

Driving the Nail

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Among the various everyday superstitions of the Romans was a belief that a calamity might be fixed in place by means of driving an iron nail, trapping the event in place and time. Pliny, for example, recorded a folk remedy for epilepsy that involved driving an iron nail into the place the afflicted person's head had first struck the ground (Pliny *HN* 28.17.63).

In the passage below, Livy recounts how this ritual was used as one of many attempts at propitiating, or calming, the gods in a time of plague, reviving and adapting a long-abandoned custom from the beginning of the Roman Republic of fixing the prior year's disasters in place (so they would not recur) with an iron nail driven into a temple wall on a specific day each year. As the magistrate with the highest authority was required in the ancient practice, a dictator was now appointed for this purpose—the first Roman dictator appointed to accomplish a specific task rather than to solve an overall threat to Rome. Though said dictator (uniquely) abused his authority after the ritual and tried to drum up a war (upon which he was forced to resign in shame), the plague apparently fell away and the propitiation was deemed successful. Appointing a dictator to drive the nail was the standard response to crises involving pestilence or famine for the next 150 years.

- From Livy, 7.1-7.3 (written ca. 20 BCE). Translated by Benjamin Oliver Foster, 1924.

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[7.1]⁷Then came the consulship of Lucius Genucius [Aventinensis] and Quintus Servilius [Ahalia] [365 BCE]. There was neither party strife nor war to disturb the peace, but lest there should ever be freedom from fear and danger, a great pestilence broke out.⁸It is stated that a censor, a curule aedile, and three plebeian tribunes died, with a correspondingly large number from the rest of the population. But what chiefly made this pestilence noteworthy was the death of Marcus Furius [Camillus], who, though ripe in years, was bitterly regretted.⁹For he was truly a man of singular excellence whether in good or evil fortune; foremost in peace and in war before his banishment, and in exile even more distinguished, whether one thinks of the yearning of his countrymen who called on him in his absence to save their captured City, or of the success with which on being restored to his country he restored the country itself at the same time;¹⁰after this for five and twenty years—for he survived so long—he maintained his glorious reputation, and was deemed worthy of being named next after Romulus, as Rome's second Founder.

7.2. The pestilence lasted during both this and the following year, the consulship of Gaius Sulpicius Peticus and Gaius Licinius Stolo.²In the latter year nothing memorable occurred, except that with the object of appeasing the divine displeasure they made a *lectisternium*, or banquet to the gods, being the third in the history of the City;³and when neither human wisdom nor the help of Heaven was found to mitigate the scourge, men gave way to superstitious fears, and, amongst other efforts to disarm the wrath of the gods, are said also to have instituted scenic entertainments.⁴This was a new departure for a warlike people, whose only exhibitions had been those of the circus; but indeed it began in a small way, as most things do, and even so was imported from abroad. Without any singing, without imitating the action of singers, players who had been brought in from Etruria danced to the strains of the flautist and performed not ungraceful evolutions in the Tuscan fashion.⁵Next the young Romans began to imitate them, at the same time exchanging jests in uncouth verses, and bringing their movements into a certain harmony with the words.⁶And so the amusement was adopted, and frequent use kept

it alive. The native professional actors were called *histriones*, from *ister*, the Tuscan word for player; they no longer—as before—alternately⁷ threw off rude lines hastily improvised, like the Fescennines, but performed medleys, full of musical measures, to melodies which were now written out to go with the flute, and with appropriate gesticulation. ...

7.3. However, the plays thus for the first time introduced by way of expiation neither freed men's minds of religious fears nor their bodies of disease.² Indeed, it fell out quite otherwise; for the games were in full swing when an inundation of the Tiber flooded the circus and put a stop to them, an accident which—as though the gods had already turned away, rejecting the proffered appeasement of their anger—filled the people with fear.³ And so when Gnaeus Genucius [Aventinensis] and Lucius Aemilius Mamercus (for the second time) were consuls [363 BCE], and men's minds were more troubled by the search for means of propitiation than were their bodies by disease, it is said that the elders recollected that a pestilence had once been allayed by the dictator's driving a nail [into the wall of a temple].⁴ Induced thereto by this superstition, the senate ordered the appointment of a dictator for the purpose of driving the nail.⁵ Lucius Manlius Imperiosus was appointed, and named Lucius Pinarius master of the horse.

There is an ancient law, recorded in archaic words and letters, that the highest-ranking magistrate shall on the thirteenth of September drive a nail; the tablet was formerly affixed to the right side of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, where Minerva's chapel is.⁶ This nail served, they say, in those days of little writing, to mark the number of years, and the law was confided to the chapel of Minerva, for the reason that number was an invention of that goddess.⁷ (Cincius, a careful student of such memorials, asserts that at Volsinii [an Etruscan town], too, nails may be seen in the temple of Nortia, an Etruscan goddess [of Fortune], driven in to indicate the number of years.)⁸ Marcus Horatius the consul dedicated had the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in accordance with this law, in the year after the expulsion of the kings [508 BCE]; later the ceremony of driving the nail was transferred from consuls to dictators, because theirs was the higher authority. Then, after the custom had been allowed to lapse, it was thought to be of sufficient importance to warrant the appointment of a dictator for that very purpose.⁹ It was for this reason that Manlius was now designated; who, however, as though appointed to wage war and not to discharge a religious obligation, [after driving the nail also] aspired to conduct the war with the Hernici, and hunted down the men of military age in a rigorous levy; but in the upshot, opposed by the united efforts of all the tribunes of the plebs, he yielded either to force or to a sense of shame, and resigned his dictatorship.