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A ROMAN ASTROLOGER AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE: JULIUS FIRMICUS MATERNUS

BY LYNN THORNDIKE

During the Italian Renaissance astrological treatises were thought as important as other classical writings, and were frequently printed. As astrology came to be considered a worthless delusion, they were forgotten or were stigmatized as spurious writings when encountered among the works of well-known authors like Ptolemy and Lucian. Today the importance of the magical and astrological writings of the ancient world, if only because of their bulk, has been again recognized. Greek papyri filled with magic texts are being brought to light and published; many dissertations on ancient superstition have appeared. The revived interest in classical astrology is seen, not only in such a work as Bouché-Leclercq's *L'astrologie grecque*,¹ but also in the *Catalogus Codicum Graecorum Astrologorum*,² a series of volumes now appearing in which a group of European scholars are co-operating under the leadership of Professor Franz Cumont in providing a guide to the many astrological manuscripts in European libraries. Besides this, in recent years several astrological treatises have been edited and published separately. In fact, the movement has advanced so far that already German scholars are busy in detecting in those astrological writings which are extant their indebtedness to, and dependence on, earlier works which we no longer possess.³ The value of astrological books to the student of ancient religions,⁴ or indeed of the whole mental life of the times, is being appreciated; and the influence of astrology

¹ Paris, 1899, 658 pp., illus. One might also note De la Ville de Mirmont, *L'Astrologie chez les Gallo-Romains*, Bordeaux, 1904.

² Brussels, 1898-.

³ See articles by W. Kroll in the *Catalogus*, and F. Boll, "Studien über Claudius Ptolemaeus," *Jahrb. f. kl. Philol.*, Suppl. XXI (1894), 49-244.

⁴ See Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, New York, 1912; or his briefer chapter on "Astrology and Magic" in his *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, Chicago, 1911.

upon the form of history in the Middle Ages has been interestingly discussed by F. v. Bezold.¹

I intend to show that an astrological treatise may also give us a picture of past society and thus contribute to the content of history. The point is that in trying to predict the future the astrologers really depict their own civilization. Their scope is as broad as are human life and human interests. Slave and artisan are dealt with as well as emperor and philosopher, and the astrologer can boast with Juvenal

*quidquid agunt homines, votum timor ira voluptas
gaudia discursus, nostri farrago libelli est.*

Indeed the astrological poet Manilius does boast, proudly contrasting his art to the fictions and sentimentalities of other poets:

It embraces every sort of fact, every effort, every achievement, and every art, that through all the phases of human life may concern human fate; and it has disposed these in as many varied ways as there are positions of the stars; has attributed to each object definite functions and appropriate names; and through the stars by a fixed system has ordained a complete census of the human race.²

Nor is astrology prone to that usual failing of historical records, the omission of what is obvious at the time of writing, since it deals in futurities which are never obvious and must be explicitly predicted.

But what is the historical reliability of astrological works? We must not think of them as compositions by ignorant quacks and impostors for a credulous and inferior minority of the public, full of extravagant promises and terrifying threats. Practically everyone believed in astrology; learned men wrote treatises on the art, which took itself with great seriousness and prided itself upon its scientific methods. Moreover, in an astrological handbook there was almost no occasion for the personal or party prejudice of so many professed historians, or for the satiric bias of a Juvenal. Even Christian and pagan wrote much alike on this theme. "The complete census of the human race" supplied by an astrologer is unsystematic perhaps, and may be more meager than his pretentious prospectus leads one to expect, but it seems to have the merit of being a naïve, unconscious, largely objective and sincere picture of his

¹ *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, VIII (1892), 29 ff.

² *Astronomica* III. 67.

own age. There is, however, one difficulty. Does the author really picture his own society, or are his topics, which we suppose to represent the structure of contemporary civilization, merely traditional categories long fixed by the rules of his art? and are the details of his subject-matter his own intelligent adaptation of the general principles of his art to present conditions, or are they slavishly copied from earlier manuals? This question must be determined in each particular case largely from internal evidence.¹

This article will consider the third and fourth books of the *Mathesis* of Julius Firmicus Maternus as a specific instance of how an astrological treatise may be utilized as a historical source. Firmicus lists various constellations, and states under each its effects upon men born under it. This introduces a quantitative element, since the same phenomenon may be mentioned under several constellations; and one naturally assumes that those matters to which Firmicus devotes most space and emphasis are the most prominent features of his age. Therefore an analysis of his *apotelesmata* (i.e., "effects") should give us a description and to some extent a measurement of fourth-century civilization.

The *Mathesis* contains eight books, but the first two are introductory and not devoted to *apotelesmata*, while the last four have not yet appeared in a critical edition.² They do not rest on as early manuscripts as the other books, while the old printed editions of 1497 and 1499 differ considerably, and more than is stated by Boll

¹ Thus the first two books of Hephaestion of Thebes (Engelbrecht, *Hephästion von Theben und sein astrologisches Compendium*, Vienna, 1887) simply reproduce Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*. But Guido Bonatti, a thirteenth century astrologer (*Liber astronomicus*, Augsburg, 1491, 422 fols.), though he cites the ancients, evidently writes for and of his own age, replying to arguments of contemporary theologians against astrology; instructing how to determine whether the candidate for a position as abbot, bishop, or cardinal, will secure the coveted office, and how to find the most auspicious hour for laying a church corner-stone; and mentioning sugar, unknown to the ancient world.

