ a bit of folk medicine to the effect that the powdered liver of a vulture, taken in the blood of a vulture for thrice seven days, would cure epilepsy. "Some," he adds, "give twenty-one red flies in a liquid, especially flies that have been on a corpse." For the cure of the same disease Pliny's contemporary, Scribonius Largus, suggests⁶⁰ a

et exspuito; and for the cure of the itch (*ib.* p. 265, 26): Ad scabiem. item vel tribus digitis cum comprehendas, haec ter dicis, et despuito: 'furem ferrum furca premet cum dolore fero, fur surgit foras.' haec gratis docere non oportebit. Finally, fistula may be cured as follows (*ib.* p. 249, 14): <Ad> syringium curandum haec verba infra scripta dicis, ascendis in montem mundus purus ex omni re, ter dicis sic extensa manu palmam habens: 'Sol invicte . . . (then follows a prayer to the sun).' For the cure of varicose veins we find (Marc. 34, 83): Hederae bacas tres, quae per parietem repit, pedi, in quo sunt varices alligato.

⁵⁶ 34, 54: Tribus fabae granis clavum tangito, eaque in sterculinio defodito, ne renasci possint; quanto maturius conputerint, tanto celerius clavos sponte decidere miraberis.

⁵⁷ 57: Haec est herba argimonia quam Minerva tradidit potionem Apollini. Apollo tradidit inter humanos, si cui sciaticus morbus est, hanc herbam. si hoc cum ter incantaveris. . . . Cf. Cod. Sang. 751, p. 252, 29.

⁵⁸ *N.H.* xxxii, 39: Ita decoctarum (*sc.* trium testudinum in paludibus viventium) ad tertias partes sucus paralysim et articularios morbos sentientibus bibitur.

⁵⁹ *N.H.* xxx, 92: Praedicatur . . . iocur vulturis tritum cum suo sanguine ter septenis diebus potum (*sc.* morbo comitali mederi). . . . fuere et qui muscas XXI rufas, et quidem a mortuo, in potu darent.

⁶⁰ 16: Hoc medicamentum ligneo vase servatum reponitur. cum opus fuerit, dantur ex eo, luna decrescente, per continuos dies triginta primum coclearia tria, deinde quinque, deinde septem, deinde novem, summum undecim, et rursus no-

medicine compounded with much attention to magic detail, which was to be administered, beginning when the moon was waning, for thirty continuous days in doses increasing daily from three to five, seven, nine, and eleven teaspoonfuls, and then in the same manner decreasing to three, repeating the process until the whole thirty days were completed. After that the remainder of the medicine was to be taken, three teaspoonfuls a day, for sixty days, in three *cyathi* of water. "Some," it is added, "even drink blood directly from their own veins, or out of a human skull, three teaspoonfuls a day for thirty days." One cannot read of all these three's and thirty's without suspecting the existence of some magic power in the numbers themselves. How intimately Scribonius associated the multiples of three with magic cures may be shown by an additional citation,⁶¹ recommending as a cure for epilepsy a little piece of the liver of a gladiator, whose throat had been cut, given to the patient in nine doses.

Diseases peculiar to women yielded to the same magic force. It is commonly believed, writes Pliny,⁶² that flabby breasts may be made firm by passing a partridge egg around them three times; and⁶³ that difficult childbirth may be immediately relieved, if any one hurls over the house where the patient is lying a stone or other missile which, with three different strokes, has killed three animals: a man, a boar, and a bear. Sexual debility in women might also be cured by the use of three roots of a plant called *unicaulis*.⁶⁴

vem, deinde septem, deinde quinque, postea tria; et iterum augetur minuiturque numerus cocleariorum donec dies triginta ante dicti consumantur. postea oportebit scobis eboreae heminam per duos menses consumere vitio correptum, accipientem ex ea terna coclearia in die ex aquae cyathis tribus . . . sunt et qui sanguinem ex vena sua missum bibant aut de calvaria defuncti terna coclearia sumant per dies triginta.

