

GIRDLES

*Their Origin and Development, particularly
with regard to their Use as Charms in
Medicine, Marriage, and Midwifery*

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REPRINTED FROM THE "CALEDONIAN MEDICAL JOURNAL"

OCTOBER, 1913—JANUARY, 1914

GLASGOW:

PRINTED BY ALEX. MACDOUGALL, 70 MITCHELL STREET

1914

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1. *Introductory.*—In the *Caledonian Medical Journal*, vol. ix, part 1, p. 46, Dr. Rorie called attention to the belief in the efficacy of obstetric girdles or belts for assisting labour amongst the Scots, and mentioned the record of a similar custom amongst the Zulus. The present writer was fortunate in witnessing the use of one of these girdles in Ireland, and having communicated with Dr. Rorie on the matter, it was decided that the subject was worthy of investigation from the standpoint of medical folklore. The ensuing treatise is the result of that investigation.

On superficial examination the inquiry appeared to be a simple one, and it was anticipated that such cases would be few and characteristic of one or two nationalities only, but no sooner was a commencement made to trace these girdles in accounts of the primitive medicine of nations than it was found that the belief was sufficiently widespread to merit the statement that it was of world-wide distribution; and

evidences point to the fact that this must have been one of the earliest medical customs which we can trace. Before proceeding to the purely medical uses of the girdle it will perhaps be expedient to give a succinct account of the girdle as ordinarily employed in dress, and, further, since there seems reason to believe that the obstetric girdle is derived from the girdles used by the priests in sacrifice, a short description will be given of girdles used in the liturgies as religious emblems.

2. *Girdles as articles of dress.*—There can be no dubiety that the girdle was one of the earliest of garments; the clothing of the lower parts of the body demanded support; the natural means of support was the waist; and the obvious adjunct was the application of a rope, belt, or girdle above the hips. Thus, as far back as we may go, we find references to girdles used in dress. The early Egyptians employed a girdle above the loin-cloth, and they attached to it the tail of some animal or an imitation of such, made from leather;¹ and they are indicated in the sculptures as far back as the second and third dynasties.² In India, girdles come down from the remote antiquity of pre-Vedic ages; the ancient Chaldeans and Babylonians employed them;³ and we meet them also in our Norse legends, *e.g.*, Frigga's "Golden Girdle."⁴

In Biblical history girdles are frequently mentioned, although the word is often a mis-translation for "loin-cloth."⁵ The girdle, proper, of the Israelites was a long strip of cloth wound round the waist above the tunic, with or without the ends hanging down in front; in other cases it was merely a rope (Isaiah iii, 24, R.V.), while "golden girdles" are also mentioned (Revelations i, 13, and xv, 6). The Romans and Greeks wore girdles very usually made of linen, and serving, like those of the Bible, as purses.⁶ The ritual of the girdle played an important part in the daily life of the Romans, however; thus we find from Tibullus⁷ that at funeral ceremonies the girdle had to be loosened. Suetonius

¹ "Guide to Egyptian Collections," British Museum, 1909, p. 81.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 192, 194 (illus.): "Guide to First and Second Egyptian Rooms," British Museum, second edition, 1904, pp. 40 and 42 (illus.).

³ Ezekiel, chap. xxiii, v. 15.

⁴ H. A. Guerber, "Myths of the Norsemen," London, 1909, p. 42.

⁵ J. Hastings, "Small Dictionary of Bible," art. "Dress," 2 (*a*), p. 196.

⁶ Nettleship-Sandys, "Dictionary of Classical Antiquities," London 1908, p. 143.

⁷ Tibullus, iii, 2, v. 19.

mentions also that the ashes of Augustus were gathered up by the principal members of the equestrian order in ungirdled tunics.¹

Passing to the consideration of our own country, we note first that the Arch-Druids wore a girdle on which appeared the crystal of augury encased in gold,² and the ancient kings of Ireland wore golden girdles inlaid with jewels on ceremonial occasions.³ The Anglo-Saxons seemed to have made general use of the girdle only subsequent to the Norman Conquest. They gradually increased in richness of design until we find that, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were made the support for the necessary and often unnecessary appurtenances of the owner; thus, purses, daggers, keys, inkhorns, and actually books—which we hope were smaller than the tomes common in that age—dangled from them. For example, in a dialogue describing a lady's dress, the mistress thus addresses her waiting-woman:—

“Give me my Girdle, and see that all the Furniture be at it: looke if my Cizers, the Pincers, the Pen-knife, the Knife to close Letters, with the Bodkin, the Ear-picker, and the Seale be in the Case.”⁴

Ultimately laws were introduced to stop these extravagances.⁵ About 1600 the term “to turn the girdle” appears to have been a challenge, the buckle of the girdle being turned to the back of the wearer when a fight was about to ensue.⁶ Scotland seems also to have adopted the girdle at bygone times in its dress, thus, *e.g.*, we find them used in Skye over two hundred years ago to support the plaid, and the inference would be that they were then, or had been, pretty general.

“The belt was of leather and of several pieces of silver intermixed with the leather like a chain. The lower end of the belt has a piece of plate about eight inches long and three in breadth curiously engraven, the end of which was adorned with fine stones or pieces of red coral.”⁷

¹ Suetonius, “Augustus,” cap. 100.

² Matthew Arnold, “Study of Celtic Literature,” Everyman edition, p. 247; passage from D. W. Nash's “Taliesin.”

³ E. Hull, “Pagan Ireland,” 1908, p. 94.

⁴ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 374: from “In a French Garden, for English Ladyes and Gentlewomen to walke in,” 1621.

⁵ “Ency. Britt.,” eleventh edition, 1910, art. “Girdle,” vol. xii, p. 47.

⁶ Shakespeare, “Much Ado about Nothing,” act v, sc. 1, v. 143.

⁷ M. Martin, “Description of Western Islands of Scotland,” London, second edition, 1716, p. 209.

Sufficient has been said to indicate the antiquity of the girdle in apparel; that it has been in general use by all nations is evident, and survivals of the girdles of olden times are to be found in European peoples who preserve their national dress, but to enter into this matter a lengthy treatise would be necessary.¹

3. *Girdles employed in religious ritual.*—It has been stated that the origin of the dress girdle is obvious. This is by no means the case with the religious girdle, and, although it is possible to trace the religious use further back and still find attached to it some cryptic signification, it is, I think, most probable that the mystical attributes were applied to the already prevalent dress girdle. This, however, can merely be a hypothesis, since the period in which the girdle took its place in religious ceremonies is so remote that no final decision on this matter is likely to be attained.

The earliest form of the sacrificial girdle was probably a cord worn round the waist by the priests, and representing the year-girdle of the mythical gods of the Vedas. At a later period it was worn on the right shoulder, and, lastly, it was placed over the left shoulder. These girdles are found not only in India, but also in Umbria and Mexico.²

The importance of the Indian religious girdles is illustrated by the fact that before its assumption, which constitutes the second birth, no religious ceremony may be performed.³ The Vedic Brahmans wear the girdle over the right shoulder, but during funeral ceremonies the custom is reversed and the girdle worn on the left shoulder.⁴ The various Brahmanic castes have girdles made of different materials,⁵ while the age of investiture is also stipulated;⁶ the ceremonies connected with the investiture are complicated and lengthy,⁷ the

¹ *Vide* art. "Girdle," by author, in J. Hastings "Encyclop. of Religion and Ethics."

² J. F. Hewitt, "Primitive Traditional History," London, 1907, vol. ii, p. 988.

³ Buhler, "Manu," vol. ii, pp. 169-171.

⁴ "Sacred Books of the East," 1882, vol. xii, pp. 363, 423, 424 (note 2), 428-433; c.f. *ibid.*, 1892, vol. xxx, pp. 16, 17, 251.

⁵ Buhler, "Manu," vol. ii, p. 42 *et seq.*; "Sacred Books of the East," 1886, vol. xxix, p. 60.

⁶ "Sacred Books of the East," 1886, vol. xxix, p. 58 *et seq.*; 1892, vol. xxx, p. 63.

⁷ Dubois-Beauchamp, "Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies," Oxford, third edition, 1906, p. 160 *et seq.*; "Sacred Books of the East," 1886, vol. xxix, pp. 61, 238; *ibid.*, 1892, vol. xxx, pp. 67, 148.

symbolical number "three" recurring frequently during the ceremony. The association of the number three with these ceremonies is, according to Hewitt, derived from the ages of star-worship, and symbolises the three stars in Orion's belt.¹ The Southern Dravidian Brahmans wear a girdle made of three strands of cotton, in each of which are nine threads,² and a similar three-knotted girdle is worn by the Dervishes in South-West Asia.³ In the Zoroastrian ritual the sacred "Kusthi" or girdle, with which all children are invested at the age of fifteen, must also be made according to a definite numerical design; it is passed three times round the waist and twice knotted.⁴ All these factors have their religious significations. At the Iguvian annual May procession of the boundaries a sacred girdle was worn on the right shoulder⁵ in a manner similar to that of the Vedic Brahmans and perhaps derived from them.⁶ The oldest extant charm connected with girdles is derived from the Atharva-Veda (vi, 133), and is as follows⁷:—

"The god that bound on this girdle, that fastened [it] together, and that joined [it] for us, the god by whose instruction we move—may he seek the further shore, and may he release us.

"Offered to art thou, offered unto; thou art the weapon of seers; partaking first of the vow, be thou a hero-slayer, O girdle.

"Since I am death's student, soliciting from existence a man for Yama, him do I, by incantation, by fervor, by toil, tie with this girdle.

"Daughter of faith, born out of fervor, sister of the being-making seers was she; do thou, O girdle, assign to us thought, wisdom; also assign to us fervor and Indra's power.

"Thou whom the ancient being-making seers bound about, do thou embrace me, in order to length of life, O girdle."

In the mythical Wahosadha, or great medicine birth of Buddha, the sun-physician, who came into the world with a branch of sandalwood in his hand, explaining that this branch was medicine, we find that he received, amongst his

¹ J. F. Hewitt, "Primitive Traditional History," London, 1907, vol. i, p. 158.

² Dubois-Beauchamp, "Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies," Oxford, third edition, 1906, p. 160 *et seq.*

³ J. O'Neill, "The Night of the Gods," London, 1893-97, vol. i, p. 127.

⁴ West, "Sacred Books of the East," 1882, vol. xviii, p. 122 (note).

⁵ Iguvian Tables, ii, b. 27, 29; vi, b. 49.

⁶ Hewitt, "Primitive Traditional History," vol. i, p. 376.

⁷ "Atharva-Veda," trans. by Whitney Lanman, Cambridge, Mass., 1905, p. 380 *et seq.*

religious equipments, the girdle of the circling sun which bound days and nights into a perfect whole.¹

We find girdles in use in the Greek and Roman Liturgies, and in the ninth century Anastasius mentions "murænulæ," or jewelled girdles, in the shape of lampreys and eels.² The early Christians employed zodiacal amulets in the form of girdles,³ and the girdle of the Ephod amongst the Israelitish priests contains, perhaps, a curious relic of the older sun-worship ritual, in that, while the priest was engaged in sacrifice, the free ends were thrown over the left shoulder.⁴ The "orarium" was also directed to be worn over the left shoulder by the Fourth Council of Toledo, and the "pallium" in its application bears the same traces of its origin.⁵ Some doubt exists as to the "stole" which was the successor of the "orarium;" it consists of a strip of embroidery, 2 to 3 inches wide, and latterly terminating in a cross. Deacons wore it over the left shoulder, but priests crossed it over the breast.⁶ Inman, however, believed that the "stole" was originally a woman's garment, and that it was finally made on the pattern of the Isian Sistrum which he considered was of phallic signification and related to the Yoni. The ancient "pallium" bore a close resemblance to the "crux ansata," the emblem of life of the Egyptians.⁷

Much more might be written on the subject of religious girdles, but these facts are the principle features which are of general and medical interest.⁸

4. *Girdles used as amulets for the cure of diseases, &c.*—The employment of girdles as amulets for the relief of illness, warding off evil spirits, and such like is a custom to be met with in many countries, and the diseases they were supposed to alleviate were legion. Unfortunately, no sacred books of amulets were preserved by the ancient races, and the more

¹ Rhys Davids, "Buddhist Birth Stories: The Nidanakatha," London, 1880, pp. 86-88.

