

Birds in Roman Life and Myth

A thesis is presented by

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to

The School of Historical and Philosophical Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy

in the field of

Classics and Archaeology

in the

School of Historical and Philosophical Studies

Faculty of Arts

The University of Melbourne

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29th October 2020

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1. Omens, Augury, and Auspices.....	13
1.1. Introduction.....	13
1.2. Roman Augury and Auspices.....	19
1.3. Auspices in the Late Republic	26
1.4. <i>Templa</i>	33
1.5. Vultures	45
1.6. Eagles.....	52
1.7. Ravens	58
1.8. Crows	64
1.9. Owls.....	67
1.10. Woodpeckers.....	76
1.11. Conclusion.....	84
Chapter 2. The Augural Hens.....	85
2.1. Introduction.....	85
2.2. Origins of <i>auspicia ex tripudiis</i>	85
2.3. <i>Pullarii</i>	89
2.4. Negative Auspices.....	97
2.5. What Kind of Chicken?.....	99
2.6. From Republic to Empire.....	102
2.7. The Empress's Hens.....	107
2.8. Conclusion.....	113
Chapter 3. Farming and Aviculture.....	115
3.1. Introduction	116
3.2. Rise of the Aviary.....	119
3.3. Poultry.....	125
3.4. Geese.....	140
3.5. Ducks.....	148
3.6. Pigeons.....	152
3.7. Peafowl.....	157
3.8. Pheasants and Guineafowl.....	163
3.9. Conclusion.....	166
Chapter 4. Wildfowling.....	167
4.1. Introduction.....	167
4.2. Legalities of Hunting.....	170
4.3. Hunting Methods.....	171
4.4. Consuming Wildfowl.....	179
4.5. Recreational Fowling and Rarer Birds.....	188

4.6 Decoys.....	198
4.7 Falconry – Or Lack Thereof?.....	203
4.8 Conclusion.....	207
 Chapter 5. Pets and Pleasure	
5.1. Introduction.....	208
5.2 Birds and Gardens.....	210
5.3 Pest Birds.....	217
5.4 Pleasure Aviaries.....	220
5.5 Pet Birds.....	222
5.6 Fighting Birds.....	235
5.7 Talking Birds.....	241
5.8 Other Companion Birds.....	253
5.9 The <i>Passer</i>	258
5.10 Conclusion.....	266
 Conclusion	268
 Bibliography	272

Birds in Roman Life and Myth

Introduction

Birds play an intrinsic role in the expression of every human culture. They may be hunted for sport, kept as pets, viewed as omens or messengers, sacrificed, and of course eaten. Their songs inspire us and their wings make us dream of flight. Their migratory patterns reflect the change of seasons. They make their homes on our dwellings and interact with all of us in some way or another. For the Romans, the role of birds in everyday life and myth was one of critical importance. Rome's armies marched beneath the outspread wings of eagles. Imperial tables overflowed with exotic fowl. Urban populations feasted on the world's first flocks of commercially and intensively raised chickens. Pet parrots and ravens talked to their masters in Latin, caged songbirds filled houses with music, and children played with pigeons, or even battled cockerels. Studying their view of birds can give us tremendous insight into how the Romans conceived of their relationship with the gods and how they stratified and organised their society. The City's legendary founding was even attributed to the appearance of twelve vultures to Romulus at the behest of Jupiter himself. Following this mythic precedent, nothing of importance was ever done in Rome without first consulting the birds. Mighty generals consulted caged hens before marching into battle. Magistrates took auspices from wild birds before conducting the day's public business. Studying the relationship between birds and humans provides a window into the mindset and values of cultures both past and present. For this reason, this thesis aims to critically examine the unique ways the Romans used, observed, thought about, and lived with birds.

There have been many fine works written on birds in the ancient world. Sir D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson takes pride of place for his pioneering work *Glossary of Greek Birds*, first published in 1895 and revised in 1936. This book has inspired multiple works after it and remains a pinnacle reference tool today. After him, Krauss (1930) provided an analytical interpretation of bird omens and prodigies recorded in Roman literature. Keller's *Die Antike Tierwelt* (1920) investigates the place of animals and birds in classical life. Similarly, Toynbee's *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (1973) contains a sizeable chapter on birds that is useful for reference. Pollard's *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (1977) is another work, more

accessible than Thompson's that draws heavily on his research, that goes further than cataloguing to make broad inferences about the place of birds in different aspects of Greek life. Houlihan's *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* (1986) catalogues birds found in Egyptian art and hieroglyphs while recounting their importance in both religious and secular life. Arnott's more modern *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z* (2007) is perhaps the most comprehensive and thorough work of reference for those interested in the classical past. Arnott follows Thompson's precedent of listing birds alphabetically according to their Greek names, a decision which makes the book somewhat inaccessible to casual readers, and which necessarily places the Greek perspective at the forefront. Nevertheless, it is a thorough and important work of reference. All of these works demonstrate the value in studying birds in ancient life, but we can see there are few major works that focus purely on birds in Roman life. Some exceptions include Martin's *The Birds of Latin Poets* (1914), an early work that examines the symbolic nature of birds in Latin poetry.¹ Andre's *Les Noms des oiseaux en latin* (1967) and Capponi's *Ornithologia Latina* (1979) are two works focused on cataloguing and identifying birds by their Latin names. These books function well as reference tools, but draw few conclusions beyond the realm of philology. They succinctly demonstrate that far more work is needed that takes a multidisciplinary approach to look beyond literature.

Classicist and ornithologist Jeremy Mynott currently has two important books on the subject of birds in the ancient world that are particularly inspirational for their methodology and depth of research. The first book is *Birdscapes* (2009) that contains one chapter on the ancient past, but, more importantly, outlines in general terms how the study of birds can be used effectively to interpret the past. His latest publication, *Birds in the Ancient World* (2018), collates and interprets classical literature on birds in a way that is accessible to both the academic and casual reader. It is a thorough and engaging text, but it must be noted that it is intended to provide a general, broad overview on the subject, meaning there is ample room for more investigation, especially on Rome alone. In particular, this book is focused on collating and interpreting art and literature, necessarily leaving aside zooarchaeological findings that are invaluable for dissecting and interpreting classical literature. The inclusion of zooarchaeological findings is perhaps the most important addition that can be made. The works of both Geoffrey Kron (2008, 2014, 2015, 2017) and Michael MacKinnon (2004, 2013, 2014, 2018) show how enlightening zooarchaeology is for understanding and reconstructing Roman

¹ See also Hough 1974.

agriculture, while also demonstrating how it can be used to make social and cultural inferences. For birds alone, it must be noted that they are generally underrepresented in the archaeological record because excavators in the 19th and 20th centuries were primarily interested in museum pieces and threw out small bones as a matter of course.² However, new excavations and new methods for interpretation have massively improved the evidence pool in the last few decades. In this field, Dale Serjeantsen is widely considered the great pioneer of archaeo-ornithology, and credit must duly be paid to her for showing how richly the study of relationships between humans and birds can aid our understanding and reconstruction of past societies, their beliefs, and their values. Umberto Albarella, Chiara Corbino, Fay Worley and Polydora Baker are among the most significant zooarchaeologists working to reconstruct bird/human relations using faunal assemblages, while Naomi Sykes best lays out how faunal assemblages can be used to interpret past societies in her book *Beastly Questions* (2014). She defines zooarchaeology as “the study of animals – their remains, representations (artistic, linguistic or literary) and associated material culture – to examine the most fundamental issues concerning past societies: how people behaved and how they thought.”³ This thesis adopts the same methodology and seeks to understand Romans by studying their relationship with birds. All of these scholars provide fantastic precedents for how bird remains can be used to interpret the past.

The 2012 publication *Between Heaven and Earth: Birds in Ancient Egypt* is a collaborative effort that shows how effectively different strands of evidence can be combined to draw conclusions about the ancient past. It collects data from language, from mummies, from art and ornithology, and could be considered a model for how to combine all strands of evidence on birds in order to investigate ancient societies. This approach, and the ethos adopted by zooarchaeologists, informs much of the research in this thesis, which aims first and foremost to interpret Roman society and cultural values through bird/human relations. As has been shown, while there has been ample research on birds in classical Greece, ancient Egypt, and the ancient world in a general sense, to date there has been no comparable study that considers ancient Rome alone. In addition, it is evident that current scholarship on birds in Rome relies heavily on literature and often focuses on cataloguing or classifying birds in place of interpreting their significance. This thesis posits that an accurate and meaningful interpretation

² Watson 2002, 358.

³ Sykes 2014, 1.

of textual sources is dependent on the inclusion of ornithology and an understanding of natural bird behaviour. The inclusion of zooarchaeology to compare against art and literature is demonstrably vital to get a clearer and more accurate picture of the past.

Recognition of the fact that people in every cultural context use animals in their social systems is key in the works of some of the most prominent anthropologists, such as Jack Goody, Arjun Appaduri and Claude Levi-Strauss. It was Levi-Strauss who coined the expression that animals are “good to think”, and therefore imbued with diverse social meaning. Further to this, Jeremy Mynott expresses the more pointed idea that “birds are good to think with”. Coining his own term, “ornithomorphism”, he shows that across cultures “we all of us use birds freely, if unconsciously, as symbols in everyday life and in the language of analogy and metaphor”.⁴ This Roman ornithomorphism is what I would like to explore, in order to understand how birds were used to communicate ideas, values, and social difference. Considering there have been no large studies dedicated solely to birds in Roman life yet, I take a broad approach to this subject and focus on five topics I deem most important to bird/human relations in ancient Rome. In this way I hope to provide a solid foundational text that will demonstrate the richness of this field and its potential for future research. These five topics are:

- Omens and public auspices
- Chickens and military auspices
- Birds in Roman agriculture
- Wildfowling
- Birds kept for pleasure or as pets

The first chapter concerns the great Roman institute of augury and auspices. It examines how and why birds were regarded as messengers of divine will in the Republican period. The second chapter follows on from this theme to look at the curious “sacred chickens” that were used in military auspices, cataloguing how they eventually came to dominate auspices as a whole, culminating in their use by Augustus to help secure the principate. The third chapter outlines Roman aviculture and poultry farming techniques, while the fourth chapter catalogues how Romans hunted birds for pleasure, profit and subsistence. These two chapters are especially concerned with understanding why an appetite for exotic and fattened birds took

⁴ Mynott 2009, 267.

such a strong hold in the late Republic and early Empire, and the social implications surrounding the consumption of particular farmed or hunted birds. The final chapter looks at how birds provided pleasure, whether as pets, ornamental features, songsters or garden visitors. By chronology, this thesis focuses primarily on the period of late Republic to early Empire. The reason for this is that Roman uses of birds undergo a dramatic shift, reflecting the nature of this transitional period. Time periods before and after this are also considered in order to illustrate broad trends, but in rough terms the period of 100 BCE to 100 CE are most important. Given how vast the Roman Empire was, this thesis generally limits itself to beliefs relating to Rome and the Italian peninsula, though regional differences throughout the Empire are considered, particularly in regards to Roman Britain since a great deal of zooarchaeological evidence comes from this region. In sum, the first two chapters are intended to reveal how Romans conceived of their relationship with the gods and how birds affected the political processes in Rome. The latter three are investigated for the social truths they can reveal – namely, how owning, eating or otherwise exploiting birds expressed social stratification and inequality. This focus on inequality is in keeping with the latest trends in the field of human-animal relationships, which target the social, rather than strictly economic, uses of animals and how they could advertise social difference.⁵ Diet is often used to construct and express identity, and may particularly express inequality. For birds, there were different markers that expressed power, wealth and status. Whether a bird was wild or domestic, fattened or unfattened, exotic or common, available seasonally or year-round, could all express power through the acts of consumption or possession.

In terms of evidence, this thesis takes a multidisciplinary approach in an attempt to overcome the various shortcomings of each evidence strand. Artistic representations of birds are valuable for interpreting symbolism and general attitudes towards various species.⁶ However, it is all too easy to call reliability into question, as art may have an ambiguous symbolic meaning or serve a particular purpose that is difficult for the modern eye to discern. Care must be taken not to interpret birds in art in a way that is too straightforward. For instance, the peacock was a powerful symbol in art and on coinage, but its presence in art does not necessarily indicate its commonality or presence in everyday life, comparable to the way a lion may be used in art and poetry even in contexts where the animal was not present. As another

⁵ Arbuckle & McCarty 2014, 2; Morris 2011, 1.

⁶ See Tammisto 1997 for a thorough investigation of birds in art.

example, images of cockfighting have been found in Etrurian contexts that pre-date the first securely dated chicken bones found on the Italian peninsula.⁷ Images of animals may travel before the animals themselves, and we must always remember that art does not necessarily reflect reality.

When it comes to faunal remains there are myriad survival issues. Bird bones are fragile and delicate. In cases where the literature attests the eating of small passerines, it can be difficult to confirm this by looking to faunal assemblages since the tiny bones are often irrecoverable, or may be overlooked. Issues with survival are among the reasons that the field of zooarchaeology shows a preference for investigating mammals, and why archaeo-ornithology is comparatively niche. In cases where faunal assemblages are successfully recovered, interpretation is always shadowed by questions of whether they accurately reflect avian presence at a site. Nevertheless, zooarchaeology affords us the opportunity to investigate environment and subsistence in a unique way and shows how humans interacted with birds on an intimate, day-to-day basis. Refuse dumps reveal how birds were butchered and eaten. They can reveal sex ratios and the presence or absence of certain species in certain contexts. Physical evidence of meat distribution and consumption does much to reveal cultural values, and in general terms shows how Romans' lives were intertwined with the wild and domestic birds they lived with.

The bulk of evidence is pulled from Roman literature, which is problematic as this offers a principally elite perspective that does not necessarily reflect more common practice. In the case of augury and auspices, we notably struggle to reconstruct augural lore of the early Republic since we are relying on authors writing hundreds of years after the fact. A critical and circumspect approach is necessary to avoid mistakes that come from taking authors at face value, and attention must always be paid to the context in which works were written. Most attention is paid to the period of the late Republic, as our sources chiefly spring from this time. On this point, Jerzy Linderski (1986a) is the undisputed expert on augural law, and his works collate and interpret many obscure sources. When looking at the place of birds in augural law in particular, this thesis attempts to follow his rigorous methodology, especially when grappling with the fact that augural law was a subject of mystery and debate to many of the ancient authors themselves. Some of our key sources for information and misinformation about

⁷ Corbino et al. 2018.

birds come from the works of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Pliny the Elder (25-79 CE) and Aelian (c.170-230 CE). Though Aristotle is of course Greek, the latter two Roman authors draw upon his works, making his writings relevant to our discussion. Pliny and Aelian record a heady miscellany of bird lore that is equally valuable and difficult to use; they benefit enormously from corroboration with other strains of evidence. When it comes to birds and agriculture, the works of Cato (c.160BCE), Varro (116-27 BCE) and Columella (4-70 CE) provide a great deal of information on traditional farming practices and approaches to land management, but it must be acknowledged that these works come from a skewed elite perspective and contain many omissions. Written primary sources are also rendered somewhat dubious by the moralising bent of authors lamenting the debasement of the present and yearning for the “Good Old Days” – regardless of whether such a golden past ever existed.⁸ Nevertheless, they are invaluable for investigating the world of intensive farming to supply the luxury markets.

The decision to include ornithology and faunal remains means that this thesis is primarily concerned with how Roman people lived with, interacted with, and thought about real birds that had some tangible presence in their lives. Purely mythological constructions such as the phoenix, the halcyon and the birds of Diomedes are put to one side to focus on more practical topics like fowling. In considering aspects of myth and religion that involve birds (particularly in auspices) this thesis posits that they are best understood by comparing depictions and descriptions in Roman art and literature to the natural behaviour of birds. For example, it considers the myth of Romulus and Remus with its flocks of circling vultures according to how vultures naturally fly and flock, and how their unique diets explain why these birds were chosen to send the sign that founded Rome. MacKinnon (2018) lays out the diverse ways that zooarchaeology is used in the study of Roman history, as part of a larger edited volume that demonstrates how human and natural history are intertwined, and how they may successfully be studied together. Science allows us to interpret history in new and exciting ways. The science of zooarchaeology and the science of ornithology are here employed together. One cannot effectively study birds and their place in Roman life without first understanding birds themselves – Romans were, after all, reacting to the natural behaviour and appearance of birds, so the natural behaviour and appearance of birds ought to be understood and used when interpreting the past.

⁸ Lewit 1991, 67

The use of ornithology does have some drawbacks, however, especially when it comes to the task of identifying birds in literature. The picture is necessarily complicated by the fact that our modern systems of identification using scientific means, aided by our ready access to identification guides that summarise behaviour and plumage variation to a highly precise and accurate degree, is at odds with the ancient experience of viewing birds from a distance, with birds named in general terms and names often varying across time and place. On the one hand, accurate identification is essential to reconstructing how Romans interacted with birds, but on the other hand it can be exceptionally difficult to pair Latin names with discrete species. The aforementioned works of Capponi and Andre represent the best attempts to match Latin names with certain birds, while Mynott (2018) rightly cautions against concrete identification. This thesis tries to fall somewhere in between insisting on certain identifications while remaining aware that ancient categorisation is nowhere near as clear cut as our modern minds would like. For example, *hirundo* might refer to the barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), but this word and the Greek *chelidon* (χελιδών) could also refer to birds similar in behaviour and silhouette, including the house martin (*Delichon urbica*), red-rumped swallow (*H. daurica*), sand martin (*Riparia riparia*) and crag martin (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*). Even the swift (*Apus apus*), though not a part of the swallow family, is somewhat similar in appearance and could fall under the umbrella term of *hirundo*⁹. Care must always be taken to pay attention to context when translating and care must also be taken not to force modern identification when it will not necessarily fit. Conversely, there are times when a more rigorous identification is called for. In the augural context, the words *corvus* and *cornix* – raven and crow – are sometimes translated haphazardly despite the Romans distinguishing very carefully between the two, as they delivered different signs in different ways at auspices. Further, common mistranslations can render some Latin passages nonsensical. *Pica* is often translated as magpie, when in fact it refers to the Eurasian jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) in most contexts. A magpie that eats acorns and mimics human speech sounds fanciful, but reads correctly when translated as jay.

The same problems occur when trying to identify birds in art, especially in paintings. In some cases, the images have simply faded too much for definite identification to be possible. In other cases, such as when a nondescript brown bird may be seen, it is not desirable to quibble down to exact species, since Romans may have categorised it simply as *passer*, without recourse to the subtle plumage variations only visible up close that would allow us to call it

⁹ Green 2019.

Passer Italiae or *Passer domesticus*. Despite this, it must be said that Romans, in general, depict birds in art with a remarkable degree of accuracy, which helps immensely in interpreting literary passages. Again, the rule of thumb is to make judgments according to context. This thesis does not aspire to be an identification guide, yet strives to be as accurate as possible according to the information available, in order to make the inclusion of modern ornithological knowledge effective.

To put it succinctly, this thesis examines birds in their assigned roles of divine messengers, heralds, hunting quarry, domestic flocks, and companion animals. It argues that Roman relations with birds in these capacities can only be understood if art and literature are cross-checked against modern ornithological knowledge and faunal assemblages. Finally, it asserts that taking a ‘bird’s-eye view’ of history is an effective method for interpreting and understanding Roman cultural beliefs and social stratification.

1: Omens, Augury, and Auspices

1.1 Introduction

Human societies across the Mediterranean, and indeed all over the world, have traditionally accorded supernatural divinatory powers to birds.¹ The Greek word for bird, *ornis* or *oiainos* was also the word for omen, just as a bird in Latin, *avis*, could mean an omen.² The ability to prophesy via birds is listed among the forbidden knowledge given to mankind by Prometheus, the titan whose liver was daily torn out by a vulture.³ The ancients considered birds to be the principal agents by which the gods conveyed their wills, close to the heavens and therefore close to heavenly counsel.⁴ They were winged messengers, not necessarily wise in their own right, but the most fitting creatures to be utilised by the gods.⁵ According to Cicero, birds were the most divine and appropriate gifts for gods.⁶ Ovid tells us:

*intactae fueratis aves, solacia ruris,
adsuetum silvis innocuumque genus,
quae facitis nidos et plumis ova foveitis,
et facili dulces editis ore modos;
sed nihil ista iuvant, quia linguae crimen habetis,
dique putant mentes vos aperire suas.
(nec tamen hoc falsum: nam, dis ut proxima quaeque,
nunc pinna veras, nunc datis ore notas.)
tuta diu volucrum proles tum denique caesa est,
iuveruntque deos indicis exta sui.*

“Birds were once untouchable. Birds, the comfort of the countryside, those harmless creatures who live in the woods, build nests, warm eggs beneath their feathers and easily make sweet music with their mouths. But none of that avails them, for they

¹ Vaahtera 2001, 96; Torelli 1995, 107; Mynott 2009, 265-282.

² Ar. Av. 716-22; Mynott 2009, 268; Harrison 1912, 98-100. Hor. *Carm.* 1.15.5 is just one example of this usage in Latin.

³ Aesch. *PV.* 483-91.

⁴ Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.88. This interesting anti-Christian passage argues that the Christian god cannot exist because it cannot account for the prophetic powers of birds. See: Kleczkowska 2015, 104.

⁵ Porph. *Abst.* 3.5.3; Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.

⁶ Cic. *Leg.* 3.45.

have the crime of chattering, and the gods complain that they reveal their thoughts. Nor is this charge untrue, for the nearer you are to the gods, the truer the signs you give by wing or song. Once safe, the race of birds was slaughtered at last, and the guts of these proclaimers please the gods.”⁷



Figure 1: Youth with a bird for ritual offering. Trier, inv. ST. 9746, 2nd century CE.

Birds were close to the gods, pleasing as sacrifices, and many Roman gods possess wings, from Cupid to Mercury, so that divinity itself is created in the image of a bird. How did birds come to be seen in this way? Why were they held in such esteem, and why was this esteem prevalent across the ancient Mediterranean world? Plutarch offers one explanation, claiming that it is not only a bird's ability to fly, but its own inherent cleverness and its speedy responses to environmental phenomena that made it sensitive to the directives of deities.⁸ There was a recognition of birds' sensitivities to weather and the changing of seasons, with migration being

⁷ Ov. *Fast.* 1.441-456

⁸ Plut. *Mor. De soll. an.* 975A.

the most obvious example of this. On this point, and before we treat Roman augury in detail, a distinction must be made between the types of divination that involve birds.

On the one hand, there are signs which can be derived from a bird's own natural behaviour and perceived intelligence. On the other hand, there are signs which are derived from a controlling deity's supposed influence on a bird, over which the bird has no control. We may call these two categories, respectively, natural and superstitious divination. Into the category of natural divination fall the signs which are entirely appropriate to take as predictors of the future. Birds were important markers of time in ancient societies, making seasons known by their arrival or departure. The swallow is a famous harbinger of spring, marking the end of winter with its return.⁹

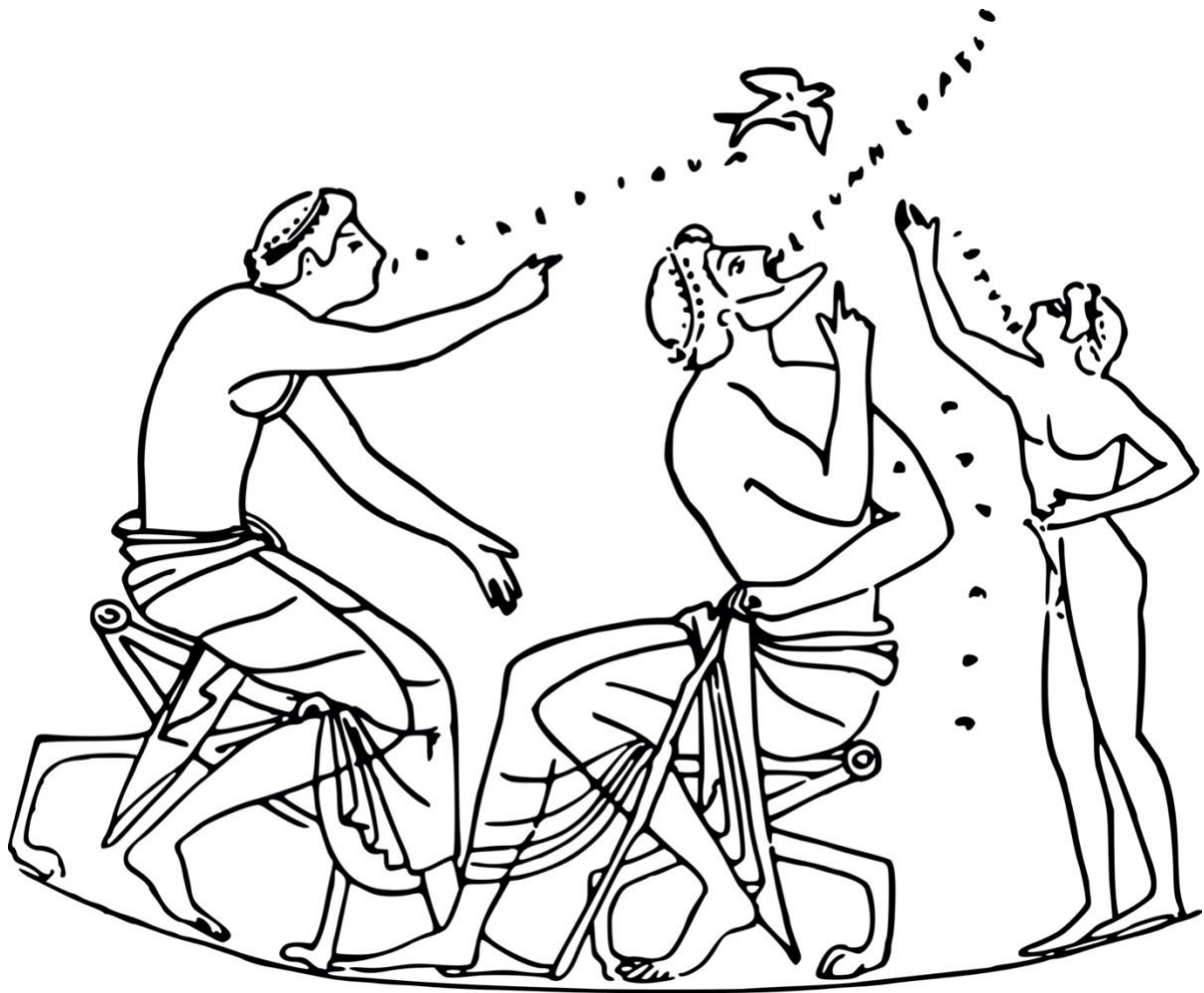


Figure 2: *The First Swallow of Spring* in S. Reinach, *Répertoire des vases peints*, 1899 Attic red-figure vase, 515-505 BCE.

⁹ Hor. *Carm.* 4.12.1-6; Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 485-492; Dionysius, *De Avibus*, 1.13. For the departure of the swallow, see Plin. *HN*, 18.311.

The crying of migrating cranes told the farmer when it was time to sow.¹⁰ Even the barnyard cock was elevated to the rank of prophetic animal. Pliny recounts that a rooster's habit of heralding sunrise by crowing makes him something of an astronomer, with a knowledge of celestial movements exceeding man's.¹¹ Though this seems exaggerated in our eyes, one cannot underestimate the importance of cock-crow to pre-industrial societies. As Dembeck says:

“Sundials, hourglasses, and water-clocks were available as measures of time – but all of these were silent. The cock served as a community waker; when it began to crow, the peasants in the countryside and the artisans in the towns rose from their beds.”¹²

For the sailor, bird behaviour could help him predict the weather. Migrating cranes only flew in favourable conditions, so if a pilot saw cranes turning back from the sea he knew contrary winds were blowing so he should return to shore.¹³ Theophrastus also informs us that cranes departing early forebode an early winter, and a late winter if they lingered, which is an entirely sensible assumption.¹⁴ A particularly hot summer could result in a shortage of food that would cause atypical behaviour in birds, such as an owl hunting in the daytime. Prolonged wet weather might interrupt breeding patterns, all of which could be interpreted by a canny farmer.¹⁵ It was said many hoopoes crying in the fields portended a good harvest, ostensibly because the birds knew there was food for them.¹⁶ Weather even has an effect on birdsong, as sound carries further during certain meteorological conditions. For example, birds will cease to sing in strong wind, while a calm morning enables audibility and encourages strident singing.¹⁷ Audibility is better at night than during the day, and for diurnal birds, singing in the morning can be up to 20 times more effective in terms of coverage than singing at midday.¹⁸ Waterfowl will seek shelter from rough water and adverse weather by moving closer to a lee shore, and some will

¹⁰ Hes. *Op.* 448 – 451; Aratus, *Phaen.* 1075f. Compare with a poetical account of this phenomenon: Eur. *Hel.* 1478 - 1490.

¹¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.24.

¹² Dembeck 1965, 200; see also Zeuner 1963, 449.

¹³ Ael. *NA*, 3.14. See also: Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 6.3.39; Aratus, *Phaen.* 1010f.

¹⁴ Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 6.4.38

¹⁵ Elkins 1988, 57.

¹⁶ Horapollo 2.92.

¹⁷ Elkins 1988, 80

¹⁸ Elkins 1988, 81

even roost ashore when it is particularly bad.¹⁹ In his *Georgics*, Virgil writes a passage describing all the signs of fair and foul weather given by birds and displays an awareness that a bird's prescience is natural rather than supernatural in origin.

*haud equidem credo, quia sit diuinitus illis
ingenium aut rerum fato prudentia maior;
uerum ubi tempestas et caeli mobilis umor
mutauere uias et Iuppiter uuidus Austris
denset erant quae rara modo, et quae densa relaxat,
uertuntur species animorum, et pectora motus
nunc alios, alios dum nubila uentus agebat,
concupiunt: hinc ille auium concentus in agris
et laetae pecudes et ouantes gutture corui.*

“And, I believe, **not because they have divine wisdom, or a greater prescience of fate**, but rather because when the weather and the fickle moisture of the sky change their course, and Jupiter, soaked with the south wind, makes thick what was once scarce, and makes scarce what is thick, it alters their minds, now stirring their breasts to other things, things they could not conceive of while the wind brewed clouds. Thus, then, the concert of birds in the fields, the happiness of the flocks, and the ravens’ throats full of rejoicing cries.”²⁰

It was not only time and weather that birds presaged. They were useful in warfare, and observing them could lead to victory. Frontinus records:

Aemilius Paulus consul, bello Etrusco apud oppidum Vetulonium demissurus exercitum in planitiem, contemplatus procul avium multitudinem citatiore volatu ex silva consurrexisse, intellexit aliquid illic insidiarum latere, quod et turbatae aves et plures simul evolaverant. Praemissis igitur exploratoribus comperit, decem milia Boiorum excipiendi ibi Romanorum agmini imminere, eaque alio quam exspectabatur latere missis legionibus circumfudit.

¹⁹ Elkins 1988, 103; Plin. *HN*, 18.361-4.

²⁰ Verg. *G.* 1.351-423. See also Lucr. *De rerum natura*, 5.1078-86.

“While waging war with the Etruscans, the consul Aemilius Paulus was about to send his army down into a plain near Vetulonia when suddenly in the distance he saw a great number of birds rise in startled flight from the forest, and realised that a trap lurked there, because the birds had risen in a clamour and in great numbers simultaneously. He therefore sent forth scouts and discovered ten thousand Boii soldiers waiting to meet the Roman army. These same men he overcame by sending his legions against them from a different place than had been expected.”²¹

For ancient farmers, sailors and soldiers, it was prudent to watch birds in order to determine whether an undertaking would be favourable or not. Viewed through ancient eyes, birds do seem to possess a prescience and a knowledge of time that is divine, mystical, and above all useful, for even sceptics like Virgil do not scorn the wisdom of birds, though they might question the source of such wisdom and call it natural understanding rather than divine inspiration. It is likely that early observations of bird behaviour spawned the many superstitions that came to surround birds. If a swallow can herald springtime, what else can it tell us? If a crane can tell us a storm is approaching, why can't another kind of bird act as a weather prophet? Is it possible, in fact, to ask the birds what they know?

Hence the category of superstitious divination, one that is inevitably much broader. This relies on the belief that a god or gods can and will control the behaviour of a bird to send a message to humans, and that such messages can be reliably interpreted. Propheying via birds was a tradition common across Greece, Italy and the Near East, but no culture developed, codified and regulated it as rigorously as the Romans.²² Thus, the great institution of augury and auspices was formed, which we shall interpret according to the idea that the natural behaviour of birds still has bearing on how signs were given and interpreted. The above catalogue of various bird behaviours is intended to impress that the natural movement of birds, their habits and their place in the environment are essential to understanding how the Romans interpreted them as divinatory signs. Many erudite scholars have written about Roman augury, and this chapter intends to build on their work by investigating it from a different perspective. Beginning with an overview of the key concepts relating to the study, this chapter goes on to

²¹ Frontin. *Str.* 1.2.7. It was actually Q. Aemilius Papus, consul 282 & 278 BCE, who waged war on the Etruscans. See also Frontin. *Str.* 1.2.8 for another example, and Polyaeus, *Strat.* 2.37.

²² de Grummond 2013, 550

ask *how* the Romans divined using birds, *where* such divination took place and *which* birds were chosen as key messengers. In this way it is hoped that birds may help us to understand the complex social and legal rules surrounding augury and auspices.

1.2 Roman Augury and Auspices

The power of a magistrate *cum imperio* was chiefly defined by two inextricably interconnected prerogatives: *imperium* and *auspicium*, as expressed in the term *imperium auspiciumque*. The former was his power to command, the latter his ability to ask the gods for permission to use that power. Taking auspices was “essentially an appraisal of the divine will as to the activity undertaken, rather than an act of crystal-gazing.”²³ *Auspicium* was inherent in full *imperium*. This allowed magistrates to exercise their authority in a co-ordinated fashion.²⁴ *Auspicium* is derived from the words *avis* + *spectio*, and literally means ‘watching birds’, so it should come as no surprise that taking auspices involved, among other things, observing bird behavior. Though the discipline as a whole was overseen by augurs, only magistrates had *spectio* and therefore the ability to take *auspicia publica*, which were an essential precursor to any public action. The auspices of the magistrates were divided into *minora*, belonging to the lesser magistrates, and *maiora*, belonging to the greater magistrates (consuls, praetors, censors, and a number of other non-annual magistrates *cum imperio*). This meant that the same omen would be given greater or lesser weight depending on who saw it.²⁵ This practice of birdwatching (or perhaps skywatching) was ancient, even more ancient than the founding of the City, and is amply recorded in Rome’s histories and the stories of her mythic founding.²⁶

Festus records that there were five types of *omina*.²⁷ Out of the three most important, two are concerned with birds, though the strongest of all were *signa ex caelo* – thunder and lightning rumbling and flashing in different parts of the sky.²⁸ This is unsurprising given that the augural deity was Jupiter, sky god of thunder and lightning. Next in importance came the *signa ex avibus*, where birds were observed, and the present subject of our investigation. The augural birds were divided into two categories, *oscines* (singers) and *alites* (fliers), although Isidore implies that most birds delivered portents through *both* flight patterns and cries. He,

²³ Vervaet 2015, 201.

²⁴ See Vervaet 2014 for a full appraisal of the complexities of the *imperium auspiciumque*.

²⁵ Gell. NA 13.15.4. See also Vervaet 2015.

²⁶ Vaahtera 2001, 96.

²⁷ Paul. Fest. 367; Paul. Fest. 262M; 316 L.

²⁸ These signs trumped all others. See: Serv. Aen. 2.693; Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 2.5.5; Dio Cass. 38.13.3–4

however, is interpreting augural lore at a distance of several centuries.²⁹ The more reliable Cicero says:

Eademque efficit in avibus divina mens, ut tum huc, tum illuc volent alites, tum in hac, tum in illa parte se occultent, tum a dextra, tum a sinistra parte canant oscines.