² The editions of the *Mathesis* are as follows: Iulii Firmici Materni Matheseos Libri VIII ediderunt W. Kroll et F. Skutsch. Fasciculus prior librorum IV priores et quinti proemium continens. Lipsiae, 1897, 280 pp.; Julius Firmicus de nativitatibus. . . . Impressum Venetiis per Symonem papiensem dictum bivilaque, 1497 die 13 Iunii, CXV fols.; Iulii Firmici Astronomicorum libri octo integri et emendati ex Scythicis oris ad nos nuper allati. . . . Venetiis cura et diligentia Aldi Ro. Mense octob. MID. The Basel editions of 1533 and 1551 by M. Pruckner reproduce the Aldine text. The references throughout this article are to the page and line of Kroll-Skutsch; the second fascicle has recently been published.

in Pauly-Wissowa—for instance, over one-third of Book v in the Aldine edition (pp. 194–214) is omitted in the *editio princeps*.¹ Moreover, although these four books cover more pages than the other two, they do not supply so many details nor so satisfactory a picture of human society. These divergences, mainly ones of omission, do not invalidate the results gained from the third and fourth books, but do raise the question whether the later books, especially the fifth and sixth, were written by Firmicus. In them the wording becomes vaguer, little knowledge is shown of conditions at the time that Firmicus wrote, the predictions are more sensational and rhetorical. Only the latter portion of the eighth book carries the conviction of reality that books three and four do. These two books are both independent units and supply a general picture of human life.

Firmicus flourished during the reigns of Constantine the Great and his sons.² Sicily was his native land; he was of senatorial rank and very well educated for his time, showing interest in natural philosophy, literature, and rhetoric. He writes on astrology at the request of a similarly cultured friend, Lollianus or Mavortius, who had held various important governmental posts. Firmicus is also the author of a work *On the Error of Profane Religions*,³ addressed to Constantius and Constans, and urging them to eradicate pagan cults. The writing of two such books by one man has long given critics pause, and is a splendid warning against taking anything for granted in our study of the past. The assertion of Boll that “there is no question but that he was a pagan when he wrote his book on astrology”⁴ seems to me overconfident; but whatever the personal convictions of the author of the *Mathesis* may have been, it is certain that Christianity has made little impression upon his *apotelesmata*. On the other hand, in his Christian work he not only never attacks astrology, but he criticizes certain pagan cults as sharply for their incorrect physical notions as he does others for their travesty of Christian mysteries, while his allusions to the planets, among

¹ I regard these additions in the Aldine as spurious.

² For bibliography of Firmicus see Boll's article "Firmicus" in Pauly-Wissowa.

³ A more critical edition than that in Migne is by Konrat Ziegler, Leipzig, 1907.

⁴ Pauly-Wissowa, VI, 2365.

which is a representation of the Sun making a reproachful address to certain pagans,¹ indicate that he still regarded the stars as of immense importance in the administration of the universe. Moreover, as before, he sets the emperors above the rest of mankind and closely associates them with the celestial bodies and "the supreme God."²

Do Firmicus' *apotelesmata* apply to his own century or are they copied from earlier writers? He uses words and phrases that are evidently from the Greek; he frequently mentions authorities, especially the Greeks and "the divine men of Egypt and Babylon"; and regards himself as rendering available for the Latin-speaking world an art which their writers (so he says) have hitherto neglected. Consequently recent investigators of classical astrology have been trying to discover the nature of these earlier writings and to make out how far their contents are preserved for us in the *Mathesis*. Thus far sources have been discovered or suggested only for limited

¹ Ziegler, p. 23.

² Compare Kroll-Skutsch, p. 86, with Ziegler, p. 53. Consequently the date of writing the *Mathesis* should be determined without any assumptions as to Firmicus' religion; and I am inclined to dispute Mommsen's contention (*Hermes*, XXIX, 468-72) that "it is beyond doubt" that the *Mathesis* was written between 334 and 337 A.D. To accept this conclusion it is necessary to explain away the mention of Lollianus as *ordinario consuli designato* (Kroll-Skutsch, 3, 27), an office which he held in 355. I think that it is preferable to explain away the apparent mentions of Constantine the Great, upon which Mommsen laid so much stress. The names, Constantine and Constantius, are frequently confused in the sources, and the expression "Constantinus scilicet maximus divi Constantini filius" (37, 25) might as well be read "Constantius, son of Constantine" as "Constantine, son of Constantius." The words "Constantinum maximum principem et huius invictissimos liberos, dominos et Caesares nostros" seem to refer unmistakably to Constantine, but they occur in a prayer to the planets and to the supreme God that Constantine and his children may "rule over our posterity and the posterity of our posterity through infinite succession of ages." As this is simply equivalent to expressing a hope that the dynasty may never become extinct, there seems no reason why the passage should not be left unaltered in a book published after the death of Constantine.

Moreover, Firmicus explicitly states that the writing of his book has been long delayed (1, 3 and 3, 19), and it is evident that he and his friend were scarcely young when the promise to compose the *Mathesis* was first made. Lollianus was then *consularis* of Campania and, according to inscriptions, had already held a number of offices. Firmicus would frequently give up his task in despair, but then Lollianus would urge him on again. Having become "Count of all the Orient," he continued his importunities, until at last when he was proconsul and ordinary-consul-elect the book was finished and presented to him. Meanwhile Firmicus had retired from public life. Yet we are asked to believe, not merely that he writes a vehement invective against profane religions a decade later, but also that, twenty years after, his friend is still a vigorous administrator and praetorian praefect (Ammianus Marcellinus xvi. 8. 5).

portions of the *Mathesis*, and chiefly in other books than iii and iv, and in these cases it is evident that Firmicus has made additions and alterations and is no mere copyist.¹