² Addis-Arnold, "A Catholic Dictionary," 1903, sixth edition, p. 403.

³ A. Lillie, "Buddhism in Christendom," 1887, p. 122; Martigny, "Dict. d'Antiquites Chretiennes," Paris, 1865, art. "Zodiaque."

⁴ R. A. S. Macalister, "Ecclesiastical Vestments," London, 1896, p. 4.

⁵ R. A. S. Macalister, "Ecclesiastical Vestments," London, 1896, pp. 38-40, 47.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 73-4.

⁷ Thomas Inman, "Ancient Faiths embodied in Ancient Names," 1872, second edition, vol. i, p. 165; vol. ii, pp. 745, 916-7.

⁸ The above summary is condensed from the author's article on Girdles in J. Hastings "Encyc. of Religion and Ethics."

antique cases are difficult to trace. That they originally derived their virtues from religious associations is undoubted, and several of the undermentioned cases afford ample evidence of this fact. In the great majority of instances, however, the religious significance has been lost to us, undoubtedly owing to omission of accurate descriptions of the girdles and their mode of application.

The earliest notice I have traced of the girdle used as an amulet is derived from Festus:—

“Varrius asserts, on the contrary, that the same remedies are called amulets which Caia Cæcilia, the wife of Traquinius Priscus, is supposed to have invented and introduced into her girdle which is in the Temple of Sancus, who is called Deus fidius, and girt about a statue of his. Out of this girdle, those in danger (or sick persons) took little chips; the same was called “præbia” (amulets), because they prevented evils.”¹

Another early Roman account is that mentioned by Pliny the Elder; he states that if the girdle which they wore every day were tied with a Hercules knot, a knot tied very hard, in which no ends were visible, it would be productive of certain beneficial effects, and that Hercules was the first to discover this fact.² As Hercules is one of the oldest heroes of Greek mythology, and the idea embodied goes back further still, this instance—if Pliny be correct in his statement—must be of extreme antiquity.

A very interesting, if obscure, example comes from a poetic charm in Bale’s “Interlude” concerning the Laws of Nature, Moses, and Christ (1562), cited fully by Brand³:—

“A Dram of a Shepe’s Tyrdle,
And good Saynt Frances Gyrdle,
With the Hamlet of a Hyrdle,
Are wholsom for the Pyppe.”

In Macedonia we meet with the girdle as an amulet, but usually associated with a charm of some sort; these charms were, as a rule, worn suspended from the neck, but in many cases traces of the girdle custom arise, as in the following:—

“To cure a woman of hæmorrhage write on a piece of papyrus and tie it to her belly with one thread and say “Our Father” and the following prayer: “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the

¹ Sexti Pompeii Festi, “De Verborum Significatione,” Lib. XIV, s.v. præbia and prædia; c.p. Varro, “de Lingua Latina,” Lib. VII, section 107.

² Pliny, “Historia Naturalis,” Lib. XXVIII, ch. 17.

³ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 749.

God of Jacob, the God who stayed the river Mortham on the 6th day, stay also the flowing of the blood of thy servant So-and-so, and the seal of our Lord Jesus Christ. Stand we fairly, stand we with fear of God, Amen. And may the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John cure the patient." Write this on an olive leaf. *ἔισχυφθ.*"¹

From "Memorable Things noted in the Description of the World" Brand extracts the interesting tale that "about children's necks the wild Irish hung the beginning of St. John's Gospel, a crooked nail of a horse-shoe, or a piece of wolve's skin, and that both the sucking child and the nurse were girt with girdles finely plaited with women's hair" in order to improve the strength of their healths.²

Similarly, in Scottish folklore the elfin-woman or banshis gave their mortal lovers a magic belt to protect them in danger,³ and MacCuaric, or Kennedy, of Lianachan in Lochaber bound the captured "Glaistig" to his horse with the "wizard belt of Fillan."⁴ A reminiscence of the Celtic pagan period may exist also in the following charm or hymn written by an Irish monk in Austrian Klosterneuburg⁵:—

"The girdle (cris) of Finnen is round about me, that I walk not the way which encircleth the people; . . . against disease, against anxiety, against the charms of foolish women. . . . The girdle of John is my girdle, . . . it putteth to shame the wrath of men, it averteth the charms of women. The girdle of the serpent is my girdle, the serpent is about me that men may not wound me, that women may not destroy me; to the stars that it hath exalted me; at my hour it is about me."

Closely related to these is the magical blue belt derived from the elfins, which had the power of increasing the wearer's strength—a legend current in the Norse folk-lore;⁶ and, again, there is the Germanic belief that one can change himself into a werwolf by donning a belt of wolf's skin.⁷ The natives of the Island of Harris, or some of the neighbouring islands, wore a girdle of sealskin about the

¹ G. F. Abbott, "Macedonian Folklore," Cambridge, 1903, p. 234.

² J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, p. 339.

³ J. G. Campbell, "Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland," Glasgow, 1900, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵ Zeuss-Ebel, "Gramm. Celt," Berlin, 1871, p. 954 *et seq.*

⁶ Sir C. W. Dasent, "Popular Tales from the Norse," London (N.D.), second edition, p. 198.

⁷ E. H. Meyer, "Germ. Myth," Berlin, 1891, p. 69; Chantepie de la Saussaye, "Relig. of the Teutons," London, 1902, p. 298.

middle to remove sciatica, and those of Aberdeenshire are said to have made use of one to cure "chin-cough."¹ In Ardnamurchan, to this day, when a child is born a rope of grass is wound round it to keep away many diseases; an incantation is used, and the grass must be pulled, not cut. Some place the rope round the neck and chest in the form of a cross; it is finally cut into nine pieces and flung into the wine.² The last-mentioned case is extremely interesting and valuable, showing, as it does, distinct traces both of Christian and Pagan dogma in the cross and number nine, derived from the mystical triad.

In the "Dictionnaire infernal" a curious French instance is recorded:—

"Many secret books teach you that all sorts of internal maladies are cured by the sick person's wearing a girdle of ferns plucked at noon on the eve of St. John, and woven so as to form the magic character **HVTY**. The synod of Bordeaux, in 1600, condemned this remedy."³

The following instances, from widely separated regions, are directly comparable with the above, and show also relationships with the religious girdles.

During the middle ages in England curative girdles, rings, and garters were often decorated or inscribed with the names of the three Magi—Melchior, Balthazar, and Jaspas. Now, Scripture gives no authority, so far as I am aware, for limiting the number to three, hence one may presume that the three was adopted on account of its beneficent influence. Such girdles were supposed to be efficacious against cramp, but they served also against sorcery and sudden death.⁴

In Britain, also, we note that the common people of the country used to take a twig of elder and cut the piece of wood between two of its knots into nine pieces; these pieces, bound with a thread, are placed on the "spoon of the heart or on the sword-formed cartilage," and bound thereon with a silken or linen roller wrapped about the body till the thread break of itself. This treatment was employed for the cure of erysipelas.⁵ The number nine here is sufficient to give a

¹ M. Martin, "Description of Western Islands of Scotland," London, 1716, second edition, p. 65.

² Tradition narrated by Rev. Angus Macdonald, Ullapool, 1913.

³ F. Collin de Plancy, "Dictionnaire infernal," Bruxelles, 1845, under "ceintures magiques."

⁴ Chambers, "Book of Days," Edinburgh, 1863, vol. ii, p. 752.

⁵ J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, p. 735; from "Anatomie of the Elder," 1655.

cryptic savour to the practice, but the expression, "till the thread break of itself," immediately brings to memory the Norse legend of the three Norns with the rope of Fate.

Amongst the Nyam Nyam and Gour tribes of Bahr-el-Ghazal, in Southern Egypt, a tight cord is placed round the chest of a man suffering from pleurisy, and to this cord cylindrical wooden charms are attached (see Fig. 1).¹ For his kindness in permitting me to make use of this illustration I am much indebted to Mr. Henry S. Wellcome.

A belt made of thirty to sixty strands of rather fine string made from vegetable fibre is used by the Warramunga tribes of Northern Australia as an ordinary girdle, and possesses no magical properties; the same article usually "sung" by Tjingilli men is traded to the Southern tribes, such as the Aruntas, where it becomes the "ililika," or knout, which is carried secretly by the man, and used to correct the erring ways of his wife. The sight of it alone is enough to make her obedient, and a blow from it is supposed to have fatal effects. Even distant women can be injured by cracking the knout in their direction.²

Amongst the same tribes girdles made from a dead man's hair are presented to a man who is either the actual or tribal husband of the daughter of the dead man's sister, and on him devolves the duty of avenging the death. For them the relationship is important, but for us it is more enlightening to hear that the supposed culprit's legs tremble under him, and he becomes incapable of fighting on seeing the girdle.³

A curious instance of the girdle idea arose as an offshoot of the early attempts at mesmerism. The Marquis de Puysegur, one of Mesmer's devotees, heard his teacher remark that he had magnetised bits of wood. M. de Puysegur extended the idea, and magnetised a large elm on the village green at Busancy; he then caused circular seats to be placed around it, and cords to be suspended from it in all directions. When the patients had seated themselves they twined the cords round the diseased parts of their bodies, and held one another firmly by the thumb to form a direct channel of communication for the passage of the mesmeric "fluid."⁴ Closely

¹ Wellcome, "Tropical Research Laboratories," 1911, fourth report, Vol. B, Plate XVII, Fig. 68, p. 251.

² B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, "Northern Tribes of Central Australia," London, 1904, pp. 544-5.

³ Ibid., pp. 544-5.

⁴ Chas. Mackay, "Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions," London, 1852, vol. i, p. 284.



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FIG. 1.—THE TYING CURE.

A tight cord is tied round the chest of a man suffering from pleurisy. The "tie" is accompanied by some cylindrical wooden charms (Bagara). (Reproduced by kind permission of Mr. H. S. Wellcome.)

related to these are the "magnetic belts" which one sees advertised in the current literature of to-day.

The mystic girdle has not yet altogether disappeared as a charm for disease; in fact, one may anticipate that it is more commonly worn in outlying districts than can be discovered. A few months ago my colleague, Dr. Kesson, on proceeding to examine the chest of a female patient of Roman Catholic faith at Keith, discovered a leathern belt around her chest, and, on enquiring why she wore it, he was informed that it helped her trouble. The disease from which she suffered was "heart disease," and I have little doubt her remedy was suitable for all forms of that condition.

No good purpose would be served by detailing more of the various uses of girdles as curative charms. I am persuaded that the custom is, and has been, very wide-spread, that the diseases said to be cured were legion, and that they were often believed to be of prophylactic value. I feel that further recital of these would be tedious to the reader, but I shall, nevertheless, be much indebted for information about instances of their use, and the diseases they were supposed to ward off or cure.

5. *Girdles in relation to women and to the marriage ceremony.*—Previous to the discussion of the girdle as an aid in childbirth, it were logical to show some instances of its special association with the female sex. This I am constrained to do in some detail, since the girdle has had in its relation to women in nearly all nationalities some mystical signification. The wherefore of this mysticism concerning the womanly girdle—an article which, on superficial examination, appears to us merely a necessity of dress—is, I think, not far to seek, and from an examination of the ensuing examples of its application as a symbol, the reader will discover that the girdle was emblematic of the *hymen virginis*.