“Divine will accomplishes the same through birds, and makes it so that the *alites*, who give omens by their flight, fly here and there and disappear into this or that part, while the *oscines*, who give omens by crying, sing now on the right, and now on the left part.”³⁰

Then came the auspices from observing the feeding patterns of chickens, or *auspicia ex tripudiis*. The final categories of omen named by Festus are auspices *ex quadrupedibus*, which came from the odd behaviour of mammals, and *ex diris*, which drew conclusions based on odd occurrences and accidents that seemed ominous. These omens generally held less weight and importance than the first three.

Roman divination was further divided into two classes. The first is called impetrative, where signs were formally sought out, and the second oblativae, where unsolicited signs were sent from heaven.³¹ The Roman impetrative auspices were “strikingly more developed than the Greeks”³², and far from being intuitive or mystical, the business of taking auspices was narrowly demarcated, and described as *disciplina, ars, scientia*, or law: the so-called *ius augurium* or *ius in auspiciis*.³³ The business of formally soliciting signs from Jupiter and interpreting those signs was managed by the Augural College. Augurs were responsible for overseeing this “axis of communication between men and gods.”³⁴ Birds were an indispensable part of this axis, the very tools of communication. Augurs themselves formed one of the four major Roman colleges of priests, and they traced their origins back to Romulus, who is credited as being the first augur. For the Romans, the very founding of their City began with the

²⁹ Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.75. Significance of flight and cries are also attested in Augustine’s *Doct. christ.* 2.24.37.

³⁰ Cic. *Div.* 120. See also: Varro, *Ling.* 6.7.76.

³¹ Cic. *Leg.* 2.21; Serv. *Aen.* 6.190.

³² Struck 2014, 313.

³³ Hornblower & Spawforth 2014, 214

³⁴ Gordon 1990, 63; see also Scheid 2016, 5-6, who lays out the Roman mindset on the link between gods and men.

observation of birds. According to the famous myth, Rome was founded when Romulus and his twin brother Remus took auspices to determine who should be king.

*nil opus est dixit certamine Romulus ullo;
magna fides avium est: experiamur aves.*

“There is no need for contest,” said Romulus. “Great faith is placed in birds. We shall try the birds.”³⁵

A common version of this contest relates that six vultures appeared to Remus on the Aventine Hill, but twelve appeared to Romulus on the Palatine, so the city was founded upon that spot and Romulus became king.³⁶ In Ennius’ version it is described thus:

*interea sol albus recessit in infera noctis.
exin candida se radiis dedit icta foras lux
et simul ex alto longe pulcherrima praepes
laeua uolauit auis. simul aureus exoritur sol,
cedunt de caelo ter quattuor corpora sancta
auium, praepetibus sese pulchrisque locis dant.
conspicit inde sibi data Romulus esse priora,
auspicio regni stabilita scamna solumque.*

“Meanwhile, the moon sank into infernal night. Now appears shining daylight, struck by beams, and at once from on high a magnificent and auspicious bird flew on the left. When the golden sun rose, three times four bodies of sacred birds descended from the sky and settled themselves upon illustrious places. Thereupon Romulus saw that the throne and dais of kingship had been given to him alone, made firm by auspices.”³⁷

This passage, of course, offers us more insight into the ritual of *auspicium* in the early second century BCE than the rites of 753 BCE. The intended audience of Ennius’ *Annales* was most likely the *nobiles*, making it a useful illustration of the great importance and prestige that was

³⁵ Ov. *Fast.* 4.813-14.

³⁶ Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 9; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 93; Dio Cass. 16.46; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.86; Livy, 1.7; Suet. *Aug.* 95; Ov. *Fast.* 4.817ff; Luc. *Phars.* 7.337; Aur. *Vict. Or.* 23

³⁷ Enn. *Ann.* 72–91. Skutsch 1985 = 77–96.

attached to birdwatching. Here, augury is lauded for its place in affirming the strength of Roman politics and aristocratic values, conferring unassailable legitimacy upon both the founder and the City.³⁸ Another mythical story that stresses the importance of augurs and their art takes place in the reign of Tarquin the Elder:

Attus Navius, inclitus ea tempestate augur, neque mutari neque novum constitui, nisi aves addixissent, posse. Ex eo ira regi mota, eludensque artem, ut ferunt, “Age dum,” inquit, “divine tu, inaugura fierine possit, quod nunc ego mente concipio.” Cum ille augurio rem expertus profecto futuram dixisset, “Atqui hoc animo agitavi,” inquit, “te novacula cotem discissurum; cape haec et perage quod aves tuae fieri posse portendunt.” Tum illum haud cunctanter discidisse cotem ferunt (...) Auguriis certe sacerdotioque augurum tantus honos accessit ut nihil belli domique postea nisi auspicato gereretur, concilia populi, exercitus vocati, summa rerum, ubi aves non admisissent, dirimerentur.

“Attus Navius, a famous augur in those times, declared that no change or novelty could be introduced unless the birds approved. From this the king’s anger was kindled, and he said, scorning the art, “Come, divine seer! Ask your augury if what I am thinking of will come to pass.” When Attus, through augury, divined that it would certainly come to pass, the king replied, “I thought this in my mind: that you would cut a whetstone with a razor. Take them up, and do what your birds have portended is possible!” Then, they say, the augur forthwith cleaved the whetstone in two (...) and so auguries and the augural priesthood increased so much in honour that nothing was done afterwards, at war or at home, unless the auspices had first been taken: popular assemblies, musterings of the army, acts of supreme importance—**all were put off when the birds refused their consent.**”³⁹

These passages exemplify the centrality of birds to Roman augury, making an investigation of birds pertinent to understanding the social and legal powers and prerogatives of augurs and magistrates. The position of augur was one of privilege and great influence, and only a few men in the state could serve at any one time. Cicero tells us that Romulus created one augur

³⁸ Rüpke 2016, 101-2.

³⁹ Livy 1.36.3-8.

for each of the three tribes. Two more were added by Numa to make five.⁴⁰ Livy has it that only four augurs existed in 300 BCE, and posits that two posts were vacant, making six augurs the usual number, though it is just as likely that four in total was the true number.⁴¹ Whatever the truth, after the Ogulnian Law of 300 BCE, the college was served by four patricians and five plebeians, making nine in total.⁴² New members were admitted for life, and from 103 BCE onwards they were elected by the assembly of seventeen tribes, taken from candidates put forward by two college members.⁴³ Suffice to say that, especially in the early days, these learned men would have spent a lot of time observing and thinking about birds. One of their major duties was observing birds on behalf of the *res publica*.⁴⁴ The pre-eminence of the college meant that the citizen body was very interested in bird omens too. The extensive use of augural terms and allusions to augural omens in Plautus around the second century BCE “shows how thoroughly the custom of taking auguries and auspices was fixed in the habits and thoughts of the people.”⁴⁵ And, of course, private auspices existed too. Every person had the right to take auspices pertaining to their own affairs, while public auspices were the prerogative of magistrates.⁴⁶ Citizens often consulted the birds before private matters of importance, with nuptial auspices appearing to be the most widely practiced form of private auspices.⁴⁷ In both public and private spheres, auspices were taken to feel confident of the gods’ goodwill and to stay alert to any hostility.⁴⁸ In Plautus’ words, “I go out with clear auspices, a bird on my left.”⁴⁹ The Romans made divination “integral to the political and religious life of the state”⁵⁰ in a way that was utterly distinct in the ancient world.⁵¹

It is important now to contextualise some of the general rules that governed the actual taking of auspices. When a magistrate took auspices pertaining to some public action, they were valid for one day only, and related only to the timing of the proposed action, not to its

⁴⁰ Cic. *Rep.* 2.9.16

⁴¹ Livy 10.6. For a reconciliation of the five vs. four augurs, see Catalano 1960, 55, n. 120, 562-3.

⁴² Forsythe 2005, 139.

⁴³ Hornblower & Spawforth 2012, 214.

⁴⁴ Kvium 2011, 68

⁴⁵ Gulick 1896, 238.

⁴⁶ Linderski 1990a, 34-48; Berthelet 2015, 49f.

⁴⁷ Clay 1993, 172. see Cic. *Div.* 1.16.28; Livy 6.41.4; Val. Max. 2.1; Juv. *Sat.* 10.336; Suet. *Claud.* 26; Plaut. *Cas.* 86. Juno was seen as the patroness of nuptial auspices: see Ziolkowski 1993, 217. The fact that *auspicia privata* was in decline may be symptomatic of a competitive market: more people may have chosen to consult astrologers or professional haruspices for advice instead. See Bendlin 200, 135.

⁴⁸ Val. Max. 2.1.1

⁴⁹ Plaut. *Epidicus*, 183 (*liquido exeo foras auspicio, avi sinistra*).

⁵⁰ Wardle 2006, 1.

⁵¹ Polyb. 6.56

substance.⁵² If a negative result was received, an auspican could simply return the next day and ask again.⁵³ A day was defined as 24 hours, from one midnight to the next.⁵⁴ The best time to take auspices varied according to what kind of sign one was searching for,⁵⁵ but the Romans preferred to take auspices *ex avibus* at dawn, partly according to the principle that auspices should be taken at the beginning of things.⁵⁶ On a practical level, this is indeed the best time to observe birds, when they are seen and heard most easily. The dawn chorus is a familiar phenomenon, and given the reliance on *oscines*, it would ensure you would at least hear a sign.⁵⁷ It must also be noted that perfect silence was necessary for auspices to be taken without fault.⁵⁸ The silence was so important that Cicero says an expert was required to determine when it had been obtained.⁵⁹ The reason for this pedantry is probably because silence would make it easier to determine the type and provenance of bird cries. Taking auspices at dawn also meant that public business could begin immediately without a waste of daylight hours.⁶⁰ If omens were bad, activity was delayed, but once positive signs were received and public business had commenced it could continue all day.⁶¹

So much for the public *auspicia*, performed by magistrates to facilitate the running of state under divine assent. What of the rites of augurs? When an augur consulted the birds, it was to perform a rite known as *augurium*, not *auspicium*. It was through this that they “inaugurated” and invested divine approval upon people, places and ceremonies. An *augurium* was binding, and in these cases the deity’s verdict *did* pertain to substance. If a negative answer was received, the question could not be repeated, and if a positive answer was given, then the effects of *inauguratio* could only be undone through a ritual of *exauguratio*. Livy tells us that the *fanum Termini* enclosed within the temple of Capitoline Jupiter testifies to this principle. It was an inaugurated place, and when an *exauguratio* was attempted, the birds did not consent. Their “no” was final and binding, and so the sanctuary stayed. It is but one example of how birds and

⁵² Catalano 1960, 42-45.

⁵³ Livy 9.38.15-39.

⁵⁴ Macrob. *Sat.* 1.3.7.

⁵⁵ Valeton 1890, 253 reliably asserts that *signa ex caelo* were observed at night, when lightning was easily visible.

⁵⁶ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 1.38; see Bouchè-Leclercq 1879-82, 4.278 for an analysis of this passage. The founding myth of auspices, featuring Romulus’ twelve vultures, records that the birds were seen at dawn, contributing to the sign’s auspiciousness.

⁵⁷ Elkins 1988, 81.

⁵⁸ Paschall 1936, 222.

⁵⁹ Cic. *Div.* 2.71

⁶⁰ Scullard 1981, 27; Gell. *NA*, 14.7.8.

⁶¹ Laurence 1994, 105.

augural principles literally shaped the city of Rome.⁶² In addition to performing these rites, augurs were also responsible for maintaining the integrity of the discipline as a whole. They could be called upon to assist a magistrate when he took auspices, and to help with interpretation given his greater understanding of the lore. He could also announce oblativ signs that seemed to pertain to the welfare of the state observed either by himself or others.⁶³ They delineated sacred spaces in the earth and in the sky, too:

“Augurs were, in essence, the "carvers" of space into realms holding distinct relationships to gods and to the sky. The five types of terrestrial space (*Romanus*, *Gabinus*, *peregrinus*, *hosticus*, *incertus*) were defined by augurs. All inaugurated spaces (by definition), and thus most *templa*, were also laid out by them.”⁶⁴

We should also distinguish between the duties of the College and that of individual augurs. The College was a monolith, a body of experts which had a duty to uphold the augural law that governed the observation and interpretation of auspices.⁶⁵ It was consulted on augural law and passed decrees or issued responses to questions posed by magistrates and the Senate. The College was most often consulted on matters of *vitium*, or ‘ritual fault’, and it was the College’s duty to determine whether auspices had been nullified through *vitium*.⁶⁶ They also worked to remove *religio*, or a ritual obstacle to action. As individuals, they could take *auguria*, assist magistrates, and inaugurate priests and *templa*.⁶⁷ An augur could also issue responses, which were treated separately to College responses, and they had the right of making a binding announcement – a *nuntiatio* – of oblativ omens. By pronouncing the formula *alio die*, they could cancel the public business of the day, and this is recorded as occurring chiefly at popular assemblies.⁶⁸ There is a certain affinity between augurs and birds; in Linderski’s words, “the augurs were *internuntii* or *nuntii*, and so were the birds.”⁶⁹

⁶² Livy, *Histories*, 1.55.3.

⁶³ Scheid 2003, 112

⁶⁴ Taylor 2000, 12

⁶⁵ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.122

⁶⁶ Paschall 1936, 219-20; Linderski 1986a, 2159.

⁶⁷ Wissowa 1896, 2313-2344; Linderski 1986a, 2150-1.

⁶⁸ Cic. *Leg.* 2.31; Cic. *Phil.* 2.79-84.

⁶⁹ Linderski 1986a, 2229.

1.3 Auspices in the Late Republic

Cicero was elected augur in 53 BCE on the motion of Hortensius and Pompey.⁷⁰ He considered this a great honour that he cited as the pinnacle of his distinguished career.⁷¹ The *De Divinatione* is thus a valuable source on the state of augury and auspices in the first century BCE. It is generally thought that this text indicates that the elite were sceptical about augury, prodigies and divination, but it must be noted that the text is firmly split in two, with one book arguing for the validity of auspices, and one arguing against. Cicero fails to give us a clear conclusion, but merely sets out the two arguments. We probably cannot divine his real thoughts on the subject from this text, but the argument in favour of scepticism at the very least shows that there was doubt and discourse surrounding the institution at this time.⁷² The *De Legibus* (2.13, 32-3) sees Cicero affirm his support for augury and other traditional Roman practices, and he certainly took his duties as an augur seriously. His personal correspondences refer to the day-to-day activities of augurs. He mentions a meeting of the Senate was postponed after the college confirmed a negative omen reported by a *pullarius*.⁷³ After the death of his daughter Tullia, he asked Atticus to excuse him from augural meetings.⁷⁴ In public writings, he never tired of boasting of an augur's powers and responsibilities. Shortly after his appointment, he declared the *ius augurum* was *maximum ... et praestantissimum in re publica*, and furthermore that this was indisputable fact, and not something he says merely because he is an augur.⁷⁵

Interpretes autem Iovis optumi maximi, publici augures, signis et auspiciis vidento, disciplinam tenento.

“The interpreters of Jupiter Best and Greatest, the augurs, watch for signs and auspices, and hold the discipline.”⁷⁶

He claims a good augur should always use his skills to aid the state when she needs him,⁷⁷ and in another he calls auspices and the Senate *duo firmamenta rei publicae*.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Cic. *Phil.* 2.4; Cic. *Brut.* 1.1; Plut. *Vit. Cic.* 36.1.

⁷¹ Cic. *Fam.* 4.5.5.

⁷² Beard 1986, 33-5.

⁷³ Cic. *Fam.* 10.12.3.

⁷⁴ Cic. *Att.* 12.13.2; 12.15.

⁷⁵ Cic. *Leg.* 2.31-2.

⁷⁶ Cic. *Leg.* 2.20.

⁷⁷ Cic. *Leg.* 3.43.

⁷⁸ Cic. *Rep.* 2.17.

In spite of this praise, we cannot ignore the sceptical arguments he makes in many of his writings. Frank discussion of this scepticism seems to be a product of his day. By the late Republic, the major religious offices were almost purely political and there was widespread doubt among the aristocracy about the actual existence of gods.⁷⁹ Linderski points out that Caesar's *De Bellico Gallico* and *De Bello Civili*, which were addressed to educated upper classes, do not mention auspices, omens or *haruspices*. While the idea of divine favour was important for securing the support of the masses, when it came to his political rivals Caesar chose to foreground his personal qualities and own martial skill.⁸⁰ Cicero betrays the augural college for what it really was – a tool of the *senatus auctoritas*.⁸¹ He thought it wise to continue maintaining the augural college *rei publicae causa*.⁸² Augury was an institution of the state; the true validity of omens and the wisdom of birds was a secondary concern. Augural law was so interwoven with the fabric of state it was simply impossible to imagine Rome without it.⁸³

It is unsurprising that the ability to act as the interpreter of Jupiter's will on behalf of the state was found only among the most distinguished statesmen, and was in turn bestowed by the power of other distinguished statesmen. Certainly, Cicero had the gift of foresight, but it came from his political experience and not from birds:

Non igitur ex alitis involatu nec e cantu sinistro oscinis, ut in nostra disciplina est, nec ex tripudiis sollistimis aut soniviis tibi auguror, sed habeo alia signa quae observem: quae etsi non sunt certiora illis, minus tamen habent vel obscuritatis vel erroris. Notantur autem mihi ad divinandum signa duplici quadam via, quarum alteram duco e Caesare ipso, alteram e temporum civilium natura atque ratione.

“And therefore I take it not from the flight of the *alites*, nor the left-hand cry of the *oscines*, as our discipline would have it, nor even from *tripudia sollistima* or *sonivia*, for I have other signs which I must observe, no more certain perhaps, but less difficult to see and less prone to error. The divining of signs to me is observed in two categories, one of which derives from the behaviour of Caesar himself, and the other from the

⁷⁹ Tucker 1976, 171.

⁸⁰ Polyb. 6.56.6-12; Linderski 1984, 482.

⁸¹ Giovannini 1983, 60.

⁸² Cic. *Div.* 2.75; Morrison 1981, 88.

⁸³ Szemler 1971, 109.

general nature of political conditions.”⁸⁴

It is evident that augury in the late Republic had very little to do with watching birds, and everything to do with watching one’s political opponents with great care. The strongest defense Cicero accords to augury is the way it can check abuses of *auspicium*. Disputes over omens and validity of auspices were common, and the power of an individual augur was great indeed, since he could postpone and negate a magistrate’s wishes by pronouncing the formula *alio die*.⁸⁵ In the *Philippics*, Cicero abuses Antony for violating the auspices while he was an augur. Over the matter of Dolabella’s election to consulship, the auspices changed with Antony’s mind:

Quam diu tu voles, vitiosus consul Dolabella; rursus, cum voles, salvis auspiciis creatus.

“So long as you wish, Dolabella’s consulship is flawed; then, the moment your wishes change, he was elected with the auspices in order.”⁸⁶

Cicero has Cato praise a famous augur, Fabius Maximus, by saying:

. . . augurque cum esset, dicere ausus est optimis auspiciis ea geri quae rei publicae salute gererentur; quae contra rem publicam ferrentur, contra auspicia ferri.

“And though he was an augur, he would say that whatever was done for the Republic was done under best auspices, and whatever harmed the Republic was done against auspices.”⁸⁷

So much for the wisdom of birds, and the wisdom of gods. It was man who decided what was best for himself or the Republic, and what counted as favourable or unfavourable auspices. By the late Republic, augury was a shadow of its former self, and much lore about birds was lost in the need to simplify and control the formulae for political purposes. It is a fact that Cicero does not shy away from:

Externa enim auguria, quae sunt non tam artificiosa quam superstitiosa, videamus. Omnibus fere avibus utuntur, nos admodum paucis; alia illis sinistra sunt, alia nostris.

⁸⁴ Cic. *Fam.* 6.6.7. See also Cic. *Tusc.* 1.33.

⁸⁵ Cic. *Leg.* 2.31; Cic. *Phil.* 2.82.

⁸⁶ Cic. *Phil.* 2.84

⁸⁷ Cic. *Sen.* 11.

Solebat ex me Deiotarus percontari nostri auguri disciplinam, ego ex illo sui. Di immortales! quantum differebat! ut quaedam essent etiam contraria. Atque ille eis semper utebatur, nos, nisi dum a populo auspicia accepta habemus, quam multum eis utimur? Bellicam rem administrari maiores nostri nisi auspicato noluerunt; quam multi anni sunt, cum bella a proconsulibus et a propraetoribus administrantur, qui auspicia non habent! Itaque nec amnis transeunt auspicato nec tripudio auspicantur. Ubi ergo avium divinatio? quae, quoniam ab eis, qui auspicia nulla habent, bella administrantur, ad urbanas res retenta videtur, a bellicis esse sublata.

“We shall now look at foreign auguries, which are not so artful, but rather superstitious. They use all kinds of birds, we only a few; they say some are left-hand signs, we say others. Deiotarus was accustomed to ask me about our augural discipline, I of his own. Immortal gods! How they differed! In some cases they were the exact opposite! And they always use auspices, we, not unless we have the duty of doing so by a vote of the people. Our forefathers did not wage war unless auspices were taken. Now, for many years, war is waged by proconsuls and propraetors, who don’t have *auspicium*! So they have no *tripudium*, and do not take auspices to cross rivers. What, therefore, has become of divining by birds? It is not used by those waging our wars, since they do not have auspices. I suppose it is reserved only for the City since it has been withdrawn from the field!”⁸⁸

If we examine the evidence, it is possible to track the decline of bird divination. Cicero says that augurs only pay attention to a few birds, and a passage from Seneca corroborates this:

Cur ergo aquilae hic honor datus est ut magnarum rerum faceret auspicia, aut coruo et paucissimis auibus, ceterarum sine praesagio uox est?

“Why is the honour of making auspices of important events given to very few birds, such as the eagle or the raven, while the voices of other birds are without prophetic meaning?”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Cic. *Div.* 2.76-7

⁸⁹ Seneca, *Natural Questions*, 2.32.5

This was not the case in earlier days. We know the Etruscans, who influenced the Roman art, fastidiously studied birds and wrote complex identification guides.⁹⁰ These guides, though lost, must have been comparable in intricacy and detail to the Piacenza liver, which outlines how to correctly divine from a liver.⁹¹ It is likely that these Etruscan books detailed how to identify birds, what their behaviour meant, whether they were lucky or unlucky, and in which quadrants of the sky they should ideally be seen or heard.⁹² The discovery of Etruscan tombs richly decorated with images of birds also intimates that these birds, by species or position in the artwork, were deeply symbolic.⁹³ The Tomb of the Augurs depicts a man with a curved *lituus* watching birds above the heads of wrestlers.⁹⁴ de Grummond reminds us:

“Augury was well developed among the Etruscans, and it is no surprise that among the few glosses surviving on Etruscan vocabulary are the words for falcon, *capys*; eagle, *antar*; crane, *gnis*; and hawk, *arak*.”⁹⁵

The meaning of an eagle snatching up and replacing a cap on the head of Tarquinius Priscus was interpreted by his wife, showing that avian prodigies were significant in the Etruscan political context.⁹⁶ There also exists the painting of the Vel Saties from the François Tomb in Vulci that shows a magisterial figure consulting a book as a dwarf holds a bird (probably a woodpecker) in front of him, which seems to be an example of augury in action (Fig. 3).⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, 10.37; McDonough 2003, 252.

⁹¹ Linderski 1990b, 68-70.

⁹² Rawson 1985, 27

⁹³ Spivey 1997, 106-7.

⁹⁴ Spivey 1997, 110-11

⁹⁵ de Grummond 2013, 550.

⁹⁶ Livy 1.34.8-9.

⁹⁷ de Grummond 2006, 41-2.



Figure 3: Etruscan augury in action? 340-320 BCE, held in Rome, Villa Albani.

Writing under the Empire, Seneca outlines the difference in Roman and Etruscan beliefs:

Hoc inter nos et Tuscos, quibus summa est fulgurum persequendorum scientia, interest: nos putamus, quia nubes collisae sunt, fulmina emitti; ipsi existimant nubes collidi ut fulmina emittantur; nam, cum omnia ad deum referant, in ea opinione sunt tamquam. non, quia facta sunt, significant, sed quia significatura sunt, fiant (...)

Quomodo ergo significant, nisi deo mittuntur? Quomodo aues non in hoc motae ut nobis occurrerent dextrum auspiciū sinistrumque fecerunt. Et illas, inquit, deus mouit. Nimis illum otiosum. et pusillae rei ministrum, facis, si aliis somnia, aliis exta disponit.

Ista nihilominus diuina ope geruntur, si non a deo pennae auium reguntur nec pecudum, uiscera sub ipsa securi formantur. Alia ratione fatorum series explicatur indicia uenturi ubique praemittens, ex quibus quaedam nobis familiaria, quaedam ignota sunt. Quicquid fit, alicuius rei futurae signum est.

“This separates us from the Etruscans, who have the greatest skill in interpreting lightning: we believe lightning is emitted because clouds collide. They believe clouds collide so that lightning may be emitted. Since they attribute everything to the gods’ will, they hold the opinion that things do not reveal the future because they have happened, but that things happen so they can reveal the future...

“But how do things portend the future unless sent by a god to do so?” In the same way birds do not move just so that they can appear to us to make an omen on the right- or left-hand side. “Yes,” he says, “but a god moved them.” You make god an idle minister of unimportant affairs, if for some he arranges dreams, and others entrails.

Nevertheless, such things occur through divine agency, even if the wings of a bird are not actually guided by a god, nor the entrails shaped under the axe. Fate is unfolded by different rules, sending everywhere indications of what’s to come, some familiar to us, and some unknown. Whatever happens, it is a sign that something will happen.”⁹⁸

We ought not take Seneca’s stern and sensible Stoic view as the norm; the dissenting voice of this piece is probably closer to the average Roman’s beliefs, but it illustrates how far removed Roman divination was from Etruscan principles by the late Republic and early Empire. Out of the many notable Etruscan birds, Roman augural birds dwindled to a mere handful, with the most important being vultures, eagles, crows, ravens, woodpeckers, owls and chickens, all of which shall be treated in individual detail later on. Of course, superstition and symbolism were

⁹⁸ Sen. *QNat.* 2.32.2-4.

attached to every bird, but these birds seem to be the most charismatic for the Romans, and the most important augural signs came from them.

1.4 *Templa*

It is clear that birdwatching was a fundamental part of the Roman political system. Birds were called upon to convey the gods' consent in almost every decision of state importance. It thus becomes prudent to ask *how* they delivered messages, and in what way different birds and their behaviour were interpreted by augurs and magistrates. The first step is to consider where the rite took place. A *templum* referred to a section of the sky observed by magistrates or augurs. It was the field of vision in which birds or lightning could be seen. There was also a secondary *templum in terris*, a quadrangular space on earth delimited and inaugurated by an augur that was reserved for observing signs.⁹⁹ Many official state functions had to take place in a *templum* (including meetings of the Senate) and shrines (*aedes sacra*) were often built within the space marked out as a *templum*, giving us the word temple, which refers to the building.¹⁰⁰ The importance of being able to see every part of the sky meant that any building that obscured the *templum* could be torn down.¹⁰¹ When marking out the sky for observation, the *templum* was divided into four parts with a *lituus* – a curved augural wand. The sections were: 'in front' (*pars antica*), 'behind' (*pars posterior*), 'on the left' (*in sinistrum*) and 'on the right' (*in dextrum*). This ritual, with its complexity and obsession with orientation, was probably influenced by the Etruscan belief system – the *lituus* is even an Etruscan wand.¹⁰² When taking impetrative auspices, a magistrate:

“...first pitched a tent on a particular spot. This was the *auguraculum*, which would previously have been defined and 'inaugurated' by the augurs. Auspices could only be requested from an *auguraculum*. In Rome, there were three of these: on the citadel (the *Arx*), on the Quirinal and on the Palatine.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Rüpke 2007, 71; Varro, *Ling.* 7.8

¹⁰⁰ Varro in Gell. *NA*, 14.7.7; Varro, *Ling.* 6.91, 7.6-13

¹⁰¹ Cic. *Off.* 3.16

¹⁰² de Grummond 2013, 458-9; Rose 1974, 71; Macmullen 2011, 44. For a discussion of boundaries in Etruscan beliefs, see Edlund-Berry 2006, 116-131.

¹⁰³ Scheid 2003, 113

The tent itself was referred to as a *tabernaculum*. According to Festus, it was made of skins,¹⁰⁴ and the expression *tabernaculum capere* – ‘to pitch a tent’ – came to refer to the whole ceremony of auspication, not just the erection of the structure.¹⁰⁵ Presumably the *tabernaculum* would ensure only the desired portion of the sky was available for the auspician to view, and when augural chickens were consulted, the tent served to stop them from absconding once freed from their cage. In the field, every Roman military camp would establish a temporary *templum*, or *auguratorium*, in the middle of the camp.¹⁰⁶ A tent was erected within the boundary so the magistrate could consult the augural chickens in relative privacy.¹⁰⁷ Not all inaugurated places were *templa* – the *pomerium*, for example, which marked the boundary of the city and the limits of the city auspices, was an inaugurated space, but not a *templum*.¹⁰⁸ The military camp, on the other hand, is an example of a *templum* that did not need to be inaugurated.

Now we may consider how birds were observed in *templa* and how they delivered signs. It is well-documented that when birds appeared, the right-hand side was considered favourable among the Greeks. The opposite was true for Romans, which many find surprising given the reputation of the *sinistra* – sinister left hand. It is in fact likely that confusion with Greek principles caused the left side to lose its lucky significance. But despite this difference, it shall be shown that both cultures actually considered the same quarter of the sky lucky – the east. The Greeks looked north when divining, facing the seat of the gods in the celestial heavens, so a bird flying to the right headed towards the rising sun of the auspicious east, while a bird flying left went towards the darkness of the inauspicious west.¹⁰⁹

It must be acknowledged that there is some discrepancy in our sources that makes it difficult to prove Roman orientation when taking auspices, so we shall lay out the evidence here. Some claimed one should look south.¹¹⁰ Others said east.¹¹¹ To lay this conclusively to rest, we must examine the excavated *templum* at Bantia (modern day Banzi in southern Italy).

¹⁰⁴ Fest. 11 L.

¹⁰⁵ Wardle 2006, 194; Valetton 1890, 240-3.

¹⁰⁶ Serv. Aen. 4.200

¹⁰⁷ Tac. Ann. 2.13, 15.30.

¹⁰⁸ Gell. NA, 13.14.1-2; Varro, Ling. 5.143

¹⁰⁹ Hom. Il. 12.238f.

¹¹⁰ Varro, Ling. 7.7; Festus, 339 M, 454 L; Plin. HN, 2.143.

¹¹¹ Livy 1.18.6; Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 2.5.2-3; Plut. Quaest. Rom. 78; Serv. Aen. 2.693.

This is the only surviving example we have of a *templum in terris* that was designed for auspices *ex avibus*. Regell (1970) argued that the *templa* for observing birds and the *templa* for observing lightning were the same, but the way this excavated *templum* is specially designed for watching birds seems to disprove this.

The Banzi *templum* has been reliably dated to the last century of the Republic. It was rectangular, with the sides oriented to the cardinal directions. The shorter sides ran from north to south and the slightly longer sides from east to west.¹¹² Three rows of three *cippi* mark its boundaries.¹¹³ These inscribed *cippi* could only be read by someone who was looking east.¹¹⁴ The *templum* in the sky can be understood “as a kind of mental projection” of this terrestrial *templum*.¹¹⁵ That is, these quadrangular sections marked out by the *cippi* corresponded to the regions of the sky through which the birds flew. The inscriptions existed to help the auspiciant determine the meaning of the signs he saw or heard.

On the western *finis* of the *templum*, a large, square, limestone slab was excavated, quite distinct from the circular *cippi*. Examining this layout allowed Linderski to solve the confusion surrounding Roman orientation. He proves that an auspiciant sat on this slab and looked east, “turning his back on the hostile west.”¹¹⁶ Father Jove, meanwhile, was envisioned as sitting in the north and looking south.¹¹⁷

A deorum sede cum in meridiem spectes, ad sinistram sunt partes mundi exorientes, ad dexteram occidentes. factum arbitror, ut sinistra meliora auspicia quam dextra esse existimentur.

“From the seat of the gods looking south, on the left-hand sides are the eastern parts of the world, and on the right-hand the western, so that left-hand auspices appear to be better than right-hand auspices.”¹¹⁸

In this way, the most favourable part of the sky becomes the northeast, for this makes a left-hand sign for the god looking south and a left-hand sign for the auspiciant looking east, the best

¹¹² Gottarelli 2013, 21

¹¹³ See Torelli 1995.

¹¹⁴ Torelli 1995, 97; Linderski 1986b, 339.

¹¹⁵ Kvium 2011, 75

¹¹⁶ Linderski 1986a, 2284.

¹¹⁷ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 78.

¹¹⁸ Varro ap. Festus 454L.

one could hope for. This system of orientation accounts for seemingly paradoxical situations described by Cicero, where a sign is simultaneously left and right, for a bird in the southeast would be a left-hand sign for Jupiter and a right-hand sign for the auspican. This also marries in with the way most early Roman temples were situated facing south with an unobstructed view; they were built on *templa*, meant for watching birds.¹¹⁹

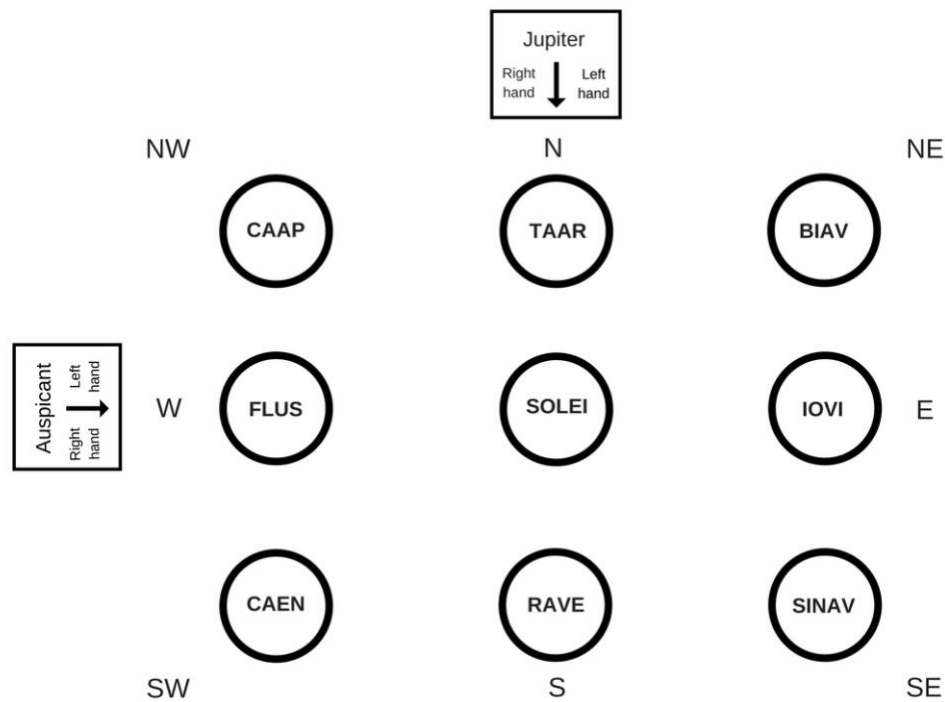


Figure 4: Reconstruction of the Templum at Banzi

Mario Torelli, the original excavator of the site, gives us the following expansions of the inscriptions on the *cippi*:

Northern line:

Northwest: C(ontraria) A(ve) A(ugurium) P(estiferum) – to the contrary bird of destructive augury.

North: TAAR – unknown. Interpreted as a neutral sign.

Northeast: B(ene) I(uvante) A V(e) – to the most helpful bird.

Middle line:

¹¹⁹ Aldrete (2004) 150

West: **FLUS**(ae) – dedicated to an Oscan deity native to the region, who corresponds to Flora.

Centre: **SOLEI** – dedicated to the sun.

East: **IOVI** – dedicated to Jupiter.

Southern line:

Southwest: **C**(ontraria) **A**(ve) **EN**(ebra) – to the contrary bird forbidding.