The criticism has been made, however, that where Firmicus is most original he is too rhetorical. Boll asserts that he breathes "the sensational atmosphere of the schools of rhetoric" and of the Pseudo-Quintilian declamations, and that "all the far-fetched calamities which in his pages continually menace mankind reveal the fearful weight with which this superstition afflicted human minds."² But "far-fetched calamities" in that day did not merely lurk in superstitious minds, they were perpetrated in the full glare of publicity. If Firmicus predicts death by being thrown to wild beasts, we must remember that even Constantine's panegyrist recounts how he had thrown Frankish chiefs into the arena at Trier and "weared the raging beasts by the multitude" of victims.³ Moreover, it is in the later books that Firmicus is most sensational. Death by beasts is mentioned nineteen times in Book viii, only once in Books iii and iv. Furthermore, he is, if anything, more rhetorical in describing contemporary facts, such as his personal experiences or the pagan practices which he attacks in the *De errore*, than in predicting future possibilities. Consequently his rhetoric is no proof of unreality. Rather, if he were entirely unrheterical, would he leave us with a false impression of his age. Finally, our method of statistical analysis will have the tendency to separate such chaff from the wheat of historical truth. Ideas will be counted rather than words, and only those passages included where Firmicus evidently has some distinct idea in his own mind and makes an express prediction.

The space limits of the present article permit only a summary of the chief results of my analysis rather than a complete exposition of it; and allow specific references in the footnotes only for those passages which are quoted, instead of for all that are enumerated, as I had planned. But I hope that the reader will get a fairly clear idea of the method employed as well as of the historical information gained thereby.

¹ See Boll, *Sphaera*, 401; Kroll in the *Catalogus*, II, 159; V, 2, 143.

² Pauly-Wissowa, VI, 2373.

³ *Paneg.* vii. 10-12; Eutropius x. 3.

Firmicus makes more allusions to public life than to any other human activity. This is appropriate in a Roman writer, especially under the bureaucratic paternalism of Diocletian and Constantine. A number of predictions refer unmistakably to their system of government, showing that Firmicus has not heedlessly copied the *apotelesmata* of earlier astrological handbooks, but has interpreted the influences of the stars to fit his own age. He mentions praetorian praefects, *vicarii* (rulers of dioceses), *praesides* (provincial governors), *decemprimi* (governing boards of municipalities), and *curiosi* (special officials connected with the imperial post).¹ He is accurate in saying *scutarios vel protectores imperatorum*, since the *protectores* were originally largely selected from the *scutarii*. He correctly alludes to *cornicularii* and *commentarienses* as bureaucratic officials connected with the administration of criminal justice, though in earlier times these were military offices, and his juxtaposition of the two names is duplicated in the inscription of Lambesia and in Pseudo-Asconius. He mentions *discussio*, the revision of the public accounts in vogue in the late imperial period and cited in Harpers' dictionary from no earlier sources than Symmachus and Justinian. He also speaks of *discussores rationales*, although Seeck in Pauly-Wissowa states that the title *discussor*, "employed since the fourth century A.D. for officials of very different kinds," but with the common characteristic of being extraordinary inspectors connected with the treasury, occurs first in 368 A.D. (*Cod. Theod.*, VIII, 15, 5).²

Besides a great number of vague predictions of political life or mentions of well-known magistracies,³ due attention is given to

¹ *Praesides*, in 4 passages; *decemprimi*, in 5; the others once or twice each. None of these offices is mentioned in the other books of the *Mathesis*.

² Kroll-Skutsch, 136, 28; 172, 22; 180, 19.

³ Administration and administrators, 28 passages; emperors, 8; those concerned with the affairs of emperors or of great men, 4; friends of, known to, or in favor with, emperors and powerful men, 8; rule of the whole world, 5; kings, 29; *fasces* and consular rank, 12, including proconsuls, 8, and *consules ordinarii*, 3; rulers set over great cities or provinces, 18; magistrate of a small place or single city, 3; possessing the *imperium*, 3; ambassadors, 3; messengers, 6; "public acts," 9; public honors and popular favor, 6; *coronati*, 8; those who sell their lives to kings or to powerful men *viti cuiusdam causa*, 1.

One reference to "overthrowers of emperors," if not also the 8 predictions that persons will become emperors, is inconsistent with the statement made earlier that the emperor alone is not subject to the stars, since as lord of the whole world his fate is

Roman law.¹ Indeed Firmicus states that he himself had formerly "resisted with unbending confidence and firmness" factious and wicked and avaricious men, "who from fear of law-suits seemed terrible to the unfortunate"; and that "with liberal mind, despising forensic gains, to men in trouble. . . . I displayed a pure and faithful defense in the courts of law." By this upright conduct he incurred much enmity and danger.² In allusions to military affairs generals are mentioned twice as often as soldiers; and while the latter are once called "glorious soldiers" and promised promotion and happiness, in other passages we hear of "miserable soldiers" and "the everlasting burden" of military service.³ The matter of finance, so prominent in the declining empire, receives due recognition. At least thirty passages have to do with public finance, which receives as much attention and more specific description than private banking and commerce.⁴ The two seem closely connected and successful business men are likely to be drawn into public finance. Economic paternalism is suggested by such phrases as "public wares," "public arts but hidden and miserable," "public artificers," "superintendents of the royal weaving establishments." Public games and state education are mentioned.⁵ Deposition from power, failure to remain in office, imperial disfavor, exile, captivity, or violent death are occasionally mentioned as the fate of men engaged in

directly determined by the supreme God and he "is numbered among those gods whom the principal divinity has established to make and maintain everything" (Kroll-Skutsch, 86, 19).