The classical scholar will probably recall the passage relating to Hera in the "Iliad,"¹ which is quoted here:—

"Then she clad her in her fragrant robe that Athene wrought delicately for her, and therein set many things beautifully made, and fastened it over her breast with clasps of gold. And she girdled it with a girdle arrayed with a hundred tassels."

She then demands of Venus:—

¹ Homer, "Iliad," bk. xiv, v, 178.

“Give me now Love and Desire wherewith thou dost overcome all the Immortals and mortal men.”¹

From Venus she receives the Cestus, as is described in the subsequent passage²:—

“Therewith from her breast she loosed the broidered girdle, fair-wrought, wherein are all her enchantments; therein are love, and desire, and loving converse that steals the wits even of the wise. This girdle she laid in her hands and spake and said: ‘Lo now, take this girdle and lay it up in thy bosom, this fair-wrought girdle, wherein all things are fashioned; methinks thou wilt not return with that unaccomplished, which in thy heart thou desirest.’”³

Somewhat similar to this is the legend preserved in the Icelandic “Völsungen Saga,” which tells of the wood-pecker’s song relating to Sigurd the story of Brynhild:—

“ A fair may know I
Fair of all the fairest,
Girt about with gold,
Good for thy getting.”⁴

Again, an important position is assigned to the girdles in the Germanic Saga of the “Nibelungenlied,” where we find that, in the course of her resistance to Gunther’s advances, Brunhild seizes her girdle, a strong, embroidered silk cord, and belabours him with it, ultimately tying his hands and feet and hanging him up on the wall.⁵

These three examples afford us a glimpse of the meaning underlying the maiden’s girdle; but of prime importance in this respect are the references to girdles as used by the Greek and Roman maidens, and I may therefore be pardoned for entering into the matter at some length, particularly as these accounts are somewhat scattered, and entailed considerable labour in the collecting. In the language of both Greek and Roman, the term “to undo the girdle” was currently employed to designate the loss of virginity. This sense is well shown in the “Odyssey”⁶:—

¹ “Iliad of Homer,” translated by Lang, Leaf, and Myers, London, 1883, pp. 278-9.

² Homer, “Iliad,” bk. xiv, v, 214 ff.

³ “Iliad of Homer,” translated by Lang, Leaf, and Myers, London, 1883, p. 279.

⁴ “Völsungen Saga,” translated by E. Magnusson and W. Morris, edited by H. H. Sparling, Scott Library Edition, London (N.D.), p. 65.

⁵ The “Nibelungenlied,” translated by Margaret Armour, London, Everyman edition (N.D.), p. 61.

⁶ Homer, “Odyssey,” bk. xi, v. 245-247.

“And he undid her maiden girdle, and shed a slumber over her. Now when the god had done the work of love, he clasped her hand and spake and hailed her;”¹

and also in the following passage from Ovid’s “*Epistolarum Heroidum*”²:—

“Whose virginity was violated by thee with unhappy omens,
And whose girdle was unfastened by thy treacherous hand.”

Somewhat similar is the import of the following reference from Catullus³:—

“As they say was to the swift-footed
Girl (*Atalanta*) that golden apple
Which loosed her long-bound zone.”

These extracts are amply sufficient to confirm the previous evidence that the girdle was an emblem of chastity, whence we can understand Hera’s womanly desire to obtain the “*Cestus of Venus*,” to renew, as it were, her youth and attractiveness. But these customs become still more entertaining when we reflect that in Greece the same signification was attached to the “*mitra*,” or band, with which the maidens bound their hair. This same band appears in Scotland and was termed the “*snood*,” and the lassie who had “lost her snood” without permission of the Kirk was in danger of the “*cutty-stool*.”⁴ The “*snood*” was simply a forehead hair girdle, and the “*cutty-stool*” a sort of pillory, or raised pew, conspicuous in the Kirk. In it the penitent for this misconduct had to stand, usually bareheaded and barefooted, in sackcloth or a linen sheet for three successive Sundays.⁵

To return to the Romans. Varro⁶ stated the following:—

“There was a goddess named *Virginensis*, in whose honour the virgins used to unloose their girdles.”

They often called this goddess the “*Fortuna Virginalis*,” and to her the robes of virgins were taken at the time of marriage, when the women discarded the clothes of childhood; she

¹ “*Odyssey of Homer*,” translated by S. H. Butcher and A. Lang, fifth edition, London, 1885, p. 179.

² P. Ovidii Nasonis, “*Epistolarum Heroidum*,” ep. ii, v. 115.

³ C. Valerii Catulli, “*Carmen*,” ii, v. 11-13.

⁴ Works of Catullus and Tibullus; prose translation by W. K. Kelly (London: Bohn), 1854, p. 10, fn. 2.

⁵ Chambers’ “*Encyc.*,” 1892, vol. ix, p. 750; c.p. Edgar, in “*The Church of Scotland*,” edited by R. H. Story, London, 1891, vol. v, pp. 525-9; and Scott, “*Heart of Midlothian*,” chap. 37.

⁶ Varro apud Augustinum de Civit, Lib. IV, Cap. 11; c.p. *ibid.*, Lib. VI, Cap. 9.

also appears to have presided over the loosing of the bridal zone.

A most interesting example has been communicated to me by the kindness of Dr. Johnson, of Copenhagen. This verse was written about the year 1225:—

“My beloved beautiful girl, read cautiously what I have written to thee, what a girl is it whose face is beautiful and who bears the stamp of her noble ancestors. I am burning with love and I sigh oft and oft. Her beauty wounds my heart, her eyes are bright as the sun and as lightning on a dark night. Give the gods that I may soon unfasten her maiden girdle.”¹

Such beliefs were apparently prevalent in Denmark, and in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek there is a statue of a female figure, by P. Hasselberg, named “Sneklokken”—Snowdrop; the figure shows the waist-girdle in the act of bursting, and the symbolism is obviously the transition of maidenhood into womanhood.

One cannot forbear from mentioning an instance in “King Henry the Fifth,” act v, scene 2, where—while the discussion of Henry’s engagement to Katherine of France is taking place—the French King remarks, “Yes, my Lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid; for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never entered.” He who has perceived the import of the preceding quotations and remarks can hardly fail to detect the thinly-veiled allusion to the girdle custom by Shakespeare.

In the Kaitish tribe of Northern Australia a peculiar custom, similar in many respects to those we have noted, is observed. The girl who has been promised as a wife to any youth—and the betrothal may take place before either one or both of them are born—makes out of her own hair a girdle, which is passed round the youth’s waist when, as a “wurtja,” he passes through the initiation ceremony.²

In France courtesans were not permitted to wear the girdle, a custom which is on a plane with that of the Romans in forbidding these women to wear the “stola,” and, with the latter, the term “discinctus,” ungirdled, was also applied to loose characters.³

¹ “Carmina Burana,” No. 141, edited 1847 by Schmeller, third edition, Breslau, 1894; Fr. Moth Vagrantirserne (Vagrant’s songs), Copenhagen, 1913.

² B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, “Northern Tribes of Central Australia,” London, 1904, p. 603.

³ Horace, Epod. I, 34; c.f. Suetonius, “Caes” 45.

Exigences of space and the danger of wearying the reader compel me to pass on to the use of the girdle in the marriage ceremony.

In the Brahmana marriage ceremony the bride is invested by her relations with a red and black woollen or linen cord with three amulet gems. The ceremony is accompanied by the verse, "Dark blue and red," and the bridegroom ties Madhuka flowers to her body.¹ The girdle mentioned here is not the sacrificial cord which women were not permitted to wear.² Later, when the bride departs from the house, the verse, "I loosen thee," is said,³ but I can find no trace of the unloosening of the cord actually being stated, although, if on the bridal journey an axle breaks or something gets loose, they have to perform oblations and repeat the verse, "He who without binding."⁴

Amongst the Romans at a marriage ceremony the bride was clothed in a long tunica with a purple fringe, embroidered ribands, and a saffron or flame-coloured veil⁵; her flowing garments were bound with a girdle made of sheep's wool and tied with a Herculean knot. After the marriage ceremony the bride proceeded to her husband's house, where she bound the door-posts with woollen fillets,⁶ and anointed them with the fat of swine and wolves to avert enchantments.⁷ She was then lifted over the threshold, because this was sacred to Vesta, Goddess of Virgins,⁸ or perhaps to avoid the evil omen of a chance stumble. After the festivities, and when the bridal chamber was reached, the husband there untied the Herculean knot and removed the girdle. This custom is directly comparable with those previously cited regarding the girdle's symbolism of virginity, and, as I have not seen in any work a full statement of the evidence on this point, it will be well to give the matter in some detail and in chronological order.

Varro (116-27 B.C.), in an unpreserved work, "Gerontodidascalus," states that "the newly-married husband loosened

¹ "Sacred Books of the East," vol. xxix, 1886, p. 33; "Rigveda," x, 85, 28.

² "Sacred Books of the East," vol. xxx, 1892, p. 44 (F.N.).

³ Ibid., vol. xxix, p. 39; "Rigveda," x, 85, 24.

⁴ "Sacred Books of the East," vol. xxx, p. 49-50; "Sama-veda," i, 224.

⁵ Juvenal, Satire II, v. 124 (segmenta et longos habitus, et flammea sumit); c.p. Lucan, "Pharsalia," Lib. II, v. 350 ff.

⁶ Pliny, "Historia Naturalis," Lib. XXIX, chap. 9.

⁷ Ibid., Lib. XXVIII, chap. 37.

⁸ Lucan, "Pharsalia," Lib. II, v. 359; c.p. Catullus, LXI, v. 166-8.

gently and silently his wife's girdle (*novus maritus tacitulus taxim uxoris solvebat cingillum*)."¹

Catullus (87-54 B.C.) mentions the marriage girdle in the two ensuing excerpts from his poems:—

“Hymen, O Hymen!
Thee the anxious parent
Invokes for his children; for thee virgins
Loose the zone from their bosoms.”²

“Or that his enervated son was incapable
Of marital functions, and that abler means
To loosen the virgin's zone had to be sought elsewhere.”³

Festus (Second Century A.D.) in his abridgment of Verrius Flaccus' "Lexikon" gives us more particular information on the subject:—

“The newly-married woman used to be bound with a girdle, made of sheep's wool, which the husband loosened on the marriage bed: in order that, just as the wool was taken up and joined together in threads, so in the same way her husband should be girded and bound together with her. This girdle, tied with a Herculean knot, the husband unloosened for a good omen, in order that he too might be as fortunate in rearing children as was Hercules, who left behind 70 offspring.”⁴

Regarding the Herculean knot, it is interesting to find that it is represented in the "Caduceus," and Macrobius' description of the details of this symbolism is worthy of full citation:—

“It is clear that in the person of Mercury also the sun is worshipped on account of the Caduceus, for the Egyptians fashioned it to represent the union of a male and female serpent as an offering to Mercury. Those serpents are united at the middle part of their bulk by the knot which is called after Hercules; the fore-parts of their bodies are turned backwards so as to form a circle, and their mouths meet so as to complete the circle; behind the knot their tails go back and join the handle of the Caduceus, and have an ornamentation of wings growing out of the handle at that point. The Egyptians extend the application of the Caduceus also to the nativity of human beings, which they called 'genesis'; they say that four gods watch over the birth of human beings, Daimon, Tuche,

¹ Nonius Marcellus, "De Proprietate Sermonum," I, M. 47, under "Cingillum"; c.p. Sexti Pompeii Festi, "De Verborum Significatione, with notes." (London: Valpy), 1826, Lib. III, *sub* "Cingulo" (F.N.).

² C. Valerii Catulli, "Carmen," LXI, v. 50 *f*.

³ *Ibid.*, LXVIII, v. 26.