South: **R**(emore) **A VE** – to the delaying bird.

Southeast: **SIN**(istra) **A V**(e) – to the left-hand bird.¹²⁰

This is a reliable reconstruction, and it corresponds with testimony from literary sources, though there is one glitch. Linderski quibbles with the extension of the SINAV inscription in the southeast, pointing out that *sinistra ave* is unsatisfactory. An auspican looking east would behold the southwest on his right, not his left, and this was not as strong or favourable as the northeast. A better alternative is *sinente ave* – to the ‘allowing bird.’¹²¹ Not as strong as the bountifully propitious northeast, but still a positive answer. Meanwhile, the *remore ave* of the south is the ‘delaying’ bird which does not say no, but merely advises the auspican to try again another time.¹²² The ‘neutral’ northern position probably represents the *avis arcula* mentioned in Festus, a bird which prohibits action, but which is not threatening.¹²³ One might then expect the southwest to be the least auspicious, since it makes a right-hand sign for god and man, but it is not dire, only ‘inhibitory’.¹²⁴ The northwest, meanwhile, which is a left-hand sign for man and a right-hand sign for Jupiter, is the domain of the contrary bird which not only forbids the action, but threatens calamity.

This augural system has a great deal in common with haruspicy, for the arrangement of the sky corresponds closely to the arrangement of significant regions on sacrificial livers interpreted by *haruspices*.¹²⁵ Livers were divided into 16 sections, for the 16 astrological houses of the heavens.¹²⁶ The liver’s propitious half was to the east, and the unpropitious to the west. Similarly, when interpreting lightning, Etruscans deemed flashes in the west

¹²⁰ Torelli’s reconstruction taken from Linderski (1986b) 339.

¹²¹ Linderski (1986a) 2284-5.

¹²² Festus 345 L: *remores aves in auspicio dicuntur, quae acturum aliquid remorari conpellunt*

¹²³ Festus 15 L: *arcula... quae in auspiciis vetabat aliquid fieri*

¹²⁴ Festus 67 L.

¹²⁵ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.5.2–4; Plin. *HN*, 2.142–43; Serv. *Aen.* 2.693; Torelli 1995, 108-9.

¹²⁶ Jannot 2005, 12-13.

inauspicious, and flashes in the east auspicious. This was because the propitious divinities were thought to reside in the east and the infernal in the west. The northeast was the seat of the heavenly divinities, the south was the seat of the earthly, and the northwest the seat of the infernal.¹²⁷

In this *templum* we see the Romans observed half as many heavenly seats as the Etruscans, dividing the sky into eight parts around a centre point. Looking east along the central *cippus*, we see the centre is the sun, while the west is dedicated to a deity of earth and nature, Flusa/Flora, and the east to the sky god Jupiter. The north/south axis in both cultures seems to indicate the strength of the sign, and the east/west axis its auspiciousness. In the simplest terms possible, north was strong, south was weak, east was good, and west was bad. Our ancient sources insist that auspices and the science of augury were not Etruscan in origin.¹²⁸ The only form of divination considered Etruscan in origin was extispicy (the examination of entrails), which remained the preserve of the Etruscan *haruspices* throughout Roman history.¹²⁹ Despite this, the similarity of the systems is striking, and the observation of and obsession with boundaries has always been an Etruscan trait.¹³⁰ We should conclude, then, that although the observation of birds ultimately became a Roman specialty, it is likely that it had common origins with Etruscan lore.¹³¹

With all this said we can reconstruct the *templum* to the fullest:

¹²⁷ Lulof & Van Kampen 2011, 122-3, 129.

¹²⁸ Cornell 1995, 166.

¹²⁹ Cornell 1995, 166-7.

¹³⁰ Warden 2016, 171

¹³¹ Jannot 2005, 29; Thulin 1912, 2465-6.

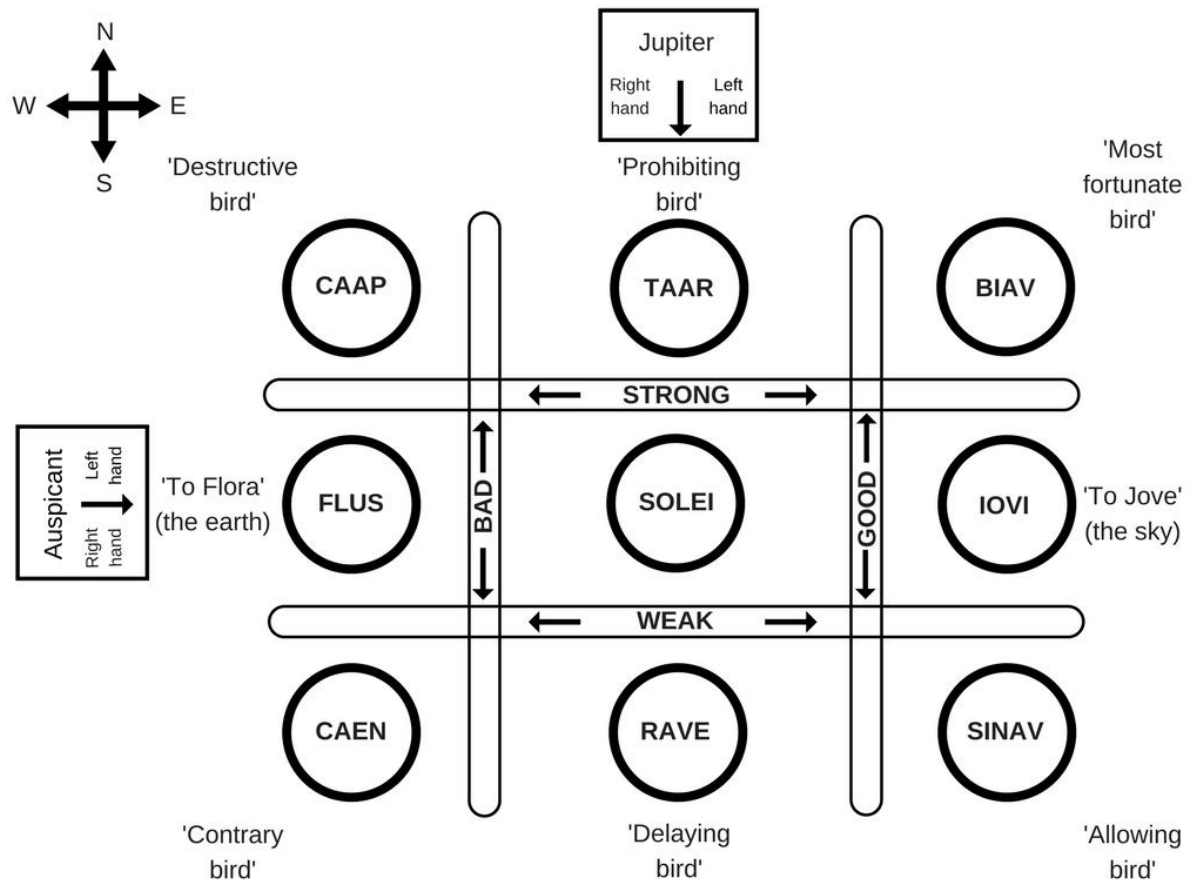
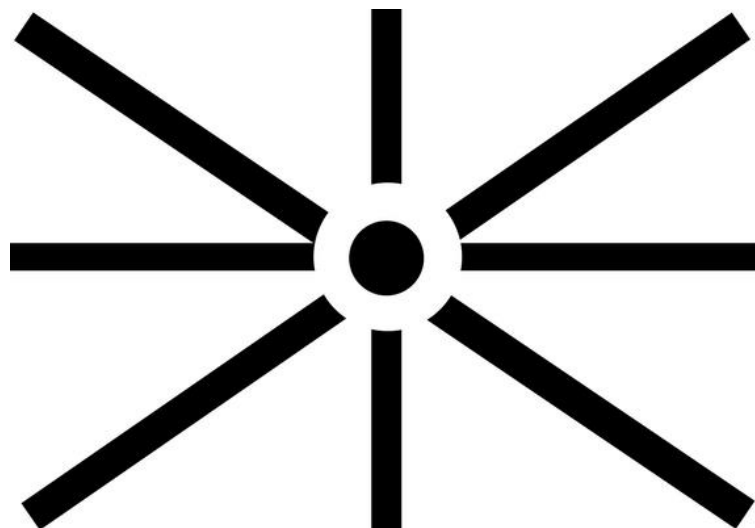


Figure 5: Full reconstruction of the Banzi templum

We can see that every point has a different level of auspiciousness assigned to it except for the central *cippus*, since no bird can spontaneously appear in the centre of the *templum*. This central *cippus* stands instead for the sun at its noonday zenith. If we draw eight lines from the central *cippus* fanning outward to each of the *cippi* surrounding it, we create something that appears to be a perfect compass.



When Pliny gives instructions for making a compass, he calls for a line to be drawn running from north to south, and a line laying transversely across this from east to west. Upon this was drawn an X, with all points crossing at a centre point called the *umbilicus*. The *umbilicus* stood for the sun at noon, fixed and unchanging, while the positions of sunrise and sunset differed each day.¹³² He then explains how noting the position of the sun at dawn in relation to the compass allows one to track the times of the solstices, equinoxes, and slow changing of the seasons. The northeast point marks where the sun rises on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. Naturally, the southeast marks the point at which the sun rises on the winter solstice, the shortest day. This allows us to account for the augural system. The strength accorded to north/south axis corresponds to the strength of the sun at the summer solstice versus the winter solstice, while the fortuitousness of the sign along the east/west axis corresponds to sunrise and sunset. The central labelled *sol* marker shows us how everything in auspices literally revolved around the sun and the movement of the heavens.

It is intriguing that this compass shape also looks like a star with eight points – three above, three below and two on either side, with the ‘sun’ at the centre. According to Festus, inaugurated spaces were marked by a bronze star.¹³³ It is likely that this ‘star’ was actually a representation of the *templum* grid itself. A Republican *aes signatum* from c260 BCE shows two augural hens feeding with two eight-pointed stars between them.¹³⁴

¹³² Plin. *HN*, 18.331-7; Gottarelli 2013, 36.

¹³³ Festus 476L; see also Kvium 2011, 66.

¹³⁴ Sutherland 1974, 29 Republic. *Obv.*, two hens feeding, face to face; between, two stars. *Rev.*, two rostra, l. and r.; between, two dolphins. C. 260 BC Rome (cast bronze bar, 3500 gm., 164 by 93 mm., BM).



Thomsen speculates that this coin is connected to a naval victory in the First Punic War since chickens would have provided the favourable auspices needed to go into battle.¹³⁵ The fact that they are feeding in an auspicial capacity is expressed through the stars, which are essentially basic representations of *templa*. Divine eight-pointed stars are seen on other coins – for example, the famous coins celebrating the deification of Julius Caesar.



A quote in Pliny informs us that the comet signaling Julius Caesar's apotheosis was seen in the northern part of the sky.¹³⁶ If we interpret the 'star' as a representation of a *templum*, then a fiery comet does indeed burn on the northern point. This might be the reason the comet was so often called a star instead – the *sidus Julium*. The augural star was a very old symbol, shorthand

¹³⁵ Thomsen 1961, 143

¹³⁶ Plin. *HN*, 2.23

for sacred or divine. Combined with the comet, it symbolised the omen of his deification, and eventually was simply known as the star.

Studying the archaeological site at Banzi also gives us an opportunity to review some of the literature on augury. The famous augur Messalla wrote that the reason the Aventine Hill alone of Rome's seven hills was not included in the *pomerium*, the boundary of the city (and therefore excluded from the urban auspices), was because this was where the unlucky Remus took auspices. It was *quasi avibus obscenis ominosum* – “as if it were made ominous by inauspicious birds”, so even when the *pomerium* was expanded in the Republic, it remained unwelcome.¹³⁷ It was not until Claudius made a further extension in 49 CE that the hill was finally included within the boundary.¹³⁸ But curiously, in Ennius' account of the myth, the oldest of the sources, he places Romulus on the Aventine and Remus on the *mons Murcus*, a second peak of the hill. He is unique in recounting such placement. Skutsch argues that in the period after Ennius, Romulus began to be associated exclusively with the Palatine, and so it became tradition that he took auspices there as well.¹³⁹ It is also recorded that after the augural contest, Romulus threw his cornel lance from the Aventine to the Palatine, where it grew into a sacred tree – possibly just after auspices had been taken.¹⁴⁰ Using the Banzi *templum* as a model, Mignone makes the case that the Aventine was traditionally held to be the site where Romulus took auspices. Ennius described the twelve birds descending on Romulus' left in the northeast part of the sky. If we map this onto the topography of Rome, we find that a figure looking east on the Aventine would indeed find the Palatine Hill to his left, in the northeast.¹⁴¹ The mythical *auguraculum* was therefore originally on the Aventine in the southwest, with birds flying over the Palatine on Romulus' left, in the northeast, marking that hill as the site of the City. The Aventine was excluded from the *pomerium* like all the hills and valleys besides the Palatine in the early days, and continued to be excluded even as the *pomerium* expanded. In succeeding centuries, the need to explain its ongoing exclusion led to the augur Messalla saying it was *quasi* – “as if” – the hill was made ominous by Remus' failed auspices, since the unlucky brother's *auguraculum* was still assigned to the Aventine.

This business of birds being lucky in certain parts of the sky is complicated by the fact that there were right-hand and left-hand birds – that is, some birds were seen as lucky if they

¹³⁷ Gell. NA, 13.14.7.

¹³⁸ Mignone 2016, 391.

¹³⁹ Skutsch 1968, 65.

¹⁴⁰ Serv. Aen. 3.49:

¹⁴¹ Mignone 2016.

appeared on the auspiciant's left, as we would expect, while some were considered lucky only if they appeared on the right. Knowledge of whether a bird was left-hand or right-hand was at the forefront of public consciousness, and Plautus gives us several humorous examples of characters applying augural formulae to everyday life:

Impetritum, inauguratum est: quouis admittuntaues.

Picus et cornix ab laeua, coruos, parra ab dextera

Consuadent: certum herclest uostram consequi sententiam.

Sed quid hoc, quod picus ulmum tundit? haud temerariumst.

There is a favourable omen – a lucky sign – the birds let me go in any direction! The woodpecker and crow on my left and the raven and the owl on my right recommend it. By Hercules I shall follow their wisdom. But what's that? The woodpecker is tapping an elm. Surely that's not a coincidence!¹⁴²

The woodpecker and crow on the left are lucky but the situation is reversed for the owl and the raven. This reversal is substantiated by Cicero and Horace, so we may take Plautus at his word despite the humour intended here.¹⁴³ Since both the raven and the owl were more often birds of ill-omen (the owl especially), it may be that a bad bird in a bad part of the sky served to cancel out the offence – they were in the part of the sky accorded to them, making it favourable.

Here we see the cry of the raven on the left, the favourable side, treated as unlucky:

non temere est quod coruos cantat mihi nunc ab laeua manu.

Semul radebat pedibus terram et uoce crocibat sua.

It is not by chance that a raven sang just now on my left – raking the earth with his feet and croaking with his voice.¹⁴⁴

The left-hand/right-hand distinction, the exceptions to these rules, and the way a sign could be *both* left and right at once no doubt caused much confusion, which was only exacerbated by the way the rules were reversed in Greek culture. By the Augustan age, Roman traditions were visibly slipping to accommodate the Greek, especially in literature. Ovid names “left-hand

¹⁴² Plaut. *Asin.* 258f.

¹⁴³ Cic. *Div.* 1.7.12; Hor. *Carm.* 3.27.15-16.

¹⁴⁴ Plaut. *Aulularia*, 624.

birds” as birds of ill-omen.¹⁴⁵ Horace claims a woodpecker on the left is unlucky, and a raven from the east lucky.¹⁴⁶ It is probable that these poets chose the Greek version deliberately, but the dissemination of such work would have caused confusion abroad.

Other intricacies of formula involve hierarchy, as we know there were many grades of auspices.¹⁴⁷ Those observed by a major magistrate supplanted those observed by a minor.¹⁴⁸ Thunder and lightning – the *auspicia maxima* – supplanted a sign given by a bird.¹⁴⁹ A lightning stroke could not be contradicted by any other sign.¹⁵⁰ So among birds themselves, species mattered.

*ut puta, si parra vel picus auspicium dederit, et deinde contrarium aquila dederit,
auspicium aquilae praeualet*

“For instance, if a *parra* (barn owl) or a *picus* (woodpecker) were to give a sign at auspices, and then an *aquila* (eagle) gave a contrary sign, the eagle’s sign would prevail.”¹⁵¹

If two signs of equal weight were observed, preference went to the one seen first, as Ovid tells us an augur would take his cue from the first bird he saw.¹⁵² But a stronger sign seen afterwards still prevailed. This explains why an augur would jump up immediately after receiving the desired auspices, breaking his line of sight and ending the ritual. It left no time for Jupiter to change his mind and countermand the signal by sending a stronger, negative sign.¹⁵³ On the other hand, an auspiciant receiving a negative sign might be inclined to remain in position, just in case Jupiter sent a contrary bird. A number of factors could determine how ‘strong’ a sign was – not only species, but the number of birds, the type of cry they emitted, where in the *templum* they flew in and out, how high or low they flew, what they perched on, whether they dropped something and what that was, their general behaviour, and so on, which we shall consider in finer detail shortly.

¹⁴⁵ Ov. *Her.* 2.115

¹⁴⁶ Hor. *Carm.* 3.27.11-16.

¹⁴⁷ Serv. *Aen.* 3.374 (*notum est esse apud augures auspiciorum gradus plures*).

¹⁴⁸ Gell. *NA*, 13.15.4

¹⁴⁹ Serv. *Aen.* 2.693; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.5.5; Dio Cass. 38.13.3–4.

¹⁵⁰ Sen. *QNat.* 2.34.1

¹⁵¹ Serv. *Aen.* 3.374.

¹⁵² Ov. *Fast.* 1.178-80.

¹⁵³ Serv. *Aen.* 2.699.

We can only make guesses as to how such signs were further broken down, but in terms of numbers it seems likely that three was significant. The Romans considered three to be a magic number, as is testified in a number of sources. Perhaps the most extreme example comes from Livy. A *ver sacrum* (sacred spring) was vowed in 217 BC, which would cost 333,333 1-3 asses, a sacrifice of 300 oxen to Jupiter, a *lectisternium* for a period of 3 days, at which 6 couches could be seen.¹⁵⁴ Plutarch comments on the affair, claiming that it was arranged thus in order to praise the number three as the most perfect of all numbers, since it is the first odd number, the beginning of quantity, and contains the first differences and the elements of all numbers blended together.¹⁵⁵ Pliny declares odd numbers are favourable; later, that even numbers are bad.¹⁵⁶ When interpreting the *oscines* – the birds who cry – the number of cries was important.¹⁵⁷ When interpreting the *alites* – the birds who fly – it is similarly prudent to assume the number of times a bird circled or entered into a particular quadrant of sky was significant, and also the number of birds seen. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the fact that Romulus' twelve vultures trumped Remus' six, even though his brother saw the sacred birds first.

We shall now consider some of the augural birds in individual detail.

1.5 Vultures

It is best to start with the *vultur*, since Roman legend has it that the City owes its existence to her.¹⁵⁸ Among the Greeks, there is a famous tendency to confuse vultures with eagles.¹⁵⁹ The Romans were a little more fastidious. Vultures furnished Romulus with perfect augury for the founding of his City. In his epigrams Posidippus tells us a vulture was a perfect omen for the birth of a child.¹⁶⁰ We can interpret from this that vultures were the most positive omens for beginnings, whether for people or places. They were the birds chiefly observed at

¹⁵⁴ Livy 22.9.7-11, 10.

¹⁵⁵ Plut. *Fabius Maximus*, 4.4-5.

¹⁵⁶ Plin. *HN*, 28.23; 28.27.

¹⁵⁷ This is certainly true of ravens and crows – in weather divination, the number of times a raven or a crow croaked gave different significance to their appearance. See Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 6.4.16, 39, 52.

¹⁵⁸ Cic. *Rep.* 2.51; Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 9.

¹⁵⁹ Aesch. *Ag.* 138; Hes. *Theog.* 523; Aesch. *PV*, 1022. Greeks also considered vultures sapient birds, but not to the same extent as Romans: Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.9.12.

¹⁶⁰ Posidippus, *Epigrams*, 27.

auguries, a fact that some find confusing, since the eagle seems so pre-eminent for the Romans. Why should the vulture merit such treatment?

For one thing, appearing suddenly, in great numbers, and circling around a fixed spot is normal behaviour for vultures. Many gather in the same place when a carcass is found, and the circling behaviour is due to the way they coast on thermals to avoid strenuous flapping.

“[Vultures] do not have the advantage of an almost ever-present wind. Instead, they exploit rising currents of warm air. Such currents, called thermals, are generated by the way in which different surfaces of the land react to the sun’s heat. A tract of lush grass absorbs a great deal of heat. A patch of bare rock, however, reflects heat into the surrounding air. So a column of warm air rises from rock patches and continues upwards, high into the sky. A vulture, once it manages to reach such a thermal, circles within it and rises upwards until, perhaps a thousand feet above the ground, the thermal has lost so much of its heat into the surrounding air that it no longer has any strength. Once the vulture has gained sufficient height, it can circle for hours, scanning the plains below for a carcass that might provide it with food.”¹⁶¹

It is said the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), now all but vanished from Italy, was valued by Etruscan augurs for its enormous wingspan – larger than that of the golden eagle, and more beautiful too.¹⁶² In Egypt, the words for mother and vulture were both *mw.t*, and Maat, a mother-goddess, was identified with the vulture. She sheltered kings beneath her mighty wings, which are so omnipresent and recognizable in Egyptian art.¹⁶³ The Egyptians claimed that vultures were all female and impregnated by the wind, a belief that migrated to Italy at a later date.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Attenborough 1998, 56.

¹⁶² Graves 1948, 192.

¹⁶³ Baillieul-LeSuer 2012, 52-3, 57.

¹⁶⁴ Horapollo 1.11; Ael. NA, 2.46.



Figure 6: Gold ring with carnelian, vulture and scarab. From Tarquinia, 5th century BCE. Ashmolean, Spencer-Churchill Collection, AN1965:347

Even bigger than the griffon vulture is the cinereous vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), and archaeological evidence shows that they were widespread in the Roman period. They lived close to Roman towns and forts and may have scavenged from refuse pits.¹⁶⁵ These imposing black birds – among the largest birds found in the old world – may have been more familiar to the Romans than the griffon, but it is hard to differentiate based on the available evidence. Pliny makes mention of a black vulture and a white vulture, which likely correspond to the cinereous and griffon vulture, respectively. He describes the black vulture as the strongest, which fits with the cinereous vulture's larger size.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, while all vultures protected against serpents, the black allegedly had less power in this respect than the white. Burning vulture feathers acted as a fumigant against snakes, and carrying the heart of a vulture was a charm to protect against snakes, beasts, bandits and the wrath of kings.¹⁶⁷ Reading Pliny's lore on vultures, we can detect a high amount of superstition in the recorded remedies. Five out of 16 examples are concerned with the vulture as a magical charm. The rest include five ointments, four potions, one fumigant and one remedy for bad breath, employing parts as diverse as the skull, brain, gall, feathers, blood, heart, lung, liver and fat.¹⁶⁸ One of the most

¹⁶⁵ Groot et al. 2010, 241-250.

¹⁶⁶ Plin. *HN*, 10.19

¹⁶⁷ Plin. *HN*, 29.77

¹⁶⁸ MacKinney 1942, 1264; Plin. *HN*, 29.112, 29.123, 30.27, 30.30, 30.50, 30.110, 30.141, 30.130.

interesting lines concerns the directive to feed a vulture to a sick patient that has dined upon a human corpse.¹⁶⁹ The remarkable find of ritually deposited vulture bones at Rome's Lapis Niger indicates at least some truth to these ideas that they were useful in ritual and magic.¹⁷⁰ Pliny also speaks of a bearded eagle (*Gypaetus barbatus*) known to the Tuscans, who called it *ossifraga* – bone-breaker.¹⁷¹ While this bird is a singularly large and impressive type of vulture, it was identified by the Romans as an *aquila*, probably because its range in the Italian peninsula is limited, and so was unlikely to have been looked for in auspices. The name *ossifraga* comes from its habit of dropping bones onto rocks from a great height, after which it consumes the shattered fragments. For his part, Pliny adds that he does not believe a bird as strange as the bearded vulture could exist, and writes it off as a fabrication. We can therefore exclude the bearded vulture from auspices and assume that the cinereous and griffon vultures were the birds most beloved by the Romans.

What made vultures pre-eminent as augural birds was a matter of diet and behavior as well as appearance. They were the largest birds with the biggest wingspans and, as Plutarch points out, they do no harm to any living creature. Vultures are benign to birds, livestock, to man, and to his crops.¹⁷² It was the most righteous of flesh-eating birds, for, in Aeschylus' words, "How can a bird that eateth birds be pure?"¹⁷³ The vulture was purity personified, working to cleanse after death, and this idea now finds expression in the scientific name of the turkey vulture, *Cathartes*. Since the bird harmed none, the Romans were encouraged to repay the kindness by refraining from harming the vulture.¹⁷⁴ Vultures were also said to protect against serpents.¹⁷⁵ The learned augur Umbricius claimed vultures laid thirteen eggs, and used the thirteenth to clean the others before hurling it from the nest, thus hatching a perfect twelve chicks.¹⁷⁶ This emphasis on the cleanliness of vultures and their protective natures is upheld by the evidence. Vultures have highly acidic gastric juices that are capable of killing most bacteria, allowing them to consume injured, diseased and dead bodies without getting ill. This helps to limit the transmission of pathogens in the wider environment.¹⁷⁷ One recorded prodigy involves a calamitous lack of vultures to clean up after a plague:

¹⁶⁹ Plin. *HN*, 30.92

¹⁷⁰ Rask 2014, 290

¹⁷¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.12

¹⁷² Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 9.5-7

¹⁷³ Aesch. *Supp.* 226.

¹⁷⁴ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 1.8; Rose 1974, 207.

¹⁷⁵ Plin. *HN*, 29.77

¹⁷⁶ Plin. *HN*, 10.19

¹⁷⁷ Andreoni 2016, 5.

Gravi pestilentia hominum boumque cadavera non sufficiente Libitina cum iacerent, vulturius non apparuit.

“During a terrible plague in men and cattle alike, corpses lay exposed because Libitina was overwhelmed, but no vultures appeared.”¹⁷⁸

Proverbially, vultures were known for eating humans.¹⁷⁹ Specifically, they ate the slain on the battlefield.¹⁸⁰ Their diets implicitly connected them with warfare, and they were known to follow armies in anticipation of slaughter.¹⁸¹ On an Etrusco-Corinthian jug from the early 6th century BCE, we see two vultures settling on a corpse after combat.¹⁸² An anecdote from St Basil in the 4th century CE provides illumination for how the Romans interpreted such a phenomenon:

Quis praenuntiat vulturibus hominum mortem tum, cum sibi invicem inferunt bellum? Videas enim innumeros greges vulturum exercitus sequentes, et ex armorum apparatu exitum conjectantes.

“Who foretells to vultures the deaths of men, when they are waging war upon themselves? You can see the innumerable flocks of vultures following the armies, and reasoning the outcome based on the preparations of arms.”¹⁸³

Perhaps the vulture’s pre-eminence in augury came from soldiers trying to divine who would be victorious based on the number or behaviour of vultures lingering near the camps, waiting for the feast.

In what is usually called the first case of bird banding, Plutarch records that while the famous commander Marius (157-86 BCE) was waging war on Germanic tribes, two vultures were seen hovering above his armies as they marched from victory to victory. One day, the

¹⁷⁸ Julius Obsequens 175.

¹⁷⁹ Mart. 6.6, Ov. Tr. 1.6.11-12.

¹⁸⁰ Hom. Il. 16.836; 18.271.

¹⁸¹ Ael. NA, 2.46; Arist. Hist. an. 563a.

¹⁸² Spivey 1997, 67.

¹⁸³ St Basil, Hexaameron, Homily 8.7. See also: Horapollon 11

soldiers caught the vultures in their nets. The blacksmith forged two bronze collars and they fastened these around their necks and released them. From then on, whenever the soldiers saw the vultures appear, with their collars gleaming in the sun, they would take it as an omen that they would be victorious, and that their beloved mascots would soon feast on the bodies of their slain enemies.¹⁸⁴ This is comparable to the way the Vikings marched under raven banners, which signaled to their enemies that their own favoured carrion bird would soon feast on their flesh.¹⁸⁵ But such symbolism could be turned against an army too. While Brutus and Cassius prepared for battle against Octavian and Antony, vultures and other carrion-feeding birds gathered around their army, a prodigy that apparently signalled their corpses would soon feed the birds.¹⁸⁶



Figure 7: Pompeiian painting of a griffon vulture in a Nile scene. Naples Archaeological Museum.

Aelian writes of the Vaccaeï, a tribe in the north-west of Spain. They believed vultures were sacred and offered up to them the bodies of warriors who had died nobly in battle. Those who died a cowardly death at home were granted no such honour, and were burned instead.¹⁸⁷ We might compare this to Tibetan sky burials, where human bodies are dismembered and left out to be consumed by vultures, an act that is simultaneously liberating and cleansing. This was not a custom the Romans shared, but they had a similar relationship with them nonetheless,

¹⁸⁴ Plut. *Vit. Mar.* 17.3

¹⁸⁵ Ingersoll 1923, 159-161.

¹⁸⁶ Julius Obsequens 42.

¹⁸⁷ Ael. *NA*, 10.22.

explicitly calling them “sacred birds”, as in Ennius. Their appearance before battle indicated they possessed powers of prescience – they knew a battle was imminent, so men studied them in the hope they could divine the outcome. Vultures then purified battlefields afterwards and helped to limit the spread of disease.

Pliny states, quite correctly, *aquilae clarius cernunt, vultures sagacius odorantur* – “eagles have clearer sight, vultures keener smell.”¹⁸⁸ Writing on the sense of smell, Lucretius candidly says that vultures are drawn by carrion.¹⁸⁹ That the Romans should have recognised the vulture’s prodigious sense of smell is extraordinary. Many ornithologists, well into the 20th century, did not believe birds had a sense of smell at all.¹⁹⁰ But, being a carrion-eater, the ability to smell blood and meat at a great distance is an essential trait. This, too, could account for a belief in the vulture’s prescience, and it may well be that birds were sometimes summoned – deliberately or otherwise – by meat from sacrifices.

Despite its reputation as auspicious, we do find instances of the vulture as a bird of ill-omen. In 209 BCE, one flew down into a shop in the crowded Forum at Privernum. This prodigy required immediate expiation.¹⁹¹ The previous year in Caere, a solitary vulture flew around Jupiter’s temple. Livy counts this as a grim portent.¹⁹² Let us compare these incidents to Romulus’ augury, and to Augustus’ tale that twelve vultures appeared to him when he took the auspices during his first consulship, which indicated he would become emperor and found a new Rome.¹⁹³ In the first two instances, the omens were dire, unsolicited, and came from a single bird. In the latter two, the omens were positive, solicited, and conferred through a magical number of them. We can conclude that solitary vultures were inauspicious, and oblique signs from vultures similarly unlucky. Vultures that appeared in great numbers (multiples of three) were positive, as were vultures that appeared when impetrative auspices were taken.

¹⁸⁸ Plin. *HN*, 10.191

¹⁸⁹ Luc. *De Rerum Natura*, 4.674-83.

¹⁹⁰ Birkhead 2012, 127-163. Ingersoll 1923, 75, amusingly scoffs at the notion that vultures can smell and makes the sweeping generalisation that, “none of the senses in birds is so little developed or of so small use as the olfactory.”

¹⁹¹ Livy 27.11.4.

¹⁹² Livy 27.33.3.

¹⁹³ Suet. *Aug.* 95

1.6 Eagles

Of all the birds, the mighty *aquila* is the one most readily associated with ancient Rome. A huge, unmistakable apex predator, the eagle was the bird of Father Jove, the Imperial family, and the Roman army. Due to its lack of a crest and the way it is usually painted, the Roman eagle is most readily identified as the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). However, while calling eagles the strongest and most honourable of birds, Pliny lists six different types recognized by the Romans. The appearance of any eagle was thought to be Jupiter himself indicating his will to mankind.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, it may have been the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) that furnished most sightings. Pliny tells us that in his day the white-tailed eagle could be found in towns and open country.¹⁹⁵ Modern observation bears this out, showing that it is primarily a scavenger that benefits from associations with human settlements, while the more elusive golden eagle is a predator less inclined to settle in urban areas.¹⁹⁶

In Homer, the eagle sends signs from Zeus.¹⁹⁷ The Egyptians considered him a royal bird, as did the Greeks.¹⁹⁸ Augustus' soul was allegedly carried into the sky by an eagle.¹⁹⁹ Allegedly, he became Jupiter's armour bearer because he cannot be killed by a thunderbolt.²⁰⁰ In art, along with the thunderbolt and scepter, the eagle is one of the most common attributes of Jupiter.²⁰¹ The eagle was, in essence, the most trusted messenger of Jupiter, god of auspices. A popular image was that of Jupiter, either seated or standing, with an eagle at his feet, looking up at him and waiting expectantly for a command.²⁰² He is often shown clutching lightning in his talons.²⁰³ There is a sense, as we shall see, that the bird was sent directly from Jupiter's side to deliver auspices. Crucially, as well as accompanying Jupiter himself, it is common for the eagle to be depicted as standing at the foot of the emperor.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁴ Plin. *HN*, 10.6.

¹⁹⁵ Plin. *HN*, 10.7

¹⁹⁶ Durham 2013, 94; Serjeantsen 2009, 376.

¹⁹⁷ Hom. *Il.* 8.345-52, 24.315-21.

¹⁹⁸ Horapollon, 2.56; Diod. Sic. 1.87.9; Aesch. *Ag.* 49ff.

¹⁹⁹ Dio Cass. 56.42. Mattingly 1967, 171 discusses this motif in iconography.

²⁰⁰ Plin. *HN*, 2.146; 10.15

²⁰¹ Toynbee 1973, 240.

²⁰² Horn 1972, 77

²⁰³ For an old depiction on a coin: Sutherland 1974, 21. Republic. *Obv.*, eagle, wings spread, holding thunderbolt. *Rev.*, Pegasus prancing, wings spread; ROMANOM. C. 300-275 BC Rome. (cast bronze bar, 1389.64 gm., 167 x 99 mm., BMCRR Rome 2).

²⁰⁴ Durham 2013, 89.



Figure 8: Jupiter and his eagle. Naples Archaeological Museum.

Cicero gives us the tale of the omen that foretold Marius' return from exile. In this retelling, Marius saw an eagle fighting a snake. The bird won the battle and dropped the snake into the sea, then, in typical fortunate fashion, turned its back on the west and flew away towards the east, soaring high.²⁰⁵ The eagle appears in a number of other doubtful stories that

²⁰⁵ Cic. *Div.* 1.106.

are still worth relating. It is said that in the regal period an eagle flew down from an auspicious part of the sky, snatched the cap from the head of Tarquin the Elder while he was on the road, soared upwards, and then replaced it on his head as an omen of his future rule.²⁰⁶ In a story with suspiciously similar substance, an eagle stole some bread out of Augustus' hand while he was on the road, flew up high, and returned it to him.²⁰⁷ Doubtless Augustus' story was modelled on the first, but it shows how they envisioned divine favour. For the eagle to do something so out of character, and to leave the target completely unharmed, while also flying in and out of an auspicious quarter – it can be nothing less than a message straight from Jupiter. Another message of support came from an eagle dropping a white hen, unharmed, into his wife Livia's lap while she was returning to her estate, on which more later.²⁰⁸

There are many more examples to ponder. Eagles followed Brutus to Philippi, and foretold his defeat by deserting him upon arrival.²⁰⁹ An eagle set upon by two ravens was likened to the princely eagle Octavian being attacked by, but ultimately defeating, the upstart ravens Brutus and Cassius.²¹⁰ Young Germanicus was led by eight eagles, and of course went on to lead eight legions on the Rhine.²¹¹ The sight of an eagle in Rhodes caused the exiled Tiberius to hope he would return to Augustus' good graces.²¹² The death of Augustus and his deification were prophesied by an eagle.²¹³ Three eagles were seen fighting in the year of the four emperors, obviously symbolizing the imperial struggle.²¹⁴ An eagle snatched entrails from a sacrifice and hung them in an oak tree, thus foretelling Galba's rise.²¹⁵ An eagle kept pace with Vitellius' victorious army.²¹⁶ Domitian knew of his success when he saw an eagle.²¹⁷

From this catalogue of omens, we see a pattern emerging. The eagle – Jove's bird – is increasingly associated with the emperor and the imperial struggle. He almost always appears as an oblique sign, dropping out of the sky at his own leisure and not when called upon. Many

²⁰⁶ Livy 1.34.8-9; see also Cic. *Leg.* 1.4, who disparages those credulous enough to believe this story.