Kroll (*Catalogus*, V, 2, 148) thinks the frequent mention of kings an indication of use of Hellenistic works, and does not believe it likely that "the kings of the Bosporani, Armenians, or Parthians, and such monarchs" are meant. Yet when Constantine made his three sons Caesars, he created a kingdom in Asia for his nephew Hannibalianus, and one source states that he was given the title "king of kings." And we have already heard a panegyrist of Constantine apply the term *reges* to Frankish chiefs.

¹ Judges, 19; judicial assessors, 1; jurists, 7; advocates, 5; notaries, court reporters, scribes, etc., 7.

² Kroll-Skutsch, 195, 3 ff.

³ Military leaders (usually *duces*), 41; soldiers, 16.

⁴ *Fiscus*, 9; tax collectors (*exactores*, *vectigaliarii*, and *publicani*), 4; farming of the taxes (*conduccio*), 4; *procuratores*, 4; *rationales*, 3; public accounts, 4; intrusted with royal treasure or deposits by foreign nations, 5; *annonae*, 5; *horrea*, 2.

⁵ There are also allusions to imperial tutors, private secretaries, and men of letters, and to pleasure-makers to royalty.

politics. Once elevation to a dignified public position is promised to men of the lower classes (*iacentes homines et abiectos*), but only after great toil, obstruction, and sacrifice of property.

To religion Firmicus gives much less space than to politics. There are no clear references to Christianity, but there are few allusions to any particular cults. Firmicus, however, indicates the existence of many cults, speaking five times of the heads of religions, and characterizing men as "those who regard all religions and gods with a certain trepidation," "those devoted to certain religions," "those who cherish the greatest religions," and so on. Temples,¹ priests, and divination² are the three features of religion that he mentions most. Magic and religion are closely associated in his predictions, for instance, "temple priests ever famed in magic lore." Sacred or religious literatures and persons devoted to them are mentioned thrice, while in a fourth passage we hear of men "investigating the secrets of all religions and of heaven itself." Other interesting descriptions³ are of those who "stay in temples in an unkempt state and always walk abroad thus, and never cut their hair, and who would announce something to men as if said by the gods, such as are wont to be in temples, who are accustomed to predict the future"; and of "men terrible to the gods and who despise all kinds of perjuries. Moreover, they will be terrible to all demons, and at their approach the wicked spirits of demons flee; and they free men who are thus troubled, not by force of words but by their mere appearing; and however violent the demon may be who shakes the body and spirit of man, whether he be aerial or terrestrial or infernal, he flees at the bidding of this sort of man and fears his precepts with a certain veneration. These are they who are called exorcists by the people." Religious games and contests are mentioned four times: the carving, consecrating, adoring, and clothing of images of the gods, twice each; porters at religious ceremonies, thrice; hymn singers, twice;

¹ Temple-robbers, 5; servile or ignoble employ in temples, 5; spending one's time in temples, 4; builders of temples, 3; beneficiaries of temples, 3; temple guards, 2; *neocori*, 3; and so on, making 35 references to temples in all.

² Chief priests, 5; priests, 9; of provinces, 1; priestess, 1; priests of Cybele (*archigalli*), 3; Asiarchae, 1; priest of some great goddess, 1; illicit rites, 1. There are 27 passages concerning divination.

³ Kroll-Skutsch, 148, 8 and 123, 4.

pipe-players once. Five passages represent persons professionally engaged in religion as growing rich thereby.

We are told that men "predict the future either by the divinity of their own minds or by the admonition of the gods or from oracles or by the venerable discipline of some art."¹ Augurs, aruspices, interpreters of dreams, *mathematici* (astrologers), diviners, and prophets are mentioned. Once Firmicus alludes to false divination but he usually implies that it is a valid art.

From religion and divination we easily pass to the occult arts and sciences, and thence to learning and literature in general, from which occult learning is scarcely distinguished in the *Mathesis*. Magicians or magic arts are mentioned no less than seven times in varied relations with religion, philosophy, medicine, and astronomy or astrology, showing that magic was not invariably regarded as evil in that age, and that it was confused and intermingled with the arts and philosophy as well as with the religion of the times.² There are a number of other allusions to secret and illicit arts or writings; these, however, appear to be more unfavorably regarded and probably largely consist of witchcraft and poisoning.

The evidence of the *Mathesis* suggests that the civilization of declining Rome was at least not conscious of the intellectual decadence and lack of scientific interest so generally imputed to it. We find three descriptions of intellectual pioneers who learn what no master has ever taught them, and one other instance of men who pretend to do so. We also hear of "those learning much and knowing all, also inventors," and of those "learning everything," and "desiring to learn the secrets of all arts." This curiosity, it is true, seems to be largely devoted to occult science, but it also seems plain that mathematics and medicine were important factors in fourth-

¹ Kroll-Skutsch, 201, 6.