⁴ Sexti Pompeii Festi, "De Verborum Significatione," Lib. III, under "Cingulo."

Eros, and Necessity, and by the first two they understand the sun and the moon, for the sun as origin of heat and light is the creator and preserver of human life and on that account is held to be the Daimon, that is, the god of birth; Tuche is the moon because she watches over the bodies which are tossed on the sea of change and fortune; Love (Eros) is indicated by the kiss (of the two serpents); and Necessity by the knot. The reason for the addition of the wings has been explained above. In symbolism of this kind the figures of serpents have been specially selected on account of the snake-like path of the two heavenly bodies.”¹

A further explanation is given by Athenagoras in the speech, entitled “*Legatio ad Impp. Antoninos*,” where, speaking of Jupiter, it is said that:—

“He pursued his mother, Rhea, after she had refused to be his wife; she became a dragon; he changed into a dragon, and, binding her to him in what is called the Herculean knot, he had intercourse with her and the wand of Mercury is a symbol of that intercourse.”

It is probable that this was the origin of the use of the knot in marriage—an expression which persists even in our own day; but Festus’ remark that its unloosening was for an omen is worthy of attention, particularly as Hercules loosed the knots of fifty of his sisters.²

Rossbach believes—on account of the probable identity of Hercules with Sancus, a god worshipped by the Romans, Sabines, and Umbrians—that the idea of the knot was originally associated with Sancus, and that the latter, as god of light, protected men from epidemics, illness, death, and bewitchment, which protective powers the knot, as his symbol, possessed. His conclusion is that the knot, as used in marriage, was merely an amulet against witchcraft.³ The present writer’s opinion—which differs from the above—has been stated, and, although as shown Festus does remark on its meaning as an omen, one is inclined to the belief that this was a later interpretation of the custom. Certainly, in many instances, the idea of an omen is not associated with the marriage girdle. Sancus was also the god of oaths and, therefore, the knot might just as easily have been interpreted as a symbol of the binding character of the marriage oath. Rossbach also states that Sancus was

¹ Macrobius, “*Saturnalia*,” Lib. I, chap. xix, sec. 16-18.

² Daceries ad Sex. P. Fest, ed. London, 1826, vol. i, Lib. III, pp. 156-7 (F.N.).

³ A. Rossbach, “*Die römische Ehe*,” Stuttgart, 1853, p. 279.

probably identical with Jupiter, which brings us back again to the above explanation by Athenagoras.

Under "Cinxia Junonis" Festus states:—

"The name of Juno Cinxia was held sacred in marriage because the loosening of the girdle, by which the newly-married woman was bound, was the beginning of wedlock."¹

Juno used to preside over marriage; Ovid uses the expression "and high Juno, who rules over the marriage bed;" and, according to Virgil ("Aeneid" IV, v. 166), she is "Juno pronuba" (Juno, the bride's woman).

Arnobius (*circa* 295 A.D.) gives us some more details of the multifarious duties of Juno at the marriage ceremony:—

"Unxia presides over the anointing (of doorposts); Cinxia over the loosening of the zone; . . . would gods not have names if brides did not besmear their husbands' doorposts with greasy ointment?; or, if the husbands now eagerly drawing near, did not unbind their maiden girdles?"²

And Martianus Capella (*circa* 439 A.D.) finally sums up the matter in the following statement relating to Juno:—

"Mortal women are bound to invoke Iterduca, Domiduca, Unxia, and Cinxia in marriage, in order to watch over them and their paths, and lead them to the home of their desire, and, as they are anointing the doorposts, give them a favourable omen and do not desert them when they lay aside their girdle in the marriage chamber."³

With these Roman customs the statement in "Much Ado about Nothing" (Act II, sc. 1) would seem to be connected:—

"*D. Pedro.* . . . I will, in the interim, undertake one of Hercules' labours, which is to bring Signior Benedick and the lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection, the one with the other."

The presumption would be that the task Don Pedro set himself was merely one of difficulty, and I, being no authority on Shakespearean cryptics, am disinclined to read anything further into the text; but it is just possible that Shakespeare may have been aware of Hercules' connection with the marriage ceremony.

¹ Sexti Pompeii Festi, "De Verborum Significatione," Lib. III, s.v. "Cinxia Junonis."

² Arnobii, "Adversus Nationes," Lib. III, sec. 25; c.p. *ibid.*, Lib. III, sec. 21, 23.

³ Martianus Capella, "De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii," Lib. II, sec. 149.

While thinking over the Herculean knot and its connection with marriage, the suggestion occurred to me that it might in some way be connected with the true lovers' knot since this is not unlike a caduceus. On going into this matter I was much surprised to find myself long forestalled. Sir Thomas Browne, in his "Vulgar Errors," has it "that the True Lovers' Knot, which, though in all points it doth not make out, had, perhaps, its original from Nodus Herculanus or that which was called Hercules, his knot, resembling the snaky complication in the Caduceus or Rod of Hermes, and in which form the zone, or woollen girdle, of the bride was fastened."

In the "Paradoxical Assertions and Philosophical Problems" (1664) a passage occurs which gives the matter less poetically than cynically, "I shall appeal to any Enamoretto but newly married, whether he took not more pleasure in weaving innocent True-Love Knots than in untying the virgin zone, or knitting that more than Gordian Knot, which none but that invincible Alexander, Death, can untye."¹

In the "Autobiography of Cellini" (1500-1571), a curious instance of a girdle is related, "About this time I made a silver heart-key—for so were such things called in those days—which was a belt, three fingers broad, to be worn by a bride. It was worked in half-relief, with some little figures in the round."² One cannot help suspecting some near connection between this girdle and those of the older Romans, the expression "heart-key" gives, in my opinion, to the article the same symbolism as was possessed by the Roman girdles.

Before parting with the Roman marriage customs I may point out that Brand refers to an English custom whereby the bride had to be lifted over the threshold of the bridegroom's house by her nearest relative, and had also to knit her fillets to the doorposts and anoint the sides to avert the mischievous fascinations of witches, and, before the operation, had to assume a yellow veil.³ The similarity to the Roman usage from which the custom must have been derived is delightful, and we can only regret that the girdle is omitted from the ceremony.

Another custom which prevailed in England, and was recently

¹ J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, pp. 360-1; c.p. p. 351.

² "Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini," Everyman edition, London (N.D.), p. 26.

³ J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, p. 399.

brought into prominence again by its revival in the German Court, was in all probability a derivation of the idea of "loosening the zona." This was the common practice of the young men at a wedding, scrambling to be the first to wrest the bride's garters from her legs. The bride used to be gartered with ribbons for this purpose, although later it was given up owing to the practice being indulged in, even in front of the altar. From the evidence in Brand it would appear that the garter scramble originally took place after the bride had been put to bed. Further, Brand believes that the origin of the Order of the Garter is to be sought for in this custom.¹

In Pausanias's "Description of Greece" it is stated that Aethra made it a rule for Troezenian maidens to dedicate their girdles before marriage to the Apaturian Athena,² and we discover in Macedonia during modern times that the bride before the wedding procession has a girdle with three knots tied round her waist by one of her brothers; these Macedonian girdles appear to be costly, but essential, since the parish hires them out to the peasantry.³ An exactly similar method of procuring the necessary girdle is adopted by the poorer Norwegian peasants.⁴

The Japanese receives at her betrothal a piece of gold embroidery for a girdle, and the bride takes to her husband seven presents, amongst which are an upper and an under girdle, but I can find no trace of any ritualistic observances connected with them.⁵

A peculiar custom relating to girdles and their knots holds in Russia; during the marriage ceremony a net "from its affluence of knots" is thrown over the bride or bridegroom and the attendants are girt with pieces of net, "or at least with tight drawn girdles, for before a wizard can begin to injure them he must undo all the knots in the net or take off the girdles."⁶

Next, an example from England, one of some curiosity on account of its relationship to the "Iliad" girdle. I quote

¹ J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, pp. 371-2.

² Pausanias, "Description of Greece," translated by J. G. Frazer, 1898, vol. i, bk. i, ch. 44 (i).

³ G. F. Abbott, "Macedonian Folklore," Cambridge, 1903, pp. 168, 175.

⁴ Chambers's "Book of Days," vol. i, p. 720.

⁵ A. B. Mitford, "Tales of Old Japan," London, 1871, vol. ii, pp. 244-5.

⁶ Ralston, "Songs of the Russian People," p. 390; Abbott, loc. cit., p. 170.

directly from Brand, who apparently obtained the passage from a newspaper called the *Cumberland Packet*:—

“George Hayton who married Ann, the daughter of Joseph and Dinah Collin of Crossley Mill, purposes having a Bride Wain at his house at Crossley, near Mary Port, on Thursday, May 7th next [1789], where he will be happy to see his Friends and Well-wishers, for whose amusement there will be . . . a Girdle (Ceinture de Venus) possessing qualities not to be described, and many other Articles which can never prove tedious in the exhibition.”¹

I have been through a tolerable number of ancient tomes in the course of this inquiry, but I have failed to find any facts which elucidate the above mysterious girdle; the only other reference to the “Cestus” I have found in this country is the following:—“The Irish are observed to present their lovers with Bracelets of women’s hair, whether in reference to Venus’ Cestus or not, I know not.”² The questions naturally arise as to how the girdle came into use in our land; why the term “Ceinture de Venus”—pagan and French even then—was adopted; and whether the undescribed qualities were those of the original “Iliad” Cestus.

I have not found any direct mention of the girdle in the Scottish marriage ceremony, but customs more or less similar existed; thus, in the “Statistical Account of Scotland,” 1793, the minister of Logierait, Perthshire, says—

“Immediately before the celebration of the marriage ceremony every knot about the bride and bridegroom (garters, shoe-strings, strings of petticoats, &c.) is carefully loosened. After leaving the church, the whole company walk round it, keeping the church walls always upon the right hand. The bridegroom, however, first retires one way with some young men to tie the knots that were loosened about him, while the young married woman in the same manner retires somewhere else to adjust the disorder of her dress.”³

Finally, in connection with marriage, we get the girdle custom cropping up in Melanesia, where a native girl of German New Guinea, on attaining a marriageable age, has a girdle placed round her hips, and, with her hair curled and twisted, she sits in the open village to be admired by eligible bachelors.⁴

¹ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 386

² Ibid., p. 348.

³ Ibid., p. 381.

⁴ “Customs of the World,” edited by W. Hutchinson, London, 1912, art. “Melanesia,” by R. W. Williamson, pp. 26-7.

I do not propose to do more than merely mention the "Ceinture de Chasteté"—the girdle which the crusaders sometimes locked on their ladies before leaving them for long periods. They were made of iron, and possessed a perineal band or pad which was locked in position.

6. *Girdles used during pregnancy and confinement.*—The application of the girdle during pregnancy and labour forms a most curious problem in ethnology. It is well known that in most nationalities the popular conception is that everything should be unloosened in these contingencies; thus, husbands must not sit with their legs crossed, doors must be opened, knots of all kinds undone—as is the case even among the Kayans of Borneo, where, before confinement, the prospective mother must refrain from tying knots¹—and the hair must often be loosened. Similar, if somewhat exaggerated, customs are said to have been followed in Persia, where, when a woman was about to lie in, the schoolmasters were requested to give liberty to the boys, and birds confined in cages were permitted to escape.² History does not inform us whether all the schoolboys were granted holidays on such occasions; certainly, were this the case, their lessons must have proceeded in a disjointed fashion.