²⁰⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 94.7.

²⁰⁸ Suet. *Galb.* 1.

²⁰⁹ Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 37.4.

²¹⁰ Suetonius, *Augustus*, 96.1.

²¹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.17.2.

²¹² Suet. *Tib.* 14.4.

²¹³ Suet. *Aug.* 97.1.

²¹⁴ Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6; Tac. *Hist.* 2.50.5.

²¹⁵ Suet. *Galb.* 4.2.

²¹⁶ Suet. *Vit.* 9.

²¹⁷ Suet. *Dom.* 6.2.

(all?) of these stories are certainly fabricated, and they serve as part of imperial propaganda to assure the people that the king of gods and men approved of the empire and its emperor.

The eagle is most famous as a military symbol. Plutarch tells us that Romulus' armies were originally headed by a standard bearer with shrubs tied to his pole.²¹⁸ Pliny says in the time of Gaius Marius (104 BCE) five animals were used – boar, eagle, wolf, minotaur and horse. A few years earlier it had become practice to advance only the eagles into battle and leave the rest at the camp. Marius ended up abolishing the others, and made the eagle the sole military ensign. Standards were simply known as *aquilae*. If an *aquila* was captured, it was a source of immense shame for the Romans, and much is made of the need to retrieve lost eagles.

“The eagle-standard had a special place in Augustus' political-military imagery after he persuaded the Parthians in 20 B.C. to return the standards lost in Parthia by Crassus, Decidius and Antony, a triumph which gave rise to the famous issue of coins *signis receptis*.”²¹⁹

The imagined loss of an eagle was even a prodigy that beset Gnaeus Pompeius:

Decem legionum aquilae Gnaeo, Cn. Pompeii filio, quae fulmina tenebant visae dimittere et in sublime avolare. Ipse adulescens Pompeius victus et fugiens occisus.

“To Gnaeus, son of Pompey, the eagles of the ten legions appeared to drop the lightning bolts they held and fly into the sky. Young Pompey was himself defeated and killed as he fled.”²²⁰

Similarly, in 43 BCE Octavian received an omen from the standards. Those standards of the legion left by Pansa as a garrison for Rome appeared as if wrapped in spiderwebs from long disuse. The same year, at Octavian's camp at dawn an eagle landed on a ridge above, was disturbed by several smaller birds, and flew away.²²¹

²¹⁸ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 8.6.

²¹⁹ Eidinow 1993, 414.

²²⁰ Julius Obsequens 46.

²²¹ Julius Obsequens 43.



Figure 9: In the midst of this dramatic battle scene on the Grand Ludovisi Sarcophagus, the eagle standard can be seen. Mid 3rd century CE, held in the Palazzo Altemps.

In the archaeological context, it is interesting to note that finds of eagle remains increased in the Roman period in Britain.²²² Britain has two indigenous eagles, the white-tailed eagle and the golden eagle. Both were caught and killed. They were particularly abundant on Roman military sites, where mass collection is evident.²²³ As one example, the fort at South Shields, Newcastle, contained the remains of 14 white-tailed eagles, 13 of which were found at the commandant's house. Other sites showed butchery relating to the harvesting of wing feathers.²²⁴ Parker offers an explanation for the abundance of eagle wings by citing possible uses as brushes, quill pens, or for fletching arrows.²²⁵ However, given the symbolic importance of eagles to the Roman army, it is more likely that their collection was inspired by something less utilitarian. Ritual deposition or personal adornment are possible factors. One find in particular from Cheriton Rd, Kent, shows that the ulna and radius had been carefully cut in a way that would preserve the wing feathers for use as a fan or brush.²²⁶ A possible artistic

²²² Holmes 2018, 183.

²²³ Durham 2013, 95.

²²⁴ Holmes 2018, 185-7.

²²⁵ Parker 1988, 201.

²²⁶ Holmes 2018, 187.

representation of eagle feathers being used for personal display comes to us from the funeral stele of a gladiator called Aquila, who is depicted wearing a crest of upright feathers. Exactly which bird the feathers came from is unclear, but with a name like Aquila it would not be remiss to assume the gladiator did indeed wear eagle feathers.



Figure 10: Stele of the slave gladiator Aquilo, probably freed after winning a series of fights. First half of the first century CE, from Köln. Held in the Romano-Germanic Museum.

According to Pliny, parts of the eagle could be employed in medicine. Their gall was said to be effective at healing eye wounds and cataracts due to the way the eagle could stare at the sun.²²⁷ This may be another motivating factor behind their capture. Throughout history and in cultures around the world eagle feathers have been attributed certain special powers and properties. They can be used as good luck charms or as decorative elements on ritual and martial items, including headdresses, weapons and shields. They may act as status markers that indicate social standing or battle prowess.²²⁸ Durham points out that they are also used as a

²²⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 29.118, 123

²²⁸ Serjeantsen 2009, 185

form of sympathetic magic. Soldiers may have coveted eagle feathers to bring them success in warfare.²²⁹

The eagle's association with victory was palpable. He was the only "proper guardian spirit of the Roman legion."²³⁰ Eagle symbolism has resounded through the ages, and the armies of Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Napoleon, Bismarck and Hitler all marched beneath eagles.²³¹ The Imperial Eagle is one of the most powerful symbols of all time, and as an augural bird he was impressive beyond belief, deigning only to appear in times of great strife or victory as an oblativ omen, and only interacting with royalty.

1.7 Ravens

The *corvus* is an exceedingly charismatic bird in Roman augury. He was auspicious on the right and ill-omened on the left, but was generally not viewed with as much dread as the owl when he appeared as an inauspicious sign. In Plautus, when a raven croaks on his left Euclio is grateful for having heard it, as its warning gave him time to avert disaster.²³² Part of this mixed attitude may be due to a curious belief recorded by Pliny:

corvi in auspicis soli videntur intellectum habere significationum suarum

"Ravens alone seem to have intelligence of their own significance in auspices."²³³

While all other birds who acted as divine portents were controlled by deities and otherwise unaware of their actions, ravens knew of their own significance. They knew if they were delivering good or bad omens. It adds a sort of human dimension to them, and allows for the possibility of regarding them as smug or fearful when they delivered their portents. This might be why Horace calls on ravens to hold him to his word in this humorous declaration:

²²⁹ Durham 2013, 96

²³⁰ Krauss 1930, 100

²³¹ Mynott 2009, 273.

²³² Plaut. *Aulularia*, 669-73.

²³³ Plin. *HN*, 10.33.

mentior at siquid, merdis caput inquiner albis corvorum

If I lie, may my head be befouled by the white shit of ravens.²³⁴

In this we may see the Roman recognition of the unsurpassed intelligence of ravens:

“Which birds are the most intelligent...? [The] answer often given is crows, ravens, and related birds – the corvids. These large, aggressive, opportunistic omnivores exhibit great behavioural flexibility by taking foods so diverse as fruits, insects, small living vertebrates, carrion, and much else. When removed from the nest before they are well feathered to be hand-raised, they become strongly attached to their foster parents.”²³⁵

Ravens gave powerful positive signs if they sang clearly on the right.²³⁶ After *pullarii* falsified auspices, causing the Roman army to go into battle *contra auspicia*, the consul Papirius discovered the truth and expiated the sin by sending the guilty chicken-keeper to the front line. The unlucky man was struck through the chest with a javelin and Papirius declared the sin had been expiated. A raven cawed to him in agreement, and the army knew the gods were on their side.²³⁷ More often, however, the raven was the messenger of mischief and destruction.²³⁸ In a list of evil portents, Livy states a raven perched on Juno’s own couch in her temple.²³⁹ In another case a raven nested in Juno’s temple.²⁴⁰ It is reported that ravens pecked and ate some of the gold off the Capitol.²⁴¹ Ravens brawling to the left of Tiberius Gracchus as he was on his way to the Capitol made him pause, but his followers told him it would be shameful to turn back on their account, since he was too illustrious to listen to such creatures. He proceeded, and was duly clubbed to death that same day.²⁴² Shortly before his fall from grace, Sejanus took auspices in his capacity as consul (31 CE). He did not see a single favourable sign. Instead, a great flock of ravens circled around him and cried from every direction. The confusion made it impossible to determine the exact provenance of the cries. They then settled on the jail in

²³⁴ Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.37-8

²³⁵ Skutch 1996, 120-1

²³⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.12, 85.

²³⁷ Livy 10.40.1-14

²³⁸ Krauss 1930, 104

²³⁹ Livy 21.62.4

²⁴⁰ Livy 24.10.6

²⁴¹ Livy 30.2.9

²⁴² Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 17.1 See also Julius Obsequens 133, which records ravens dropping pieces of roof tile at his feet.

which Sejanus would shortly be imprisoned.²⁴³ Ravens and crows are opportunistic feeders, and their fondness for dead bodies did not go unnoticed by the Romans.²⁴⁴ It was a colloquial expression that a crucified criminal would make a feast for ravens.²⁴⁵ Like vultures, ravens learned that marching armies meant fresh meat, and so followed them.

“It is a small step from observing a bird to be associated with death, as is the carrion-feeding raven, to connecting it with doom (...) able to predict events both good and evil.”²⁴⁶

Their appetite for human flesh combined with their ability to accurately predict when slaughter would occur undoubtedly had a hand in shaping their reputations.²⁴⁷ A prodigy list records the following event:

Sex. Titius tribunus plebis de agris dividendis populo cum repugnantibus collegis pertinaciter legem ferret, corvi duo numero in alto volantes ita pugnaverunt supra contionem ut rostris unguibusque lacerarentur. Aruspices sacra Apollini litanda et de lege, quae ferebatur, supersedendum pronuntiarunt.

“Sextus Titius, tribune of the plebs, persisted in offering legislation on land distribution against the resistance of his colleagues, when ravens, two in number flying above fought fiercely over the assembly, lacerating one another with beak and claw. The *haruspices* mandated that an offering should be made to Apollo, and that the proposed action should be abandoned.”²⁴⁸

Another prodigy runs thus:

Mithridati adversus socios bellum paranti prodigia apparuerunt. Stratopedo, ubi

²⁴³ Dio Cass. 58.5.7

²⁴⁴ Macrobi. *Sat.* 7.5.11

²⁴⁵ Hor. *Epist.* 1.16.48; Petr. *Sat.* 58.

²⁴⁶ Armstrong 1958, 73.

²⁴⁷ The Norse view of ravens makes for a useful comparison here. To make war was to ‘feed and please the raven’ (*hrafna seðja, hrafna gleðja*); see Hjelmquist 142. Norse poetry identifies ravens with war, blood and corpses; see Hjelmquist 143. And they too spoke of the ravens’ love for human offal - *Hrafnar skulu þér á hám galga slíta sjónir ór* – ‘the ravens shall tear out your eyes in the high gallows.’ See stanza 45 in *Fjölsvinnsmál*, cited in Hjelmquist 144. Yet for all that, they loved the raven, and treasured him as a mascot and a familiar.

²⁴⁸ Julius Obsequens 99.

senatus haberi solet, corvi vulturem tundendo rostris occiderunt.

“While Mithridates prepared for war against our allies, prodigies appeared. At Stratopedon, where the senate usually meets, ravens killed a vulture by beating it with their beaks”.²⁴⁹

One happy incident deserves close inspection. In 349 BCE, a Roman soldier called Valerius Corvus defeated a Gaul in single combat, allegedly because a raven appeared and pecked the face of his opponent. This show of divine favour through the assistance of the bird led to him adopting the name of Corvus.²⁵⁰ This myth has been combed extensively by historians, and not necessarily for auspicial lore. Oakley points out that Gallic helmets often had animals fixed to the top, and that this tale may come from Valerius capturing the enemy’s helmet which had a raven fixed atop it.²⁵¹ An iron Celtic helmet from the second or third century BC, found in Ciulesti Romania, was crowned with a raven that had hinged wings, and which would “flap” in battle. Others question which deity was thought to have sent the raven. The bird was sometimes associated with Juno, Minerva and Apollo, but not in connection with warfare. However, to send a raven would have been in character for the Celtic battle goddesses Badbh and Morrigan, to whom ravens were sacred, and it was said to be a lucky sign if a raven followed a warrior.²⁵² It is possible that this was meant as a co-option of the Celtic goddesses, a show that the native gods were on the Romans’ side.²⁵³ Whatever the merit of those arguments, it is undeniable that this myth uses accurate augural terminology. Jupiter often sent ravens as messengers. This raven conforms to our understanding of what constituted a positive sign, for it was said to come from the sky and landed firmly. Valerius formally accepted this omen, said a prayer, and when the Gaul was mown down the bird flew east and was lost from sight – *ex conspectu elatus orientem petit*. The same flight pattern was accomplished by Romulus’ vultures and an eagle sent to Marius.²⁵⁴

Ravens and crows were interred in graves in Iron Age and Roman Britain. Many of these showed signs of having feathers deliberately removed, perhaps for use in decoration or as charms. It is suggested that the helmets with metal ravens mounted on the top may have had

²⁴⁹ Julius Obsequens 88.

²⁵⁰ Livy 7.26.1-10; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 15.1.1-4; Gell. *NA*, 9.11.1-10.

²⁵¹ Oakley 1985, 394

²⁵² Ingersoll 1923, 161.

²⁵³ Sax 2003, 55. See Armstrong 1958, 83 for more on the ‘Raven of Battle’ and the Celtic raven goddesses.

²⁵⁴ Ennius, in Cic. *Div.* 1.107-8. Cic. *Div.* 1.106.

feathers glued to their flapping wings – a much more impressive sight than mere pieces of metal clattering against one’s head.²⁵⁵ It is uncertain why these birds were interred in the graves, but one possible explanation is that they were pets or animal familiars, tamed for companionship or ritual purposes.²⁵⁶ Raven bones have been found in Roman camps in Britain, thought to be camp sacrifices to native gods.²⁵⁷

A raven’s cry was important when taking auspices, possibly because he was capable of making such a wide variety of sounds. Isidorus claims that *corvi* were so named because they speak *a cordis voce* – from a voice in its chest, in unmistakable croaks and groans that rise gutturally from the chest.²⁵⁸ Pliny states that it is especially bad if a raven gulps as it croaks, as if it were choking. Its ability to make watery sounds may be why it holds such widespread esteem as a weather prophet.²⁵⁹

*Ego cui timebo
 providus auspex
 antequam stantis repetat paludes
 imbrium divina avis inminentum
 oscinem coruum prece suscitabo
 solis ab ortu.*

“But I, the provident auspican, fear for you, and with prayer I will summon a solitary singing raven from the east before the divine bird of imminent rain returns to standing water.”²⁶⁰

This association is recorded in Greek literature too. Both Theophrastus and Aratus state the raven can signify rain sent from Zeus.²⁶¹ Aristotle informs us that two ravens lived in the temple of Zeus at Pedasa in Caria, leading us to conjecture that their association with the god of thunder may be responsible for their status as harbingers of rain and storms.²⁶² Among the

²⁵⁵ Serjeantsen and Morris 2011, 98-9.

²⁵⁶ Serjeantsen and Morris 2011, 100

²⁵⁷ Johnson 1968, 76.

²⁵⁸ Isid. *Etym.* 12.4.13

²⁵⁹ Plin. *HN*, 10.33

²⁶⁰ Hor. *Carm.* 3.27

²⁶¹ Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 6.16; Aratus, *Phaen.* 963-9.

²⁶² Aristotle, *De mirab.* 844b 8.

Norse he was a storm bird, as the raven god Odin's son was Thor the Thunderer. Even in the Bible he is associated with rainstorms in the tale of Noah's Ark, where it is said Noah first released a raven from the ark, and then a dove.

Aelian states that Apollo afflicted the raven with thirst, and his croaking betrays this punishment (though he personally does not believe the tale).²⁶³ He goes on to say:

“The Raven must really be the most clamorous of birds and have the largest variety of tones, for it can be taught to speak like a human being. For playful moods it has one voice, for serious moods another, and if it is delivering answers from the gods, then its voice assumes a devout and prophetic tone.”²⁶⁴

Ravens are excellent mimics and hand-reared birds may be taught to speak. In fact, for the Romans, ravens and crows were the chief speaking birds, and often tamed and taught phrases.²⁶⁵ It is not until the first century CE that they begin to be supplanted by superior foreign talkers such as Indian mynahs and parrots. Their ability to communicate is extraordinary:

“Corvids have big brains – the largest, relative to body size, of any bird. They also have big vocabularies. Dozens of vocalisations have been described in the ornithological literature, and the birds are thought to vary meaning by modifying intensity, pitch, sequence and repetition rate.”²⁶⁶

However, this does not amount to delivering weather forecasts:

“What makes a raven croak? (...) These birds share foraging information when they discover a good amount of food. By scouting separately, members of a group can improve the chances of spotting such sporadic foods; pooling information is an effective strategy.”²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Ael. NA, 1.47. For another version of this legend, see: Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 40.

²⁶⁴ Ael. NA, 2.51.

²⁶⁵ Macrob. *Sat.* 2.4.29–30.

²⁶⁶ Wheye 2008, 99.

²⁶⁷ Wheye 2008, 13.

It appears that the belief that ravens were weather prophets must be partly blamed on the Romans' interpretation of ravens' communicative cries as indicative of thirst, or imitative of raindrops, and partly because the raven was caught in a folkloric web across Eurasia that tied him to rainstorms.²⁶⁸

Overall, the Roman attitude toward ravens is more positive than that of the Greeks. The Greeks shunned ravens for being portents of death. The birds are said to have prophesied the death of Alexander the Great and foretold disaster when they suddenly attacked the statue of Athena at Delphi and pecked away all the gold just as the Athenians were preparing to leave for their ill-fated Sicilian expedition.²⁶⁹ Dreaming of ravens was said to foretell death.²⁷⁰ The Roman tendency to tame and speak to ravens, and their blatant anthropomorphising of the intelligent birds may account for the grains of positivity. In Augustan poetry, as Apollo became more important to the Romans as a god of augury, the raven was consecrated to him because of his gift of prophecy.²⁷¹ We can consider the raven to be one of the *oscines*, a right-hand bird capable of giving positive and negative signs in equal measure with its large repertoire of distinct cries.

1.8 Crows

The *cornix* shared many similarities with the raven as an augural bird, but also many crucial differences. For one, the crow was a left-hand bird, and therefore had to be carefully distinguished from the right-hand raven. Fortunately, this was a simple task even at a distance for the Romans. The pure black carrion crow (*Corvus corone*) is a native only in Spain, north-western Europe and Britain. The Italian crow was, and still is, the hooded crow (*Corvus cornix*), which has a jacket of grey feathers.²⁷² It, too, was thought to take its name from the sound it made, because it croaks – *coracinare* – in its throat.²⁷³ The crow was associated with corpses, and Isidorus records that it showed a special fondness for eyes, seeking them out first when it

²⁶⁸ Ael. NA, 6.19.

²⁶⁹ Plut. Vit. Alex. 27, 73; Paus. 10.15.5. Aesch. Ag. 1473 describes the murderess Clytemnestra as a raven.

²⁷⁰ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 4.32.

²⁷¹ Hor. Carm. 3.27.11; Ov. Met. 5.329. See also: Ael. NA, 1.48.

²⁷² Pollard 1977, 25. The hooded crow was the native in Greece and Egypt too.

²⁷³ Isid. Etym. 12.7.43. Ravens and crows are often observed eating eyes. Their relatively weak beaks are incapable of tearing flesh or breaking bone, so if they alight on a fresh carcass they will feed on the soft, exposed parts; namely, the eyes, the tongue and around the anus. Only once other predators have torn the carcass apart can they reach other tidbits. See Fountopoulos & Litinas 2005, 17.

alighted on a dead body.²⁷⁴ He adds the detail that it was attentive to the concerns of humans and could show where ambush lay, and predict the future – though, as a Christian writing retrospectively, he holds it a sin to believe that God would entrust His wisdom to mere crows.²⁷⁵ A crow’s age was proverbial, and it was believed they lived for many decades.²⁷⁶ Ovid dreamt he saw a black crow pecking the breast of a white heifer, and the crow was interpreted to represent an aged female procuress.²⁷⁷ Crows and ravens are indeed long-lived, sometimes living up to twenty years in the wild. It’s not quite as long as the ancients claimed, but it’s certainly longer than the average of three years for small passerine birds.

This notion of longevity, combined with their garrulous, intelligent natures, and their habit of living alongside humans in family groups of their own probably contributed to the conception of crows as knowledgeable and interested in human affairs. Propertius says certain truths may be divined by one who understands the beating wings of a crow.²⁷⁸ Virgil writes an example of a personal warning delivered by a crow:

*Quod nisi me quacumque nouas incidere litis
ante sinistra caua monuisset ab ilice cornix,
nec tuos hic Moeris nec uiueret ipse Menalcas*

“Had that crow on my left just now, from the hollow oak tree, not warned me to leave off my quarrel, neither your Moeris nor Menalcas would be living now.”²⁷⁹

Horace references the tale that a crow once tried to dress herself in the cast-off feathers of a peacock.²⁸⁰ The lesson appears to be that despite attempts to beautify herself, she could not disguise her true, black feathers and only made a fool of herself. The crow, in broad terms, symbolised age, darkness and misfortune, and her appearance was portentous, but like all augural birds the interpretation depended on context.

²⁷⁴ Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.43.

²⁷⁵ Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.44.

²⁷⁶ Hor. *Carm.* 3.17.13; 4.13.25. According to Hesiod, the crow lived for nine generations of men; see fragment 304.

²⁷⁷ Ov. *Am.* 3.5

²⁷⁸ Prop. 4.1a.105

²⁷⁹ Verg. *Ecl.* 9.14-16

²⁸⁰ Hor. *Epist.* 1.3.17-20



Figure 11: Pompeii, House of the Golden Bracelet. The grey-black hooded crow may be seen in the top middle.

Crows also had special significance as symbols of conjugal fidelity.²⁸¹ The Romans believed that they mated for life and remained faithful to their partners even in death. While it is true that ravens and crows are monogamous, and often raise broods with the same bird for years on end, the idea that they remained single if widowed is an exaggeration. Yet this explains why wedding guests earnestly hoped to see or hear crows when nuptial auspices were taken, and why a single crow was an evil omen at a wedding.²⁸² Two or more crows meant family and a happy marriage. A single, unpaired crow was a widow, and it threatened the bride with widowhood.²⁸³ Hera, patroness of marriage, was sometimes shown in conference with crows.²⁸⁴ Like ravens, crows were seen as harbingers of storms.²⁸⁵ Virgil writes:

tum cornix plena pluuiam uocat improba uoce

“Then the wicked crow calls down rain with her deep voice.”²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ Klingender 1971, 92; Ael. NA, 3.9.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Foufopoulos & Litinas 2005, 15.

²⁸⁴ Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 3.923-51

²⁸⁵ Plin. *HN*, 18.363

²⁸⁶ Verg. *G.* 1.388

The crow was a talking bird, but her vocalisations were not considered as impressive as the raven's. However, Suetonius gives us this story about the demise of Domitian:

Ante paucos quam occideretur menses cornix in Capitolio elocuta est: ἔσται πάντα καλῶς, nec defuit qui ostentum sic interpretaretur: Nuper Tarpeio quae sedit culmine cornix “Est bene” non potuit dicere, dixit: “Erit.”

A few months before Domitian was killed, a crow perched on the Capitol and cried “all will be well”. Some interpreted this omen as follows: recently on the Tarpeian roof there sat a crow who could not say “it is well”, and so said, “it will be”.²⁸⁷

To the Roman ear, the cry of a crow sounded like “cras! cras!” – “tomorrow! tomorrow!”. It was a shout of hope, a cry that better times were coming, which may be why she was thought to deliver this message.

In fable, it is said that the *cornix* was jealous of the greater significance of the raven, for crows were not particularly ominous for the Greeks.²⁸⁸ The same may be said of the Romans, for although the crow was an important augural bird, it is evident she did not quite have the same charisma as the raven. Nevertheless, like the raven, we can count the crow among the *oscines*, capable of giving both positive and negative signs, and of particular interest for those taking private auspices, especially nuptial auspices.

1.9 Owls

Nocturnae Aves – night birds – were the most fearful of all portents and inauspicious of birds. We think of owls as wise, but to the Romans the owl was *avis turpissima*, associated with death, night, evil spirits and witches. The Athenians alone considered the owl venerable, since they likened her to Athena.²⁸⁹ Her bird was the little owl, still called the *Athene noctua*, and so identified today because ancient depictions of the bird are spotted and lack the tufted ‘horns’

²⁸⁷ Suet. *Dom.* 23.2.

²⁸⁸ Aesop, *Fables*, 125; Pollard 1977, 127.

²⁸⁹ Harting 1871, 83.

of the larger varieties.²⁹⁰ Minerva was also attached to this owl, and the tawny owl too, but owls were not revered by Romans as a result, and they were certainly not subject to protective taboos.²⁹¹ Nevertheless, as long as it had no horns, an owl in art could indicate Minerva's presence or benediction. Graffiti on a Pompeian shop front gives us this delightful reimagining of the first line of the *Aeneid* - *fullones ululam ego cano non arma virumque* – “I sing of fullers and the owl, not arms and a man.”²⁹² Minerva was the patron deity of fullers, who did their work at night, so an owl can be seen with them.²⁹³ This graffiti is made more enigmatic by the fact that it was discovered outside the workshop of M. Fabius Ululitremus – Owl-Shaker – in the context of an image that depicted Aeneas himself.²⁹⁴



Figure 12: Fullers and the owl. National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv.

9774

²⁹⁰ Thompson 1936, 46.

²⁹¹ Arnott 2007, 14.

²⁹² *CIL* IV 9131

²⁹³ Jashemski 1993, 135. In both the inscription and the painting, the tawny owl rather than the little owl seems to be meant.

²⁹⁴ Pompeii IX.13.5; *CIL* IV 7963.

Fullers and the owl are linked by another piece of graffiti in Pompeii, which is even accompanied by a crude drawing of the creature:

Cresce(n)s fullonibus et ululae suae sal(utem) (...) ulula est

Greeting from Crescens to the fullers and his owl. (It is an owl).²⁹⁵

It would appear *ulula est* was meant to clarify what the drawing beneath it represented. Small, hornless owls seem to have been tolerated, even liked by certain groups.

Proserpina's owl was the ghostly barn owl (*Tyto alba*), the *parra*, which Plautus names as a bird of ill omen. Horace declares, *impios parrae recinentis omen/ducat* – “let the omen of barn owls screaming lead forth the wicked.”²⁹⁶ However, a *parra* on the right hand became a lucky sign.²⁹⁷ In contrast to other owls, the barn owl does not hoot but lets out a bloodcurdling, humanlike scream that would doubtless terrify any innocent Roman walking home at night.

It is easy to account for the owl's poor reputation throughout Roman literature.

“The owl's natural characteristics, its sudden pounce on its victims, its eerie cry, its preference for darkness, and the carrion smell of its nest made it the sinister messenger of the death goddesses.”²⁹⁸

An owl appearing during the day was a particularly bad omen. What may have contributed to this dread of owls appearing during the day is the fact that an owl emerging in daylight is likely to be attacked by large numbers of small diurnal birds. This behavior is called “mobbing”, and it is an instinctive response to drive out the threatening, distinctive and unwelcome intruder. As early as the 6th century BCE, bird-catchers used this behavior to their advantage, and would capture an owl to use as bait. They would place her in a tree, cover the branches with birdlime, and collect all the angry little birds that got caught while attacking the owl.²⁹⁹ A late 3rd century owl mosaic from Thysdrus, El-Djem Tunisia, depicts mobbing in action. In it, a togate owl is

²⁹⁵ *CIL* IV 4118

²⁹⁶ Hor. *Carm.* 3.27.1-2

²⁹⁷ Plaut. *Asin.* 260

²⁹⁸ Rowland 1978, 115

²⁹⁹ Morris 2009, 166; Fischer 2013, 263.

surrounded by dead songbirds. Above the mosaic, a line reads *invidia rumpuntur aves, neque noctua curat* – ‘the birds burst with envy, but the little owl cares not.’ This floor mosaic was discovered in the bathhouse of Thysdrus in North Africa and displays the insignia of a local troupe of performers, the Telegenii. The mosaic seems to exhibit their status and their immunity to attacks from those in the city who resent their influence.³⁰⁰ This metaphorical image expresses the idea that others birds attacked decoy owls out of envy, a belief recorded in Aristotle. By contrast, Pliny believes the birds mob the owl because they hate her, and on this particular issue Pliny is correct.³⁰¹ The animosity of other birds towards the owl, not to mention the fact that they are prey to her, seemed to exacerbate the Romans’ dislike. Nevertheless, this widespread cultural trend could not resist the predilections of a strange few who seemed to delight in the company of owls. Aelian describes with mystified revulsion the ability of owls to charm fowlers, who end up carrying them on their shoulders as beloved pets.³⁰² We can compare this to the fullers’ affection for their mascot bird, perhaps an indulgence of those engaged in such low-class work that was shunned by those of higher rank – they enjoyed the association with a reviled animal.

Out of all the owls, the most dreadful was the *bubo*, commonly identified as the Eurasian eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*). Its fearsome size, great tufted horns and chilling hoot made it a monster to the Romans. These enormous birds had a connection to witches, as in Apuleius the witch Pamphile transforms herself into a *bubo*.³⁰³ Pliny writes:

Uncos unguis et nocturnae aves habent, ut noctuae, bubo, ululae. omnium horum hebetes interdiu oculi. bubo funebris et maxime abominatus publicis praecipue auspiciis deserta incolit nec tantum desolata sed dira etiam et inaccessa, noctis monstrum, nec cantu aliquo vocalis sed gemitu. itaque in urbibus aut omnino in luce visus dirum ostentum est; privatorum domibus insidentem plurimum scio non fuisse feralem. volat numquam quo libuit, sed transversus aufertur. Capitolii cellam ipsam intravit Sexto Palpellio Histro L. Pedanio coss., propter quod nonis Martiis urbs lustrata est eo anno.

³⁰⁰ Porstner 2020.

³⁰¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.39.

³⁰² Ael. *NA*, 1.29.

³⁰³ Apul. *Met.* 3.23.

“Night birds have hooked talons, such as the little owl, the eagle-owl, and the tawny owl. All of these are weak-sighted in the daytime. The eagle-owl is a fatal bird and a most abominable omen, especially at public auspices. It lives in deserted places that are not merely empty of human life, but also fearful and inaccessible. A portent of the night, its cry is not tuneful but rather like a lamenting groan. Therefore, when seen in cities or in daylight, in all circumstances, it is a deathly portent; but I know of several cases where it has perched on private houses without fatal results. It never flies where it wants to go, instead sweeping slantways out of its course. One entered the very shrine of the Capitol in the consulship of Sextus Palpellius Hister and Lucius Pedanius; on its account the city of Rome was purified on the 7th of March that year.”

The appearance of a *bubo* at the public auspices was undoubtedly the worst sign one could receive, and Pliny’s rather reasonable aside that he has seen the *bubo* perch on a private house without any fatalities indicates that generally the *bubo* was believed to bring death wherever it went. Unlike the *parra*, which might give a positive omen on the right-hand, the appearance of a *bubo* could not be positive under any circumstances. One can only imagine the sheer terror it must have caused ordinary people as well as statesmen, since it could threaten individuals and the state alike. The *bubo* was used to presage the death of Dido.³⁰⁴ Allegedly it also presaged the assassination of Julius Caesar.³⁰⁵ Pliny records a second purification that took place on account of a *bubo* in 107 BCE, during the consulship of Lucius Cassius Longinus and Gaius Marius. These extreme reactions to portentous birds are corroborated by Livy’s list of prodigies as reproduced by Julius Obsequens, where *bubones* are common omens. The year 135 BCE saw this dramatic scene:

Bubonis vox primum in Capitolio dein circa urbem audita. Quae avis praemio posito ab aucupe capta combustaque; cinis eius in Tiberim dispersus.

The cry of an eagle-owl was heard first in the Capitol, and then around the City. When a reward was offered, the bird was caught by a fowler and burned. Its ashes were scattered in the Tiber.

³⁰⁴ Verg. *Aen.* 4.462.

³⁰⁵ Ov. *Met.* 15.791.

In 134 BCE, though no owl is mentioned, there is a similarly disturbing scene that can probably be blamed on a *bubo*:

In Capitolio nocte avis gemitus similes hominis dedit.

At night on the Capitol a bird gave groans that sounded human.

In 133 BCE a *bubo* was seen, as well as an *avis ignota*. 125 and 122 BCE both record the sighting of a *bubo* on the Capitol. In 108, a ‘firebird’ and *bubo* were seen in the City. In 104, one was seen outside the City. Here no purification is recorded. In 99, a *bubo* was sighted and the City underwent purification. In 98, a *bubo* was seen on the Capitol and expiatory offerings were made. In 96 a *bubo* was caught and killed on the Capitol. In 92, a *bubo* was killed in the temple *Fortunae Equestris*.³⁰⁶ In Tacitus we also have the prodigy of evil birds perching on the Capitol during Claudius’ reign, which merited a lustration.³⁰⁷ Purification after such a portent involved citizens and pontifices solemnly walking around the *pomerium*. In times of crisis, the sacred boundary of Rome had to be purified and strengthened.³⁰⁸ The appearance of a *bubo* was such a terrible portent that it threatened the safety of Rome herself, and every effort was immediately made to avert calamity.

These reactions to owl omens reveal that Romans actively sought to kill owls that perched or hooted in the City as a method of expiation, and that a fowler might even be employed to do just that. Ordinary people beset by hooting owls employed similar methods to avert calamity, with Apuleius informing us it was common to kill an owl by nailing it to one’s house, thereby expiating the evil they had presaged through their own suffering.³⁰⁹ This explains why the following story was an example of insolence:

etiam militis non libertatem tantum sed et temeritatem tulit. in quadam villa inquietas noctes agebat, rumpente somnum eius crebro noctuae cantu. prendendam curavit noctuam miles aucupii peritus et spe ingentis praemii pertulit. laudato imperator mille nummos dari iussit. ille ausus est dicere, “malo vivat,” avemque dimisit. quis non miratus est non offenso Caesare abisse militem contumacem?

³⁰⁶ Julius Obsequens, 135, 134, 125, 122, 108, 104, 99, 98, 96, 92.

³⁰⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.43.1

³⁰⁸ Beard et al. 1998, 178. For a description of the purification, see Lucan 1.584-604.

³⁰⁹ Apul. *Met.* 3.23.

“In the case of a soldier [Augustus] bore speech that was more brazen than free. He passed some restless nights in a villa where his sleep was disturbed by a little owl’s hooting. A soldier skilled at bird-catching took pains to capture the owl, and in hope of a large reward brought it forward. The emperor praised him and ordered a thousand sesterces be given to him – but the daring soldier said, “I’d prefer it lived,” and freed the bird. Who did not marvel when Caesar took no offence but let the defiant soldier go too?”³¹⁰

If it had been a monstrous *bubo* and not a comparatively harmless *noctua* – little owl – Augustus probably would not have been so forgiving.