² Cumont says (*Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, p. 188): "But the ancients expressly distinguished 'magic,' which was always under suspicion and disapproved of, from the legitimate and honorable art for which the name 'theurgy' was invented." This distinction was made by Porphyry and others, and is alluded to by Augustine in the *City of God*, but it is to be noted that Firmicus does not use the word 'theurgy.' Cumont also states (p. 179) that in the last period of paganism the name philosopher was finally applied to all adepts in occult science. But in Firmicus, while magic and philosophy are associated in two passages, there are five other allusions to magic and three separate mentions of philosophers.

century culture as well as the rhetorical studies whose rôle has perhaps been overestimated. Let us compare the statistics. Oratory is mentioned eighteen times, and it is to be noted that literary attainments and learning as well as mere eloquence are regarded as essential in an orator. Men of letters other than orators are found in six passages, and poets in only three. A passage reading "philologists or those skilled in laborious letters" suggests that four instances of the phrase *difficiles litterae* should perhaps be classed under linguistic rather than occult studies. There are four allusions to grammarians and two to masters of grammar, as against one description of "contentions, contradictory dialecticians, professing that they know what no teaching has acquainted them with, mischievous fellows, but unable to do any effective thinking."¹ On the other hand, there are fourteen allusions to astronomy and astrology (not including the *mathematici* already listed under divination), three to geometry, and six to other varieties of mathematics.² Philosophers are mentioned five times; practitioners of medicine, eleven times;³ surgeons, once; and botanists, twice. These professions seem to be well paid and are spoken of in complimentary terms.

That education was still widespread is indicated by eighteen mentions of masters, while one phrase suggests educational administration.⁴ In two cases where men are said to be strangers to letters they are once diseased and once "of accursed mind."

From the numerous references to music⁵ and athletics⁶ we infer that they were still prominent features of ancient culture and education. On the other hand, relatively little is said of the stage,⁷ and the sole allusion to gladiators describes them as "those who

¹ Kroll-Skutsch, 161, 26.

² *Computus*, 3; *calculus*, 2; and "those who excel at numbers," 1.

³ Including two mentions of court physicians (*archiatri*). See *Codex Theod.*, Lib. XIII, Tit. 3, *passim*, for their position.

⁴ There are 7 vague allusions to *disciplina*, *doctrina*, and *sophia*.

⁵ Sixteen or 17 in all, including 4 about instrument-makers or -players, 2 concerning composers, 4 in which music is described as a source of pleasure or as evoking admiration and public honors.

⁶ Athletes, 10; lovers of athletes, 1; masters of athletes, 1; *palaestrae* and *gymnasiums*, 7.

⁷ Jugglers, mimes or dancers, actors and actresses are mentioned once each.

perish by an atrociously cruel death in the sight of the people."¹ Firmicus is far from regarding travel as an amusement, and often speaks of its dangers or inconveniences.²

Professor Dill has pointed out that it is "curious to note how small a part of the Theodosian Code is devoted to the subject of trade and commerce." He thinks that "the *negotiatores* were in the fifth century probably on a much lower social level than the humblest landed proprietor," and he says that "if fortunes were accumulated in commerce, they have left few traces in the pages of the Code." A reason for this, he believes with other historians, is that "the wars and social confusion of the latter part of the third century gave a shock to commerce from which it never recovered."³ The predictions of Firmicus scarcely substantiate these statements. He does not, it is true, devote very many passages to commerce,⁴ but he says nothing to indicate that the lot of the *negotiator* is a hard or a low one. Rather he mentions it as a path to wealth or to important public positions, and several times gives financiers a high intellectual character. Guardians and agents of persons and property are mentioned in eighteen passages.

Firmicus appears also to have considerable respect for artists and artisans,⁵ and draws no sharp distinction between the fine arts and other industries. Architects, sculptors, painters, and mosaic-makers are mentioned, and art still seems to be largely in the service of religion. Five passages listing goldsmiths, gilders, those who adorn garments with gold, workers in gold leaf, and silversmiths, and describing them as normally prosperous, are of interest in view of the fact that in this period only copper coins were in circulation,

¹ Kroll-Skutsch, 121, 20.

² In 10 out of 30 passages.

³ Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century*, 246-47.

⁴ Those in charge of accounts, 6; accounts, 3; *negotiatio*, 16; *fenus, feneratio*, etc., 7; *mensae*, 3; sureties, guards of money, and secreters of money, twice each; and other vague allusions.

⁵ *Artifices*, as well as priests, magicians, and physicians, are among those "who gain their livelihood by these arts and possess such genius that they learn by themselves what no training of a master has transmitted to them." All through the *Mathesis* Firmicus speaks of God in the creation of man as an *artifex*, and in the *De errore* also mentions "the supreme God who composed all things with the moderation of divine artifice" (Ziegler, p. 5).

and the coinage almost hopelessly debased. There are many references to lapidaries and dealers in precious stones (8 passages), to pigments (8), aromatics (8), dyers (7), those who find or invent colors (3), sellers of unguents (2), pharmacists (1), and medicaments (1). All this suggests the painted courtesan, and one is somewhat surprised at these indications of highly colored and highly scented luxury in an age of approaching political and economic decline and of Christian and ascetic growth.

The following are other occupations, arranged according to the frequency with which Firmicus mentions them: "arts concerned with fire and iron" (12); cooks and tavern-keepers (7); fishermen, tanners, and guards of sepulchers (5); embalmers, gardeners, and pilots (4); makers of tunics, manufacturers of linen, farmers, hunters, keepers of wild beasts, shipowners, and those who draw water from deep wells (3); workers in wool, in bronze, in other metals, miners, fullers, shoemakers, millers or bakers, undertakers, flower-sellers, cattle fanciers, cowherds, shepherds, grooms, fowlers, sailors, water-carriers (2); weavers, diggers of gold, "mechanics," turners, wine merchants, makers of articles for feminine use who are welcome in palaces, swineherd, stable boy, keeper of the royal animals, those who clean drains (1).