On account of the antiquity of the girdle custom, and the fact that during pregnancy and labour the girdle is sometimes applied and sometimes loosened—which resembles the knot untying—it is meantime impossible to make any definite statements as to its original source or import. It is most probable, I think, that it arose as an offshoot of the sacrificial girdle, and may therefore be considered as an instance of sympathetic magic, or, in other words, the ascription of marvellous powers to the clothes or relics of departed saints, a custom familiar in Mohammedan and Buddhist, as well as Christian communities. But one must not forget that it is quite conceivable that the girdle idea originated as a simple means of applying *vis a tergo* in a manner obviously rational to the mind of primitive man. It has also occurred to the writer that the old legends of the sun giving birth to all nature from the womb of mother earth at the commencement of his northern circuit may have been the source of the application of the girdle in pregnancy; but in the chaos of a

¹ "Customs of the World," edited by W. Hutchinson, London, 1912, p. 201.

² J. C. Lettsom, "History of the Origin of Medicine," London, 1778, p. 48 (F.N.).

collection of fragmentary and widely scattered instances, it is felt that adherence must be given to the maxim of "no conclusion is better than a false conclusion."

I shall, therefore, confine myself to stating the various customs which have prevailed amongst different peoples who employed them, noting such cases as were connected with religious ceremonials, and making comments on the relationships exhibited by the usages in the several centres.

It will be observed that the number 3 recurs again in the ritual of the obstetric girdles; such cases have not been specially selected, and although I am inclined to the belief that this number has had a distinct signification with regard to the obstetric girdles, I am no less cognisant of the fact that "3" has been from the distant past a figure which has, as a sacred number, played a *rôle* in most legendary customs. No unassailable evidence has been found which would indicate the reason of its persistence in the structure of the girdle, and, if I have suggested its possible connection with the three stars of Orion's Belt symbolised in the Brahmana sacrificial cord, this must be understood as a tentative hypothesis. Another suggestion which might meet the case is that it was in this connection of phallic significance, but circumstantial evidence being wanting, no verdict can be given on the case. Doubtless, if one had been able to obtain fuller descriptions of the girdles, and some specimens of the more ancient examples, answers to these problems would have been forthcoming.

These preliminary remarks will indicate what may have been the foundations of the belief in girdles as obstetric aids, and the details may be obtained from the ensuing description of the examples I have collected.

Amongst the Hindus, on the occasion of a birth, a charm is bound about the belly of the woman in labour; this charm, which is written by a "skilful man," takes the form of a double equilateral triangle, or a collection of magic words arranged in three rows of three such as the example shown:—

hrom hrom hrom	hrom	hrom hrom
hrom	Name of the woman is written here.	klom klom
klom	hrom	kom kom

This charm is stated to be so powerful that, if it were bound to the woman's loins instead of to her belly, she would never be delivered.¹

Thus we find the number "3" at once amongst the Indian birth girdles, and we may presume some connection between it and the three stars of Orion's Belt which became the distaff of the Norse Frigga, the Goddess of Marriage. The Burmese women wear a tight bandage round the abdomen after the end of the seventh month of pregnancy; this is to prevent the uterus ascending too far, the underlying idea being that the higher the child ascends in the abdomen, the farther it will require to travel, and hence the more painful will be the delivery.²

In an Assyro-Babylonian fragment preserved in the British Museum (K 879), there is apparently part of a prayer or incantation, which is bilingual, and has been used both by Sumero-Akkadians and Semitic Babylonians. In it, binding is stated to require relief; but, the fragment being incomplete, no further details are obtainable:—

"The woman . . .
Her binding, which is before thy divinity, may it be relieved
. . . safely may she bring forth."³

The Babylonish Istar was not only the Goddess of the pregnant and of those in labour, but was also the heavenly virgin, Queen of the Night and Queen of Heaven. With her name the Babylonians connected the idea of the moist, pregnant, fruitful Earth and the impregnated Moon. Istar carried as her symbol the womanly girdle, and, as Goddess of Fruitfulness, she was the general Mother or All-bearer.⁴ Istar is, it should be noticed, comparable with Aphrodite and Frigga.

Amongst the Greeks a birth was forwarded or retarded by divine beings, the Eileithyiai, handmaids of Hera; there seem to have been two Eileithyiai, one propitious (Epilysamene—"Loosing"), and the other unpropitious (Mogostokos), from which we get the Greek "*μογοστοκία*"—a painful childbirth.

¹ J. Hastings, "Encycl. of Religion and Ethics," Edinburgh, 1909, art. "Birth, Hindu, Popular," by W. D. Sutherland, vol. ii, p. 652.

² C. J. Engelmann, "Labor among Primitive Peoples," second edition, St. Louis, 1883, p. 5.

³ J. Hastings, "Encyc. of Religion and Ethics," art. "Birth, Assyro-Babylonian," by T. G. Pinches, vol. ii, p. 644.

⁴ Ploss-Bartels, "Das Weib in der Natur u. Völkerkunde," eighth edition, Leipzig, 1905, vol. ii, p. 16.

Authority for these statements is given in the "Iliad," thus:—

"And even as when the keen shaft cometh upon a woman in her travail, the piercing shaft that the goddesses of the birth-pangs send, even the Eilithyiai, the daughters of Hera, that have bitter pangs in their gift, even so keen pains sank into the might of the son of Atreus."¹

And again in the following passage:—

"But when Eilithyia, Goddess of the pains of travail, had brought him to the light, and he saw the rays of the sun."²

An excellent example of the interference of Hera in birth through the Eilithyiai is exhibited in the following account of the birth of Hercules, which Hera postponed for seven days, while she caused the premature arrival of Eurystheus:—

". . . On the day when Alkmene in fair-crowned Thebes was to bring forth the strength of Hercules. . . . This day shall Eileithyia, the help of travailing women, bring to the light a man who shall be lord over all that dwell round about."³

And in the subsequent lines:—

"For Hera darted from Olympus' peak, and came swiftly to Achaian Argos, where she knew was the stately wife of Sthenelos, son of Perseus, who also was great with child, and her seventh month was come. Her son Hera brought to the light, though his tale of months was untold, but she stayed Alkmene's bearing and kept the Eileithyiai from her aid."⁴

According to Theocritus, the Eileithyia is called the "girdle-loosing" (*λυσίζωνος*) thus:—

"She invoked Eileithyia to loose the parturient zone."⁵

And by the later authors of Artemis, the term "*ζώνην κατατίθεσθαι*" is employed to signify "a woman in labour,"⁶ and "*ζώνην λύνειν*" as "assisting in childbirth;"⁷ further, the term "*ζώνη*" is frequently employed in mentioning pregnant women as in the following passages:—"ἤνεγχε' ὑπὸ ζώνην

¹ Homer, "Iliad," bk. xi, v. 269-272; "Iliad of Homer," translated by Lang, Leaf, and Myers, London, 1883, p. 210.

² Homer, "Iliad," bk. xvi, v. 187-8; "Iliad of Homer," translated by Lang, Leaf, and Myers, London, 1883, p. 320.

³ Ibid., bk. xix, v. 98-9, 103-4; *ibid.*, p. 399.

⁴ Ibid., bk. xix, v. 114-9; *ibid.*, p. 389.

⁵ Theocritus, Idyll XVII, v. 60.

⁶ Pindar, "Olympia," Lib. VI, v. 66.

⁷ Oppianus, "Cynegetica," Lib. III, v. 56.

βάρος;"¹ "σ' ἔθρεψεν ἐντὸς . . . ζώνης;"² and "τοῦτον . . . ἔφερον ζώνης ὑπο."³

Amongst the ancient Greek women it was a practice when a pregnancy occurred for the first time to loosen their girdles and dedicate them in the Temple of Artemis,⁴ and the expression "ζώνην λύειν," "to unloosen the girdle," is applied to Artemis in her character as patroness of women in travail.⁵

Soranus of Ephesus, a physician of the second century, A.D., also recommended the carrying of a waistband during pregnancy. He permits this, however, only until the beginning of the eighth month in order that the weight of the child might assist in hastening the approaching birth.⁶

Later the two Eileithyiai became merged into one who became the Roman "Lucina." Lucina is, be it observed, merely another epithet for Juno or Hera. Juno was Goddess of Marriage and assisted at many parts of the marriage ceremony, for which I have previously cited authorities.⁷ Now we find her assisting at the birth under the name of "Lucina," a term applied to her as Goddess of Light and Queen of Heaven, the appearance of light out of darkness being mythologically viewed as a birth.

The Roman matrons bound the abdomen with a waistband-like girdle from the eighth month of pregnancy onwards, and it was loosened and removed at the beginning of confinement, hence the Goddess of Birth gradually acquired the epithet "Solvizona"—"the Girdle-loosing."⁸ Further, the following remarks anent these girdles were made by Tertullian⁹:—

"Thus it comes to pass that all men are brought to the birth with idolatry for the midwife, whilst the very wombs that bear them, still bound with the fillets before the idols declare their offspring to be consecrated to demons."

During pregnancy offerings were made to the Nymph Egeria, and in confinement Lucina, Diana, or Numeria were invoked.

Pliny also mentions the girdle as an obstetric aid among

¹ Aeschylus "Choephoroe," v. 992.

² Aeschylus, "Eumenides," v. 608.

³ Euripides, "Hecuba," v. 762.

⁴ E. S. Hartland, "Legend of Perseus," 1895, vol. ii, p. 91.

⁵ G. F. Abbott, "Macedonian Folklore," Cambridge, 1903, p. 100.

⁶ Ploss-Bartels, "Das Weib.," eighth edition, Leipzig, 1905, vol. i, p. 852.

⁷ Vide supra.

⁸ Ploss Bartels, "Das Weib.," vol. i, p. 852; J. Hastings, "Encycl. of Religion and Ethics," vol. ii, p. 649.

⁹ Tertullian, "De Anima," chap. xxxix.

the Romans, and his statement is so remarkable that I feel it essential to give both the Latin and English of the paragraph:—

“Partus adcelerat vicinos, ex quo quæque conceperit, si cinctu suo soluto feminam cinxerit, dein solverit, adjecta præcatione ‘se vinxisse, eundem et soluturum,’ atque abierit.”¹

“Delivery when near at hand will be accelerated, if the man by whom the woman has conceived unties his girdle and after tying it round her, unties it, adding at the same time this formula, ‘I have tied it and I will untie it,’ and then taking his departure.”

Here one may interpolate that it was a custom of the Romans to tie woollen fillets round the doorposts at a birth, a custom which also prevailed in England.²

It will have been perceived by this time that two or three variations of usage exist in regard to these girdles—in some cases the girdle is applied during labour as a charm; in others, as a means of pressure; and it is also employed, probably as a support to the abdomen, in the later months of pregnancy and removed when labour approaches. This introduces us to an interesting philological curiosity connected with the last variety. The Latin word “incincta” means “girded,” sometimes “ungirdled,”³ and, in the vulgar tongue “a pregnant woman;” from this is derived the Italian “incincta”—“pregnant;” Spanish, “estar encinta”—“to be pregnant;” French, “enceinte”—“pregnant;” and probably German, “entbinden”—“to unloosen” and “to deliver.” These words supply us with excellent confirmatory evidence of the fact that the girdle played a most important rôle in pregnancy in early times.

According to Stern, the Jewesses in Palestine apply during pregnancy a girdle with which a Thora-roll had been wound in the synagogue, but they also wind a silk thread round their hips, with which thread they have measured the temple walls.⁴ Others of them, to prevent mishap, wear a girdle made of snake’s skin or that of a she-ass round the waist.⁵ The Turkish women hold similar beliefs, thus:—

“The abdomen of the mother is constricted by a strong band in the

¹ Pliny, “Historia Naturalis,” bk. xxviii, chap. 9.

² J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 334.

³ Tibullus, Lib. III, ecl. 2, v. 18; vide supra.

⁴ B. Stern, “Medizin, Aberglaube u. Geschlechtsleben in der Türkei,” Berlin, 1903, pp. 270, 274, 289-90.