Figure 13: *Noctua with the trappings of Minerva. Pompeii, Casa del Menandro. It is interesting that depictions of hornless owls in art are plentiful, but horned owls are rare.*

Varro notes that some owls have onomatopoeic names such as *bubo* and *ulula*. This grants us the ability to nail down the identification, as an eagle-owl’s hoot really does sound like a morbid rendition of the word *bubo*. As for *ulula*, it is often translated as ‘screech owl’. This is misleading, for although colloquially and historically the barn owl was sometimes called a ‘screech owl’, strictly speaking there are no screech owls native to Europe; they are restricted to the Americas. To avoid confusion, the bird the Romans called *ulula* should be translated as ‘tawny owl’ (*Strix aluco*). Proof that the Roman *ulula* and our tawny owl are the

³¹⁰ Macrob. Sat. 2.4.26.

same come straight from the name: the tawny owl is the only European owl whose cry could match the onomatopoeic *ulula* sound. While the female makes a *ke-whit* sound, the male's call is a distinctive – and unsettling – three-note hoot. Pliny records that the learned Nigidius says owls have nine distinct cries.³¹¹ We can safely count owls among the *oscines* that deliver portents through their voices, and it is plain that any augur worth his salt would need to identify these different cries and the associated portents. Their nocturnal habits mean that it is far more likely the average Roman would hear an owl rather than see one, and the superstition surrounding them probably meant most people learned to identify different owls by ear. The bat was also included among the night birds as a consequence of its nocturnal habits and birdlike screams:

“The little owl, the tawny owl, the eagle owl, the barn owl, the little horned owl, the long-eared owl and also the bat and any other kind of nocturnal bird all signify failure in regard to business enterprises... The bat alone is auspicious for pregnant women. For it does not lay eggs like other birds but is live-bearing, has milk in its breasts, and raises its own nestlings (...) If these birds nest in the house, it means that the house will be deserted.”³¹²

There are several unidentified bird species among the night birds, including the ‘firebird’ whose appearance merited a purification.

Inauspicata est et incendiaria avis, quam propter saepenumero lustratam urbem in annalibus invenimus, sicut L. Cassio C. Mario coss., quo anno et bubone viso lustratam esse. quae sit avis ea non reperitur nec traditur. quidam ita interpretantur, incendiariam esse quaecumque apparuerit carbonem ferens ex aris vel altaribus: alii spinturnicem eam vocant, sed haec ipsa quae esset inter aves qui se scire diceret non inveni. cliviam quoque avem ab antiquis nominatam animadverto ignorari—quidam clamatoriam dicunt, Labeo prohibitoriam; et apud Nigidium insuper appellatur avis quae aquilarum ova frangat. sunt praeterea conplura genera depicta in Etrusca disciplina saeculis non visa, quae nunc defecisse mirum est cum abundant etiam quae gula humana populatur.

³¹¹ Varro, *Ling.* 5.9.76; Plin. *HN*, 10.39.

³¹² Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 3.65. Translation taken from White 1975.

“There is also an inauspicious bird called the firebird, on whose account the city has been cleansed many times, such as during the consulship of Lucius Cassius and Gaius Marius, the same year an eagle-owl’s appearance occasioned a purification. Exactly what bird this is I could not discover, nor is it recorded. Some interpret the firebird to be any bird that appears bearing a coal from an altar or burnt offering. Others call it a *spinturnix*, but I have not come across anyone who professes to know what particular species of bird that is. I also notice that the bird the ancients called ‘clivia’ is unidentified – some call it a ‘screecher’; Labeo, ‘warning owl,’; and on top of this in Nigidius there is a bird that’s said to break eagles’ eggs. In addition, there are many varieties depicted in Etruscan lore that have not been seen for generations. It is miraculous that they should be extinct when those devastated by man’s appetite remain abundant.”³¹³

Plautus uses the word *spinturnicium* – a diminutive meaning little *spinturnix* – and describes it as a bird that hunts its prey.³¹⁴ If the *spinturnix*/firebird are the same creature, as Pliny suggests, it is possible it is our old friend the eagle-owl, for in his commentary on the *Aeneid*, Servius notes that if an eagle-owl brings something from a tomb, perches on a house and shrieks, it is a sign the house will catch fire.³¹⁵ The eagle-owl also has huge orange eyes which, to the imaginative mind, might seem to burn. Another theory is that the *spinturnix*/firebird is the alpine chough, since this bird has been reported carrying flaming objects, has orange legs, and choughs were called *pyrrhocorax* in Greek and in Latin – fire raven.³¹⁶

Another unidentified night bird is the *strix*. There are mixed descriptions of the creature, and Pliny admits he does not quite know what it is.³¹⁷ Ovid gives us a haunting vision in the *Fasti*, describing hooked claws, light grey feathers, a piercing shriek and a penchant for attacking children.³¹⁸ Plautus claims it feeds on the intestines of living people.³¹⁹ Tibullus, Lucan and Statius list it alongside the funereal *bubo* when describing evil omens and supernatural stirrings.³²⁰ Isidorus links the word *strix* to *stridere*, explaining that it was named

³¹³ Plin. *HN*, 36-7.

³¹⁴ Plaut. *Mil.* 989-90

³¹⁵ Serv. *Aen.* 4.462.

³¹⁶ Arnott 2007, 222

³¹⁷ Plin. *HN*, 11.232

³¹⁸ Ov. *Fast.* 6.131-40

³¹⁹ Plaut. *Pseud.* 820-21

³²⁰ Luc. *Phars.* 6.688-89; Tib. 1.5.52; Stat. *Theb.* 3.508-9; see also Ov. *Am.* 1.12.19-20.

for its shrill scream.³²¹ It is therefore likely that the *strix* is a barn owl to match its screech and whitish feathers. But these descriptions of the *strix* make it a monster fit to haunt children's stories, and should perhaps indicate how an ordinary owl took on nightmarish dimensions in Roman minds.

Owls loomed large in the Roman imagination as harbingers of doom and detestable monsters of the night. They distinguished between them largely on the basis of their cries, and dreaded the sounds of hooting and screeching in the night, believing that death and calamity were sure to follow. They exaggerated the fearful qualities of the owl to an extraordinary degree, speaking of them as monsters, purifying their city after an unsolicited appearance, and killing them as a form of self-defense against the misfortune they carried on their swift, silent wings. Yet while the 'horned' varieties seem to have been shunned completely, those without horns – the barn owl, little owl and tawny owl – occasionally crop up in positive ways, dedicated to Minerva, adopted as patron by workers of the night, and in the case of the barn owl even delivering positive signs at auspices when seen on the traditionally unlucky right-hand side.

1.10 Woodpecker

The *picus* enjoyed great prestige as an augural bird in Rome, and there is strong evidence to suggest that the superstitions surrounding him were primarily indigenous Italian and not Hellenic in origin. The woodpecker was often hailed as a weather prophet, with the green woodpecker retaining its status as a rain bird even today.³²² It is the green woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) that the Greeks chiefly noted, and though their woodpecker lore is paltry when compared to Rome's, it is worth cataloguing briefly. Antoninus Liberalis (c.19) preserves the legend of a man called Keleos (Κελεός) who entered the cave of Zeus to steal honey and was transformed into a green woodpecker – a *keleos*. Green woodpeckers do, in fact, pay unwelcome visits to beehives in winter, searching for larvae, and are occasionally confused with the bee-eater, which makes this a rather mundane tale.³²³ But the particular connection with Zeus warrants further investigation. In Aristophanes' *The Birds*, the characters speak of a

³²¹ Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.42.

³²² Flegg 2001, 156

³²³ Krappe 1941, 243

time when birds, not gods, ruled the world, and say that Zeus won't be in a hurry to return his sceptre to a woodpecker tapping an oak.³²⁴ Harrison suggests that this refers to Zeus eclipsing an old woodpecker god of some kind, naming the legendary king of Eleusis, Keleos, as a possible suspect. This Keleos, distinct from the aforementioned honey-thief, is the father of Demophon and Triptolemos. In return for treating her hospitably, Demeter tried to bestow immortality on Keleos' son Demophon, but was interrupted and so gave Triptolemos the first wheat instead.³²⁵ He went on to become the Greek demi-god of sowing in the Eleusinian mysteries. In Ovid's Latin version of the tale, Demeter tries to give immortality to Triptolemos himself, and when interrupted she tells his mother:

iste quidem mortalis erit, sed primus arabit et seret et culta praemia tollet humo.

"Your boy shall indeed be mortal, but he will be the first to plow, sow, and reap a great bounty from the earth."³²⁶

The first plowman was the son of Keleos – "green woodpecker" – on which point Armstrong elaborates, pointing out that when searching for ants a green woodpecker "[thrusts] its bill into the earth in similar fashion to the prong of wood which served as share on a primitive plough."³²⁷ This connects the woodpecker to farming and to the weather in Greece, but the paucity of other woodpecker-stories tells us most of the Roman tales must have sprung up largely independent of Greek influence.³²⁸

Plutarch remarks that the Romans showed a curious reverence for the woodpecker and that unlike the Greeks the Romans observed the black woodpecker rather than the green.³²⁹ With his impressive size, sleek black body and a bright crown of red plumage on his head, the black woodpecker was, to the Romans, the bird of Mars, and its scientific name today pays homage to that – *Dryocopus martius*. Exactly how the woodpecker became the familiar of the god of war makes for a detailed study, but first and foremost his prodigious strength must be considered. The birds are hardy and strong and they make a sound like thunder when they drill

³²⁴ Ar. Av. 480-5

³²⁵ Homeric Hymn to Demeter 96 – 479.

³²⁶ Ov. Fast. 4.559-60

³²⁷ Armstrong 1958, 104

³²⁸ See Krappe 1941, 241-257; Harrison 1912 101-110; Halliday 1922, 110-112 for further discussions on the woodpecker's alleged significance in Greece.

³²⁹ Plut. Quaest. Rom. 21

into wood. Their violent lifestyles are difficult to ignore, and the black woodpecker is the largest and most striking of the European varieties.³³⁰

In mythology, the woodpecker figures in the tale of Rome's founding. The twin sons of Mars, Romulus and Remus, were suckled by a she-wolf after they were cast aside by their pitiless uncle, and a woodpecker brought them morsels of food as if they were her own chicks. Ovid asks:

lacte quis infantes nescit crevisse ferino, et picum expositis saepe tulisse cibos?

“Who does not know how the babies thrived on the milk of a wild beast, and how a woodpecker often brought food for the foundlings?”³³¹

According to Plutarch this is why both wolves and woodpeckers were venerated by the Romans. Both were closely associated with dense woods, and both still inhabit the same wooded areas today.³³² This connection to trees is echoed elsewhere in Ovid. When pregnant with Romulus and Remus, Rhea Silvia dreamed that her uncle was trying to cut down two magnificent palm trees, when *Martia picus avis* – Mars' bird, the woodpecker – and a she-wolf came to their defense and saved the trees.³³³

The bird's association with Mars goes beyond Rome's founding. In Italy the Picentes allegedly settled in Picenum ('Woodpecker Town') because Mars' woodpecker led them there.

Ἔστι δ' ἡ Πικεντίνη μετὰ τὰς τῶν Ὀμβρικῶν πόλεις τὰς μεταξὺ Ἀριμίνου καὶ Ἀγκῶνος. ὥρμηται δ' ἐκ τῆς Σαβίνης οἱ Πικεντῖνοι, δρυοκολάπτου τὴν ὁδὸν ἡγησαμένου τοῖς ἀρχηγέταις, ἀφ' οὗ καὶ τοῦνομα· πῖκον γὰρ τὸν ὄρνιν τοῦτον ὀνομάζουσι, καὶ νομίζουσιν Ἄρεως ἱερόν.

“Next after those cities of the Ombrici that are between Ariminum and Ancona comes the Picentine country. The Picentini are originally from the Sabine country, a woodpecker having led the way for their progenitors; and hence their name, for they

³³⁰ Attenborough 1998, 88.

³³¹ Ov. *Fast.* 3.53-4.

³³² Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 4.2, 7.6.

³³³ Ov. *Fast.* 32-40.

call this bird ‘picus’ and consider it sacred to Mars.”³³⁴

The woodpecker as a guide or wayfinder is attested elsewhere in European folklore, leading Krappe to posit that people navigating the woods, particularly hunters, took note of where woodpeckers had scored trees to avoid getting lost.³³⁵

Roman mythology also alludes to a legendary king called Picus. In the *Aeneid*, King Latinus entertains the Trojans in the sacred temple of Laurentian Picus. This temple, which also doubles as a palace, is noted for its beautiful grove, as well as for a carving of Picus that depicts the king clutching a Quirinal staff in his hand – that is, an augur’s *lituus*. Virgil tells us this king was changed into a bird by Circe, thus becoming his own namesake – *picus*, the augural woodpecker.³³⁶ In a different version, Ovid relates in detail how Circe transfigured Picus into a woodpecker for spurning her advances.³³⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus states King Picus was transformed into a woodpecker and went on to give oracles,³³⁸ while Plutarch adds the detail that Picus is the son of Mars and that Romans were forbidden to harm woodpeckers.³³⁹ For the Romans, Picus was a king, an augur, and a bird.

If Virgil states that Picus held the augural staff before Romulus even became the first augur, and we compare this to other legends of Mars’ woodpecker giving prophecies, we may infer that the woodpecker enjoyed great prestige as an oracular bird amongst the early Italian peoples, which became assimilated into Roman augural lore. Pliny candidly states:

ipsi principales Latio sunt in auguriis a rege qui nomen huic avi dedit.

[Woodpeckers] have been chief among auguries in Latium from the time of the king who gave his name to the bird.³⁴⁰

If woodpeckers were oracular birds as well as the birds of Mars, might we infer that Mars was once an oracular divinity to the Latins? There is evidence that this was so, as we see from the following passage:

Ἀπὸ δὲ Τρεάτου πάλιν τοῖς τὴν ἐπὶ Λιστίνην ὁδὸν ἰοῦσι Βατία μὲν ἀπὸ τριάκοντα

³³⁴ Strabo, *Geographica*, 5.4.2, translated by Horace Leonard Jones (LCL 50).

³³⁵ Krappe 1941, 250.

³³⁶ Verg. *Aen.* 7.169-189.

³³⁷ Ov. *Met.* 14.320ff

³³⁸ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.31

³³⁹ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 21; Rose 1974, 40.

³⁴⁰ Plin. *HN*, 10.41.

σταδίων, Τιώρα δὲ ἀπὸ τριακοσίων, ἡ καλουμένη Ματιήνη. ἐν ταύτῃ λέγεται χρηστήριον Ἄρεος γενέσθαι πάνυ ἀρχαῖον. ὁ δὲ τρόπος αὐτοῦ παραπλήσιος ἦν ὥς φασι τῷ παρὰ Δωδωναίοις μυθολογουμένῳ ποτὲ γενέσθαι· πλὴν ὅσον ἐκεῖ μὲν ἐπὶ δρυὸς ἱερᾶς πέλεια καθεζομένη θεσπιφδεῖν ἐλέγετο, παρὰ δὲ τοῖς Ἀβοριγῖσι θεόπεμπος ὄρνις, ὃν αὐτοὶ μὲν πῖκον, Ἕλληνες δὲ δρυοκολάπτην καλοῦσιν, ἐπὶ κίονος ξυλίνου φαινόμενος τὸ αὐτὸ ἔδρα.

Again, as one goes from Reate by the road towards the Listine district, there is Batia, thirty stades distant; then Tiora, called Matiene, at a distance of three hundred stades. In this city, they say there was a very ancient oracle of Mars, the nature of which was similar to that of the oracle which legend says once existed at Dodona; only there a pigeon was said to prophesy, sitting on a sacred oak, whereas among the Aborigines a heaven-sent bird, which they call *picus* and the Greeks *dryocopus*, appearing on a pillar of wood, did the same.³⁴¹

Unfortunately, though these prophetic pigeons of Dodona and their oaks were well-known in antiquity,³⁴² we do not know exactly how the birds delivered oracles, and so cannot use their example to work out what the oracular woodpecker did. Some pictorial representations of the woodpeckers at Tiora Matiene still exist, which will help our interpretation. A carnelian held in the Berlin Museum depicts a warrior consulting a bird perched atop a pillar. A sacrificial ram lies at his feet and a snake coils upwards around the pillar. The same scene appears on a second carnelian now held at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.³⁴³ Harrison suggests that the snake is meant to signify that the pillar, like a tree, springs from the earth – it is chthonic.³⁴⁴ This marriage of earth and heaven through bird and snake, mediated by a pillar rooted in the earth and stretching to the sky, makes for a powerful image. The fact that a warrior is shown consulting the war god's bird is noteworthy. One wonders exactly how the birds delivered their portents, and whether they were exclusively martial in nature, but without more evidence we can only speculate.

³⁴¹ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.14, translated by Earnest Cary (LCL 319).

³⁴² Prop. 2.21.3 puts the Roman point of view succinctly: *sed tibi iam videor Dodona verior augur*. 'But now you seem to be a truer augur than that of Dodona.'

³⁴³ Pictured in Armstrong 1958, 102.

³⁴⁴ Harrison 1912, 101.



Figure 14: Similar examples held in the British Museum, (c) Trustees of the British Museum.

To return to Rome, in Plautus a woodpecker is noted on a character's left – a lucky sign.³⁴⁵ We are then told that the bird is tapping on an elm tree, which tells us that a woodpecker's provenance as well as the tree it alighted upon were observed by an ausplicant. In this case, an elm was positive, but it is very likely that a woodpecker on an oak was the best sign. Varro mentions that the original terrestrial *templa* were bordered with trees.³⁴⁶ This might simply indicate that they observed groves through which birds could fly, perch, sing and (in the case of woodpeckers) peck.³⁴⁷ Our *templum* at Bantia made do with good local limestone for their *cippi*, but it is entirely possible that different varieties of trees were once cultivated around the *finis* to encourage birds – especially woodpeckers – to roost and peck. Wood and trees are of immense importance to the woodpecker and can change the interpretation of an augural sign. They are unique among the augural birds for the sound of their activities – their drumming on trees – to count as an augural sign.

Pliny describes the birds thus:

Sunt et parvae aves uncorum unguium, ut pici Martio cognomine insignes et in

³⁴⁵ Plaut. *Aulularia*, 624

³⁴⁶ Varro, *Ling.* 7.9

³⁴⁷ Palmer 1970, 91.

auspicatu magni. quo in genere arborum cavatores scandentes in subrectum felium modo, illi vero et supini, percussi corticis sono pabulum subesse intellegunt. pullos in cavis educant avium soli. adactos cavernis eorum a pastore cuneos admota quadam ab iis herba elabi creditur vulgo. Trebius auctor est clavum cuneumve adactum quanta libeat vi arbori in qua nidum habeat statim exilire cum crepitu arboris cum insederit.

“There are also small birds with hooked claws, such as the famous woodpeckers of Mars that are important in auguries. In this genus are tree-boring woodpeckers that climb straight upwards like cats, and which learn by tapping bark whether there is food beneath it. They are the only birds to rear their young in hollows. Some believe that when wedges are driven into their holes by a shepherd the birds use a kind of herb to make them slip out again. Trebius states that you can drive a nail into a tree that holds woodpecker’s nest with however much force you like; when the bird perches on it, it will immediately spring out with a rustle of the tree.”

Of course, owls also nest in tree hollows, but for some reason this is unknown or ignored to emphasise the woodpecker’s special connection with wood. The Romans observed the way these birds navigated the forest, foraged for food, and nested in tree hollows, extrapolating on this to suggest that they had a magical affinity with the trees that protected their nests from man’s meddling. Isidorus repeats the idea that the bird has a kind of supernatural quality, for a nail, or anything else pounded into a tree that a woodpecker calls home will immediately fall out.³⁴⁸ Pliny’s tale continues:

in capite praetoris urbani Aelii Tuberonis in foro iura pro tribunali reddentis sedit ita placide ut manu prehenderetur. respondere vates exitium imperio portendi si dimitteretur, at si exanimaretur praetori. ille autem protinus concerpisit, nec multo post implevit prodigium.

“When the urban praetor Aelius Tubero sat in the Forum giving judgement from the tribunal seat, a woodpecker perched on his head so placidly that he was able to catch it in his hand. In response to the soothsayers predicting either the destruction of the city if the bird was released, or the death of the praetor if it was killed, he straight away tore it to pieces, and not long afterwards the prophecy came true.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.47

³⁴⁹ Plin. *HN*, 10.40-41.

The portentous significance of Mars' bird perching on a man's head is not too far removed from the imagery of the oracular woodpecker perching on a pillar at Tiora Matiene, so it is possible Tubero was standing in for the pillar. As for the nature of the omen, since the woodpecker is a martial bird he suits an omen of violent destruction. The taboo about harming woodpeckers and the fact that Tubero invited destruction on his own head by killing the bird also fits. This myth serves to exemplify Roman ideals of valour and self-sacrifice in the service of one's country. The woodpecker's escape meant the ruin of the empire; his death – and the praetor's death – its salvation. In the same way, soldiers and martial men were required to offer up their lives for the greater good, in the service of their country.

The woodpecker is often cited as a weather prophet in general superstition, even in modern times, foretelling rain through his cries. Some suggest this is because rain brings out the insects on which it feeds,³⁵⁰ but it is more likely that the way his hammering on trees sounds like thunder is to blame. Plutarch remarks on the bird's ability to destroy oak trees, while Aelian states that it nests in oaks.³⁵¹ This connection to a tree sacred to Jupiter – the sky god who is ultimately responsible for the weather – and moreover, the bird's ability to *destroy* those trees, may also explain his esteem. Lightning could obliterate an ancient oak. So too could a determined woodpecker. For the famous pigeons of Dodona, just nesting in Zeus' oaks was enough. Another possibility is that it is derived from his status as Mars' bird, since Mars was once more significant as an agricultural deity.³⁵² We see echoes of this in the way Cato the Elder instructs the farmer to secure Mars' protection and blessing for his crops through sacrifice.³⁵³ Mars' connection with agriculture is further evinced by the fact that the Romans began their year in the month of March, which marked the return of spring and vegetation.³⁵⁴ If Mars was once more important for securing good weather for crops, his bird might well have been understood as the messenger of rain.

The woodpecker was a tremendously important bird to the early Italian peoples, serving as a wayfinder, an augur, and even a king. Though Romans observed all woodpeckers, the black woodpecker was the most revered, whereas the Greeks noted the green more, which supports the notion that the woodpecker's augural functions were indigenous and not Hellenic

³⁵⁰ Halliday 1922, 111

³⁵¹ Ael. *NA*, 1.45.

³⁵² Armstrong 1958, 102.

³⁵³ Cato, *Agr.* 141.

³⁵⁴ Forsythe 2005, 127-8.

in origin. Though his sacred status had diminished by the advent of the Empire, the bird was still subject to protective taboo and was still closely observed when auspices were taken. Today, if you listen for it carefully, you can still hear the sound of drumming woodpeckers in Rome, just as an auspican would have done two thousand years ago.

1.11 Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered some of the practical questions surrounding the taking of auspices *ex avibus*. The choice of birds as divine messengers relates in part to their ability to fly, connecting them with the realm of the augural deity, Jupiter, and in part to the way certain avian observations can reveal information about weather and the passing of time. The actual observation of birds was revealed to take place in a *templum* that was closely aligned to the movement of the sun, with fortunate signs relating to dawn and the summer solstice, and unfortunate signs relating to sunset and the winter solstice. Birds gave signs by moving through and singing in different parts of the sky, and these signs were rigidly demarcated and determined by celestial movements. We considered how birds could affect machinations of state and how magistrates and augurs relied upon them to exercise power in their official capacities. This in turn had consequences for cultural practices and beliefs, as birds were sought to deliver signs to average individuals when they took private auspices, meaning birds could have far-reaching effects on the workings of state, as well as influence over ordinary people through the supposed omens they delivered. Finally, we catalogued the most important wild augural birds that were noted at public auspices. Each bird is acknowledged to carry diverse meanings, with some considered lucky on the left, others lucky on the right, some thought to give omens by their flight, others through their cries. Picking apart the various rules applied to each type of bird has allowed us to see that a certain logic governs Roman auspices. An appraisal of natural bird behaviour allows us to interpret augural lore more effectively. Having considered the place of wild birds in the *auspicia publica*, it remains to investigate the use of chickens in the taking of military auspices, and how chickens eventually came to supplant the importance of wild birds and even propped up Augustus during the transition to the principate.

Chapter 2: The Augural Hens

2.1 Introduction

Impressive as vultures and eagles might be, no bird was more heavily observed in auspices than the humble chicken. Wild birds were consulted in urban public auspices within the *pomerium*, but beyond this sacred boundary chickens reigned as the only birds from which one could take impetrative military auspices.¹ This chapter examines the rite of taking auspices from chickens – *auspicia ex tripudiis* – and attempts to discover how and why chickens came to hold such prestige, with caged fowl eventually eclipsing wild birds as the preferred messengers of Jove, especially in the Middle and Late Republic.

Many eminent scholars have written about the various rites and lore surrounding *auspicium* and augury, but thus far none have focused solely on the simple question: why did they use chickens? Neglecting this question causes us to overlook some of the most basic practical considerations when it comes to the task of taking auspices. Chickens are living, breathing creatures that must be managed, cared for, corralled, and conjured up upon the magistrate's command. More remarkably, they are distinct in the catalogue of augural birds. Fowl are not only domestic as opposed to wild, they are also an introduced species not native to the Italian peninsula and therefore interlopers in the ancient art of augury. The use of chickens represents a significant development in augural lore and focusing on the birds themselves can help us to untangle obscure passages about augural rituals that survive to us. By investigating key texts and unpacking the technical terminology, this chapter tracks how the practice of divining with chickens evolved from the earliest days of the Republic to the reign of Augustus. It considers the practicalities, limitations and advantages of using chickens in the military sphere and thoroughly interrogates the notion that these birds were used simply because they were 'sacred'.

2.2 Origins of *auspicia ex tripudiis*

We have shown that the practice of divining by birds was an ancient one, employed by the Etruscans and believed by the Romans to date back to their own mythic founding. The use

¹ Brennan 2014, 25.

of chickens, however, is less so. Archaeological evidence shows that chickens did not even exist on the Italian peninsula until the 8th century BCE, and not in any significant abundance until the 3rd century BCE.² Auspication using *pulli* – the name given to the augural hens – similarly dates to the 3rd century BCE.³ Yet by the Late Republic, we see Cicero lamenting that the *disciplina et ars* of augury had faded by his time.⁴ According to him, despite the large body of rules governing augury and auspices, in practice many rules no longer applied, and interpreting signs was a fairly straightforward affair.⁵ An over-reliance on *auspicia ex tripudiis* was partly blamed for this, as the supposedly simplistic use of chickens meant more complicated rituals fell out of favour. As a result, *multa auguria, multa auspicia (...) negelegentia collegi amissa plane et deserta sunt* – “many auguries and auspices have been abandoned and completely lost by the neglect of the College.”⁶ Reliance on chickens represented both a simplification and a decay in Cicero’s eyes. But with magistrates needing a favourable answer – often quickly – in order to proceed with matters of state, it is perhaps unsurprising that this occurred. *Auspicia ex tripudiis* did not require extensive knowledge of avian symbolism or elaborate interpretation. As we shall see, to a large extent it did not even depend on chance. Chickens represented a solution for impatient or calculating magistrates, a way around complicated rules, as will be shown.

The name given to the procedure of taking auspices from chickens is *tripudium*, and it presents something of a puzzle. Cicero tells us that the name derives from *terram pavire* (‘to strike the ground’) because they must eat so greedily that food falls from their beaks and hits the ground. In the next passage, he laments that the chickens were shut up in cages and starved to force them to eat, stating that if the birds were free to roam they might truly be called *interpres et satelles Iovis*, but at present the whole thing is a farce.⁷ The ancient augurs never operated this way, which he proves by citing an ancient augural ruling that *any* bird can make a *tripudium*.⁸ This represents an opportunity to discover how chickens were adopted into the augural canon, for if auspices *ex tripudiis* did not always refer to auspices taken from chickens, then we must ask what it originally referenced. If we take *tripudium* to mean ‘things dropped

² de Grossi Mazzorin 2000, 352.

³ Foti 2011.

⁴ Cic. *Leg.* 2.33.

⁵ Rüpke 2014, 215

⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.15.

⁷ Ibid. 2.73.

⁸ Ibid. See: Valeton 1890, 211-15; Wissowa 1912, 532; Foti 2011, 90-1.

by birds’, we might compare it to the standard *topos* in Greek literature where a bird will drop an object or a living creature in front of a chosen individual as a show of divine favour or ill-will.⁹ Famously, in the *Iliad* a sign sent directly from Zeus involved an eagle dropping a snake in front of the Trojans, an omen that Hector ignores at his peril.¹⁰ A more pertinent Roman example allegedly occurred during Caesar’s rise to power when a kite dropped a sprig of laurel upon one of his companions in the Forum.¹¹ The rarity and perceived significance of such an event would explain why the original auspices *ex tripudiis* were considered so favourable; a bird was literally casting down a sign from heaven. This sign must be considered an example of *auspicia oblativa*, sent by the gods unasked, which then became a form of *auspicia impetrativa* when chickens were employed, since one could easily corral chickens to see if food dropped from their beaks.¹² An investigation of the terminology around the ritual reveals how the transference was effected within the bounds of augural law. When chickens were used and they ate hungrily, a *tripudium sollistimum* was announced. *Sollistimus* is an old superlative of *sollus*, meaning ‘unbroken, whole, complete’.¹³ It only appears in connection to the auspices *ex tripudiis* and is the best result an auspican could hope for. Chickens dropping food from their mouths induced a *tripudium sollistimum* on a technicality, and turned a rare and awe-inspiring event where a sign fell from heaven into a crumb falling from a starving hen’s beak – remarkably easy to achieve, but still in substance a ‘most favourable omen’. The simplicity and auspiciousness of this ritual easily explains why feeding caged chickens became so popular that the original meaning was all but forgotten. Essentially, feeding domestic chickens allowed the auspican to observe a sign being dropped by a bird, a most favourable omen, with predictable certainty.

Some of the other terminology surrounding the ritual bears investigation. *Sonivius* is an adjective that means ‘noisy’, or ‘rattling’.¹⁴ It too is only used in conjunction with *tripudium*, and it signifies the rattling of food as it falls from the chickens’ beaks to the ground, an excellent sign.¹⁵ But surprisingly, *puls* was the name of the food fed to the chickens.¹⁶ This translates as a thick porridge made of meal or pulse, perhaps a mixture of chickpeas, lentils, beans and

⁹ Reeder 1997, 97.

¹⁰ Hom. *Il.* 12.175-250.

¹¹ Dio Cass. 41.39.2.

¹² Linderski 1986a, 2156.

¹³ P.G.W. Glare (ed), *OLD*² (2012), ‘sollus’.

¹⁴ Ibid. ‘sonivius’.

¹⁵ Cic. *Fam.* 6.6.7.

¹⁶ Festus, *Gloss. Lat.* 245M.

ground grains all boiled together. Allegedly it was a fit meal for primitive Romans before bread became the preferred subsistence food. It was also used at sacrifices.¹⁷ Wet porridge can hardly rattle as it hits the ground, so presumably the mixture was pressed into cakes and dried before it was given to the hens. A passage from Cicero intimates this:

Nam nostri quidem magistratus auspiciis utuntur coactis; necesse est enim offa obiecta cadere frustum ex pulli ore cum pascitur.

“For our magistrates use forced auspices; it is necessary that scraps of cake should fall from the mouths of the chickens when eating.”¹⁸

The word *offa*, which can mean cake or lump of food, confirms this idea that the chickens were given special cakes designed to crumble when pecked at. We may infer that someone – very likely the chicken-keeper, or *pullarius* – was in charge of preparing *puls* that would disintegrate into crumbs when the birds ate, guaranteeing a pleasing rattle and a *tripudium sollicitum*, that all-important dropping of the sign.

From this investigation it becomes obvious that a chicken makes a far more reliable messenger of the gods than a wild bird. An auspiciant has no need to wait – possibly in vain – for a bird to appear in the sky if he can bring forth a cage full of hens. This is especially important for military auspices. Scheid puzzles over the wisdom of committing one’s fortunes to the whims of hungry chickens, especially when deciding whether to go into battle.¹⁹ However, it seems likely that the need to leave as little to chance as possible is precisely what led to chickens being used in the first place. Vaahtera stresses, “the Romans always went into battle *auspicato*, that is, the commanders took the auspices in the field before the battle.”²⁰ It is nigh impossible to conjure a wild bird to sanction combat by appearing in a desired fragment of sky, but chickens, transported along with the army, can be relied upon to eat happily and induce that most favourable sign on a technicality. It may be argued that the need for immediate divine approval in the field is what led to the rise and eventual domination of the humble chicken. It is common wisdom that:

¹⁷ Varro, *Ling.* 5.105; Val. Max. 2.5.5; Macrobian. *Sat.* 1.12.33.

¹⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.15.

¹⁹ Scheid 2012, 15

²⁰ Vaahtera 2001, 27.

“Although one could auspicate *sive tripudio sive de caelo* (Cic. Div. 2.33), the extant evidence suggests that the latter procedure was confined to the (taking of the intrapomerial) *auspicia urbana* while imperators in the field would do so by virtue of *tripudium*, regardless of whether they were magistrates or promagistrates.’²¹

From the 3rd century BCE, if not earlier, chickens alone were used to deliver military auspices. Wild birds do not seem to have factored into field maneuvers except when our historians record oblativ omens. In the field, a general’s need to leave nothing to chance and to act quickly and decisively meant that chickens alone were permitted to give impetrative auspices. Pliny praises chickens as *victoriarum omnium toto orbe partarum auspices* – “the auspices of all our victories in the whole world”, telling us unambiguously that this was the case, which Cicero confirms.²² The sole use of hens in a military context supports the idea that they were favoured because they were more likely to give a positive and immediate answer. Having the gods on your side was a sensible military tactic.²³ Chickens made that happen.

2.3 Pullarii

Chickens may have facilitated an easy way to induce ‘most favourable auspices’, but it remains to ask how they were kept, cared for, and consulted. There was a job specifically dedicated to the management of augural hens, occupied by *pullarii*. These *pullarii* cared for hens and consulted them when the (pro-) magistrate commanded. For this reason they deserve close examination. Cicero speaks disparagingly of chicken-keepers, disgruntled by the fact that magistrates typically employed a *pullarius* as their assistant when taking *auspicia ex tripudiis*. He complains that nowadays any old Quintus Fabius can assist with the auspices, whereas in the good old days that privilege was granted to an experienced augur.²⁴ It seems to indicate a loss of prestige and control for men of Cicero’s standing, and it also suggests that a magistrate could take auspices and get his favourable answer from the gods without the intervention or assistance of the Augural College at all. Since we know very little about the Roman civil service

²¹ Vervaet 2014, 283.

²² Plin. HN 10.49; Cic. Div. 1.35.

²³ Holladay & Goodman 1986, 152.

²⁴ Cic. Div. 2.72.

until the last fifty years of the Republic, *pullarii* are shrouded in mystery.²⁵ However, we can discern that they belonged to the privileged body of magistrates' assistants known as *apparitores*, and were part of the social class just below that of equestrian.²⁶ They had to be free, but not necessarily freeborn, and such a position meant that they were part of the 'working mechanism' of the Republic.²⁷ Like augurs, *pullarii* assisted magistrates in the name of the state.²⁸ A chicken-keeper was quite an attractive position, all things considered, even though the job came with risks. An epitaph for a *pullarius* from about 100 CE runs thus:

*M(arco) Pompeio M(arci) f(ilio) Ani(ensi) Aspro | (centurioni) leg(ionis) XV
Apollinar(is) (centurioni) coh(ortis) III Pr(aetoriae) | primop(ilo) leg(ionis) III
Cyren(aicae) praef(ecto) castr(or)um | leg(ionis) XX Victr(icis) | Atimetus lib(ertus)
pullarius | fecit et sibi et | M(arco) Pompeio M(arci) f(ilio) | Col(lina) Aspro | filio suo
et | M(arco) Pompeio M(arci) f(ilio) Col(lina) | Aspro filio minori | et Cinciae |
Saturninae | uxori suae.*

“To Marcus Pompeius Asper, son of Marcus, of the Aniensian voting tribe, centurion of the Fifteenth Legion Apollinaris, centurion of the Third Praetorian Cohort, primuspilus of the Third Legion Cyrenaica, camp prefect of the Twentieth Legion Victrix, Atimetus, freedman, chicken-keeper, who made this; and to himself and to Marcus Pompeius Asper, son of Marcus, of the Collina voting tribe, his son and to Marcus Pompeius Asper, son of Marcus, of the Collina voting tribe, his younger son and to his wife Cincia Saturnina.”²⁹

²⁵ Jones 1949, 38.