Firmicus also occasionally describes the conditions attending different occupations, speaking, for example, of "illustrious and noble arts from fire and from iron, and arts that are brought to the notice of all by the famous stamp of nobility," and again of arts which "will be either sordid or squalid or involving disagreeable stenches, or ones in which constant vigilance is demanded of the workmen."¹ Of nine vague allusions to "acts about water" and aquatic employment, five stigmatize that mode of life as laborious; and one mention of "unceasing labors about water" is immediately followed by a more specific description of "day laborers devoted to unremitting toil and who are wont to hire out their bodies for some job, earning a living by carrying loads on their backs and shoulders."² In this connection we may note that the expression *urinatores aquas ex altis puteis levantes* indicates that *urinator* does not always mean "a diver."³

¹ Kroll-Skutsch, 261, 3 and 166, 28.

² *Ibid.*, 224, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 168, 18.

The treatment of agriculture seems meager. Possibly this is because farming was largely done by slaves and *coloni*. Owners of great estates are twice mentioned, and farmers are well spoken of as "cultivators of the fields who seek their fortunes with their own strength, efficient, prudent, and who always joy and delight in damp soil"; and again as "respectable farmers of decent habits, and rich, and whose possessions always adjoin the sea or rivers or swamps."¹ Gardeners, on the other hand, are once called "wretched."

From honest employment we pass to the underworld of crime and vice. It does not, however, seem to have been kept under very successfully in Firmicus' day. His descriptions of the ways in which men meet with injuries and death² give the impression that he lives in an age of war and violence. Sixty-eight passages predicting accusations, judicial sentences, and forms of punishment also give a sinister impression of his age, whether we choose to take them as signs of a disorderly and criminal society, or as manifestations of a suspicious, cruel, and oppressive government. A dozen passages show the prevalency of capital punishment, and seven others mention executioners. Seven attest the widespread employment of torture in this period, and twenty-two prophecy imprisonment, or mention wardens and prison guards. The squalor of prisons and the unkempt hair and deformity of prisoners are described. Men are sometimes imprisoned for life, or at least die in prison. Twelve passages mention delation, informers, and betrayers. Firmicus seems to regard them and executioners as of the same class with criminals. The following are the varieties of crimes and criminals in the order of the frequency with which they are mentioned in some 36 passages: thieves and unspecified homicide, 7 times each; sorcerers, 6; temple robbers, and death at the hands of pirates or brigands, 5; family murders, burglars, forgers, and those who deny

¹ *Ibid.*, 102, 22, and 254, 22.

² Of 135 passages directly mentioning death (and not including such predictions as, "They lose wives and children," or "murderers of wife and children") 53 use the word *biothanati* to indicate a violent death; 10 use *violentus*; an "evil death," 17; from disease, 11; from insanity, 1; from vicious excesses, 1; by falls from heights, 5; by sword, 5; by water, 4; by fire, 3; by ruins, 1; thrown to beasts, 1; in battle, 1; as a gladiator, 1; by robbers, 2; by pirates, 2; by one's domestics, 1; abroad, 5; in the desert, 1; in watery regions, 1; in prison, 2; public, 4; as a judicial penalty, 6 or 8; early death, 8; sudden and painless, 2; sad, 2; glorious, 1.

deposits intrusted to them, 4; poisoners, and further mentions of brigands and of pirates, 3; vagabonds, 2; cutthroats, and suicide, once each. Poisoners are twice mentioned with sorcery, and secret writings are so mentioned once.

Firmicus gives a shocking and disgusting picture of the immorality of his age, and devotes as much space to lust and vice as to religion. Of sixty-four passages nine mention courtesans and harlots; four speak of panderers; incest and cohabitation with relatives are described in seven places, and four times at considerable length; adultery is mentioned four times; eight passages predict pederasty, the great vice of antiquity; effeminates are mentioned twice; unnatural vices and lusts of men, three times; those of women, also three times. The remaining passages speak either of illicit love and sexual intercourse, or of an impure life, or in a general way of vices and lusts, sometimes described as "preposterous." In nineteen cases vice and lust involve the offender in infamy, which also is predicted in fifteen passages where no specific mention of sexual immorality occurs. Sexual deficiency is often correlated with immorality. It is interesting to observe that in the *De errore* Firmicus criticizes the immoral ritual of pagan cults in the same phrases that he employs in predicting vice in the *Mathesis*.

Nor do Firmicus' predictions give us a favorable impression of family life in the fourth century. Homes seem to be disrupted too frequently, and the members of families are too often separated by death or dissension.¹ Marriage does not appear to be in a normal and healthy state.² Finally the evidence is strong for the prevalence

¹ Death of both parents or orphanage of children (*orbis, orbitas*), 18 (in some cases, however, the meaning seems to be that children are deprived of their parents' society and care rather than bereaved); death of father, 6; death of mother, 5; sickness of mother, 5; her enslavement, 1; separation from parents, 3; alienation from them, 5.

² Remain unmarried, 4; marry late, 4; "marry with difficulty," 4; (5 of these cases of remaining unmarried or marrying with difficulty are due to sterility); an early marriage, only once; many wives, 1; a "good marriage," 3; men gain wealth, happiness, and success through their wives, 10; a wife from a temple, 1; marriage with a prophetess, 1; a foreign wife, 1; 12 undesirable marriages, including one "unworthy" marriage, one unhappy match, one case where the husband "contracts infamy from his wife's conduct," six cases where men wed prostitutes, while wives are described twice as sterile, once as feeble, once as deformed, once as old, once as a virago, twice as not compliant to their husbands, thrice as slaves, once as degenerate, once as of lower birth than the husband, and thrice as widows, who seem almost as unfavorably

of much sterility and childlessness, yet the old practice of exposing infants seems to continue unabated.¹ All this goes to prove the depopulation and decline of the empire. Nine passages show that the principle of primogeniture is observed in transmitting family property and suggest a selfish spirit on the part of the younger brothers, who would seem to be hoping for the death of their older brothers.² In comparing eighteen mentions of family dissensions with seventeen indications of family affection it should be remembered that the latter is probably usually taken for granted. It is, in fact, generally mentioned incidentally, not predicted expressly. One pleasing picture is of "fathers of families, removed from all luxurious pleasure, just, having leisure for self-communion, apart from the uproar of public intercourse."³