⁵ J. Hastings, “Encycl. of Religion and Ethics,” art. “Birth, Jewish,” by M. Gaster, vol. ii, p. 657.

fifth or sixth month of pregnancy ; this pressure on the abdomen of the mother is kept up till the end of the pregnancy in order that the child may not grow too large.”¹

Compare with the Jewish custom that of Brandenburg women who seek to gain an easy delivery by binding round their abdomen the skin of a snake which they have found,² and also the instance mentioned by Lupton in his fourth “Book of Notable Things”—

“Let the woman that travails with her child be girded with the skin that a serpent or snake casts off; and then she will be quickly delivered.”³

In a Danish natural history of Norway the following custom is said to have been practised for the relief of parturient women:—

“Once a year the white worm will cast its slough. This is to be taken and tied round the waist of the parturient woman, then the parturition will be made easy for her.”⁴

Dr. Johnsson tells me the same custom prevailed in Denmark among the peasantry. From a manuscript, called the “Avernako M.S.,” he culled an interesting extract in mediæval German, which I translate:—

“When the fruit in the body is dead, then the pregnant woman must hang a snake’s skin, which the snake itself had cast, round her neck, first in a letter or paper. If she hangs it then on the bare abdomen, afterwards in the form of a bandage, then must the fœtus come forth if it is already dead.”

Another valuable example of the use of the snake’s skin in this respect is contained in Dr. Johnsson’s most interesting treatise on the “*Experimenta Magistri Nicolai*,”⁵ a work dating from the fourteenth century:—“*Pellis serpentis mulieri laboranti in partu ligata super ventram statim parere facit.*” Dr. Johnsson adds a footnote stating that the snake’s skin has been a popular remedy for such conditions in most countries.

In Macedonian folklore, if one’s girdle becomes unloosened, it means that some woman “enceinte” belonging to the

¹ B. Stern, loc. cit.; c.p. Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib,” vol. i, p. 856.

² A. Engeliën und W. Lahn, “Der Volksmund in der Mark Brandenburg,” Eberfeldt, 1869.

³ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 332.

⁴ Efter Pontoppidan, “Norges naturlige Historie,” ii, p. 59 (Bergens Stift, 1752).

⁵ J. W. S. Johnsson, “*Experimenta Magistri Nicolai*,” “Bulletin d. l. Soc. franc. d’Hist. d. l. Médecine,” vol. x, No. 6, May, 1911, p. 277.

family has just been delivered; a girdle loosened accidentally is construed into an omen of easy delivery, and in olden times the girdle was most probably deliberately loosened in order to bring about this result.¹ Abbot believes these to be undoubted instances of divination derived from sympathetic or imitative magic.

Let us now proceed to the examples which may be derived from less civilised races.

An ancient Chinese physician directed his patients to wear a waistband during pregnancy, it was to be 12 to 14 thumbs-breadth, and in regard to its value he expressed himself thus:—

“In the first place, through it the loins are increased in strength; at the same time such a band with such a breadth holds together the abdomen of the pregnant woman, and when one loosens it immediately before the confinement, the abdomen becomes at once enlarged and the fruit gains room thereby to turn itself round.”²

Again, we find that a month previous to the anticipated date of the birth, the bride's mother or other near relative is expected to arrive with the accustomed gifts and perform the ceremony known as “undoing the fastening.”³

The same customs prevail in Japan, and would appear to be of great antiquity. It is related that it was the general custom amongst women to bind the abdomen tightly with a silken cord from the fifth month onwards; the object in doing so was to quieten the fœtus so that it should not ascend. The custom is said to have come from the time of the Empress Djin-go-kogu, who as field-general in the war against Korea carried a breast-plate which she, because she was “enceinte,” made fast to her abdomen by applying around it a folded silken cloth. After the spoliation of Korea, she gave happy birth to a prince, and in honour of the Empress the pregnant women then likewise put on a bandage in the hope thereby to perpetuate peace and prosperity.⁴ According to this statement the usage would have arisen about 200 A.D., but from historical sources the first mention of these girdles is in 1118 A.D.

¹ G. F. Abbott, “Macedonian Folklore,” Cambridge, 1903, pp. 99, 100.

² Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib,” vol. i, p. 854.

³ J. Hastings, “Encycl. of Religion and Ethics,” art. “Birth, Chinese,” by E. G. Walshe, vol. ii, p. 645.

⁴ B. Miyake, “Über die japanesische Geburtshilfe, Mitth. d. deut. Gesell. f. Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens,” Yokohama, September, 1875, Heft VIII; Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib,” vol. i, p. 854.

From the Japanese record of ceremonies "Sho-rei Hikki," Mitford has translated the following passage:—

"In the fifth month of a woman's pregnancy, a very lucky day is selected for the ceremony of putting on the girdle, which is of white and red silk, folded, and eight feet in length. The husband produces it from the left sleeve of his dress; and the wife receives it in the right sleeve of her dress, and girds it on for the first time. This ceremony is only performed once. When a child is born, the white part of the girdle is dyed sky-blue, with a peculiar mark on it, and is made into clothes for the child. These, however, are not the first clothes which it wears. The dyer is presented with wine and condiments when the girdle is entrusted to him. It is customary to beg some matron, who has herself had an easy confinement, for the girdle which she wore during her pregnancy; and this lady is called the girdle-mother. The borrowed girdle is tied on with that given by the husband, and the girdle-mother at this time gives and receives a present."¹

One must presume that the girdle-mother presents them only with the red portion of her girdle, the white portion no doubt being used for her child's clothing. Speaking of the girdle-mother or the "Obi-no-Oya," Schiller states that she is either a relative or a woman of higher rank who has already had successful confinements, and that she assists in applying the article. He mentions that the ceremony of its application is termed "Iwataobi no Iwai," the girdle "Shitaobi" (under-girdle) or "Iwataobi." Apparently the derivation of "Iwataobi" is uncertain; some believe it to come from "yuwaera," meaning "to bind," and "ata-hada"—"naked;" others from "Iwa"—"a stone," and give the word the sense of "to harden" or "make strong."²

Kangawa, who carried out many reforms in Japan, declared the girdle to be harmful, and spoke strongly against its use, but in spite of his assertions it was still a prevalent custom about the year 1860, when a Russian physician wrote that pregnant women constrict their abdomens very tightly in the epigastric region from the fifth month onwards with a small girdle in the hope of preventing the fœtus from becoming too large and rendering birth difficult. In the description of a Japanese embassy at Rome in the year 1586, Guido Guelferi thus delineates the Japanese women:—

¹ A. B. Mitford, "Tales of Old Japan," London, 1871, vol. ii. Appendix B., p. 260.

² E. Schiller, "Japanische Geschenksitten," Mitth. d. deutsch. Gesell. f. Natur- u. Völkerkunde Ostasiens, Tokyo, 1900-2, Bd. VIII, S. 282; Ploss-Bartels, "Das Weib," vol. i, p. 855.

“Those who were not pregnant wore a large and flowing girdle, but those who were visibly ‘enceinte’ bound this girdle so tightly with a little band that it seemed as if they would burst. They say, however, that if they do not tighten themselves it will result in a very bad accouchment.”¹

According to Engelmann, these Japanese girdles are removed when labour begins.² Illustrations of them are given in the work by Ploss-Bartels.³

Travelling southwards, we trace the girdle again amongst the Kalmucks, a numerous nomad tribe of Mongolian race who owe their medical knowledge to the Thibetan Buddhists. The poor people of this tribe buckle broad leather belts around the abdomen of the patient as soon as labour begins, and try to hasten matters by pressure from above downwards.⁴ The customs prevalent in Burma have been mentioned (*vide supra*).

The natives of Java, the Orang Benua of Malacca, and the Badus are accustomed to wear an abdominal band during pregnancy; the last mentioned employ one which must be made of five-stranded interwoven *kapas*, of which each strand is four-ply. A peculiar custom in which the girdle enters is also practised by the Buginese and Makassare of the Southern Celebes Islands. When a birth is imminent they hold a festival, and massage the abdomen of the pregnant woman; then they push under the woman, who lies on a bed in the dorsal position, a sort of belly-band, bring the ends of it together, and press them gently down over her body. Hereupon the woman is carefully shaken to and fro, and the band is undone at the stair; she is once more shaken at the door in order to drive away evil spirits. This ritual is carried out three times on the first day, and on the second day only once.⁵

Continuing the journey southwards amongst the primitive tribes of mankind, excellent examples of animism exist in the girdles of the Australian aborigines. The story is of sufficient interest to merit fairly full recital:—

¹ Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib.,” vol. i, pp. 854-5.

² C. J. Engelmann, “Labor among Primitive Peoples,” St. Louis, 1883, second edition, p. 5.

³ Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib.,” vol. i, pp. 806, 853, 857.

⁴ R. Krebel, “Volksmedizin u. Volksmittel verschiedener Volkerstamme Russlands,” Leipzig, 1858; Engelmann, loc. cit., p. 208.

⁵ C. M. Pleyte, “Plechtigheden en Gebruiken uit den Cyklus van het Familienleven der Volker van der Indischen Archipel.” Bijdragen voor de Tall-, Land-, en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indie, 5 Volgr., VII Deel; Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib.,” vol. i, p. 856.

“There is, about fifteen miles S.S.E. of Alice Springs, a special rounded stone which projects from the ground amidst ‘mulga’ scrub for about the height of three feet. This stone is called ‘Erathipa.’ On one side of it is a round hole through which the spirit children are supposed to be on the lookout for women who may chance to pass near, and it is firmly believed that visiting the stone will result in conception.¹ If a young woman has to pass near to the stone and does not wish to have a child, she will carefully disguise her youth, distorting her face, and walking with the aid of a stick. She will bend herself double like a very old woman, the tones of whose voice she will imitate, saying, ‘Don’t come to me, I am an old woman.’ Above the small round hole a black line is painted with charcoal, and this is always renewed by any man who happens to visit the spot. [See Fig. 2, which is reproduced from Spencer and Gillen’s ‘Northern Tribes of Central Australia,’ by kind permission of Messrs. Macmillan.] It is called ‘Iknula,’ and a black line such as this, and called by the same name, is always painted above the eye of a newly-born child, as it is supposed to prevent sickness.

Not only may the woman become pregnant by visiting the stone, but it is believed that by performing a very simple ceremony a malicious man may cause women and even children who are at a distance to become so. All that has to be done is for the man to go to the stone by himself, clear a space of ground around it, and the while rubbing it with the hands to mutter the words, ‘Arakutja wunka oknirra unta munja aritchika,’ which means, literally translated, ‘Plenty of young women, you look and go quickly.’ If, again, a man wishes to punish his wife for supposed unfaithfulness, he may go to the stone and, rubbing it, mutter the words, ‘Arakutja tana yingalla iwupiwuma ertwa airpinna alimila munja ichkirakitcha,’ which means, ‘That woman of mine has thrown me aside and gone with another man, go quickly and hang on tightly,’ meaning that the child is to remain a long time in the woman, and so cause her death. Or, again, if a man and his wife both wish for a child, the man ties his hair-girdle round the stone, rubs it, and mutters, ‘Arakutja thingunawa unta koanilla arapirima,’ which means, ‘The woman, my wife, you [think] not good, look.’”²

The word “Erathipa” which is applied to the stone means a child, although the term is seldom employed in this sense. The girdle, however, is not only a creator of children amongst them, it is also an accoucheur. Previous to the birth of the child in the Arunta tribe, the woman goes to the “Erlukwirra,” or woman’s camp. If there be any difficulty in the progress

¹ c.p. “Customs in Scotland,” narrated by Rorie, “Caledonian Medical Journal,” 1911, vol. viii, p. 410.

² B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, “Northern Tribes of Central Australia” (London: Macmillan), 1899, pp. 336-8.



From "*The Northern Tribes of Central Australia.*"

[*Macmillan & Co.*

FIG. 2.—STONE CONTAINING SPIRIT-CHILDREN.