⁶¹ 17: Item ex iecinore gladiatoris iugulati particulam aliquam novies datam consumant (*sc. comitiales*).

⁶² *N.H.* XXX, 131: Putant et ter (*sc. mammas*) circumductas ovo perdicis . . . non inclinari.

⁶³ *N.H.* XXVIII, 33: Ferunt difficiles partus statim solvi, cum quis tectum, in quo sit gravida, transmiserit lapide vel missile ex iis, qui III animalia singulis ictibus interfecerint, hominem, aprum, ursum.

⁶⁴ *N.H.* XX, 227: Tres radices (*sc. unicaulis*) iuxta adalligatas (*sc. Xenocritus* tradit feminarum aviditates augere).

For rheumatic and other pains we discover an interesting folk remedy repeated by Varro. In the *de Re Rustica*⁶⁵ a certain Tarquenna is given as the authority for a magic remedy for pains in the feet. It consists of an incantation which is to be repeated thrice nine times, each repetition to be accompanied by spitting and touching the earth. It is further enjoined that the afflicted person be fasting when he utters the charm. The latter swings so metrically in its natural prose accents that I wish to give it in Latin: '*Ego tui memini, medere meis pedibus, terra pestem teneto, salus hic maneto [in meis pedibus].*' "I remember thee; cure my feet; may earth take the pain, may health here remain in my feet."

For diseases of the tendons and hips, and for pains in all the limbs we possess remedies involving the magic number three from late authors only;⁶⁶ but when we come to consider the magic cure of ulcers and tumors, we find Pliny our sole and important authority. He tells us⁶⁷ that to cure ulcers of the groin one has only to tie three horse hairs into three knots and bind the whole within the ulcer. All inflammations⁶⁸ may likewise be scattered by the use of a plant

⁶⁵ I, 2, 27: Cum homini pedes dolere coepissent, qui tui meminisset, ei mederi posse. '*ego tui memini, medere meis pedibus; terra pestem teneto, salus hic maneto [in meis pedibus].*' hoc ter noviens cantare iubet, terram tangere, despuere, iejunum cantare. For the cure of gout cf. also Marc. 25, 13: Sed hanc herbam ter, dum tenes, antequam colligas, praecantare debes sic: '*terram teneo, herbam lego, in nomine Christi prosit ad quod te colligo.*' Cf. also *Id.* 25, 11 and *supra*, p. 130, n. 57.

⁶⁶ For the first cf. Marc. 35, 18: De tribus cumulis terrae, quos talpae faciunt, ter sinistra manu quod adprehenderis tolles, hoc est novem pugnos plenos et aceto addito temperabis et subiges atque eo malagmate cum opus fuerit efficaciter uteris. For diseases of the hips cf. *Id.* 25, 30: Muscerdae novem tritae ex vini quartario super scabillum vel sellam laboranti potui dantur, ita ut pede uno quem dolet stans ad orientem versus potionem bibat et cum biberit, saltu desiliat et ter uno pede saliat atque hoc per triduum faciat. For the relief of pains in all the limbs cf. Cod. Sang. 751, p. 254, 20: Ad membrorum omnium dolorem praecantatio: homini haec dicis tergens ter novies de manu sinistra digito medicinali et pollice, dices: '*vertigontes audierunt, Iovem patrem sibi ad optationem dedisse, ut si quid doleret, eadem die, qua te nominasset, tu illi sanum faceres quod doleret. . . .*' omnia nominabis.

⁶⁷ *N.H.* XXVIII, 218: Remedio sunt (*sc.* ulceri) equi saetae III totidem nodis alligatae intra ulcus.