²⁶ Kunkel 1995, 127.

²⁷ Purcell 1983, 127.

²⁸ Van Haepelen 2012, 88.

²⁹ *CIL* XIV 2523. The original is housed in Rome, Palazzo Albani del Drago.

A 16th century engraving records this tombstone, replete with military insignia and the chickens pecking in their cage (Fig. 1 & 2).



Figure 15: Funerary relief of Marcus Pompeius Asper. Engraving by Nicolas Beatrizet at the press of Antonio Lafreri, Rome (1551). Held in the Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae (B293) Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 16: Close up of the chickens feeding in their cage.

The chickens were naturally open to manipulation by the *pullarius*.³⁰ Cicero describes them as *inclusa in cavea et fame enecta* – “enclosed in a cage and wracked with hunger”.³¹ The *pullarius*, subordinate to whichever magistrate he attended, was likely instructed to keep the birds hungry before auspices were taken. But a *pullarius* could induce a negative result too. Cicero records that Gaius Flaminius neglected the auspices in 217 BCE during the Second Punic War. The chickens refused to eat, and Flaminius spoke scornfully to his *pullarius*:

Praeclara vero auspicia, si esurientibus pullis res geri poterit, saturis nihil geretur!

“Splendid auspices indeed, to counsel action when the chickens are starving and no action when satiated!”³²

Such a statement implies that the birds had been deliberately stuffed with food prior to the ritual to ruin their appetites. Dissatisfied with this result, Flaminius marched into battle contrary

³⁰ Rüpke 2014, 215

³¹ Cic. Div. 2.72.

³² Cic. Div. 1.77.

to auspices, only to be defeated and slain by Hannibal at Lake Trasimene with a loss of 15 000 men.³³ If a *pullarius* was reasonably expected to control the appetite of his birds to ensure his magistrate received a favourable result, why did the chickens refuse to eat in this instance? The passage suggests there was some tension between this magistrate and his *pullarius*, and since a chicken's bulging crop betrays when it has eaten its fill, it would be easy for Flaminius to detect foul play. Why, then, would the *pullarius* sabotage Flaminius' auspices and attempt to stall battle?

The answer will come if we examine Flaminius' rocky relationship with the Senate. A maverick *novus homo*, Flaminius incurred the wrath of the other senators for his role as a popular leader, his controversial attempts at land reform, his push to give greater voting rights to the lower classes, and for the fact that he alone of his peers supported the *lex Claudia* aimed at restricting senatorial involvement in maritime trade.³⁴ As consul for the first time in 223 BCE, the Senate (through the Augural College no doubt) had tried to make him abdicate on grounds that unfavourable omens had been reported. Inauspicious omens seem to have been "contemporary weapons in domestic politics",³⁵ so even Flaminius was in the middle of campaigning against the Gauls he was ordered to return to Rome at once. In turn, Flaminius ignored (or failed to see) their missive, and instead entered into battle with the Gauls, winning a great victory. As a result, he ended up celebrating a public triumph by a vote of the People and *against* the wishes of the Senate.³⁶ To say the least, this was a precarious position to be in.

Livy recounts that towards the end of the consular year of 218, Flaminius as consul-elect requested that the consul Ti. Sempronius Longus make his troops ready in the camp at Arminium on the Ides of March. His plan was to assume his second consulship there, having neither forgotten nor forgiven his former quarrels with the Senate. This, as it turns out, was an incredibly controversial decision:

Ob haec ratus auspiciis ementiendis Latinarumque feriarum mora et consularibus aliis impedimentis retenturos se in urbe, simulato itinere privatus clam in provinciam abiit. Ea res ubi palam facta est, novam insuper iram infestis iam ante patribus movit: non

³³ Livy 21.57, 63.

³⁴ Cic. *Brut.* 57, 77.

³⁵ Vishnia 2012, 35.

³⁶ Cic. *Div.* 1.77; Plut. *Vit. Marc.* 4; Zonar. 8.20. See also: Petrucci 1996, 88; Pittenger 2008, 40.

cum senatu modo sed iam cum dis immortalibus C. Flaminium bellum gerere. Consulem ante inauspicato factum revocantibus ex ipsa acie dis atque hominibus non paruisse; nunc conscientia spreto et Capitolium et sollemne votorum nuncupationem fugisse, ne die initi magistratus Iovis optimi maximi templum adiret, ne senatum invisus ipse et sibi uni invisum videret consuleretque, ne Latinas indiceret Iovique Latiari sollemne sacrum in monte faceret, ne auspicio profectus in Capitolium ad vota nuncupanda, paludatus inde cum lictoribus in provinciam iret. Lixae modo sine insignibus, sine lictoribus profectum clam, furtim, haud aliter quam si exsilii causa solum vertisset. Magis pro maiestate videlicet imperii Arimini quam Romae magistratum initurum et in deversorio hospitali quam apud penates suos praetextam sumpturum.

“Believing, therefore, that [the senators] would falsify the auspices and use the Latin Festival and other ways of hindering a consul in order to detain him in the City, Flaminius feigned taking a journey as a private citizen and absconded to his province. When this was discovered, it stirred up fresh anger in the senators who already hated him, for Flaminius was waging war not only with the Senate but also with the immortal gods. Once before he had been made Consul without auspices, and though gods and men had tried to recall him from the very battle-line he had not obeyed. Now, conscious of having scorned them, he had fled from the Capitol and the customary solemn pronouncement of vows. So he had not visited the temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest; and he had not gone to see the Senate (which hated him, and which he alone of all men hated); and he had not proclaimed the Latin Festival by making the accustomed sacrifice to Jupiter Latiaris on the mount; and he had not gone to the Capitolium to make his vows after receiving auspices, and thence gone to his province in the commander’s cloak, with his lictors. Instead, like a camp-follower, without insignia and without lictors, he departed secretly, and alone, just as if he were going into exile. Clearly he must have thought it was more suited to his dignified office to begin his magistracy in Arminium and not Rome, and to assume the *toga praetexta* in an inn than in the presence of his household gods!”³⁷

³⁷ Livy 21.63.

Flaminius' decision to assume his consulship in his province and his failure to complete these compulsory rituals, including the vote of a *lex curiata de imperio*, meant that "he did not possess *imperium iustum* and thus lacked the auspices 'optima lege.'" ³⁸ Livy recounts that the Senate complained bitterly of Flaminius' actions, lamenting:

duos se consules creasse, unum habere; quod enim illi iustum imperium, quod auspicium esse?

"They had created two consuls but had only one; for what lawful *imperium*, what *auspicium*, did Flaminius have?" ³⁹

Placed into context, it cannot be mere coincidence that the chickens withheld their consent when Flaminius tried to engage Hannibal in battle in 217. Under augural law he had no lawful *auspicium*, which begs the question of where the dissenting *pullarius*' loyalties lay. Of course, this may simply be another example of auspices and omens being used against Flaminius to discredit him, regardless of whether the omens actually occurred or not, but for the sake of argument we will take it at face value that the chickens truly were reported to have balked before battle.

The role of *pullarius* seems to have been born out of necessity. While augurs could be called upon to assist when magistrates were taking auspices, Linderski points out that we do not have any examples of augurs intervening in military auspices. ⁴⁰ Valeton observes that unless augurs were serving in the army, they could not assist in the field. ⁴¹ This is where the *pullarius* comes in, taking the place of the augur and acting as assistant while the magistrate was in the field, while also overseeing the care, transport and feeding of the fowl. Access to the augural flocks placed a *pullarius* in a unique position of power, and it is not a stretch to wonder if a *pullarius* could act as a mole for the Senate while a magistrate was in the field and far from their control. After Flaminius' willful neglect of their rituals, the Senate could hardly suffer to see him march back to Rome victorious, celebrating another triumph against their will, so it may well be that his *pullarius* was following the directive of the Senate when his

³⁸ Vervaet 2014, 320. See Rafferty 2019 for more on these rituals.

³⁹ Livy, 22.1.

⁴⁰ Linderski 1986a, 2198.

⁴¹ Valeton 1890, 452-5. In the early days, an augur may have joined a consul or a praetor, however.

chickens fatefully refused their food.⁴² Berthelet, after carefully investigating a number of case studies, including that of Flaminius, shows that it is entirely plausible that *pullarii* manipulated the auspices according to the will of the Senate.⁴³ Similarly, Giovannini found in his study that it was more important for a general to have the consent of the Senate than the consent of the gods when going into battle. He argues that favourable auspices were cultivated by the wily *pullarius*, who had control over his chickens' appetites, making auspices a manifestation of the Senate's will rather than heaven's. Therefore, a military leader who lost under favourable auspices – such as Lucius Aemilius Paulus in 216 B.C.E. – was remembered well, and kept his good reputation. But a general who defied auspices and lost, such as Flaminius – well, that was plain insubordination, and it would see his reputation blackened, regardless of victory or defeat.⁴⁴ Even if he had won, he had still gone against the gods, and would surely have been hounded by the Senate all the same.

To return to Cicero's complaint about the power of *pullarii* in his own day, it may be that his chief grievance was that *pullarii* were not only watching chickens in the field, but also rendering assistance to auspices taken within city limits when an augur was available to help. A *pullarius* was a useful alternative to an augur when a magistrate was far from Rome, but there was no need for them to assist at urban auspices. This phenomenon may also indicate that the Senate no longer wielded uncontested influence over *pullarii* by Cicero's time, and that *pullarii* worked according to the interests of the individual magistrate instead. There is evidence that *pullarii* went further than merely assisting within the city limits, too. Dionysius of Halicarnassus states that taking auspices when assuming a magistracy was merely done for form's sake, and that *ornithoskopoi* (ὀρνιθοσκόπων) employed by the state would announce there had been a left-hand lightning flash even when nothing had been sighted.⁴⁵ On the basis that augurs were not, to our knowledge, paid by the state, Van Haepereen posits that *ὀρνιθοσκόπων* refers to the *pullarii* rather than augurs.⁴⁶ If this is true, Cicero may be right that the *pullarii* were getting too big for their boots. *Spectio* was the exclusive reserve of magistrates; chicken-keepers had no right to watch the skies!

⁴² Cic. *Div.* 1.77.

⁴³ Berthelet 2015, 232.

⁴⁴ Giovannini 1998, 109.

⁴⁵ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.6.2.

⁴⁶ Van Haepereen 2012, 88.

This investigation of the *pullarii* shows that these magistrates' assistants wielded a significant amount of influence through the simple fact that they controlled the birds that manifested the will of Jupiter. The practicalities of managing the chickens and their appetites allows us to observe how political struggles manifested through the auspices *ex tripudiis*.

The use of chickens within the city limits is attested in multiple sources, showing how the ease of use caused them to spread beyond the military sphere, although it is sometimes difficult to determine if the auspices are being taken in a public or private setting. For example, it is said that Tiberius Gracchus took auspices on the day he was murdered:

Ἄμα δ' ἡμέρα παρῆν ὃ τὰς ὄρνιθας αἷς διαμαντεύονται κομίζων, καὶ προέβαλλε τροφήν αὐταῖς. αἱ δ' οὐ προῆλθον, εἰ μὴ μία μόνη, διασεΐσαντος εὖ μάλα τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ ἀγγεῖον· οὐδὲ αὕτη δὲ τῆς τροφῆς ἔθιγεν, ἀλλ' ἐπάρασα τὴν ἀριστερὰν πτέρυγα καὶ παρατείνασα τὸ σκέλος πάλιν εἰς τὸ ἀγγεῖον κατέφυγε.

“At break of day there came to the house the man who brought the birds with which auspices are taken, and threw food before them. But the birds would not come out of the cage, with the exception of one, though the keeper shook the cage right hard; and even the one that came out would not touch the food, but raised its left wing, stretched out its leg, and then ran back into the cage.”⁴⁷

Magistrates of the plebs did not possess *auspicium publicum*, so the anecdote would indicate that this is a private consultation.⁴⁸ This notion is backed up by the fact that the auspices were taken in his home, meaning that he must have been taking auspices pertaining to himself and not on behalf of the state.⁴⁹ A similar tale is told about the Ides of March. Out of the many omens surrounding Caesar's death, one involves him taking auspices in his own house at dawn. The chickens refused to eat, thus counselling him not to leave the house.⁵⁰ As we know, their advice went unheeded and Gracchus and Caesar were murdered the same day they took unfavourable auspices. Though these anecdotes seem to infer the use of chickens in private

⁴⁷ Plut. *Vit. Ti. Gracch*, 17.1, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (LCL 102).

⁴⁸ Linderski 1990, 34–48; Rawson 1974, 196; Lanfranchi 2015, 215: “(...) la situation demeure claire. Les tribuns n'avaient aucun accès aux auspices publics de Rome et ne pouvaient posséder que des auspices privés.”

⁴⁹ This is in spite of the fact that a tribune's home had to be open to public 24/7.

⁵⁰ Cass. Dio, 44.17.3.

auspices, a passage in Pliny soundly confirms the increasing use of chickens in public, urban auspices:

Horum sunt tripudia sollistima, hi magistratus nostros cotidie regunt domusque ipsis suas claudunt aut reserant, hi fasces Romanos inpellunt aut retinent, iubent acies aut prohibent, victoriarum omnium toto orbe partarum auspices; hi maxime terrarum imperio imperant.

“The most favourable omens come from [chickens]. They daily rule our magistrates and close or open their own houses to them. They impel or hold back the Roman *fasces*, order or forbid battle, and are the auspices of all our victories in the whole world. Chickens rule over the greatest empire of the world.”⁵¹

This would imply that by the first century CE chickens were not only used in military auspices, but also in urban auspices, daily holding sway over magistrates in a legally binding and prohibitive fashion. In this climate it is little wonder that Cicero was so concerned about the decay of the College’s influence when so much depended on the pullarius’ control of his flock.

2.4. Negative Auspices

With chickens holding such enormous sway through their use in auspices, it is worth investigating cases where negative results were received from chickens and scheming *pullarii* cannot readily be blamed. The practicalities of using fowl reveal themselves in various ways. One famous example occurred in 249 BCE, where the consul P. Claudius Pulcher is said to have lost almost his entire fleet in a naval defeat at Drepanum because he disregarded the auspices.⁵² In this oft-cited example, the chickens refused to eat when called upon, so Pulcher threw them overboard, declaring, “if they won’t eat, let them drink!”⁵³ Since chickens are easily affected by motion sickness, the reason for their refusal may easily be attributed to the fact that they were suffering from seasickness and were too queasy to eat. Another example is presented in the figure of C. Hostilius Mancinus, consul in 137 B.C.E., who was beset by ominous prodigies.

⁵¹ Plin. *HN* 10.49.

⁵² Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.7; Cic. *Div.* 1.29, 2.20; Livy, *Per.* 19.4, Suet. *Tib.* 2.2; Val. Max. 1.4.3.

⁵³ Val. Max. 1.4.3.

pulli cavea emissi in proximam silvam fugerunt summaque diligentia quaesiti reperiri nequiverunt

“Once released from their cage the chickens fled into a nearby wood and though they were sought with the greatest diligence, they could not be recovered.”⁵⁴

This was said to augur a lost battle, but assuming the *pullarius* had no part in the daring escape, it cannot really be blamed on anything but poor camp security and the chickens’ natural instincts to make a bid for freedom at the first opportunity. A third example occurred in 293 BCE during a war with the Samnites. The consul Papirius, stirred by the zeal of his soldiers for battle, rose *tertia vigilia noctis* – at the third watch of night, between midnight and 3 AM – and told his *pullarii* to take the auspices. In the 24-hour auspicial cycle that runs from one midnight to the next, this was the earliest one could take auspices for the coming day.⁵⁵ But the birds, unsurprisingly, refused to eat at this absurd hour.⁵⁶ In Pliny’s words:

Cum sole eunt cubitum, quartaque castrensi vigilia ad curas laboremque revocant

“With the sun chickens go to bed, and at the fourth camp-watch recall us to our cares and labours.”⁵⁷

Chickens rise with the sun. If disturbed before the fourth quarter of night, the pre-dawn hours, they will be unresponsive, and they will certainly be unwilling to eat. The best time for observing *signa ex avibus* was at dawn, and our other examples suggest that this was the ideal time to consult chickens, too.⁵⁸ Anyone who keeps chickens will know how eagerly they leave their coops in the morning, and how greedily they eat after a night’s fasting. The story continues that the *pullarii* falsified the auspices and declared that the chickens had eaten hungrily, in spite of the fact that fowl simply cannot be roused at night. The consul went into battle, but upon learning of the falsification he averted the wrath of the gods by sending the guilty *pullarius* to the front line, where he was killed. Papirius announced that the sin had been expiated and the

⁵⁴ Val. Max. 1.6.7. See also Julius Obsequens 137.

⁵⁵ Macrob. *Sat.* 1.3.7.

⁵⁶ Livy 10.40.1-14.

⁵⁷ Pliny, *HN* 10.24.

⁵⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.108; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 38.

gods were now with his army. Supposedly, this was confirmed by a well-timed caw from a raven. In this case, the *vitium* lay with the *pullarius* who had falsified the report, and once the guilty party paid the penalty it ensured the army was safe from heaven's wrath.⁵⁹ Interestingly, this anecdote indicates that it was not necessary for magistrates to observe the chickens themselves, which in itself provided another safeguard against failure, since the magistrate could trust his *pullarius*' announcement, even if it did not reflect the truth.⁶⁰ One wonders whether the consul, eager for battle and triumphal honour, really was ignorant of the falsification, or whether the hapless *pullarius* merely provided a handy scapegoat. In any case, in these examples it is easy to identify an oversight that led to a negative verdict from the chickens. We can conclude that typically chickens could be relied upon to deliver the desired auspices – or rather, the auspices wanted by the Senate. This alone is enough to explain why chickens were increasingly used. The ritual was simple and the chickens were easy to manipulate, assuming one controlled the extraneous variables around their natural behaviour.

2.5 What Kind of Chicken?

Further to the point that auspices *ex tripudiis* allowed reasonable control over the outcome, we must consider what type of bird was employed. *Pulli* is the term used to designate chickens used in auspices, as opposed to the barnyard hen, *gallina*, and her chicken-keeper the *gallinarius*. The word *pulli* is often translated as “sacred chickens”.⁶¹ However, this translation is misleading, for it conjures images of animals raised in temples and pampered or specially bred and raised for the purpose. While this is a possibility, the glaring lack of any evidence suggests otherwise, especially if we contrast it against the wealth of information we have about Rome's sacred geese.⁶² Cicero's description of hapless creatures stuffed into cages and starved does not suggest the animals were revered either. And if we examine Claudius Pulcher's actions, we find that his *vitium* lay not in drowning the chickens, or killing sacred animals, but in going *contra auspicia* and ignoring the will of Jupiter. In support of this, we should consider how the birds were consulted. In the same way that a raven seen when taking auspices *ex avibus*

⁵⁹ There is a comparable case where the Romans won a battle in spite of vitiated auspices, and the victory was explained because the guilty general had died in the fighting – since the fault lay with him, the gods punished him alone and spared the army. See Livy 41.18 and Val. Max. 1.5.9.

⁶⁰ Kunkel 1985, 31.

⁶¹ Almost invariably. For only a few examples, see: Aldrete 2004, 144; Berthelet 2015, 49; Dembeck 1965, 199; de Grummond 2013, 550; Hornblower & Spawforth 2012, 223; Lattimore 1934, 442; Linderski 1986a; Tucker 1976, 174; Purcell 1983, 129; Scott 1925, 103; Vervaet 2015, 211.

⁶² Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 98; Plut. *De fort. Rom.* 12.325C; Petron. *Sat.* 136; Plin. *HN*, 10.51.

was not considered a sacred animal, the chickens were not considered sacred when the auspices *ex tripudiis* were conducted. Birds became significant at the moment the ritual was performed because they were ostensibly under the control of a deity, but were still perfectly ordinary birds. It would be a mistake to consider the augural chickens sacred when their true function was simply to act as vehicles through which divine will could manifest.

Rather than calling the chickens ‘sacred’ as a way of explaining why they were used, let us examine the context in which chickens were first used in the auspices. We know that fowl remains were sporadic in Italy until the 3rd century BCE and only became widespread in the Roman period.⁶³ The impetus for their spread across Europe appears to have been related to cockfighting and their usefulness in entertainment, ritual and sacrifice, rather than to their value as meat producers. Eggs were more commonly consumed than the birds themselves, but the high ratios of cockerels to hens we see in Iron Age sites in Central Europe suggest that egg production was a secondary factor behind their spread.⁶⁴ They were, originally, not ‘food birds’ as we think of them today. Consistent with the zooarchaeological record is Varro’s assertion they were first kept on villas for use in ritual:

Earum rerum cultura instituta prima ea quae in villa habetur; non enim solum augures Romani ad auspicia primum pararunt pullos, sed etiam patres familiae rure

“The rearing of [chickens] was the first to have been done within the villa. Not only did the Roman augurs first raise pullets for the auspices, but so did the heads of households in the countryside.”⁶⁵

If their origin is as semi-exotic ritual animals bred and raised on Roman villas, this sheds some light on how they came to be the chief augural birds. It also provides an origin for the *pullarius*. Presumably he was originally the servant to whom the breeding and management of chickens was conferred.⁶⁶ It is not until the Imperial period that we see intensive and large-scale chicken farming for food and profit; before this time, the cultural attitude towards chickens would have centered around their usefulness when alive rather than their value when dead. The Roman

⁶³ de Grossi Mazzorin 2000, 352.

⁶⁴ Sykes 2012, 162.

⁶⁵ Varro, *Rust.* 3.3.5.

⁶⁶ Kunkel 1985, 31.

view of chickens as ritual animals aligns with the opinions of other ancient cultures, including the Etruscans, but the Roman preference for hens in auspicial rites is unusual. In the first millennium BCE, whether in Iron Age Britain, Egypt or the Levant, chickens usually or exclusively appear in the context of cockfighting.⁶⁷ The trend across the ancient world was to value the male bird for sacrifice and entertainment. Even in the Roman period the rooster was used in backyard divination, and admired for his pugnacity, sexual prowess and prescience.⁶⁸ Roosters were popular victims of sacrifice, being especially fit for Aesculapius and the Bona Dea.⁶⁹ They were potent symbols in warfare and combat. Famously, the Gauls were fond of comparing themselves to victorious, strutting roosters.⁷⁰ Yet, the rooster was specifically precluded from auspices. Hens alone were used for Roman ritual. A simple explanation might be that it was to avoid any fighting or bloodshed between male birds, since auspices were bloodless rituals firmly delineated from ritual sacrifice. Roosters together would fight one another and upset the proceedings. A single rooster lording it amongst hens would doubtless also disrupt the ritual. Given that the evidence so far shows that chickens were valued for their ability to produce a predictable outcome, it is simplest to say that roosters and young cockerels could not be trusted to peck happily at grain when required. The high value placed on hens is a singularly Roman peculiarity and likely results from utilitarian consideration. Pliny gives us a snapshot of how hens were viewed:

Villaribus gallinis et religio inest: inhorrescunt edito ovo excutiuntque sese et circumactae purificant ac festuca aliqua sese et ova lustrant.

“Farmyard hens even have a religious ritual: after laying an egg they tremble and shake and purify themselves by circling round, and also use straw to cleanse their eggs.”⁷¹

When we think of the augural chickens, we must lay aside our modern perception of chickens as stupid and useless except as a source of food. The Romans saw hens as clean animals that performed their own purification rituals. With their early status as exotic ritual birds and the way they could be easily manipulated, it is little wonder that the Romans preferred tame, clean and reliable pullets to act as the interpreters and satellites of Jove. In sum, when we translate

⁶⁷ Sykes 2012, 162.

⁶⁸ Sheasley, 2008, 45.

⁶⁹ Zeuner 1963, 448; Ov. *Fast.* 1.455-6; Plin. *HN.* 10.156; Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 5.9.

⁷⁰ Dembeck 1965, 201-2.

⁷¹ Plin. *HN* 10.51.

the word *pulli*, we must avoid the temptation to say “sacred chickens” and look at what the Romans are actually telling us. *Pullus* can refer generally to a young animal, or specifically to a young hen. The *pulli* were just that – pullets, hens on the cusp of maturity. Older hens can become broody, even when isolated from roosters, and are more temperamental.⁷² A broody hen, significantly, could refuse to leave her cage. Using young hens bypassed this problem. The sacred chickens were not sacred at all. They were simply young, eager hens that could be relied upon to leave the cage. It is not until the Augustan period that we find any evidence of chickens specially bred for the purpose, but even they could not be called sacred. More on them soon.

2.6 From Republic to Empire

It is abundantly evident that by the late Republic, augural knowledge was in decline and many nobles had serious doubts about the validity of divination.⁷³ The taking of auspices had become farcical in many ways, yet *auspicium* was still a fundamental part of magisterial power and the structure of Republic, so the struggle for imperial power necessarily involved grappling over the right to watch birds. Cicero named auspices and the Senate as the foundations for the Republic.⁷⁴ He stressed that an augur’s duty is to defend the Republic and said the sky itself is so divided so we can call on divine assistance for the Republic.⁷⁵ Therefore, Augustus made it his business to take control of augury and auspices. In this way he could, “under the guise of restoration,” devise a new augural structure that would no longer benefit the Republic, but ensure its slow asphyxiation.⁷⁶ Birds, augury and auspices allegedly founded the city of Rome. Under Augustus, they would found an Empire.

In an event already mentioned, the young Octavian is said to have observed twelve vultures when he took the auspices for his first consulship in 43 BCE.⁷⁷ This tall tale was spread as part of his propaganda, stressing the link between himself and Romulus, signaling he would

⁷² Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.13 is especially proud of the Roman hen’s reputation as a broody and attentive nurse, mother and incubator.

⁷³ Rüpke 2011, 29.

⁷⁴ Cic. *Rep.* 17

⁷⁵ Cic. *Leg.* 3.43.

⁷⁶ Small 1982, 97; see also Green 2009, 148.

⁷⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 95, Dio Cass. 46.46.2.

found the City anew.⁷⁸ Augustus certainly made the most of this rehash of Romulus' auspices.⁷⁹ Famously, he restored the temple of Quirinus on the Quirinal Hill in his lifetime.⁸⁰ Quirinus had been identified with the deified Romulus since the late Republic. While the original decoration of the temple has not survived, a portion of a relief from the late first century CE depicts the temple pediment. This pediment shows two augurs watching the skies, overseen by gods. Scott describes the scene:

“The scene represented is without doubt the augury of Romulus and Remus (...) in the centre of the pediment a great flight of birds directed towards a personage seated on the extreme left, [which] shows that the episode is the augurium or omen of the birds in favour of Romulus.”⁸¹

At the centre of the scene is a lattice door that probably alludes to an *auguraculum* entrance, the space in which augury was conducted.⁸² Note that Romulus is on the extreme left – the west – looking east, with birds coming down from the east and the auspican's left. In restoring this temple and placing this scene on the pediments, Augustus ensured visitors would be reminded of how the City was founded, and of the vultures that also appeared to himself, thus stressing that Romulus' rule and his own were sanctioned by birds.

A year after this miracle with the vultures, like his adoptive father Julius Caesar before him Octavian was appointed augur, and many coins depict Octavian with the *lituus* of the augural trade. The *lituus*, sometimes paired with a libation jug to symbolize auspices and sacrifice (the prerequisites for every political act), first appeared on coins under Sulla in 83 or 84 BCE, who was himself made an augur in 82 BCE.⁸³ The mint was under Octavian's influence from the late 40s onwards,⁸⁴ but the *lituus* did not appear with his image until 27 BCE. One suspects that the augural symbol was used to legitimise his office. The strong connection of the *lituus* to Romulus and the founding of the city suited him best at this time, once he had become sole triumvir.⁸⁵ He proudly lists his position as augur among his various

⁷⁸ Julius Obsequens 43.

⁷⁹ Scheid 2005.

⁸⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 30.2.

⁸¹ Scott 1925, 92-3.

⁸² Beard et al. 1998, 182-3.

⁸³ Stewart 1997, 170.

⁸⁴ Sutherland 1974, 102.

⁸⁵ Vaahtera 2001, 127; Vervaet 2010.

other priesthoods in the *Res Gestae*.⁸⁶ He also used his position to revive an old augural tradition called the *augurium Salutis* – Augury of Safety. This required consuls coming into office to take the auspices before praying to Salus, and what is so deviously clever about this move is that the Augury of Safety could only be taken in times of peace.⁸⁷ This ancient augural ceremony was essentially revived to advertise the *pax Augusta*. And of course there is the most obvious exploitation of all – the name Octavian chose in 27 BCE, the name by which he is now known: Augustus.

Cum, quibusdam censentibus Romulum appellari oportere quasi et ipsum conditorem urbis, praevaluisset, ut Augustus potius vocaretur, non tantum novo sed etiam ampliore cognomine, quod loca quoque religiosa et in quibus augurato quid consecratur augusta dicantur, ab auctu vel ab avium gestu gustuve, sicut etiam Ennius docet scribens:

Augusto augurio postquam incluta condita Roma est.

“When some declared that he should be called Romulus as the city’s second founder, Plancus carried the proposal that he should be titled Augustus instead, on the grounds that not merely was this a new title but also more honourable, because sacred places, and those in which anything is consecrated by augury, are called *augusta* from the increase (*auctus*) in dignity, or from the movements or feeding of birds (*avium gestus gustuve*), as Ennius also shows when he writes:

‘After glorious Rome by august augury had been founded.’”⁸⁸

Augustus implied augury, august, and august augury.⁸⁹ It was a perfect name, and it reminds us that he owed a considerable part of his success to the divine approval of birds and the augural discipline.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ *Res Gestae*, 7.

⁸⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 31; see also Dio Cass. 37.24.

⁸⁸ Suet. *Aug.* 7.

⁸⁹ Momigliano 1984, 162; Scott 1925, 85. Ov. *Fast.* 1.593-616 shows the connection with *augurium*.

⁹⁰ Dalla Rosa 2011, 244.

Part of Augustus' takeover included making it so that battles were increasingly fought and won under his own auspices. No matter what his real input was, Augustus always claimed the kudos. In his own words:

Ob res a me aut per legatos meos auspiciis meis terra marique prospere gestas quinquagiens et quinquiens decrevit senatus supplicandum esse dis immortalibus

“For victories achieved by me or the commanders **under my auspices** on land or sea the senate decreed 55 times thanks should be given to the immortal gods.”⁹¹

Never mind who the commanders were – all due credit must go to the man who held the supreme auspices.

Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt duo exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Arabiam quae appellatur Eudaemon, magnaue hostium gentis utriusque copiae caesae sunt in acie et complura oppida capta.

“At my command and **led by my auspices** were two excursions almost simultaneously into Ethiopia and into Arabia which is called Eudaemon, and a great many enemies on both sides were cut to pieces in battle and many towns captured.”⁹²

Augustus could not be in two places at once, but his all-embracing auspices certainly could.

Citra quod Dacorum transgressus exercitus meis auspiciis victus profligatusque est, et postea trans Danuvium ductus exercitus meus Dacorum gentes imperia populi Romani perferre coegit.

“An army of Dacians which trespassed on this side of the river was defeated and crushed **under my auspices**, and afterwards across the Danube my own army was led and the race of Dacians compelled to endure the imperium of the Roman people.”⁹³

⁹¹ *Res Gestae*, 4.

⁹² *Res Gestae*, 26.

⁹³ *Res Gestae*, 30.

Over and over, we see this theme of battles being won and armies vanquished under Augustus' auspices, ensuring that the people knew that it was the divine favour bestowed upon *him* that vouchsafed these victories. It is an exceedingly clever tactic, and it changed the nature of *auspicium* forever.

“Augustus transformed the system of auspices... by repeatedly occupying the consulate, along with his friends, during the decade following the victory of Actium (31 BC) he took possession *de facto* of the urban auspices. And when, in 27 BC, the Senate charged him with the task of administering the ‘armed’ provinces, thereby in effect commanding all the legions (bar one, which was under the power of the proconsul of Africa), he alone controlled *imperium* and the *auspicia militiae*.”⁹⁴

Possessing *auspicium* meant possessing the right to triumph, for “victorious commanders only qualified for triumphal celebrations if they had *auspicium* of their own.”⁹⁵ As *summus imperator*, the highest authority in the land, all victories were won under his auspices whether he actually led the army into battle or not. Now wars were fought under the leadership, or *ductu* of a general, and the *auspicium* of the emperor.⁹⁶ M. Licinius Crassus, proconsul of Macedonia, famously demanded the honour of *spolia opima* that had been awarded to only two Romans since Romulus after he killed an enemy chief with his own hand in single combat. Augustus rejected the claim on the grounds that Crassus was a proconsul, and therefore had not fought under his own auspices, and miraculously happened upon evidence to show that the last man to win the *spolia opima*, Cornelius Cossus, was a consul, and therefore fighting under his own auspices.⁹⁷ This precedent thus barred Crassus from the honour he had won. As an old man, Augustus bestowed this privilege of universal supreme command and overarching auspices upon his successor Tiberius Caesar, thus securing the line of Julio-Claudian emperors.⁹⁸ All campaigns were conducted under imperial auspices. All military glory belonged to the Emperor now.⁹⁹ And Tiberius wisely kept up the exploitation of *lituus* and augur symbolism too.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Scheid 2003, 119.

⁹⁵ Vervaeke 2014, 120.

⁹⁶ Popkin 2016, 94.

⁹⁷ Livy 4.20.

⁹⁸ Vell. Pat. 2.121.1; Vervaeke 2014, 273.

⁹⁹ Campbell 1994, 68

¹⁰⁰ Scott 1925, 104

2.7 The Empress's Hens

Having considered Augustus' meticulous exploitation of augury and auspices, we may now place his special use of chickens into context. While the sacred chickens cannot be called sacred, towards the Empire there is evidence that special augural chickens did exist. A key event in Augustan history involves Empress Livia, an eagle, a white hen, and a sprig of laurel. Let us compare two different accounts of this omen.

Liviae, olim post Augusti statim nuptias Veientanum suum revisenti, praetervolans aquila gallinam albam ramulum lauri rostro tenentem, ita ut rapuerat, demisit in gremium; cumque nutriri alitem, pangi ramulum placuisset, tanta pullorum suboles provenit, ut hodieque ea uilla ad Gallinas vocetur, tale vero lauretum, ut triumphaturi Caesares inde laureas decerperent; fuitque mos triumphantibus, illas confestim eodem loco pangere; et observatum est, sub cuiusque obitum arborem ab ipso institutam elanguisse. Ergo novissimo Neronis anno et silva omnis exaruit radicitus, et quidquid ibi gallinarum erat interiit.

“Once, shortly after Livia’s marriage to Augustus, when she was returning to her estate near Veii, an eagle swooped past and dropped into her lap a white hen that it had snatched away, which held a sprig of laurel in its beak. She cared for the bird and planted the laurel, hatching such a great brood of chicks from the hen that the villa is now called The Henhouse, and such a grove of laurel grew that thereafter triumphant Caesars plucked their laurels from it. The custom was that after triumphs they would then plant them in the same place. It was noticed that the death of the trees signified the languishing of the house. Therefore, in the last year of Nero’s reign, all the laurel trees withered at the root and every single chicken died.”¹⁰¹

We might call this a *tripudium* according to the old definition, for it involves a bird dropping something from the sky. The *villa ad gallinas*, which we shall hereafter render as The Henhouse, is the subject of many archaeological surveys, and is in fact where our most famous statue of Augustus comes from, the Augustus of Prima Porta. Unfortunately, direct evidence of chicken habitation here has not been recovered, possibly be due to the fact that bombing in

¹⁰¹ Suet. *Galb.* 1. For eastern origins of the suppliant bird motif, see Gaál 2017, 8.