The stone is believed by the natives to contain the spirits of children. By visiting the stone a woman becomes pregnant. A man can cause his wife to be with child by tying his girdle round the stone.



FIG. 3.—BELT OF MATTED VEGETABLE FIBRE.

The belt is worn by Shangaan women during pregnancy. (*Portuguese East Africa.*)

of labour, the husband, who is at his own camp, without saying anything strips off all his personal adornments, and empties his bag or wallet of knick-knacks on to the ground. Then a man who is "Mura" to him (that is, wife's or husband's mother's blood and tribe), without in any way referring to the matter, takes the hair-girdle and, proceeding to the "Erlukwirra," near to which as a general rule, no man may go, ties it tightly round the woman's body just under the breasts, and then returns to the husband's camp. Not a word is spoken, but if, after a time, the birth of the child is not announced, the husband, still quite unadorned, walks once or twice slowly at a distance of about fifty yards up and down past the "Erlukwirra" with a view to inducing the unborn child to follow him, which it is said rarely to fail to do.¹

A comparable practice prevails in the Kaitish tribe of Central Australia, where, when a birth is imminent, the prospective mother informs her elder sister, who conveys the news to the father and mother of the woman, the father then informing the husband; the parents of the woman depart and camp by themselves in silence for two days, and the husband goes into the scrub for three days, after leaving behind him his waist-girdle and arm-bands, so that he has nothing tied tightly round any part of his body, a state of affairs which is supposed to be beneficial to the "lubra," or wife.² This case is most interesting in this respect, that it appears not unlike an instance of the "couvade" custom, where the husband takes to bed during his wife's confinement. In connection with these rites, and the entrance again of the number 3, I may mention that the aborigines of Australia are believed to be connected ethnologically with the Indian Dravidians.

We must now embark for the American continent, and prosecute our enquiries amongst the American Indians. They have also heard of our girdle, and certainly used it recently, if they are not continuing to do so. The Californian Indians employ a broad cloth, or binder, by which steady compression is kept up on the abdomen, and which an assistant tightens during each pain. The Kiowas, in the S.W. Indian territory, the Comanches of Texas and Mexico, and the Wichitas of Kansas use a broad bandage of buckskin, ornamented with beads, which they buckle tightly round the abdomen of the

¹ B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, "Northern Tribes of Central Australia." London, 1899, pp. 466-7.

² Ibid., 1904, pp. 606-7.

mother immediately *after* the completion of labour, and wear it for a month. The same rule holds in the Klatsops. The Sioux tribes apply a belt either before confinement or—and more usually—before the expulsion of the placenta, and the belt is removed next morning. This belt, termed the “squaw belt,” is a leathern belt about 4 inches wide, decorated with three buckles, and is applied by the woman herself as tightly as her strength permits.¹ These cases resemble the use which is made of the binder in modern times, and therefore require no further comment.

Amongst other tribes, such as the Nez-Perces, the Gros-Ventres, the Pahutes, the Creeks, and the Piutes, a different custom is preserved. They apply a leather girdle around the waist above the fundus of the uterus, slackly enough to slip up and down; as expulsive pains come on, attendant women push the girdle down after the escaping child. The Piute Indians, and perhaps the others also, regard the descent of the child as voluntary on its part, and push the girdle down to support it in its progress so that it shall not lose its foothold and slip back, thereby losing all the distance gained in its effort to reach food and daylight; its footsteps are followed therefore until, as they say, it has asserted its freedom and broken its fast.²

Next, a few instances collected from the Continent of Africa. During a Zulu confinement, a medical man in Natal has recorded that “a grass rope is tightly fastened round the middle of the woman in labour to keep the infant from slipping up again.”³ The reader will observe that we have passed in review several examples of this belief, which appears to be prevalent particularly amongst the less civilised communities. To races unlearned in anatomy such an idea would be quite natural, as they must have learned by practical experience of the uterine relaxations and the retreat of the presenting part. Although I have no stated authority and it is unwise to judge from an illustration,⁴ I am nevertheless inclined to the belief that the girdle is also worn in Zululand during pregnancy, but not as a rule by non-pregnant women. Strange to say, some Zulu girdles in my possession, unfortunately minus the essential information as

¹ G. J. Engelmann, “Labor among Primitive Peoples,” St. Louis, 1883, second edition, pp. 18, 25, 84-5, 160-1 (illus.), 189-90.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 129, 139, 187.

³ “British Medical Journal,” 28th October, 1911, p. 1144.

⁴ “Living Races of Mankind,” edited by H. N. Hutchinson (N.D.), vol. ii, p. 303.

to their employment, are decorated with beads of three colours arranged in rows of three, but, in absence of any proof of their use, I can lay no stress on this fact. Amongst the Bantus of South Africa when a woman becomes pregnant she is required to appear before Nyambi, in order that the "nganga" inspired by the fetish may formally declare her condition, paint her, and put a girdle round her as an amulet for easy delivery. Not till this ritual has been enacted is she allowed to mention the fact of her pregnancy.¹

A very curious girdle is that worn by the Shangaan women of Portuguese East Africa during pregnancy (see Fig. 3); it is of woven fibre, hinged in the middle so as to resemble a pair of calipers, $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch broad, $\frac{3}{16}$ ths inch thick, and 14 inches long. It is composed of two rows of fifteen strands each, joined in the middle; at the hinge and both ends, thicker hempen-like cord is bound in rolls over two cylindrical pieces of wood; six of these cords at the hinge and four at each end are coloured blue. The strands are formed of three-ply twisted vegetable fibre, probably a grass of some sort. The small size of the girdle makes it difficult to understand how it was applied; it would hold on the thigh, but not on the abdomen, unless tied in position by a cord. I am unable to state whether there is any meaning in the numbers of the strands, but give them for the sake of reference.²

The natives of Old Calabar in Nigeria employ a sort of handkerchief, which is simply tied round the abdomen and twisted so as to form a cincture; it appears to be placed right over the hard contracting uterus. Lastly, to close the tour of the less cultured races, we find in Syria a broad bandage worn, and in Finland they compress the abdomen in tedious cases with a belt of some form.³

In historic times, and particularly amongst Catholic peoples, the belief in the efficacy of girdles in difficult labour has been, and probably still is, rife. They are usually connected with the name of some saint, who is then specially invoked by the temporary patient in order to obtain his intercession for the relief of the condition. I understand that Catholic priests are directed to warn their parishioners against the use of these religious emblems as amulets; but, as is well

¹ Bastian, "Loango-Küste," vol. i, pp. 173, 175; J. Hastings, "Encycl. of Religion and Ethics," vol. ii, p. 366.

² Anthropological Museum, Aberdeen University, Africa, No. 243, Cat., p. 331.

³ Ploss-Bartels, "Das Weib.," vol. i, p. 857; vol. ii, p. 30.

known, it is excessively difficult to stamp out a folklore belief. The use of these girdles must undoubtedly become less frequent, and every instance of their employment is worthy of being placed on record.

In France we read of the girdle of St. Oyan being employed for this purpose, and in England the cord of St. Joseph was used certainly in 1159 in childbirth, and I hear that these St. Joseph girdles still exist as amulets, although I have not been successful in tracing one; further, the girdle of the Abbot Robert of Newminster was such an amulet, and, amongst the Swabians, the girdle of the "Holy Margareta with the Dragon," which she carries on her girdle, still stands in high respect for its property of relieving difficult labour; there is performed a symbolical loosing of the girdle along with an invocation. St. Margaret is the special protectress of pregnant women, and in different parts of Germany she stands definitely in the relation of the old "girdle-loosing" goddess. So in Paris, on St. Margaret's day, all come to church that are or hope to be with child that year, and in England—as again in Prague—she was also invoked against danger in child-bearing.¹

It is not difficult to understand the application of the names of Christian saints to the old pagan girdles when we reflect that the Christian priests must have found the virtues of this custom deeply impressed on the minds of their uneducated flock, and, doubtless, being unable to eradicate the superstition, they sanctified the girdles, gave them the names of their own saints, and permitted the people the use of them, thus satisfying their own consciences and the popular demands.

As might be anticipated, curious instances may be traced in the more isolated and nomad races of Europe who preserve their ancient characteristics and national customs. The Servian and Bosnian gipsies wear a girdle of five-fingers' breadth, worked from the hair of an ass' tail, in which is sewn successively with red cotton a star, a waxing and a waning moon. By wearing this girdle they believe to diminish the prospective labour pains and keep away from their bodies the demons of illness.²

Amongst the Hungarians the following superstitions were current belief:—

¹ J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, pp. 188, 197.

² H. v. Wlislöcki, "Volksglaube u. religiöser Brauch der Zigeuner;" Darst. a.d. Gebiet d. nichtchrist. Religionsgeschichte, Mancher in W., 1891, Bd. IV; Ploss-Bartels, "Das Weib.," vol. i, p. 858.

“The belly must be smeared with onion juice, a stocking-garter bound round the abdomen, and on this the woman must pull, or a piece of scalded yarn, which was the first handiwork of a maiden, should be bound round the abdomen, or there should be bound round the abdomen of the labouring woman the garter of her husband, or a piece of ordinary yarn which had been passed through hot water.”¹

Again the Donau gipsies use a girdle of about 4 inches broad, decorated with embroidered crosses “for luck.” The girdle is of red or yellow wool with the crosses in green, and is slung round the abdomen of a pregnant woman; and the Hungarian gipsy tribes employ one of a coarse strip of linen, about 1 to 2 yards long, although occasionally soft tanned calf leather is used. Like the Servian girdles they hang from them the teeth of bears, or even those of children, but frequently only hare’s feet. These amulets ensure the happy advent of a healthy, strong, and agile child.²

From a fourteenth century Codex in the monastery of St. Florian, at Linz, in Austria, Fossel found that a cord the length of the standing image of St. Sixtus was used by the pregnant to gird themselves before delivery:—

“The pregnant woman shall measure a cord as long as the picture of St. Sixtus and girdle the belly, so nothing will miscarry at the birth.”³

Evidently like beliefs were prevalent in France as the following passage from Bale’s “Comedye concernynge thre Lawes” (1583) shows, but the cord here is used as a cure for sterility:—

“And as for Lyons, there is the length of our Lorde
In a great pyllar. She that will with a coorde
Be fast bound to it and take soche chaunce as fall
Shall sure have chylde, for within it is hollowe all.”⁴

The Austrians have another superstition similar to the girdle custom, namely, that if women come in while another is in labour they shall quickly take off their aprons and tie them round the patient else they will be barren themselves.⁵

¹ Jemesvãry: “Volksbrãuche und Aberglaubin in der Geburtshilfe” (Hungary).

² H. v. Wislocki, “Aus dem innern Leben der Zigeuner,” *Ethnolog. Mittheilungen*, Berlin, 1892; Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib,” vol. i, p. 857.

³ Fossel, “Volksmedizin, &c., in Steiermark,” Graz, 1885, pp. 47-48; E. S. Hartland, “Legend of Perseus,” 1895, vol. ii, p. 225; Ploss-Bartels, “Das Weib,” vol. i, p. 857.

⁴ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 334.

⁵ Stallybrass-Grimm, “Teutonic Mythology,” 1888, vol. iv, p. 1806.

When Spanish women became pregnant for the first time they tied their girdles or shoe-latchets about one of the church bells and struck the bell thrice.¹

For the following unique instances, culled largely from the ancient literature of Denmark, I am extremely indebted to Dr. J. W. S. Johnsson, of Copenhagen, who very kindly offered to send me many instances of the girdle customs of his own country on hearing my paper on "Girdles" at the Seventeenth International Medical Congress. My sole regret is that space will not permit me to give all his valuable extracts. In Denmark, girdles made of human skin were employed, and Dr. Johnsson believes they were in use down to the eighteenth century. They were at one time official!