⁶⁸ *N.H.* XXVII, 131: Discutit (*sc.* reseda) collectiones inflammationesque

called *reseda*, together with the charm: '*Reseda, morbos reseda; scisne, scisne quis hic pullus egerit radices? nec caput nec pedes habeat.*' "*Reseda*, cure the diseases; knowest thou, knowest thou what parasitic shoot hath driven its roots in here? May it have neither head nor feet." This you must say three times, spitting each time. In the cure of tumors Pliny seems to have thought highly of the magic power of the number three. Five passages refer to it. Tumors may be cured, we are told,⁶⁹ by anointing them with the herb called *rodarum*; but the patient must spit to the right three times while being anointed. "They say the remedy is more effective," he adds, "if three men of three different nationalities apply it from the right side." "There are some persons," he says a little further on,⁷⁰ "who tell us to wrap nine joints of grass in fresh black wool as a cure for the same affliction. Both the one who collects this grass and the patient must fast, and the former shall say three times to the latter: 'A fasting person gives medicine to a fasting person;' and then bind the curative substance upon the patient. This action must be repeated three days in succession." "Furthermore," says Pliny,⁷¹ "the experts say that it makes a great difference if a naked, fasting virgin apply the remedy to the patient while the latter is fasting also; touching him at the same time with the back of her hand and saying: 'Apollo forbids any disease to grow which a nude virgin counteracts.' These words she is to repeat three times, and both the maiden and the patient must spit

omnes. qui curant ea, addunt haec verba: '*reseda, morbos reseda; scisne, scisne, quis hic pullus egerit radices? nec caput nec pedes habeat.*' haec ter dicunt totiensque despuant.

⁶⁹ *N.H.* xxiv, 172: Qui perunctus est despuat ad suam dextram terna. efficacius remedium esse aiunt, si tres trium nationum homines perungant dextrorsus.

⁷⁰ *N.H.* xxiv, 180-181: Sunt qui genicula viii . . . involvi lana sucida nigra iubeant ad remedia strumae panorumve. ieiunum esse debere qui colligat (atque) . . . ter dicere ieiuno ieiunum medicamentum dare, atque ita adalligare triduoque id facere.

⁷¹ *N.H.* xxvi, 93: Experti adfirmavere plurimum referre, si virgo inponat nuda ieiuna ieiuno et manu supina tangens dicat: 'negat Apollo pestem posse crescere cui nuda virgo restinguat.' atque ita retrorsa manu ter dicat totiensque despuant ambo.

three times." Others cured tumors by giving the patient for thrice seven days as much of a viper's ashes as could be held in three fingers.⁷²

For the cure of hemorrhages by the use of the number three we can quote no author earlier than Marcellus, from whose rather simple store one example will suffice. To cure a hemorrhage, our author directs,⁷³ let the patient touch the source of the hemorrhage with the *digitus medicinalis* and repeat twenty-seven times, or until the flow of blood ceases, the formula: '*socnon, socnon.*' With enough of patience such a remedy doubtless proved efficacious in minor cases.

Quartan fever was beyond the skill of Roman physicians. Accordingly, there were many attempts to cure by magic what could not be cured by science. Three such remedies employ the number three. Pliny is our authority for the first one. The Magi, he writes,⁷⁴ cure quartan fever by putting a caterpillar in a piece of linen cloth, and then winding a linen thread three times around the cloth, tying the thread with three knots, and at the tying of each knot declaring the purpose of the act.

This completes our list of the diseases which the Roman

⁷² *N.H.* xxx, 40: Cinerem eum (*sc. viperae*) dant bibendum ter septenis diebus, quantum prenditur ternis digitis.

⁷³ *IO*, 55: Locum ex quo defluit digito medicinali tanges et vices septies dices et quotiens volueris repetes, donec fluorem pervincas: '*socnon, socnon.*' mire prodest. Or (*Marc.* *IO*, 70) one might write the Greek syllables ψαψεψηψεψηψαψε on virgin parchment, and suspend the amulet thus made from the neck of the patient with a rough string tied in three knots. For bleeding of the nose cf. *Marc.* *IO*, 56: Pollicem et medicinalem digitum a fronte usque ad cerebrum et inde usque ad cervicem duces et nonagies novies dices: '*sirmio, sirmio,*' quod ad aurem eius partis dici oportet de qua nare sanguis propensus fluit. The same result could be obtained by saying '*σοκσοκαμ σνκυμα*' thrice nine times, according to *Marc.* *IO*, 69.