World War II completely destroyed a part of the site that had yet to be excavated.¹⁰² To return to our written sources:

namque Liviae Drusillae, quae postea Augustam matrimonii nomen accepit, cum pacta esset illa Caesari, gallinam conspicui candoris sedenti aquila ex alto abiecit in gremium inlaesam, intrepideque miranti accessit miraculum, quoniam teneret in rostro laureum ramum onustum suis baxis; conservari alitem et subolem iussere haruspices ramumque eum seri ac rite custodiri: quod factum est in villa Caesarum fluvio Tiberi inposita iuxta nonum lapidem Flaminiae viae, quae ob id vocatur Ad gallinas; mireque silva ea provenit: ex ea triumphans postea Caesar laurum in manu tenuit coronamque capite gessit, ac deinde imperatores Caesares cuncti; traditusque mos est ramos quos tenuerant¹ serendi, et durant silvae nominibus suis discretae, fortassis ideo mutatis triumphalibus.

“When Livia Drusilla, who afterwards took the name of Augusta upon her marriage, was betrothed to Caesar, an eagle dropped into her lap from the sky a hen of remarkable whiteness, completely unhurt. She regarded the miracle with awe, but what was more, the hen was holding a sprig of laurel with berries in her beak. The *haruspices* ordered the preservation of the bird and its chicks, and said the sprig should be planted and guarded: this was done at Caesar’s villa on the banks of the Tiber, situated nine miles down the Flaminian Way, which is called The Henhouse as a result. The laurel grove thrives there marvelously. Afterwards, during a triumph Caesar would hold a branch of laurel from the tree in his hand and wear a wreath of it on his head. Subsequent Caesars did the same, and it was tradition to plant the branches they had held, so that groves bearing their names still survive, and perhaps this caused the change of laurels in triumphs.”¹⁰³

Juvenal also tells this story, as does Dio.¹⁰⁴ Like Suetonius, Dio adds that the deaths of these white chickens and the withering of the laurel grove in Nero’s time heralded the downfall of the Julio-Claudian line.¹⁰⁵ Since the laurel represented victory and chickens were used in the auspices of all military victories, this omen has a strong whiff of martial glory and triumphal

¹⁰² Reeder 2001, 14.

¹⁰³ Plin. *HN*. 15.136-7.

¹⁰⁴ Juv. *Sat.* 13.140-142; Dio Cass. 48.52.3-4.

¹⁰⁵ Dio Cass. 63.29.3.

celebration to it. But why was such an omen bestowed upon Livia and not Augustus himself? At this early stage, Flory argues, it must have been to accrue support for their controversial marriage.¹⁰⁶ Livia and the young Octavian both divorced spouses in order to marry, and Livia was, at the time, pregnant with her former husband's child, her second son Drusus. On this point we may consider another story about Livia and chickens relating to her first son, the future emperor Tiberius:

Quin et ab homine perficiuntur. Iulia Augusta prima sua iuventa Ti. Caesare ex Nerone gravida, cum parere virilem sexum admodum cuperet, hoc usa est puellari augurio, ovum in sinu fovendo atque, cum deponendum haberet, nutrici per sinum tradendo ne intermitteretur tepor; nec falso augurata proditur.

“What’s more, eggs may be hatched by humans. Livia, in her youth, was pregnant with Tiberius Caesar by Nero, and she desired to bring forth a male child, so she used a form of augury employed by girls, and cherished an egg in her bosom. When she had to put it aside, she passed it to a nurse under the folds of their clothes so that the warmth would not be interrupted. It is said her augury did not prove false.”¹⁰⁷

By which, Pliny means, she hatched out a rooster. Suetonius also tells this story, remarking that she hatched out a male chick with a splendid comb.¹⁰⁸ If we conflate the two omens, we see that in the early days Livia desired to be associated with the hen's fertility. The omen of the white hen appearing to Livia allows it to function as a positive marriage portent, indicating the favour of the gods and the hope that, like the fertile hen, she would bear a great brood of children to Augustus. This, of course, did not eventuate.

Livia aside, the whiteness of the hen demands further explanation. The gods above were given white sacrificial animals. The gods below received dark red or black victims. Traditionally, Aesculapius received white cockerels.¹⁰⁹ So were white chickens perhaps special in some way? Our agricultural authors do not think so. According to Columella, there were two major kinds of farmyard hens, a red variety and a white variety. Red chickens, a hardy Italian

¹⁰⁶ Flory 1989, 353.

¹⁰⁷ Pliny, *HN* 10.154.

¹⁰⁸ Suet. *Tib.* 14.

¹⁰⁹ Scheid 2007, 264

breed, were prolific layers and excellent mothers. White chickens, likely a predecessor of the Leghorn breed, were apparently not as fertile, and their conspicuous colour made them easy prey for raptors. Due to this, they were not as popular among farmers.¹¹⁰ Yet much is made of this bird's remarkable whiteness. It is tempting to attribute its colour to some ritual significance, but hens (unlike roosters) were generally not associated with particular gods, regardless of their colour. Because this omen is attached to triumph, it is more probable that the white colour served to recall the gaudy white horses pulling Julius Caesar's chariot in his triumph, and the white horses Augustus subsequently used at his triumphs.¹¹¹ We are told that at his spectacular triumphs of August 29, which advertised him as the master of the Roman world, he carried a laurel branch plucked from a tree that was bestowed upon his family by heaven. It is not much of a stretch to wonder if Livia's brood of conspicuous white hens were also used for his auspices, mandating these victorious battles. Though our written sources are silent on this point, if we examine the evidence we can make some tenuous conclusions.

Iconographic depictions of auspices *ex tripudiis* are rare. The earliest comes from the Republican *aes signatum*, c.260 BCE, which we have already explored. It is not until Augustus' time that we begin to see more depictions. The most famous comes from the altar to the *Lares Augusti*, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. The inscription states it is from the Vicus Sandalarius in Rome, 2 BCE. This altar features four characters: two men, one woman, and one hungry hen. The figure in the middle is undoubtedly Augustus, veiled and holding a *lituus* in the role of augur. The hen pecks at his feet. On his left is the second man, probably Gaius Caesar, and on his right the woman, who is sometimes identified as Livia in the role of priestess.¹¹² This possible family involvement with taking auspices from hens is striking when we consider that heaven blessed the *gens Iulia* with the gift of a white hen.

¹¹⁰ Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.7.

¹¹¹ Dio Cass. 43.14.3; Beard 2007, 234-5. White horses were associated with Jupiter and the Divine Sun. The use of such horses in triumphs was rare, but not unprecedented, as it was frowned upon as an attempt to claim divine status for oneself. However, after Ceasar and Augustus, the Romans seem to have envisioned white horses as a natural part of the triumph. For example, Statius in *Thebaid* 12.532-3 imagines a Roman-style triumph for Theseus in which he is drawn by snowy horses.

¹¹² Reeder 2001, 101; Zanker 1990, 129.



Figure 17: Vicus Sandalarius Altar. 2 BCE. Florence, Uffizi Museum, inv. no. 972.

Photo: D-DAI-Rom 35.1809R.

The most persuasive interpretation is that this depicts Gaius Caesar taking auspices before his departure on a military campaign to the East.¹¹³ However, since the scene is inconsistent with what we know of how the ritual of *tripudium* was performed, it is best to view it as a symbolic pastiche. Augury, represented by Augustus, and sacrifice, represented by the female figure, were the two pillars upon which Gaius' success rested. Livia may not be present in this piece

¹¹³ Pollini 1987, 34.

after all, but rather a priestess of the Magna Mater, a goddess to whom it would be most appropriate to pray for success in the East.¹¹⁴ But even if Livia is not present, it does not take away from the notion that Augustus would want to be seen with white chickens, just to make his control over auspices more meaningful. Juvenal gives us a clue in one of his biting satires, demanding to know if someone believes they deserve special treatment

quia tu gallinae filius albae, nos uiles pulli nati infelicibus ouis

“Just because you’re the son of a white hen, while we poor pullets were hatched from less auspicious eggs?”¹¹⁵

If the white hen was not favoured as a barnyard breed, then its greater felicitousness must surely come from its status as a bird favoured in auspices.

Another depiction of the Augustan chickens comes to us in a small gemstone. Now held at Cologne University, it is dated to between 37 and 31 BCE, which makes it especially significant as it closely coincides with the advent of the omen. Flory describes the piece:

“The carved piece of glass is a prototype from which copies were made and distributed, presumably within Octavian's circle. The cameo shows a tripod from which rises a snake and below which are two pecking chickens. A *lituus* and *simpuvium* fill out the space. The two symbols and the tripod refer to Octavian's membership in three priestly colleges, the pontifices, the *augures*, and the *XV viri sacrisfaciundis*.”¹¹⁶

In a study on the gem, Zwierlein-Diehl interprets the hens as symbolic of Octavian’s military success in the battle of Actium, making a dating of 31 B.C.E. most likely.¹¹⁷ It celebrates victories won under his auspices – and possibly, taken from his chickens. The Henhouse was nine miles distant from Rome, but according to Sextus Aurelius Victor, there was a place in the City wherein white birds were kept for religious purposes.¹¹⁸ On the western portion of the Viminal Hill there also existed a street or district called *gallinae albae*.¹¹⁹ This link is made more remarkable by an inscription discovered in 1909 which tells us the villa *ad gallinas* was

¹¹⁴ Koortbojian 2013, 76-7.

¹¹⁵ Juv. *Sat.* 13.141-2.

¹¹⁶ Flory 1989, 350.

¹¹⁷ Zwierlein-Diehl 1980, 405-22.

¹¹⁸ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 5.17.

¹¹⁹ Planter & Ashby 1929, 246.

also referred to as *gallinae albae*.¹²⁰ On the basis of this evidence, Flory speculates that these special white birds were brought from The Henhouse and kept in The District of White Chickens on the Viminal Hill so they could be used easily in augural and auspicial rites.¹²¹ Using white chickens in urban and military auspices that were ostensibly bred by the Empress from a hen dropped into her lap by an eagle would have been the perfect way for Augustus to clinch ideological control over this ancient art. Despite the dwindling of lore, augury and auspices continued to be of great importance well into the Empire and were fundamental to Imperial control. Their importance may be seen in the fact that a list of auguries from the years 1 and 17 CE survive on stone.¹²² Augurs, responsible for maintaining the *pomerium* and overseeing the auspices, continued to be appointed until the end of the fourth century CE.¹²³ Since we have already established the use of chickens in public auspices, the breeding of special white hens with a link to the Imperial family for the purpose makes sense.

When considering the Roman use of chickens, it is worth comparing their system to other forms of divination. Roman divination, like Mesopotamian and Egyptian, is noted as being particularly systematised. This quality is particularly valued in structured, hierarchical societies where divination can have a significant political impact. In such cases, Driediger-Murphy argues, divination cannot be left to arbitrary or mystic interpretation, but must be controlled through consistent and logical rules with fairly predictable outcomes.¹²⁴ The augural hens represent the most Roman and most utilitarian contribution to the field of divination, hijacking rules and technicalities surrounding avian auspices to produce a ritual that could reliably produce divine sanction.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the ritual of *auspicia ex tripudiis* from a practical point of view, interrogating all the vagaries that come from utilising live chickens. An investigation of the chicken's introduction and spread in Italy allows us to conclude that these birds were originally ritual animals, and that the Romans' curious preference for hens over roosters may be attributed to their wishing to control variables that might lead to undesirable outcomes for

¹²⁰ Ashby, & Fell 1921, 145.

¹²¹ Flory 1989, 352.

¹²² *CIL* VI 36841. See Braund 1985, no.774.

¹²³ Beard et al. 1998, 179.

¹²⁴ Driediger-Murphy 2018, 15-16

the auspiciant, with young tame hens serving as the most pliable, and therefore reliable, messengers of Jupiter. Their early use in military auspices demonstrates a desire to achieve divine sanction for battle or movement in the field without having to wait for a sign from a wild bird, which might not come, and which could be negative, foiling a general's well-laid plans. The sign given by the hens involved food dropping from their beaks, which induced a *tripudium* on a technicality, since any bird could make a sign by dropping something in front of an auspiciant, allowing chickens to join the small and exclusive club of augural birds elucidated in chapter one. Generally, hens could be relied upon to eat the crumbly cakes offered to them, except in some recorded instances where certain factors hampered them – for example, they enter a sort of hypnosis at night and will not eat, and at sea may lose their appetites from motion sickness. While at first glance it might seem bizarre that Roman generals consulted chickens in the field, something to be blamed on a quaint belief that the birds were sacred in some way, but in actuality this was the most expedient way of securing a favourable answer that satisfied all legal and religious prerogatives.

The need to transport live fowl with the army raises the question of who was responsible for caring for the birds, and the shadowy figure of the *pullarius* rises to provide answers. Their ability to manipulate the animals in their care has the potential to shed light on political struggles between the Senate and individual magistrates, or between magistrates. The power of these *pullarii* appears to have increased with the use of chickens in urban auspices as well as military, with the ease of consultation and simplicity of ritual causing the meteoric rise of chickens to supreme augural birds, satellites of Jupiter himself. Their pre-eminence is further attested by their use in Augustan propaganda, as it seems likely that Augustus not only used augural hens as symbols to assert his claim to over-arching auspices, but even cultivated a distinctive flock of white chickens that could be sent from the Villa of Livia into the City. In light of this, Pliny's praise of chickens as ruling over the Empire itself (*imperio imperant*) scarcely seem overblown. From small beginnings the augural hens proved themselves fundamental to the social, political and religious life of Rome, ruling the roost in the City as magistrates conducted daily business.

Chapter 3: Farming and Aviculture

3.1 Introduction

Having considered the place of birds in the augural lore of Rome, we now turn to more practical matters – namely, the raising and consumption of birds on Roman farms. Roman society was inherently unequal, and inequality was expressed in various ways, between free people and slaves, rich and poor, citizen and non-citizen.¹ Animals as property can yield information about this social and economic inequality.² So too can the consumption of animals, through patterns of butchery, choice of animal, choice of cuts, choice of young as opposed to old, and so on.³ In Rome and Italy during the Empire, meat-eating was a standard display among the rich, as landowners could more readily afford to dedicate arable land to the raising of livestock for consumption, or pay for meat to be imported.⁴ There was a marked difference between the cuisines of the wealthy few and the more modest diets of both the rural and urban masses. As Garnsey puts it, “In strongly hierarchical and status-conscious societies, rich men use food as one of a number of ways of signalling their wealth and winning or maintaining prestige in the sight of the world.”⁵ “Gastro-politics”, or the use of food to reinforce social status, allow us to view birds as commodities that the Romans used to generate wealth and prestige.⁶ In this chapter we will investigate how the farming of birds for consumption can communicate information about wealth and inequality in the Roman world, with a particular focus on the transitional period from the late Republic to the early Empire.

Goody defines the five distinct phases of food. The first is food production, the province of the farm and the natural world. The second is food distribution, the province of trade, markets and storage. The third is food preparation, the realm of the kitchen. The fourth is consumption, which takes us to the meal and the table. Finally, there is food disposal, where scraps and refuse are discarded.⁷ The final phase is naturally where the majority of archaeological evidence about diet is recovered and interpreted.⁸ On an archaeological site, for

¹ Potter 2004.

² Barth 1969; Dahl & Hjort 1976; Bussata 2007; Mullin 1999.

³ Van der Veen 2018, 68; Hoffman 2014, 117.

⁴ Garnsey 1999, 123

⁵ Garnsey 1999, 113. See also Morley 2007, 47.

⁶ Appadurai 1981.

⁷ Goody 1982.

⁸ MacKinnon 2018, 100

example, taxonomic richness is often a key component in distinguishing elite and non-elite diets.⁹ Sites can be characterised as “high-status” or “low-status” depending on the absence or presence of certain animal species, body parts, or age groups in food dumps.¹⁰ However, as Sykes demonstrates, deducing the presence of inequality in such assemblages can be complex. Perception and recognition of inequality is temporal and situational. It is subject to great shifts over time, and what can mark an elite site in one era may be totally redundant in another.¹¹ In this chapter and the next as well, zooarchaeology is used alongside art and literature to focus on the first four “phases of food” listed here to examine how birds were hunted and farmed, traded and distributed, cooked and eaten, and what implications such things had for the status of the consumer.¹² Birds are an especially rich foodstuff to examine; not only were they used as powerful symbols of wealth and luxury, they were also the most commonly available source of meat for poorer citizens, who could raise barnyard poultry or catch smaller birds in the wild.¹³

The transitional period under investigation saw the establishment new transport and communication networks, an increase in military and state demands, and a burgeoning urban population that triggered specialised and more intensive farming in the interests of sale and profit. Bowman and Wilson outline the main changes in agriculture that occurred with the establishment of the Empire, including:

- Greater quantities of land, including marginal lands, brought under cultivation
- More efficient cultivation and crop rotation; increasing cultivation of fodder crops
- Increased output
- Increased specialisation and commercialisation
- The rise of larger and more efficient estates.¹⁴

There were, of course, many regional differences. Across the Empire a general trend shows that urban sites, villas and military sites show a greater degree of change as opposed to rural

⁹ Arbuckle & McCarty 2014, 6.

¹⁰ Ashby 2002; Crabtree 1990.

¹¹ Sykes 2014b, 353.

¹² van der Veen 2018, 68; Hoffman 2014, 117-8

¹³ Wilkins & Hill 2006, 150.

¹⁴ Bowman & Wilson 2013, 5-6.

sites where food production remained similar to the Iron Age.¹⁵ In Italy and the west the two predominant types of unit management were the villa estate and large estates that consisted of agglomerations of individual farms let out to tenants or exploited through tenancy and slave labour. Nevertheless, mobility in general surged during the Roman period, with the creation of roads and expansion of maritime trade making travel easier and safer, and facilitating greater movements of people and their animals. Commerce allowed farmers to grow crops and raise animals for profit, and profit could be invested into technical improvement. These general trends are abundantly evident in the way birds were farmed and how they reached the table for consumption.

What is striking to the modern reader is the sheer variety of birds that Romans kept. A poulterer today will generally specialise in one kind of bird, but even a middling Roman farmer in the early Empire would have kept chickens, geese, ducks, pigeons and thrushes. The income brought by these birds could then be supplemented by more exotic breeds, such as peacocks, guinea-fowl, pheasants, storks, partridges, cranes and swans. Not all birds were bred on the farm. It was common practice to catch wild birds and fatten them in captivity before selling or slaughtering them. Examining some of the archaeological evidence, the presence of so much wild game and farmed game in the diets of many upper- and middle-class Romans betrays that these seem to be prestige foods, primarily eaten (along with pork, lamb and kid) by the affluent. Specialty meats were in so much demand that they began to be consumed by people of more modest means too. In the first century BCE, feasts of *collegia* held by craftsmen included cuts of venison, boar, goose, duck, peacock and eventually pheasant. Studies from a range of sites, from cities, villages, legionary camps, *villae* and farms show wild game representing a significant portion of the meat consumed – in a few cases 20% or more. Deposits from less affluent communities show lower proportions of game, typically ranging from 1 to 3%, but as Kron points out, these so-called “game-poor” sites are still impressive when compared to the 0.3% of game meat consumed in Western Europe and North America in the early 1970s.¹⁶

Rare and imported animals and plants have always been markers of status among the elite.¹⁷ A villa with a diverse and well-stocked game preserve was a symbol of wealth and

¹⁵ Valenzuela-Lamas & Albarella 2017, 408-9.

¹⁶ Kron 2015, 165

¹⁷ Bergmann 2002, 89

power.¹⁸ Through the power to control surplus, the owner shored himself up against hard times and could maximise profit by waiting until market demand tipped in his favour. Importantly, the production of luxury foods for the urban market was considered as part of the agricultural proper.¹⁹ That is, it was an acceptable way for the aristocracy to accumulate wealth. Land, animals and agriculture were “proper wealth, for proper men” – trading and manufacturing were seen as inferior pursuits, though of course, despite the rhetoric the elite were often involved in these money-making pursuits too.²⁰ Catering to the luxury food market was a way to generate great profit without inviting too much disapproval, for it still fell within acceptable bounds of economic activity. Elites claimed an ideological connection with agricultural activity that led some Romans to compose agricultural manuals. The works of Cato (c.160BCE), Varro (37BCE) and Columella (c.60CE) provide a great deal of information on traditional farming practices and approaches to land management. This chapter draws heavily on these works, as well as on the compendium of Pliny the Elder (79CE), but readily acknowledges that these works come from a skewed perspective and contain many omissions. Yet as we are interested in how birds indicate status and inequality, the elite view offered by our sources remains an excellent starting point, and they provide great insight.²¹ In contrast to the world presented to us by these authors, most farmers would have engaged in small-scale farming rather than in capital-intensive estates.²² Zooarchaeological evidence provides the best means to interrogate the picture of agriculture left to us by written sources and can reveal the side not presented in these manuals.²³

Varro and Columella testify to the fortunes that enterprising farmers made from expanding into the exotic game market. Their recommendations for game-farming to maximise profit are detailed and correspond closely to best practice of game farmers today.²⁴ In Varro’s writing, the character Axius is advised to look at college dinners, and public and triumphal banquets as potential sources of profit.²⁵ Suetonius gives an example of one such banquet that called for 2000 fish and 7000 birds, thrown by Vitellius’ brother when the emperor arrived in

¹⁸ Green 1997, 440

¹⁹ Marzano 2013, 86.

²⁰ Howe 2014, 138-40; see Cato, *Agr.* 1.

²¹ Hoffman 2014, 38

²² Van der veen 2018, 54; Garnsey 1988, 44.

²³ Lewit 1991, 65.

²⁴ Kron 2015, 165.

²⁵ Varro, *Rust.* 3.2.16

Rome.²⁶ Merula records that it was at the banquet that marked his entry into the augural college that Q. Hortensius first served peacock, a move that was met with disapproval by upright and traditional men.²⁷ We can see here evidence for demand for great quantities of fowl, and for strange and exotic birds that can impress rivals and bring prestige for the organiser. We note that examples of these banquets are given in a moralising tone, and *luxuria* is held responsible for the fact that lavish feasts are now held almost every day in the City.²⁸ Changes in the raising of birds, as well as of fish, hares and bees, are indicted as part of the history and rise of luxury in Rome; as demand increased, farmers maximised production methods to meet it.²⁹ The most interesting part of Varro's dialogue is perhaps that the interlocutors show a general disapproval of luxury in keeping with traditional values, but the promise of great profit nevertheless overcomes any qualms they have. A thrush selling at three denarii per bird and a peacock fetching fifty is enough to tempt even the strongest traditionalist. Varro goes on to describe the efforts of Fircellia on the Via Salaria near Rome, who brought in 60 000 sesterces a year from selling thrushes. If these birds were not enough, a new fad for guineafowl was proving profitable.³⁰ The canny villa owner could capitalise enormously on the latest dining fads if he had a mind. Varro's characters stress that the greatest profits can be made at moments when the price of luxury foodstuffs suddenly escalated, so it is a wise idea to hold onto flocks until the market was ripe. The idea of making a fortune on little birds, as when the triumphal banquet of Metellus Scipio called for 5000 birds, is enough to make Varro's characters practically salivate.³¹ It is clear that urban and elite demand had a direct bearing on how agriculture changed and developed, with farmers adapting to catch, breed and fatten birds in purpose-built enclosures.³² These changes can be tracked, with the most remarkable transformation occurring around the transition of Republic to Empire. We will treat the rise of keeping aviaries for profit, then examine some of the most common farmed table birds in individual detail.

3.2 Rise of the Aviary

The drive to generate profit using birds can be seen escalating in the written records. Cato the Elder's *On Agriculture* gives a snapshot view of rural life in the Republic. It reads

²⁶ Suet. *Vit.* 13.2

²⁷ Varro, *Rust.* 3.6.6

²⁸ Varro, *Rust.* 3.12.16

²⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.3.5-10

³⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.18-19.

³¹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.3.10, 3.2.16.

³² Hoffman 2014, 118.

like a farmer's notebook, resounding with good, sensible advice for the contemporaneous agriculturalist, even if modern readers find parts difficult to stomach. What is particularly notable for us, however, is that advice relating to birds is patchy. Cato recommends pigeon dung as a fertiliser, which tells us that dovecotes – *columbaria* – were in common use at this time.³³ He also advises the farmer to fatten wild-caught wood pigeons for the market by force-feeding them a mixture of beans and barley, again affirming that the Romans had an appetite for pigeon meat. He then says every good female housekeeper must have many hens and eggs.³⁴ Elsewhere, eggs are used in medicine and everyday tasks.³⁵ We may infer that Cato took it for granted that every farm would have a number of chickens and fresh eggs available. He instructs the farmer how to fatten young hens and geese for the table with barley and wheat flour, again implying he assumed the reader would have these birds on hand. But the variety ends there. Chickens, geese and pigeons appear to be the only birds commonly farmed and sold for profit at this stage, and the methods are not particularly sophisticated. For example, there is no mention of fattening capons (castrated cocks) for the table and he has no advice for how to manage and house large flocks. Fowl, it seems, were an essential part of the rustic villa, but the science of aviculture was yet to emerge.

It is around the first century BCE that we see Romans developing a taste for exotic birds, discerning between different cuts of meat, and eating only certain parts of certain birds.³⁶ Sumptuary laws, beginning with the Lex Fannia of 161 BCE, attempted to curb such extravagance, but the rich easily ignored or circumvented them.³⁷ The more outlandish birds one could serve at a feast, the better. In 115 BCE, M.Aemilius Scaurus banned imported birds from being served at public baquets, indicating a healthy trade existed for the importation of rare and costly poultry.³⁸ Varro gives us a view of a fine villa around the advent of the Empire. He dedicates an entire book in his farming treatise to the management of fowl. The great villas were now keeping a variety of birds in huge numbers, and the wealthy were taking pride in consuming rarer breeds at lavish banquets as a display of their wealth and productivity, as we saw above. The scientific and intensive management of poultry was new at this time, for Varro remarks that previous authors had left only brief and unsystematic remarks on the subject.³⁹ He

³³ Cato, *Agr.* 36.

³⁴ Cato, *Agr.* 143.3, '*gallinas multas et ova uti habeat.*'

³⁵ Cato, *Agr.* 71, 106.

³⁶ Johnson 1968, 3.

³⁷ For legislation, see: Gell. *NA*, 2.24; Macrob. *Sat.* 3.17. For evasions of the laws, see Plin. *HN*, 10.71.138-40.

³⁸ Plin. *HN*, 8.223

³⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.2.13.

names two kinds of aviary: one for pleasure, and one for commercial use that functioned as a large poultry farm.⁴⁰ In this second type, he included a town aviary, which was like a shop adapted to the keeping and selling of live birds. The pleasure aviary was known by its Greek name, *ornithon*. This is not because it was a Greek invention. Its name merely provided a means of distinguishing it from the common Roman aviary, since the Latin *aviarium* can mean a henhouse or dovecote. *Ornithon* suggested something more refined.⁴¹ Birds were therefore kept for their ability to indicate status through display as well as through raising and consumption. Columella's farming treatise, written under the Julio-Claudians, expands on this picture and shows that Roman aviculture was only becoming more sophisticated, and that demand for fowl was also increasing.

M. Laenius Strabo of Brundisium in the first century BCE is credited as being the first Roman to establish a diverse aviary.⁴² Whether this was private or commercial is a matter of conjecture – Strabo was of the equestrian class and a businessman, which supports the latter, but Johnson points out that the structure was set into the peristyle of his house like the private aviaries that flourished in later years. It is entirely possible that Strabo intended the aviary to be both. Even emperors used their private, pleasure aviaries to turn a profit.⁴³ Varro distinguishes between birds kept for pleasure and birds kept for profit, but many birds could serve both functions. That aviaries could be turned to both pleasing and profitable ends while remaining socially acceptable likely added to their popularity. It wasn't long before every fashionable villa had an aviary attached to it, usually called an *ornithon*, and usually large in size. Cicero writes to Quintus about the construction of an aviary.⁴⁴ Augustus and Livia had an entire villa dedicated to the raising of chickens. Tiberius raised peacocks.⁴⁵ The extent to which bird fever gripped the Romans during the Empire is perhaps best illustrated by Emperor Severus Alexander, who loved breeding tame birds and kept aviaries of peacocks, pheasants, chickens, ducks and partridges, as well as 20 000 turtle-doves. In order to ensure the people did not feel the burden of his beloved birds' upkeep, he made these aviaries self-sufficient and paid for their food by selling eggs, chickens and squabs.⁴⁶ That this is added as an afterthought suggests that Severus Alexander primary motive was pleasure rather than profit.

⁴⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.4.2.

⁴¹ Johnson 1968, 7

⁴² Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.8; Plin. *HN*, 10.141.

⁴³ Johnson 1968, 6.

⁴⁴ Cic. *QFr.* 3.1.1

⁴⁵ Suet. Tib. 60; cf *CIL* VI 8848 & 8849.

⁴⁶ SHA, *Alex. Sev.* 41

The relative peace and prosperity of the Empire created the perfect environment for large commercial aviaries to flourish. These aviaries provided a steady supply of cheap poultry to the urban market and also provided luxury goods in the form of rare birds. Aviaries were made even more profitable by the valuable dung they provided, which could be sold or spread directly onto the owner's fields to increase the bounty of his land.⁴⁷ Such use of nitrogen-rich fertiliser would help to mitigate the very real threat of soil depletion on Roman farms.⁴⁸ The largest of the aviaries required teams of slaves to run them, and descriptions indicate that their existence was in a large part facilitated by the Romans' advanced aquaculture and their ready access to fresh water.⁴⁹

Under the Empire, we can also see that infrastructure was in place to deliver farmed birds to the urban markets. A town aviary, wherein one would sell live birds, has survived at Pompeii and is situated at Regio VII, Insula vii, No.16, behind the Forum and the Temple of Apollo in the garden of the House of the Veteran Julianus.⁵⁰ This town aviary doubtless supplied the residents of Pompeii with pet birds as well as poultry for the table.⁵¹ The southern half of the house consisted of a garden 7 metres square, in which the circular aviary 6 metres in diameter was situated. Poles were set into the walls, supporting a cone-shaped roof of lath, and netting covered the entire structure. Vases were found within the aviary, which perhaps contained food and water for the birds. It is speculated that wooden perches were attached to the poles, but of course no wood has survived. An aviary was found to be depicted in a painting from another Pompeian house (Regio 1, Insula iv, No.25). A passage from Cicero gives us a clue as to how the urban poulterer ran his business. The *De Officiis* (1.150 f.) declares all crafts unworthy of the freeborn citizen, especially those that catered to *voluptates* – pleasures – in some way. Bird-stuffers were included in the list, along with fishermen, cooks and butchers for their role in catering to gustatory delight. A specialist in fattening poultry was a *fartor*. This is an uncommon word, but Bond points to a small number of inscriptions that attest these individuals existed, and seem to have been especially clustered within Rome.⁵² It was not the fact that they sold poultry that made Cicero look down on them – it was the fact that they fed

⁴⁷ Littlewood 1984, 14.

⁴⁸ Hoffman 2014, 36.

⁴⁹ Thomas & Wilson 1994, 168.

⁵⁰ Jashemski 1993, 188.

⁵¹ Jashemski 1979, 108.

⁵² Bond 2016, 152; *CIL* VI, 6286, 8848, 8849, VIII 9432.

and fattened the birds to *excess* before selling them. This association with softness and excess lasted for a long time. In the *De re militari* of the late Empire, Vegetius proposes to strengthen the army by banning fowlers, fishermen, confectioners and weavers far from encampments. The proposal was linked to the wish to improve the moral and physical character of the soldiers, as if eating foods that provided pleasure damaged them somehow.⁵³ In Rome, we have records of *aviarii*, one of them an *aviarius altillarius*, who bought directly from farms and fattened birds before selling them.⁵⁴ The Edict of Diocletian distinguishes between fattened and unfattened birds, with fattened stock being on average twice as valuable. Fattening in town and close to the marketplace ensured that the birds would not lose weight during transportation. The presence of these sellers in the City, and of the aviary in Pompeii, shed light on how birds made their way from farms and fowlers to the dinner plates or birdcages of citizens. They also indicate the symbolic power of a fat, delicious table bird. The act of eating a fattened bird bought from the urban poulterer carried a great deal of moral and cultural baggage. It indicates demand for ‘luxury’ foodstuffs and shows that an entire network of infrastructure supported the sale of exotic and fattened birds.

A description of a rich man’s aviary comes to us from Martial:

*Vagatur omnis turba sordidae chortis,
argutus anser gemmeique pauones
nomenque debet quae rubentibus pinnis
et picta perdix Numidicaeque guttatae
et impiorum phasiana Colchorum;
Rhodias superbi feminas premunt galli;
sonantque turres plausibus columbarum,
gemit hinc palumbus, inde cereus turtur.*

“The whole crowd wanders in the dirty pen, the complaining goose and shining peacocks, the bird that owes its name to its red feathers (flamingos), the painted partridge, the speckled Numidian birds (guineafowl), the impious Colchians’ pheasant,

⁵³ Veg. *De re mil.* 1.7; Bond 2016, 164-5.

⁵⁴ *CIL* VI 9200, 9201.

proud cocks mounting their Rhodian ladies, cotes loud with pigeons' crooning, while here and there wood-pigeon and turtle-doves coo."⁵⁵

This menagerie inevitably made its way onto the feast tables of the rich, who sought to impress through sheer extravagant variety. Demand was so strong that Seneca even mentions that there was a slave whose sole purpose was to carve expensive game birds.⁵⁶ The raising of game birds like the flock in Martial's poem became as routine as the raising of ducks, chickens and geese in the Empire, a far cry from Cato's comparatively humble flocks. When a display becomes trendy among the rich, middle classes inevitably seek to imitate them, and so demand for game birds swelled among the lower classes as well.

"Ancient game farming (...) led to a significant increase in the supply of wild game, reducing its cost until it fell within the means of the *plebs media*, and eventually of many ordinary Romans (...) game farming soon produced pigeons, ducks, and geese as affordable as the cheapest red meats, mutton and beef; venison as inexpensive as pork, and peacock and wild boar as cheap as lamb, kid or suckling pig. The song thrush, partridge and turtle dove, harder to breed and normally caught in the wild and fattened in captivity, were significantly more expensive (...) but not prohibitively so, at least as an occasional luxury."⁵⁷

A Roman villa discovered at Kom al-Dikka in Alexandria that dates to the 2nd century CE reveals more about bird-raising practices among the elite. Christened the Villa of the Birds, the most remarkable find in the excavation was mosaic α -5, a square divided into 9 panels. Seven of the panels survive, and each shows a different bird. Birds are incredibly common motifs in Roman mosaics, but the Villa of the Birds stands out because it displays in one image the variety of birds one could expect to find being raised in rich men's villas. Present are pigeons, a purple gallinule, a quail, a teal duck, a parrot and a peacock.⁵⁸ Though at first glance it seems as though two squares depict ordinary pigeons – a strangely redundant choice – the Romans would have distinguished between the *columbae*, or domestic pigeons drinking from a bowl in the central panel, and the *palumba*, or wood pigeon, a larger bird with different plumage in the panel below. All of these birds had the potential to generate profit and prestige for the person

⁵⁵ Mart. 3.58.12-19

⁵⁶ Sen. *Ep.* 47.6.

⁵⁷ Kron 2017, 129.

⁵⁸ Kolataj et al. 2007, 35-38.

who raised them. Using their images as decoration invited association with the wealth and esteem of aviculture.



Figure 18: Villa of the Birds mosaic.