"Straps of human skin (*cingulo e corio humano*) are to be found in apothecaries' lists in 1672. The price was 4 Sletdaler (16/-). They were used in diminishing the pains of parturition, most probably as an abdominal belt; it is known that they were used in the same way, but tanned, in Germany; while in France, straps of serpent's skin were used for a similar purpose, tied round the right thigh. The straps seem to have gone out of use very soon, as in the 'Museum Regium,' written by Holger Jacobaeus, 1696, they are to be found among the curiosities of the museum: '*Calcei et sandalia ex cute humana. Parata quoque ex corio humana cingula hic conspiciuntur, qua feminis suffucatione uterina laborantibus vulgo circumligari solent.*' They still existed in the museum in 1834, when some of the curios were sold by auction."

These straps of human skin were obtained from condemned but still living criminals. On 3rd December, 1649, a murderer executed at Copenhagen was "gripped with glowing tongs before the castle, all corner-houses, and the new shops, later on he was broken on the wheel from his feet upwards, his tongue was cut off, straps were cut from his body, his heart was taken out, and at last he was laid on five wheels." The executioners were in those days popular surgeons, and laws were introduced in order to restrict their powers. They were, however, ordered to supply the apothecaries and barbers with human fat and especially the midwives with straps cut from human skin to be used in confinements. Similar girdles were used in Germany, to bind the abdomen in difficult confinements, about the year 1693.²

Thus far nothing has been said with regard to girdles in

¹ E. S. Hartland, "Legend of Perseus," 1895, vol. ii, p. 224.

² K. Carøe, "Böddel og Kirurg [executioner and surgeon] Medicinsk-historiske Smaaskriften," No. 2, Copenhagen, 1912, p. 8 *et seq.*

our own country, but our ancestors were undoubtedly "let loose" by the self-same zone. In the "Privy Purse Expenses of Elizabeth of York" in December, 1502, there is the entry:—"To a monke that brought our Lady gyrdelle to the Quene in reward, vjs. viijd;" and the commentator notes on this statement—"Probably one of the numerous relicks with which the monasteries and abbeys then abounded, and which might have been brought to the Queen for her to put on when in labour, as it was a common practice for women, in this situation, to wear blessed girdles." It would appear also that lying-in women were accustomed to wrap round them a long scroll having the "Magnificat" written upon it, and in a letter to Lord Cromwell from Dr. Leighton about 1537, the passage occurs, "I send you also our Lady's Girdle of Bruton red silke, a solemn relike, sent to women in travail."¹

Further, we read that on the dissolution of the monasteries at Leicester, a multitude of false miracles and superstitious relics were discovered. Amongst others our Lady's girdle was shown in eleven several places, and her milk in eight; together with the penknife of St. Thomas of Canterbury and a piece of his shirt "much revered by big-bellied women."²

Other charms of a like nature to those cited were bound to the thigh; of these, two examples must suffice. Lemnius states that a jewel, named Aetites, found in the eagle's nest, that rings with little stones within it, applied to the thigh of one in labour, eases and quickens delivery. The following charade, or charm, used in the same way, is so interesting that I give the full inscription³:—

"For Woman that travelyth of Chylde bynd thys Wryt to her Thye.

"In Nomine Patris + et Filii + et Spiritus Sancti + Amen. + Per Virtutem Domini sint Medicina mei pia Crux et Passio Christi + Vulnera quinque Domini sint Medicina mei. + Sancta Maria peperit Christum. + Sancta Anna peperit Mariam. + Sancta Elizabet peperit Johannem. + Sancta Cecilia peperit Remigium. + Arepo tenet opera rotas. + Christus vincit. + Christus regnat. + Christus dixit Lazare veni foras. + Christus imperat. + Christus te vocat. + Mundus te gaudet. + Lex te desiderat. + Deus ultionum Dominus. + Deus preliorum Dominus libera famulam tuam N. + Dextra Domini fecit virtutem. a. g. l. a. + Alpha. + et Ω. + Anna peperit Mariam, + Elizabet

¹ W. C. Hazlitt, "Dict. of Faiths and Folklore," 1905, vol. ii, p. 378.

² J. Brand, "Popular Antiquities," London, 1900, p. 333.

³ Ibid., p. 331-2.

precursorem, + Maria Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum, sine dolore et tristitia. O Infans sive vivus sive mortuus exi foras + Christus te vocat ad lucem. + Agyos. + Agyos. + Agyos. + Christus vincit. + Christus imperat. + Christus regnat. + Sanctus + Sanctus + Sanctus + Dominus Deus. + Christus qui es, qui eras, + et qui venturus es. + Amen. bhumon + blictaono. + Christus Nazarenus + Rex Judeorum fili Dei + miserere mei + Amen.”¹

In the “Battle of Lora,” by Ossian (James Macpherson), the following passage occurs:—

“An hundred girdles shall also be thine, to bind high-bosomed maids. The friends of the births of heroes. The cure of the sons of toil.”

To this passage Macpherson added a footnote which reads:—

“Sanctified girdles, till very lately (1761), were kept in many families in the North of Scotland; they were bound about women in labour and were supposed to alleviate their pains and to accelerate the birth. They were impressed with several mystical figures; and the ceremony of binding them about the woman’s waist was accompanied by words and gestures which showed the custom to have come from the Druids.”²

Laing believed that these girdles were in no way connected with Druids, but were merely belts consecrated by some of the Irish saints; this criticism I am inclined to homologate, although I have not seen a specimen of these belts.

Fortunately our evidence that such girdles were used by our Scottish forefathers does not rest solely on the somewhat questionable statements of Macpherson. Sir Walter Scott has also recorded an instance of the same practice in his “Demonology and Witchcraft.” Speaking of the trial of Bessie Dunlop for witchcraft, he mentions that “she lost a lace which Thome Reid (a spectre) gave her out of his own hand which tied round women in childbirth had the power of helping their delivery.”³

These girdles still exist; thus, in 1911, the late Mr. Henderson stated that they were sometimes worn by pious women “to ‘sain’ the expected child as well as the mother from all harm, and to attach good spiritual powers to her

¹ J. Brand, “Popular Antiquities,” London, 1900, p. 332.

² “The Poems of Ossian,” by James Macpherson, with notes by Malcolm Laing, Edinburgh, 1805, vol. i, p. 283.

³ Sir Walter Scott, “Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft,” London, 1830, p. 150.

side.”¹ They are, however, kept very secretly; this is evident from the fact that the writer has corresponded with several Highland medical men upon this matter, and none of them had ever heard of one.

A parallel belief is the superstition that a pregnant woman who sees “Macleod’s Fairy Banner” is taken in premature labour;² the name of the banner, according to tradition, is due to its being obtained from an elfin sweetheart, and curiously the banner is only efficacious three times, as the reader will doubtless remember. I have heard also from a reliable source that the fisher-women of Ferryden, Forfarshire, are accustomed to tie their binders round them before delivery, but no reason was adduced for this practice.

Another modern survival of the custom existed in Brittany. The nuns of St. Ursula of Quintin (Cotes-du-Nord), when any of their late pupils had married and was pregnant, sent her a riband of white silk decorated with the following inscription in blue letters:—“Notre Dame de Deliverance, protegez-nous.” Before sending it off, it was touched very carefully with the reliquary of the parish church in which they kept the precious relic of a girdle belonging previously to the St. Vierge (Virgin), and they have numerous parchments which guarantee its authenticity. The young woman who received the ribbon put it round her body, and compressed her abdomen with it in order that the confinement might pass happily.³

Lastly, to bring the subject down to the present century, the writer met with one of these girdles at Dublin in 1906; the story of its employment is as follows:—Being called to a confinement, I, and a second student, examined the woman and decided that birth would be unlikely to occur for about an hour and a half. Shortly after my arrival, a neighbour appeared with a leather belt, old and greasy, about 1½ inches broad, and long enough to pass easily round the body; it possessed an iron buckle of ordinary design, and had from my recollection no special marks on it. On demanding its purpose I was informed that it was something which I would not understand, but that it would make the baby come more quickly. On receiving permission the neighbour fastened it

¹ C. Henderson, “Survivals in Belief among the Celts,” 1911, p. 335.

² J. G. Campbell, “Superstitions of Highlands and Islands of Scotland,” Glasgow, 1900, p. 5.

³ L. Bonnemere, “Une Ceinture benie,” Bull. d. l. Soc. d’Anthrop. de Paris, Tome IX, Ser. 111, p. 753, 1886; E. S. Hartland, “Legend of Perseus,” vol. ii, p 225.

round the woman's chest, over the mammary glands, quite loosely, and from recollection without special ceremony. Due either to my false diagnosis from inexperience, which I am loth to admit, or to the virtue of the girdle the child was born in half an hour. Of this I am certain, as two other students who went for a walk to while away the anticipated hour and a half arrived just as I was leaving, and the baby had to be washed and dressed in the interval. Whatever the explanation, I was satisfied then that the girdle did have an effect, although, of course, it must have been purely a psychological one. On inquiry of the person who owned it, no information could be got, but subsequently it was ascertained that it was a belt worn by people who are members of a society of St. Augustine, and helps them in times of sickness and childbirth. I understand that such belts are worn by men and women who become members of the secular branch or third order of a community, *e.g.*, of St. Augustine, and that they, unlike the friars, wear the girdles under their outer garments.

Summary of the obstetric cases.—It is clear that the custom of wearing girdles during child-birth is prevalent in nearly all countries of the world. Thus, we have examined instances in Asia from Japan, China, Mongolia, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Babylon, India, Burma, and the Malay Archipelago; in Australia amongst the aborigines; in America amongst most of the Indian tribes; in Africa among the Zulus, the Shangaan tribe, the Bantus, and Nigerian tribes; and in Europe they can be traced in nearly all countries, and extend back into classical times.

Altogether some seventy instances of girdles used as obstetric aids have been narrated; of these, about 40 per cent are connected in some way with religion, besides four cases which are associated with the number 3. In regard to their usage, about 26 per cent are applied during pregnancy and loosed at child-birth; about 35 per cent are applied immediately before or during labour; and four cases, all American Indian examples, are applied immediately after the birth of the child. This leaves 30 per cent of doubtful cases where I have been unsuccessful in obtaining evidence of their use. From the 23 per cent of cases where a definite physiological reason is given for their application, we discover that seven are accompanied during labour by pressure from above downwards, five of these being amongst American tribes; three cases are explained as preventing the child from losing its

foothold, and two are applied to prevent the child growing too large. Other reasons afforded for the application are to quieten the foetus, and for the loosening to allow the weight of the child to assist delivery, and to allow the child to turn round. In only these few, therefore, is a satisfactory obstetrical explanation offered for their employment; the cases are chiefly American, the others being from Turkey, Greece, China, Japan, Mongolia, Burma, and Zululand. It is evident that these are confined to no single ethnological group.

Place against these facts the case for the religious origin of the girdle: of these we have examples from Europe, ancient Greece, Rome, and Babylon, and also from South Africa. Thus, the distribution of the religious instances is not so wide as that of the rationally employed girdle.

It is now left to the reader to decide what was the origin of the obstetric girdles. Were they originally discovered to be helpful by exerting *vis a tergo*, or by supporting the abdomen, and afterwards deified, or were they merely religious emblems employed as amulets?

In the opinion of the writer, no decision can be expressed at present on account of the scarcity of the material. New examples will no doubt arise, and perhaps throw a clearer light upon the subject.

In conclusion, I desire to record my indebtedness to Dr. Hastings for permission to make use of his valuable library; to Mr. J. Fraser, Lecturer in Comparative Philology, Aberdeen University, for his generous assistance and guidance with the classical translations; and to Professor Davidson for references to useful sources of information. I take this opportunity, also, to thank those medical men and others who have made enquiries in their districts with regard to these girdles.