⁷⁴ *N.H.* xxx, 101: Urucam in linteolo ter lino circumdant (*sc. Magi*) totidem nodis ad singulos dicente quare faciat, qui medebitur. In the *Medicina Plin.* p. 89 Rose, we read: Ad quartanas . . . item panem et salem in linteo de linteo alliget et circa arborem licio alliget et adiuret ter per panem et salem: '*crastino hospites mihi venturi sunt, suscipite illos.*' hoc ter dicat. Cf. *Cod. Sang.* 751, p. 272, 4: Ad quartanas . . . eum curabis oleo, in quo ranae rubetae trivio decoctae sunt.

populace attempted to cure by the magic power of the number three. But there were other kindred uses for this occult force. We read in Pseudo-Apuleius⁷⁵ that snake-bite might be prevented or cured by reciting three times the charm: '*omnia mala bestiae canto.*' The words of this charm suggest Pliny's statement⁷⁶ that to have a circle drawn about one, especially a triple circle made with a sword point, is a means of protection, both for adults and infants, against *noxia medicamenta*. And if these last words mean "harmful charms," as seems likely,⁷⁷ rather than mere poisons, we have here an instance of the number three used in counter-magic as well as in magic. Of a similar nature are the two passages in Pliny⁷⁸ which direct that before one digs up either the iris or the mandrake, both of which were thought to possess magic power, one should make three circles around the plant with the point of a sword.

Closely akin to disease was the dread felt by the Romans for the sixty-third year of a man's life, which they called the climacteric;⁷⁹ a dread which probably arose from the thought that sixty-three is the product of $3 \times 3 \times 7$.

Even metaphorical diseases, such as love of praise, yield

⁷⁵ *de Virtut. Herb.* 91, 2: Ad collubri morsum. herbam ebulum tene et antequam succidas eam, ter novies dices: '*omnia mala bestiae canto,*' atque eam . . . secundum terram trifariam praecidito.

⁷⁶ *N.H.* xxxiv, 151: Namque et circumscribi circulo terve circumlato mucrone et adultibus et infantibus prodest contra noxia medicamenta.

⁷⁷ For Pliny's use of *medicamentum* in the sense of a magic charm see *N.H.* xxviii, 142; xxx, 82.

⁷⁸ *N.H.* xxi, 42: Effosuri (*sc.* irim) tribus ante mensibus mulsa aqua circumfusa hoc veluti placamento terrae blandiuntur, circumscripam mucrone gladii orbe triplici cum legerunt; and *ib.* xxv, 148: Effosuri (*sc.* mandragoram) . . . IIIi circulis ante gladio circumscribunt.

⁷⁹ Gellius tells us how happy Augustus was when he had passed the ominous sixty-third year: Observatum in multa hominum memoria expertumque est senioribus plerisque omnibus sexagesimum tertium vitae annum cum periculo et clade aliqua venire aut corporis morbiue gravioris aut vitae interitus aut animi aegritudinis. propterea, qui rerum verborumque istiusmodi studio tenentur, eum aetatis annum appellant κλιμακτηρικόν (xv, 7, 1). In xv, 7, 3 Augustus is represented as writing to Gaius: Spero laetum et bene valentem celebrasse quartum et sexagesimum natalem meum. nam, ut vides, κλιμακτῆρα communem seniorum omnium tertium et sexagesimum annum evasimus.

to the potent spell of the number three. For does Horace not say :⁸⁰

Swell'st thou with love of praise? Thou canst make availing
atonement :

Read thou but thrice clean through a book which can make
thee all over.

And death itself had no terrors for him who possessed this occult power over nature. At least the gods of Ovid employed the magic number three quite freely in restoring mortals to life. Of Ceres we read :⁸¹

Midnight was come o'er the earth, and the silence of undisturbed
slumber ;

Now she Triptolemus raised, lifting him up to her breast ;

Thrice with her hand she stroked him, and uttered a charm that
was triple.