From Firmicus' descriptions of human personalities we can perhaps gain some further notion of the men and moral standards of his time. His character-sketching seems frank, unprejudiced, and true to life; he occasionally mingles good and evil traits in the same persons. Among desirable characteristics three stand out, namely, goodness, charm, and intellectual ability.⁴ Men possessed of personal charm succeed in life much oftener than those who are merely good, and slightly oftener than men with brains. They also get along with their wives better than good men do. The good, however, are often attractive too, as in one case of justice, piety, firm regarded as the others. Unstable affection of husband toward wife or quarrels between them occupy 8 passages, in 3 of which the children too are concerned. Yet in 3 of these same cases the men are given high characters. In other passages actual divorce is mentioned but once; separation, however, occurs 4 times; widowhood, 7; death of wife, 4.

¹ No children, 12; "either one child or none," 1; "hardly have children," 1; extinction of an entire family, 1; a large family, 2; children of both sexes or twins, 1; death of one's children, 4; loss of their affection, not including cases already listed, 2; adoption, 5; viragoes, 2; hermaphrodites, 4; eunuchs, 4; *archigalli*, 3; exposed, 13.

² Such passages as, "He will be older than all his brothers, or if anyone was born before him, such a one will be alienated from his parents." Kroll-Skutsch, 97, 17; 97, 21; 105, 20; 105, 28; 127, 16; 131, 8; 131, 12; 187, 5; 247, 17.

³ Kroll-Skutsch, 253, 18.

⁴ *Boni, justi, honesti, honestis moribus*, etc., 30; in 8 charming also and twice lovers of pleasure, in 4 serious and grave, in 3 successful, once easily deceived, once critical.

Venusti, grati, suaves, decori, decentes, amabiles, 22; of whom 3 are lustful, 9 successful. *Ingeniosi, cordati, arguti, acuti, magnae mentis*, 19; of whom 1 is good, 1 modest, 2 efficient, 6 successful.

We may also note men who are great, 2; or "divine," at least in certain respects, 5.

love of friends, and a pure and noble life, combined in men who are not only "delightful, gay, musical, continually at play, lovable, pleasing, charming . . . tall and blonde, their eyes flashing with a bright fascination," and with beautiful hair, but who are also "lustful lovers . . . often ardently inclined to sexual intercourse." To complete this description of the attractive sons of the planet Venus, we must add that they are large drinkers, moderate eaters, blest with excellent digestion, and that their "life, spirit, and profession ever adheres to music's delights."¹ Efficiency, prudence, bravery, seriousness, temperance, truthfulness, reliability, fidelity, stability, humanity, sociability, and simplicity are other desirable qualities bestowed by the stars. With such traits as ambition, imperiousness, being puffed up with lofty pride, luxury, show, and profusion we near the boundary of undesirable characteristics; but these are stated as attributes of good as well as of evil men. The repellent traits most frequently named are badness and slowness,² which are to some extent correlated with inefficiency and stupidity. We also hear of violence and passion, falsehood, fickleness, cruelty, avarice, miserliness, covetousness, jealousy, enmity, treachery, ingratitude, bitterness, and lugubriousness.

Besides predictions concerned with specific occupations and phases of life, much of Firmicus' space is taken up by vaguer prophesy of prosperity or adversity. It is here that he is most rhetorical. At first sight it may seem that such passages, even taken in the conglomerate, are unlikely to yield any historic facts. Yet one may get from them some idea of the goods most highly prized, if not actually most frequently attained, by the men of that age, and some knowledge of the miseries which they dreaded most or which were in fact their lot.

Forecasts of well-being may be grouped for the most part under three heads: happiness, wealth, and the kindred matters of power, honor, and fame. To this last group 120 passages apply.³ To wealth 125 refer, but many of these do not imply that the persons concerned

¹ Kroll-Skutsch, 249, 19.

² *Malus, malignus, malitiosus, malivolus, iniustus*, 21; *tardus, piger*, 11.

³ Distributed as follows: power, 44; glory, 41; nobility, 30; honor, 23; dignities, 17; greatness, 15; *clarus*, 9; *famosus*, 5; *notus*, 5; *principatus*, 5; authority, 3; splendor, 3.

are to be very rich. In many cases men grow rich through the regular pursuit of callings already listed; there are also eight general descriptions of self-made men. Inheritance, however, is a great source of wealth, or at least is one eagerly anticipated by those consulting astrologers.¹ If, however, we think that seven passages which hold out hopes of finding hidden treasure are visionary, we are mistaken, since there are three laws on the discovery of hidden treasure in the Theodosian Code.² Women seem often to be property-holders.