Carna, too, when about to restore a child to life, shows a similar high regard for the magic power of the number three :⁸²

Thrice then with arbutus twig she touches in order the doorposts,
Thrice, too, the sills of the door marks with the arbutus twig ;

⁸⁰ *Ep.* I, 1, 35-36: *Laudis amore tumes: sunt certa piacula quae te
Ter pure lecto poterunt recreare libello.*

In *Sat.* II, 1, 8-9, we have :

Ter uncti

Transnanto Tiberim somno quibus est opus alto,

which many editors interpret as an injunction to swim across the Tiber three times (*i.e.*, the magic number). So *e.g.* Palmer and Wickman in their editions of the *Satires*. Palmer says of this passage (*Satires of Horace* [London, 1899], p. 243): "the objection that if a man swam thrice across a river he would find himself on the far side from his clothes did not occur to Trebatius" — or to Horace. Of this I am not at all sure. It seems to me better to avoid the absurdity of leaving our swimmer without his clothes by taking *ter* strictly with *uncti*, translating simply, "thrice anointed," *i.e.*, "well anointed." In other words, the magic quality of this passage seems to me quite doubtful.

⁸¹ *Fasti*, IV, 549-551: *Noctis erat medium placidique silentia somni*

Triptolemum gremio sustulit illa suo,

Terque manu permulsit eum, tria carmina dixit.

⁸² *Fasti*, VI, 155-156: *Protinus arbutea postes ter in ordine tangit*

Fronde, ter arbutea limina fronde notat.

and Diana restores Hippolytus to life by similar means :⁸³

Thrice now his breast she touched and thrice uttered charms that
are healthful.

VI. MISCELLANEOUS

But not all the magic of the number three was concerned with the farm practice, the love, and the medicine of the Romans. There is an important class of passages in which the number three accompanies other acts of sympathetic magic. Ovid,⁸⁴ for instance, tells of an old woman who put a stop to all hostile tongues by magic rites :

And with her fingers three three grains of incense she buried
Under the sill where a mouse burrowed his small hidden path.

We feel the magic touch, too, when we read of Medea :⁸⁵

Thrice did she purify the father of Jason with water,
Thrice did she purify with fire, and three times with sulphur.

We have a similar feeling when we read⁸⁶ that if one wished to use a bat as an amulet, the animal must be carried alive around the dwelling three times ; and we cannot suppress a smile of sympathy when we are told how Julius Caesar set the fashion of repeating a certain charm three times in order to guarantee a safe carriage ride.⁸⁷

Sometimes the number three seems to have been merely auspicious, or lucky, as when Lentulus reminded the Gallic ambassadors that he was that third Cornelius to whom the supreme power was destined to fall ;⁸⁸ or when the liar in

⁸³ *Fasti*, VI, 753: Pectora ter tetigit, ter verba salubria dixit.

⁸⁴ *Fasti*, II, 573-574: Et digitis tria tura tribus sub limine ponit,
Qua brevis occultum mus sibi fecit iter.

⁸⁵ Ovid, *Met.* VII, 261: Terque senem flamma, ter aqua, ter sulphure lustrat.

⁸⁶ Pliny, *N.H.* XXIX, 83: Si ter circumlatus domui vivus super fenestram inverso capite adfigatur, amuletum esse.

⁸⁷ Pliny, *N.H.* XXVIII, 21: Caesarem dictatorem post unum ancipitem vehiculi casum ferunt semper, ut primum consedisset, id quod plerosque nunc facere scimus, carmine ter repetito securitatem itinerum aucupari solitum.

⁸⁸ Cic. *in Cat.* 3, 9: Se esse tertium illum Cornelium, ad quem regnum huius urbis atque imperium pervenire esset necesse. Cf. Sall. *Cat.* 47, 2 and Flor. II, 12, 8.

Plautus' *Pseudolus* exclaims:⁸⁹ "Thee, thee, my master, . . . do I seek, that I may give thee triple joys, thrice triple, three-fold, triple-mannered joys, delights by triple arts thrice deserved, born of triple fraud."

At other times it is difficult to decide whether the choice of the number three is due to magic or religious influences. Thus, Livy represents the Romans⁹⁰ as expiating certain *prodigia* with processions of twenty-seven maidens. But since twenty-seven, the cube of three, is so often found as a magic detail, and is here combined with the notion of virgin purity and other well-known magic ideas, one is tempted to include such passages in the category of magic.

Last of all, it is important to notice that it is the *deae tri-formes* who are addressed as the all-powerful aids to magic. Medea promises Jason the aid of her magic art,⁹¹

if only the three formed goddess

Help me in person and give consent to my great deeds of daring.

A few lines further on we read:⁹²

Reft of the moon gleamed the stars. To which her arms then
extending

Thrice she turned, and thrice with water dipped from the river
Sprinkled her hair, and three times opened her mouth with the
witch cry,

⁸⁹ 703-706: Io, te, te, turanne, te rogo, qui imperitas Pseudolo:
Quaero, quoi ter trina triplicia, tribus modis tria gaudia,
Artibus tribus tris demeritis dem laetitias, de tribus
Fraude partas, per malitiam, per dolum et fallaciam.

⁹⁰ xxvii, 37 and xxxi, 12, 5-9. Cf. with these passages Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*, which, according to an inscription set up by Augustus, was sung by a chorus of twenty-seven maidens and twenty-seven boys.

⁹¹ Ovid, *Met.* vii, 177-178: modo diva triformis
Adiuvet et praesens ingentibus annuat ausis.

⁹² *Met.* vii, 188-194.

Sidera sola micant. ad quae sua bracchia tendens
Ter se convertit, ter sumptis flumine crinem
Inroravit aquis, ternisque ululatibus ora
Solvit, et in dura summisso poplite terra
'Nox,' ait, 'arcanis fidissima quaeque diurnis
Aurea cum luna succeditis ignibus, astra,
Tuque triceps Hecate. . . '

Bending her knee the while in suppliant pose on the hard ground.
 "Night," she cries, "that art to secrets of mortals most faithful,
 And to daily fires succeedest with gold of the moonlight,
 Stars, and Hecate, thou of the three heads. . . ."

Similar invocations of triformed Hecate may be found in Seneca, Vergil, and Tibullus. In the *Medea* of Seneca, at the end of an elaborate invocation, we find the words:⁹³

Ah! Heard are my charms, for triple bark
 Fierce Hecate gave.

and again, in the same author we read:⁹⁴

The troop of Hecate barked, and thrice the hollow vales
 Gave back the doleful sound; the whole earth shook with its soil
 Upheav'd from below; "I am heard," exclaimed the seer.

So, Vergil⁹⁵ makes his Massylian priestess-magician address her incantation to

Triforméd Hecate, visages three of the maiden Diana,
 and Tibullus declares to his mistress:⁹⁶

I too binding my cap with fillet and loosing my tunic
 Uttered in silent night nine times Trivia's charms.

This concludes the evidence for three as a magic number. We shall now summarize briefly the results of our investigation. In the first place let me say that, in my opinion, the greatest value of such collections is in the mere massing of the facts in such a way that what was before a dim suspicion of the probable becomes a definite certainty. It is quite

⁹³ 840-842:

Vota tenentur: ter latratus
 Audax Hecate dedit.

⁹⁴ *Oed.* 569-571:

Latravit Hecates turba; ter valles cavae
 Sonuere maestum; tota succusso solo
 Pulsata tellus. 'audior,' vates ait.

⁹⁵ *Aen.* IV, 511:

Tergeminam Hecaten, tria virginis ora Dianae.

⁹⁶ I, 5, 15-16:

Ipse ego velatus filo tunicisque solutis
 Vota novem Triviae nocte silente dedi.

worth while, I think, to know that every age of Latin literature has contributed to form a sum total of over one hundred and forty references to this peculiar phase of magic. Of very few facts in classical antiquity, I dare say, can we speak, therefore, with more definiteness.