The treatment of the theme, happiness, is most extraordinary. With a very few exceptions Firmicus has but one word to denote happiness, *felix* or *felicitas*, which occurs in 101 passages. When other words modify and qualify it, they are merely quantitative or quite colorless. We hear often enough of "the greatest felicity," and of "increase of felicity," of "the trappings of felicity," and "the adornments of felicity," while a few times "superfluous felicity," and "happiness beyond measure" are mentioned. But qualitative and descriptive modifiers are lacking. In his descriptions of human personalities and of family life Firmicus gave us a few glimpses of a really happy existence, but in passages dealing primarily with prosperity and well-being he seems able to define happiness only in terms of wealth, position, and power. Thus felicity seems to consist largely of the possession of externals and one rather gets the impression that fourth-century humanity was not happy after all, or at least that Firmicus himself derives little satisfaction from the prospect. In predicting wealth, fame, and power his vocabulary is only a little less restricted and stereotyped than in his monotonous reiteration of promises of felicity. He expresses himself without gusto in formulae which possess little vividness or concreteness. His few allusions to amusements point in the same direction. This attitude may express the spirit of an age of decline; it may be partly due to a certain incapacity for gaiety inherent in Roman character; it may be to some extent the product of Firmicus' own temperament and outlook on the world. From this hard world where Socrates and Plato suffered while Alcibiades and Sulla prospered, from his

¹ Twenty-one passages.

² Book X, Title 18, Laws of 315, 380, and 390 A.D.

own perilous and thankless post as defender of the wretched and oppressed against the avaricious and the wicked in the sordid sphere of law courts and forum, he tells us that he has gladly retired to spend his leisure with the divine men of old of Egypt and Babylon and to purify his spirit by contemplation of the stars and of the supreme God who works through them.

It is with a richer vocabulary, a more vivid style, and apparently a deeper sympathy that our author paints the life of the unfortunate and writes "the short and simple annals of the poor." This becomes the more impressive when we remember that he is a man of senatorial rank and writes for an official high in the imperial service. The condensed formulae of an astrological handbook may seem the last place where one would look for *lacrimae rerum*, but Firmicus often alludes to the weary and heavy laden of the ancient world. Professor Dill has noted the same tone in the language of the legislation of the declining empire in the next century. He speaks of its "minute and circumstantial description of oppression and wrong," and again says, "Many of these edicts betray the style of the school rhetorician, and yet there is in many of them the ring of genuine sympathy for misery."¹

The predictions of adversity do not fall as naturally into three great groups as did the promises of prosperity, but I will try to maintain somewhat the same division for purposes of comparison. The 120 predictions of power, nobility, and fame may be offset by 132 passages containing allusions to slavery, captivity, toil and hardship, a low and ignoble existence, unpopularity and infamy.² Against the 125 allusions to wealth may be set 50 predictions of loss of property and 40 descriptions of poverty and destitution. Corresponding to the 101 cases of felicity are 104 passages in which a greater variety of terms is used to denote adversity and unhappiness in general. In fine, whereas generals were mentioned more often than soldiers, and kings than day laborers, the unfortunate are described as often as the prosperous. Moreover, there are fewer duplicates than before. Wealth and happiness went together 33 times, misfortune and

¹ *Roman Society in the Last Century*, 230-31.

² Slavery and servitude, 39; captivity, 13; degenerates, 3; ignoble, 10; inglorious, 2; abject, 2; subjected, 4; dejected, 5; a life of toil, 34; *invidia*, 6; infamy, 34.

poverty are mentioned in the same passage only 22 times; happiness went with power, honor, and fame 32 times, misfortune goes with their opposites only 22 times; wealth was associated with power, honor, and fame 33 times, poverty is mentioned with their opposites only 10 times. That Firmicus saw other factors in unhappiness is further manifested by the fact that he associates it 9 times with danger, 17 times with disease, 9 times with death, 6 times with imprisonment and other penal afflictions. Danger he mentions 51 times in all. Finally against 17 predictions of success that have not yet been recorded may be set 27 failures.¹

Death, injury, and disease loom up large in Firmicus' prospectus for the human race, making us realize the benefits of nineteenth-century medicine as well as of modern peace. No less than 174 passages deal with disease and many of them list two or more ills. Mental disorders are mentioned in 37 places;² physical deformities in six. Other specific ailments mentioned are as follows: blindness and eye troubles, 10; deafness and ear troubles, 5; impediments of speech, 4; baldness, 1; foul odors, 1; dyspeptics, 4; other stomach complaints, 7; dysentery, 2; liver trouble, 1; jaundice, 1; dropsy, 5; spleen disorders, 1; gonorrhoea, 2; other diseases of the urinary bladder and private parts, 6; consumption and lung troubles, 6; hemorrhages, 6; apoplexy, 3; spasms, 5; ills attributed to bad or excessive humors, 12; leprosy and other skin diseases, 6; ague, 1; fever, 1; pains in various parts of the body, 6; internal pains and hidden diseases, 9; diseases of women, 5. There remain a large number of vague allusions to ill-health: 21 to debility, 12 to languor, 3 to invalids, and 49 other passages. Only eight passages allude to the cure of disease. Among the methods suggested are cauterizing, incantations, ordinary remedies, and seeking divine aid, which last is mentioned most often. The eleven references to medical practitioners should, however, be recalled here. The predictions as

¹ Under success I class description of persons "who get whatever they desire," or "who gain all things easily," or "who are always accustomed to do well"; failures are those who "are impeded in all their acts," or who are easily deceived, cheated, and gotten the better of, whether by man or by fate.

² *Aestus animi*, 5; insanity, 13; lunatics, 10; epileptics, 8; melancholia, 3; inflammation of the brain (*frenetici*), 4; delirium, dementia, demoniacs, alienation, and madness, one or two each; vague allusions to mental ills and injuries, 5.

to length of life are inadequate to the drawing of conclusions on that point.

Such is the census of the human race given in the third and fourth books of the *Mathesis* of Julius Firmicus Maternus. Taken altogether, the description seems to fit the age and to give us a fairly clear photograph, even if it is taken by the flashlight of astrology, of ancient civilization in one of its last phases.

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