Of course, in the nature of things, the number three must derive its power from its occurrence along with other ideas: one must say a formula thrice,⁹⁷ make a triple circle,⁹⁸ or spit three times;⁹⁹ one must touch the earth three times,¹⁰⁰ or touch the patient thrice with a magic wand;¹⁰¹ there must be three threads in the witch's *rhombus*.¹⁰² Three was important also in the making of amulets.¹⁰³ Magic medicine must have three ingredients,¹⁰⁴ or be applied to the patient three times.¹⁰⁵ Many other magic details were intimately connected with the number three: the East must be faced;¹⁰⁶ looking backward is forbidden;¹⁰⁷ various acts must be performed with the *digitus medicinalis*,¹⁰⁸ the left hand,¹⁰⁹ or the

⁹⁷ Varro (n. 65 *supra*), Verg. (n. 18), Tib. (nn. 20, 96), Ovid (nn. 16, 21, 22, 81, 83, 84, 92), Pliny (nn. 29, 50, 68, 70, 71, 74, 87), Pseudo-Apuleius (n. 75), Pelagonius (n. 48), Marc. (nn. 11, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 40, 49, 50, 51, 55, 65, 73), *Medicina Plin.* (n. 74), *Anecd. Piech.* (nn. 32, 57), Cod. Sang. (nn. 28, 43, 49, 55, 66).

⁹⁸ Pliny (nn. 8, 36, 54, 62, 74, 76, 78). Cf. Col. (n. 2), Pliny (nn. 15, 28, 86), Verg. (n. 18).

⁹⁹ Varro (n. 65), Verg. (n. 19), Tib. (n. 20), Pliny (nn. 17, 26, 29, 53, 54, 68, 69, 71), Marc. (nn. 11, 32, 34, 35, 40, 41, 51), *Anecd. Piech.* (n. 34), Cod. Sang. (nn. 28, 40, 55).

¹⁰⁰ Varro (n. 65), Marc. (nn. 11, 32).

¹⁰¹ Ovid (nn. 22, 81, 82).

¹⁰² Verg. (nn. 18, 19).

¹⁰³ Pliny (nn. 67, 70, 74, 86), *Medicina Plin.* (n. 74), Marc. (nn. 25, 49, 73).

¹⁰⁴ Cato (n. 7), Pliny (nn. 13, 14, 58, 63, 64, 67, 72), Marc. (nn. 30, 31, 46, 47, 50, 55, 56, 66), Cod. Sang. (n. 74).

¹⁰⁵ Hor. (n. 80), Scrib. (nn. 60, 61), Pliny (nn. 24, 27, 37, 45, 52, 53, 54, 59, 62, 69), Marc. (nn. 24, 32, 41, 50, 66), Cod. Sang. (nn. 49, 55).

¹⁰⁶ Marc. (n. 66). Cf. *Id.* 8, 27; 8, 191; 23, 35; 25, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Marc. 25, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Pliny (n. 54), Marc. (nn. 32, 73; cf. *Id.* 15, 101; 25, 13), *Anecd. Piech.* (nn. 34, 35), Cod. Sang. (n. 66).

¹⁰⁹ Pliny (n. 52), Marc. (nn. 11, 66; cf. *Id.* 8, 190; 8, 191; 23, 78), Cod. Sang. (n. 66).

right hand ;¹¹⁰ fasting,¹¹¹ nudity,¹¹² and purity¹¹³ are important considerations both for the operator and for the patient ; there are specific days which are more effective for magic ;¹¹⁴ and specific places, especially the threshold.¹¹⁵ In all these occult practices, though the number three is not the visible magic act, the visible magic act is of no avail unless associated in some way or other with the number three.

Furthermore, no period of Roman life seems to have been free from this belief. Our references are exhaustive for the period extending from 191 B.C. to 300 A.D., and we have added thereto abundant evidence of the continuation and even wider spread of the belief in the later period of Latin literature. That we have not specific references for the years earlier than 191 B.C. is probably not because the Romans did not believe in the magic power of the number three before that time, but because of the scantiness of the literature. Indeed, the Laws of the Twelve Tables, published in 450 B.C., specifically forbade any one to enchant his neighbor's crop into his own field ;¹¹⁶ and if such matters were thought worthy of a place in the most revered body of Roman law, we may be sure that long before the time when these laws were promulgated, the belief in the magic power of the number three was quite prevalent.

Not only did all ages cherish this belief, but all classes of society were equally credulous. We have seen how in Cicero's day Lentulus used it to justify his own political ambitions ;¹¹⁷ and how all men of Pliny's day followed the custom, originated by Caesar, of saying a certain charm three times upon taking a seat in a vehicle, in order to avoid accidents on the journey.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Pliny (n. 69).

¹¹¹ Varro (n. 65), Pliny (nn. 53, 70, 71), Marc. (nn. 41, 50; cf. *Id.* 25, 11).

¹¹² Pliny (nn. 32, 71), Marc. 26, 94.

¹¹³ Pliny (nn. 32, 71), Marc. 15, 89; 26, 94; *Anecd. Piech.* 57.

¹¹⁴ Marc. 14, 68; 23, 78; 25, 11; 25, 13; 26, 94. For the moon's phases cf. Scrib. (n. 60), Marc. 8, 24; 25, 11.

¹¹⁵ Ovid (n. 84), Marc. (nn. 31, 50).

¹¹⁶ Cf. Bruns, *Fontes iur. Rom. ant.* 30, frag. 8, a and b.

¹¹⁷ *Supra*, p. 137.

¹¹⁸ *Supra*, p. 137.

We have found the magic number especially effective in the popular cures for diseases, which is exactly what we should expect. Was there ever a time when any remedy, no matter how absurd, did not find some one to believe in it? And so toothache, indigestion, hydrophobia—all physical ills from the treatment of sick cattle to the raising of the dead, were thought to be curable by means of the magic number three, if one only knew the proper combination of magic details.

As to the origin of the belief I have little that is positively certain to offer. Of one thing, however, I am sure. It had nothing to do with the duodecimal system or the mystic number theory of Pythagoras. In fact, the latter is mentioned only once in all the passages under consideration—quite an impossible silence, if he were really thought to be the originator of the belief. Besides, the belief is universal in modern times just as it was in antiquity, in regions where both Pythagoras and the duodecimal system are unknown.

It is quite apparent, therefore, that any theory of the peculiar magic power of the number three among the Romans will have to be capable of explaining also the same phenomenon as it exists among other peoples. Such a theory has, I believe, been put forward by Usener,¹¹⁹ and is substantially as follows: It is a well known fact that certain Brazilian and other savage tribes count on the joints of one finger, bringing their system of definite numbers to a close with *two*. Under such conditions the notion *three* is indicated by the expression *two one*, *four* by the expression *two two*, etc., while the number which has the third place in such savage systems means not *three* but *many*. Thus, instead of counting *one*, *two*, *three*, such a savage counts *one*, *two*, *many*.¹²⁰ “Our Indo-Germanic ancestors,” continues Usener, “must have remained for a long time at the stage where they counted on the joints of one finger in this way. The further advance to *four*, *five*, and the decimal system seems to have been both rapid and

¹¹⁹ *Rh. Mus.* LVIII (1903), 358 ff.

¹²⁰ Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 3rd Amer. ed. I, 242 ff.) and other students of anthropology give ample evidence of the present existence among backward tribes of number systems ending in two and three.

easy." For this reason the numbers two and three made a very lasting impression in their popular speech, their religion, their folk lore, and their magic. We have only to recall our own expression that "two is a company, three is a crowd," and the German saying, "Einer ist keiner, zwei viele, drei eine Menge," to convince ourselves that there was really a time when, to our ancestors, three meant an indefinitely large number, beyond the limits of the definite number system. So also Diels has reached the conclusion that the number three derived its peculiar magic value from the fact that it was "die ursprüngliche Endzahl der primitiven Menschheit."¹²¹ This seems to be the most probable explanation of the origin of the belief in the great magic power of the number three.

¹²¹ *Archiv f. Gesch. d. Philosophie* x (1897), 232; and *Festschrift f. Th. Gomperz*, p. 8, n. 3.