We have shown how the production and consumption of birds increased from the time of Cato to the early Empire. Elite demand saw aviaries diversify, with a focus on producing bigger, fatter and more exotic birds. Infrastructure on farms catered to intensive and profit-driven husbandry, and an urban network of poulterers acted as middlemen to get birds from farm to table. Elites despaired of how fattened, exotic birds heralded the decadence of their fellow Romans, even as they provided both the supply and the demand. Increased production also saw swelling demand among the middle classes, who sought to imitate the banquets of their social superiors. Birds communicated status in a powerful way, but to fully appreciate what they can tell us about Roman society we must consider some of the most commonly raised birds in individual detail and look for the perspective of poor or subsistence farmers amidst elite consumption.

3.3 Poultry

Chickens provide a fascinating window into the agricultural activities of the Romans and were eaten and kept by all from the poorest to wealthiest. While we think of chickens almost exclusively as food-producing animals, this was not always so, and in fact the Romans were somewhat peculiar for valuing chickens as table birds. To illustrate the Romans' unique

relationship with these birds, we should contextualise their place in the wider Mediterranean world. We have already touched on the fact that chickens were originally considered semi-exotic and that their status as food producers was initially far less important than their status as ritual animals.⁵⁹ The earliest faunal evidence for the chicken in Italy is dated to the 9th century BCE, with some artistic representations that might indicate a slightly earlier introduction. The contexts in which bones were found indicate that they were raised primarily for symbolic rather than food value.⁶⁰ Sykes convincingly lays out the evidence to prove that the spread of chickens across Europe was driven not by their value as food producers, but due to cockfighting.⁶¹ Historical and iconographic records indicate that the chicken was known from the mid-second millennium BCE in the Levant, Egypt and Mesopotamia, though finds are very sparse at this time and not associated with the domestic context.⁶² These sources refer almost exclusively to roosters and indicate they were seen as an exotic fighting birds. Finds become more common in the first millennium BCE. Seventh-century BC seals and ceramics from Egypt and the Palestinian region depict cocks and cockfights.⁶³ In the Levant and Egypt, all evidence points to them being used as fighting birds rather than as a source of food.⁶⁴ The early Greeks mainly bred chickens for use in cockfighting and medicine, and only later focused on the production of meat and eggs.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Poole 2010, 156.

⁶⁰ Corbino et al. 2018.

⁶¹ Sykes 2012.

⁶² Perry-Gal et al. 2015, 9852

⁶³ Taran 1975; MacDonald and Blend 2000, 497.

⁶⁴ Crawford 2003, 12; Sykes 2012, 161; Sykes 2014a, 85.

⁶⁵ Sheasley 2008, 73.



Figure 19: Detail from the Etruscan Tomba dei Fiorellini, 475-450 BCE. Images of cocks squaring off like this are common.

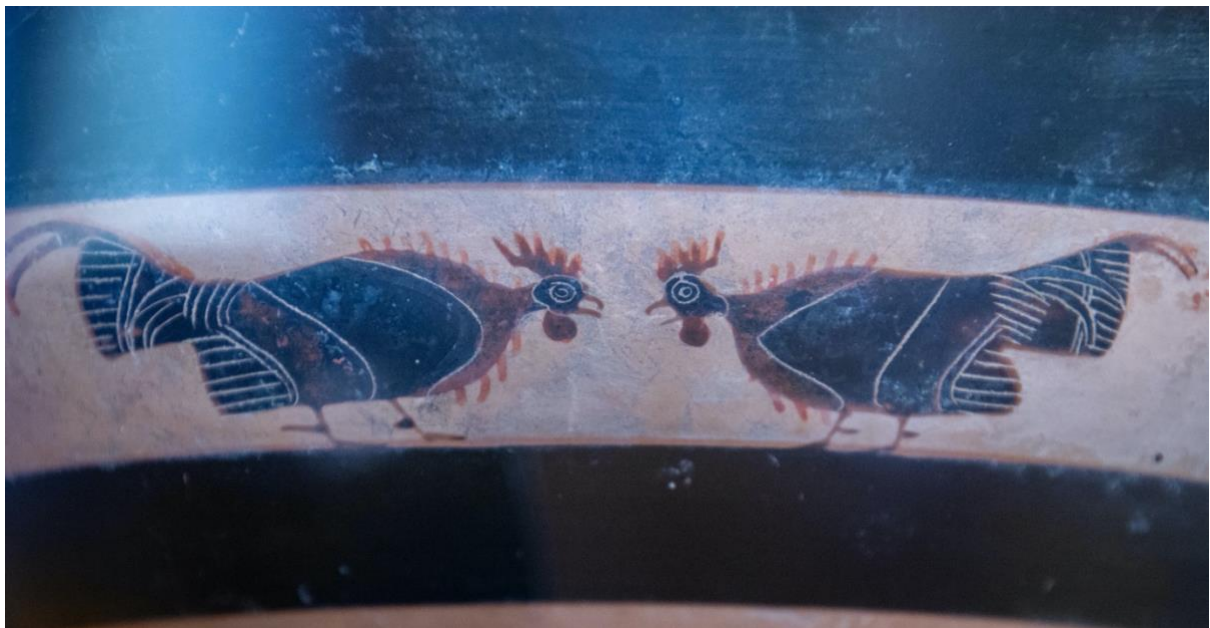


Figure 20: Detail. Fighting cocks. Etruscan band cup, c.540 BCE, Capitoline Museum.

Their introduction to Europe is usually credited to the Phoenicians, who brought their chickens with them when they colonised the west. This theory is based on the fact that the earliest chicken remains in Europe were retrieved from Phoenician sites, mainly in Iberia.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁶ Perry-Gal et al. 2015, 9852

Italy, the first occurrences are dated to the 8th century BCE, where they were ritual offerings in human graves. Possibly, cockfighting and their innate connection to bloodshed made them popular victims of blood sacrifice. We can say with certainty the animal was used in Etruscan times, for the bird may be seen in art, though it is a rarer subject for depiction than ducks and geese. Burnt bones have been discovered, and hens' eggs have been recovered from tombs.⁶⁷ Fowl remains are sporadic until the 3rd century BCE, and it is only in the Roman Imperial period that numbers become indicative of wide scale poultry farming. A gradual increase in archaeological representation continues from the fourth century BCE to the sixth century CE.⁶⁸ The evidence suggests that chickens only became widespread in the Roman period, at which point more attitudes similar to our own them began to emerge – that is, that they are valuable producers of meat and eggs. While cockfighting was certainly practiced and enjoyed from the Republic through the Imperial period, they did not show an obsession with the sport on the same level that the Greeks did. In Roman art, proud cocks are shown fighting, or with trophies and betting paraphernalia in tow, symbols of masculine strength.⁶⁹ But written sources betray that pride in their broody, fertile hens outweighed their regard for the pugnacious roosters. The works of Varro and Columella provide detailed information about chicken breeds and their management. In the Italian Middle Ages, the chicken may have been a food source, but there are no written sources that detail husbandry practices such as the efficient and intensive ones transmitted by the Romans.⁷⁰

The Roman passion for raising hens places them in stark contrast to other Mediterranean cultures. Our ancient authors would even have us believe that the Romans first raised hens – not roosters – so they could be used in auspices.⁷¹ Roosters were fine sacrificial animals, but when it came to bloodless rituals such as the taking of auspices, a lively flock of pullets was considered most suitable for the task. It is a small step from valuing hens as ritual animals to making the most of their ability to produce meat and eggs. They selectively bred for size and productivity of the females rather than the aggressiveness of the males. For a people who adored beast hunts so much, it is almost jarring to hear the way they disparage the Greeks for their devotion to cockfights, and for the savageness of their chicken breeds.

⁶⁷ de Grossi Mazzorin 2000, 352-3.

⁶⁸ de Grossi Mazzorin 2000, 354

⁶⁹ Watson 2002, 380.

⁷⁰ Corbino et al 2017, 50

⁷¹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.3.5; Cic. *Div.* 1.15.28; 2.35.73.



Figure 21: Hen and cockerel. First century CE, Naples Archaeological Museum.



Figure 22: Hens pecking at wheat. This domestic, non-aggressive imagery stands in contrast to pre-Roman depictions of fighting roosters. Fresco from the columbarium of villa Doria Pamphili in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.

Chickens can even be used to assess Romanisation under the Empire. Among the Britons in the first century BCE, geese and cocks were bred, but they could not be eaten due to a religious taboo.⁷² They were chiefly used for entertainment.⁷³ Zooarchaeological evidence shows that, in Britain, the majority of ritual deposits of chickens date to the Iron Age and Romano-British period, with only a few Romano-British and early Medieval deposits being interpreted as food waste, in contrast to later Medieval deposits where domestic fowl are interpreted as commonly consumed domestic animals.⁷⁴ Chicken was not regularly eaten on all types of site.⁷⁵ In one study, Maltby looked at proportions of domestic fowl, sheep and goats among the faunal assemblages of different site using NISP measures to assess the contribution that poultry made to the diet. Results indicated a significant urban-rural divide, as large towns contained the highest proportions of chickens. A moderate representation was found among military and villa sites, while rural sites revealed no chickens, or only a few. Though urban chicken-keeping might be attributed to the ability to keep the birds on small plots, it may also be an indication of how Romanisation affected some sites, but not others.⁷⁶ Cool points out that rural sites often showed a high proportion of chicken bones recovered from grave sites, pointing to their consumption in funeral ritual, but not in everyday life.⁷⁷ These ‘native’ practices stand in contrast to the urban and military populations.

The Romans recognised several different breeds of chickens, although the term ‘breed’ is somewhat problematic. As MacKinnon points out, the Roman view of what constituted a ‘breed’ is different to the modern definition, which employs an understanding of genetic principles and how they factor into the manipulation of physical and behavioural traits in animals to create new breeds. Ancient cultures were capable of breeding to promote certain traits in animals, but tended to distinguish the same species according to geographic location rather than the genetic and reproductive features we use today.⁷⁸ Poulterers generally disliked Greek breeds because they were bred for cockfighting; one could not turn a profit with these aggressive animals.⁷⁹ Discussing Greek and Roman chicken breeds, Columella tells us that the scientific method of raising fowls for profit was begun by the Greeks, particularly by the people

⁷² Caes. *B Gall.* 5.12

⁷³ Armstrong 1958, 32.

⁷⁴ Morris 2011, 162-3.

⁷⁵ Cool 2006, 99.

⁷⁶ Maltby 1997.

⁷⁷ Cool 2006, 101.

⁷⁸ MacKinnon 2014, 323

⁷⁹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.4-5; Cato, *Agr.* 143.3

of Delos, and that they favoured ‘long’ bodies and spirited natures in their birds. The most famous breeds were the Tanagran of Boeotia, the Chalcidian from Euboea, and the Median – that is, Persian. Tanagra was an especially famous site for breeding fighting cocks. For the enterprising farmer, native Italian breeds were typically recommended, a red variety that probably resembled the Rhode Island Red, and a white variety, probably the ancestors of the Leghorn breed.⁸⁰ The red hen, even despite the white flock kept by Augustus and Livia, remained the preferred barnyard breed for its hardiness, fertility, and for the fact it was less visible to hawks.⁸¹ Like the Greeks, the Romans employed selective breeding, but they chose different traits. Looking down on Greek birds, they raised their birds with the aim of increasing meat and egg production, selecting not for the males’ fighting spirit but for docility and fecundity of the females.⁸² Columella later specifies that although Italian breeding cocks should be spirited and muscular, these birds were *not* used for cockfights. They were bred to protect their flock of wives from snakes and vermin. If a man wanted a good fighting cock he would choose a Greek bird.⁸³ Aristotle mentions Adrian, or Adrianic fowl, that come from Adria in the Veneto region of north-east Italy.⁸⁴ These were said to be small, prolific, and very bad-tempered, most likely a bantam breed.⁸⁵ Columella was dismissive of bantams, saying that despite their fecundity they were bad-natured, and should only be kept if one took pleasure in their dwarf appearance.⁸⁶ Pliny repeats that they are especially prolific egg-layers.⁸⁷ We can see Roman values emerging: Roman chickens were for eating, laying eggs and being good mothers. If you wanted a fighting bird, you would invest in a foreign breed. Romanisation facilitated size improvement in many animal breeds, particularly in domestic cattle, ovicaprids and pigs.⁸⁸ The same pattern is apparent in Roman chickens, which were as big as some modern breeds.⁸⁹ Large animals are typically indicative of profit-driven agriculture – smaller chickens would suit the subsistence farmer as it meant the animal consumed less food and could forage with less need for him to supplement their diet with grain or fodder crops, whereas the farmer producing a bird for market desires a larger animal to net a larger profit. Zooarchaeology has

⁸⁰ Johnson 1968, 22-3.

⁸¹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.4; Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.7; Palladius 1.27

⁸² Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.4

⁸³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.11

⁸⁴ Arist. *Hist. an.* 558b, 17; *Gen. an.* 749b 28.

⁸⁵ Jennison 1937, 14

⁸⁶ Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.14

⁸⁷ Plin. *HN*, 146.

⁸⁸ Audoin- Rouzeau 1995; Filean 2008; MacKinnon 2001, 2004; Peters 1998; Trentacoste 2018.

⁸⁹ Kron 2014, 119.

confirmed the presence of at least three distinct breeds of chickens at the Roman and early Byzantine site of Sagalassos.⁹⁰



Figure 23: Though faded, we can distinguish red, white and black fowl in this painting. Casa del Vettii, Pompeii.

Chickens were present on almost every Roman farm.⁹¹ Chickens were the most acceptable of sacrificial animals, possibly because it was an animal that most people had ready access to, and could offer up without much inconvenience.⁹² On large farms, a *gallinarius* would tend to hens. Graffiti in Pompeii indicates that there were enough *gallinarii* to give group support for a political candidate.⁹³ A single *gallinarius* could look after about 200 chickens, provided he had the assistance of a boy or a crafty old woman who would ensure the animals did not stray or get picked off by men or hawks.⁹⁴ By contrast, on the average farm hens were the responsibility of the farmer's wife and an important renewable source of protein.⁹⁵ Country-dwellers would keep their own flocks, while city-dwellers could procure meat and eggs from markets supplied by the larger farms. The middleman in this transaction was a poultry merchant, called a *negotians pullarius*.⁹⁶ In Cato's time, he expected farmers to

⁹⁰ de Cupere et al. 2005, 1596

⁹¹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.1.4

⁹² Plin. *HN*, 10.24.49

⁹³ *CIL* IV 241, 373

⁹⁴ Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.7

⁹⁵ Palladius, 1.27.

⁹⁶ *CIL* VI 9674

have a few chickens, but by the Empire, if it fell within your means, you could easily establish large flocks of a few hundred and make a handsome profit supplying the urban market.

When it came to housing chickens in large numbers or small, light and ventilation were key components in the design of the coops. This helped to ward off rot and dampness.⁹⁷ The coops were kept scrupulously clean of dung (which could be composted and used as fertilizer). They were regularly cleansed and fumigated.⁹⁸ Nesting boxes were lined with chaff, and these would be cleaned and purified with Sulphur and bitumen before the hens were allowed to nest in them.⁹⁹ This helped to prevent lice infestations. Romans also knew to provide dust and ashes with which chickens could have dustbaths, another safeguard against lice.¹⁰⁰ Presumably the ashes were taken from the hearthfire, so even household soot did not go to waste. At night they slept on square-hewn wooden perches. These were at the same height to prevent bickering over who would sleep on the highest (and therefore, best) perch. This measure kept their feet free from dung as they slept, preventing infection. The poultry yard allowed ample space for exercise. To protect them from predators they were often kept enclosed in the outdoor space, but were free to peck, scratch, preen, squabble, and roam about. Netting would prevent hawks from picking them off. It does not take a flock of chickens long to pick an enclosure bare. The decision to keep them penned meant they could not effectively forage for themselves and were reliant on a supplemented diet.

Most importantly, fresh, clean water was in abundance, and accessed through lead troughs with small holes on the side to stop the chickens from fouling their water supply with food or feces.¹⁰¹ Columella stresses the importance of good, nutritious food for hens, recommending a diet of grape husks, chickpeas and half-cooked barley mixed with greens.¹⁰² The practice of half-cooking the barley rendered it easier to digest, and the addition of greens is equally sound since hens require fresh pasture to keep them in prime condition.¹⁰³ A third of their food was distributed in the morning and two-thirds towards the evening. This helped ensure they would return compliantly to the henhouse and made it easier to count them and herd them into their sleeping quarters at dusk. Columella ends on a slightly foreboding note:

⁹⁷ Kron 2014, 121

⁹⁸ Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.20

⁹⁹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.11

¹⁰⁰ Columella, *Rust.* 8.4.4

¹⁰¹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.3.8-9.

¹⁰² Columella, *Rust.* 8.4.1-2

¹⁰³ Kron 2014, 119.

Nam volatile pecus facile custodiam pastoris decipit

“Winged creatures easily delude the wits of the watchman.”¹⁰⁴

Anyone who has tried to herd chickens into their coop can probably relate to this. The high standard of care and attention to disease prevention shines through in the sources. Goebel and Peters comment:

“Great value was placed on hygienic principles (...) chickens should not sleep on the wooden floors, but on square bars, so that the manure did not attack their claws and cause podagra. To prevent the chickens from getting pituita (an infectious cold) their runs and drinking water should be kept clean, so that water dirtied by manure did not cause the illness. Today, we know the bacterial agent that causes this disease, *Haemophilus paragallinarum*. It multiplies well in dirty water, so that the infectious source observed by the agricultural writers can be verified. The *Geoponica* mentions the treatment of three illnesses not further described: an eye disease, diarrhea and an infestation with lice.”¹⁰⁵

For intensive poultry farming to flourish, such hygienic practices are essential. Though the production of poultry became highly commercialized, it seems chickens would have spent most of their lives in healthy, free-range conditions. Those that were fattened for market suffered during their final three weeks of life, gorging themselves in dark, cramped conditions with barely enough room to turn around.¹⁰⁶ Their diet consisted of barley mashed up with honey water or wheat bread soaked in wine. The sugar in their diet would have both fattened them more quickly and given the meat a sweeter flavor. The methods employed by *fartores* were akin to modern battery farming.

*Pascitur et dulci facilis gallina farina,
pascitur et tenebris. Ingeniosa gula est.*

¹⁰⁴ Columella, *Rust.* 8.4.3.

¹⁰⁵ Goebel & Peters 2014, 601-2.

¹⁰⁶ Columella, *Rust.* 8.7.4; Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.19-20

“The hen is easily nourished by sweet flour and darkness. Gluttony is ingenious!”¹⁰⁷

Male birds were gelded to improve the taste of their flesh.¹⁰⁸ This was allegedly done by burning the spurs off. While this might not sound particularly effective, our sources seem convinced that this method of castration worked.¹⁰⁹ We should perhaps interpret this to mean the animals were seared at the height of the loin – that is, on the copulation organ on the ventral side of the cloaca. It is unlikely that burning spurs would have any real effect. It is also unlikely the Romans could remove the internal testes without seriously injuring the young cockerels, but cauterising the papilla, in which the ductus deferens opens into the cloaca, would have an effect similar to real castration. It causes the bird to stop crowing, become disinterested in hens, and fatten more quickly.¹¹⁰ Martial jokingly compares capons to the eunuch priests of Cybele:

Succumbit sterili frustra gallina marito.

Hunc matris Cybeles esse decebat avem.

“In vain does the hen submit to her sterile mate. This bird should be mother Cybele’s.”¹¹¹

And again:

Ne nimis exhausto macresceret inguine gallus,

amisit testes. Nunc mihi gallus erit.

“The cock is castrated so he does not grow thin from sexual excitement. He is now a true priest of Cybele.”¹¹²

They made for good eating, with juicy and tender flesh. A guest from the countryside could impress his host by bringing delicious capons to dinner.¹¹³ Fat capons were a luxury dish at

¹⁰⁷ Mart. 13.62.

¹⁰⁸ Mart. 13.63, 64.

¹⁰⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.3; Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.3; Plin. *HN*, 10.25.50; Arist. *Hist. an.* 631b.

¹¹⁰ De Cupere et al. 2005, 1595.

¹¹¹ Mart. 13.64.

¹¹² Mart. 13.63.

¹¹³ Mart. 3.58.37.

banquets.¹¹⁴ By contrast, unfattened birds were the poor man's fare.¹¹⁵ Sumptuary laws prescribed chickens for banquets, and in the late Empire one could make a show of frugality by eating chicken instead of peacock.¹¹⁶ But while the *Edict of Diocletian* (4.23) shows that chickens were much cheaper than other birds, they were still expensive enough that the very poorest could not eat them. For those living a hand to mouth existence, egg-laying hens would have been too valuable to eat. They would have enjoyed chicken only occasionally, in the form of unfattened cockerels and hens past laying age.



Figure 24: Detail of a woman killing a chicken surrounded by Dionysiac celebration. Beginning of 3rd century CE, held in the Baths of Diocletian, inv. 326137. This piece offers a

¹¹⁴ Petr. Sat. 65.

¹¹⁵ Juv. Sat. 9.70-1; Hor. Sat. 2.2.120-1.

¹¹⁶ SHA, Alex. Sev. 37.5.

view of what must have been a common but seldom depicted occurrence – an old woman slaughtering a chicken to prepare a meal for a special occasion.

Quite naturally, eggs formed an important part of the Roman diet, with chickens providing the bulk of those consumed. They were commonly served in egg cups and eaten with a spoon. Hard-boiled eggs were called *ova elixa*.¹¹⁷ Soft-boiled were *ova hapala*.¹¹⁸ Apicius also records a milky omelette (*ova spongia ex lacte*) that was cooked only on one side.¹¹⁹ Aside from these examples, around half of his recipes contain eggs. Banquets traditionally began with an egg-course, hence the expression *ab ovo usque ad mala* – from the egg to the apple, from appetisers to dessert.¹²⁰ Eggs were used as funeral offerings.¹²¹ Because chickens are cheap and easy to rear, eggs would have provided a valuable source of protein to the poor. According to Aristophanes, every Athenian had his hen, even the poorest, so we can assume that the same was true of the Romans.¹²² Roman hens were not as prolific as modern breeds, which can lay an egg a day, but it seems they could produce one every second or third day and only ceased laying for two months in winter.¹²³ For this reason, there was a great deal of advice on how to store eggs for later consumption. Eggs may be eaten up to four months after laying if stored at room temperature; the most important thing is to keep the temperature consistent as fluctuations in temperature allow bacteria to penetrate the shell due to pores expanding and contracting.¹²⁴ Ancient advice on egg storage reads as fairly sound.¹²⁵ Columella says eggs may be kept over the winter buried in chaff, or buried in bran in the summer, after they have first been covered with salt for six hours. The salt would have had the effect of killing any moulds or spoilage organisms on the shell. Thus treated and stored in a desiccant, the eggs would have kept up to a year. Other more dubious methods listed are to bury the eggs in fresh beans or bean flour, or to pickle them in brine. Eggshells are permeable, so submerging an egg in brine is not recommended.¹²⁶ In Pompeii, we can see records of egg-laying inscribed onto the walls of villas.¹²⁷

¹¹⁷ Apicius 7.19.2.

¹¹⁸ Apicius 7.19.3.

¹¹⁹ Apicius 7.13.8.

¹²⁰ Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.115-6.

¹²¹ Juv. *Sat.* 5.84-5.

¹²² Zeuner 1963, 448.

¹²³ Plin. *HN*, 10.53.

¹²⁴ Birkhead 2016, 43f.

¹²⁵ Columella, *Rust.* 8.6.1-2; Varro *Rust.* 3.9.12

¹²⁶ Thurmond 2006, 209

¹²⁷ *CIL* IV 3890, 6873

The detail that a coop should be built to face the rising sun had the effect of helping to keep the coop warm in the cold months, and also probably assisted with prolonging the laying season.¹²⁸ Egg-laying in hens is governed by light levels. Researchers have discovered a pigment called pineal opsin in the pineal gland, located on the top of the brain in chickens. This pigment predates the development of eyesight in animals, and seems to respond to sunlight filtering through the chicken's thin skull. It is thought this is linked to the bird's biological clock and the way light exposure governs when it sleeps, when it rises, when it lays, and when it stops laying.¹²⁹ In the absence of artificial light sources that modern poultry farmers employ, maximising exposure to the sun in winter was the best the Romans could do to keep the non-productive winter season as short as possible. That the ancients were well aware of how sensitive chickens were to sunlight is also evident in the way the rooster was always considered a solar animal – though cock-crow explains that just as well.

Young hens were the most prolific layers, but when it came to hatching eggs, large, older hens with good dispositions were preferred as incubators and nurses. Calling chickens companions in the homes of men, Oppian describes the quality of their alarm calls upon seeing a hawk, and the way a mother hen will shelter and defend her chicks from attack. Such maternal behaviour invited a feeling of respect.¹³⁰ Any hen that broke or ate eggs was immediately culled.¹³¹ The eggs were marked so they could be regularly checked and turned if the hens had missed any.¹³² Damaged eggs were removed. Food was placed near brooding birds to discourage them from leaving the nest.¹³³ There were reliable methods for testing the fertility of eggs; namely, holding them up to the sun and testing their specific gravity against that of salt water. Romans also knew that eggs need not be incubated until up to ten days after being laid.¹³⁴ Though Romans knew of artificial egg incubation techniques thanks to the Egyptians, the practise never really caught on. They always preferred to trust their broody red hens as incubators.¹³⁵ Myriad other birds would also be hatched under the broody hens, who made excellent foster mothers. Taking eggs from the more valuable or rare birds, like peafowl, caused them to lay again, thus maximising the number of chicks one could hatch. We should note that

¹²⁸ Columella, *Rust.* 8.3.1. The same advice is repeated for pigeons, 8.7.2.

¹²⁹ Dohner 2001, 404

¹³⁰ Oppian, *The Chase*, 120-130

¹³¹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.6-7.

¹³² Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.14; Geoponica 14.7.20

¹³³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.13-14; Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.10; Geoponica 15.7.8

¹³⁴ Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.11; Geoponica 14.7.2

¹³⁵ Diod. Sic. 1.74.4-5; Plin. *HN*, 10.75.153

modern egg producers cull laying hens at around two years of age, once peak productivity has passed. The Romans instead found use for their older, less productive hens by having them incubate and raise the next generation. In addition, the fact that their red hens are dual-purpose birds allowed them to avoid the practice of culling male chicks, as occurs today. Male chicks hatched from egg-producing hens were simply raised as table birds, avoiding waste.

The Romans caused something of a revolution when they got their hands on chickens. In contrast to the ritual and entertainment exploitation of roosters typical of the wider Mediterranean world, Romans were deeply invested in the economic potential of hens.¹³⁶ They were the first to unlock chickens' true potential as a food source, engaging in selective breeding and intensive farming. The success of Roman poultry farming should not be underestimated. Roman chickens were as large as many modern breeds, and the hens were hardy, good layers, and excellent mothers.¹³⁷ Large scale and intensive poultry farming for food collapsed with the decline of the Empire, and their scale would not be matched again in Europe until the nineteenth century.¹³⁸ Studying the production and consumption of chickens reveals much about how the Romans conceived of themselves in contrast to other cultures such as the Britons and the Greeks, and it also reveals divisions within their own culture. The difference between eating a purchased fat capon, an unfattened hen from one's own flock, or not being able to eat a chicken at all, reflects the inequality inherent in Roman society.

¹³⁶ Perry-Gal 2015, 9849

¹³⁷ Kron 2014, 119.

¹³⁸ Gill 1994, int. xxiii.



Figure 25: Among scenes from the old and new testaments depicted on a sarcophagus, a man kneels to coax a chicken. A final vision of Roman love for their birds. Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudius, 330-335 CE, held in the Baths of Diocletian.

3.4 Geese

Geese have been among the birds raised by Romans since the earliest times. Unlike chickens, geese are native to Europe, and so appear even in Homer as domestic companions. We shall look at the diverse ways Romans kept and related to geese to discover how their changing management reflects societal values. Traditionally, geese were sacred to Juno and kept at her shrine on the Capitol from the early days of the Republic. If Petronius is to be believed, geese were kept at other temples too. In a typically ludicrous scene, the character Encolpius finds himself attacked by three geese sacred to the phallic deity Priapus. He beats one to death with a table leg, and for this crime he must undergo penance.¹³⁹ Humorous though the scene is, temple geese attacking strange visitors probably was not all that uncommon, and it must have been taboo for visitors to do them harm, though the creatures usually ended up

¹³⁹ Petr. Sat. 136.

being sacrificed and ritually eaten.¹⁴⁰ The goose was also an appropriate sacrifice for Isis since she was identified with Io, daughter of the river god Inachus.¹⁴¹ According to the famous legend, Juno's geese saved the Capitol in 390 BCE. When Rome was taken by Gauls, the marauders tried to invade the Capitol in the night, but although the watchdogs were silent, the geese woke with a fury. The ensuing clamour and cackle woke the Romans and allowed them to defend themselves in time.

Haec servavit avis Tarpei templa Tonantis.

Miraris? Nondum fecerat illa deus.

“This bird saved the temple of Tarpeian Jove the Thunderer. Do you marvel? Then a god did not build that temple.”¹⁴²

In gratitude to the vigilant geese, securing food for the temple flock was one of the first contracts a censor would arrange upon assuming the role. Thereafter, the goose was honoured, but dogs annually paid the price for their treachery.¹⁴³ Geese are loud, aggressive and territorial, and they do make excellent watchdogs. They respond quickly to anything that sounds the least bit suspicious, and if kept with other barnyard poultry they will protect the more vulnerable birds from small predators. An ominous line in Lucretius betrays the dangers of a trespassing upon a goose's territory.

et humanum longe praesentit odorem Romulidarum arcis servator, candidus anser.

“From afar the scent of man is caught by the white goose, saviour of the citadel of the Roman people.”¹⁴⁴

The goose's sacred status diminished as years went by, and by the Augustan Age the peacock had definitively replaced the goose as Juno's familiar.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps the goose could not compete with this beautiful, foreign interloper; perhaps the increased presence of peacocks on farms and

¹⁴⁰ Dembeck 1965, 200

¹⁴¹ Ov. *Fast.* 1.453-4; Juv. *Sat.* 6. 535-541

¹⁴² Mart. 13.74.

¹⁴³ Ael. NA, 12.33

¹⁴⁴ Lucr. *De Rerum Natura*, 4.682-683

¹⁴⁵ Livy 5.47.4; Plut. *Mor. De fort. Rom.* 12; Plut. *Mor. Quaest. Rom.* 98.

villas allowed for a more natural association of the birds with home, hearth and the goddess of marriage, or perhaps it was a matter of Greek influence. Athenaeus records that Hera of Samos had peacocks dedicated to her, and suggests that it is from Samos that the peacocks spread.¹⁴⁶ Varro and Aulus Gellius also link peafowl to Samos, and given Samos' proximity to the Persian Empire and associated luxury trade it is highly likely that this was indeed a breeding ground for the exotic birds.¹⁴⁷ It is not until Ovid's time that we find a Roman myth that attempts to explain why the peacock became Juno's familiar, linking it to the death of Argus, the hundred-eyed giant, whose eyes came to bejewel the peacock's tail.¹⁴⁸ The goose's loss of prestige might be related to changing farming practices, which saw them raised more intensively with an eye for profit, rather than as faithful watchdogs and household companions.



Figure 26: Detail of the Ara Pacis. The vision of Augustan peace is replete with a goddess reclining upon a goose. The goddess' exact identity is a matter of dispute.

Geese were well-established as farmyard birds from early on. Cato gives advice on how to cram geese, which shows that the average farmyard was expected to have geese, and that geese were eaten fairly regularly.¹⁴⁹ By Varro's time, landowners were keeping large flocks of the birds, reared in special pens called *chenoboscion* – literally, 'a place for feeding geese.'

¹⁴⁶ Ath. 14 655b

¹⁴⁷ Varro, *Rust.* 3.2-9; Gell. *NA*, 6.16.

¹⁴⁸ Ov. *Met.* 1.621-8, 633 – 722.

¹⁴⁹ Cato, *Agr.* 89.

Varro's use of this Greek term suggests Romans modelled their goose farming on Greek practices. We know that the Greeks had a very long tradition of raising the birds. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope has twenty geese, and says it cheers her sad soul to look at them.¹⁵⁰ Aristotle distinguishes between a large variety, a small variety, and the imported Egyptian goose, which they called *chenalopex* – “fox-goose” – though this may also refer to the ruddy shelduck.¹⁵¹ In Thessaly, it is said geese were farmed conjointly with cranes.¹⁵² For the Romans, the undisputed goose of choice was the white breed:

curandum est, ut mares feminaeque quam amplissimi corporis et albi coloris eligantur. Nam est aliud genus varium, quod a fero mitigatum domesticum factum est. Id neque aeque fecundum est, nec tam pretiosum: propter quod minime nutriendum est

“Take care that the males and females you rear are of the largest size and the whitest colour. For there is another breed which is variously coloured, originally wild but able to be tamed and turned domestic. It is not as fertile, nor as profitable, therefore it should not be reared.”¹⁵³

Varro gives the same advice.¹⁵⁴ These white geese are the domestic breed we are familiar with today, descended from the wild European greylag (*Anser anser*), while the parti-coloured geese mentioned by the writers are most likely the greylag itself. These must have been caught wild on a fairly regular basis, but obviously were not as pliable as their domesticated cousins.

A description of the goose pen runs thus. Columella advises keeping geese in a courtyard with walls nine feet high. The wall should be surrounded by porticoes, and the goose-keeper's hut was situated amongst them. Under the porticoes were pens three feet square in which the birds were enclosed when laying or sitting. If there was no pool or river nearby, an artificial pond should be constructed, for geese cannot live without water just as they cannot live without earth. They should be allowed to forage in marshy ground in which greens like endive and vetch are sown, and this should be supplemented with barley.¹⁵⁵ No netting was

¹⁵⁰ Hom. *Od.* 19.535-40.

¹⁵¹ Arist. *Hist. an.* VIII 593b. For a Roman reference, see Ael. *NA*, 5.30.

¹⁵² Pl. *Plt.* 264c.

¹⁵³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.14.

¹⁵⁴ Varro, *Agr.* 3.10.2.

¹⁵⁵ Columella, *Rust.* 14.1-2

required for their enclosure, since few raptors will attack a goose; indeed, the goose is useful for discouraging birds of prey. Such a set-up was only feasible for large landowners, but on smaller farms it was good practice to keep at least a few geese mixed in with the chickens, provided the land was suitable. In such situations, they were largely self-sufficient, and excellent watchdogs.¹⁵⁶ We are told that cranes and swans were fattened – though not bred – on Roman farms, and it is likely that these birds were shunted into goose pens such as the one Columella describes.¹⁵⁷

Geese bond readily with human owners, and humans in turn, like Penelope, grow to love their savage yet devoted gaggle.

Est et anseri vigil cura Capitolio testata defenso, per id tempus canum silentio proditis rebus, quam ob causam cibaria anserum censores in primis locant. quin et fama amoris Aegii dilecta forma pueri nomine Olenii Amphiloichi, et Glaucos Ptolomaeo regi cithara canentis quam eodem tempore et aries amasse proditur. potest et sapientiae videri intellectus his esse: ita comes perpetuo adhaesisse Lacydi philosopho dicitur, nusquam ab eo, non in publico non in balineis, non noctu non interdiu digressus.

“The goose also keeps a careful watch, as testified by its defense of the Capitol at a time when the silence of dogs betrayed us. Because of this, the censor will make the contract for the geese’s food first of all. There is a story that a goose at Aegium fell in love with a very beautiful boy, Amphiloichus of Olenus, and also that a goose loved Glaucos, a harp-player for King Ptolemy, who at the same time was also beloved by a ram. These birds may have the power of understanding wisdom. For it is said that a bird attached itself continuously to the philosopher Lycades and never left his side, not even in public or when he was at the baths, and neither by night nor day.”¹⁵⁸

Birkhead studies these odd incidents of amorous geese stalking humans and suggests that these are ancient examples of imprinting behaviour. Imprinting is a learning process in young birds that “involves a very rapid attachment during a ‘sensitive period’ to either a mother figure

¹⁵⁶ Columella, *Rust.* 13.1-3.

¹⁵⁷ Plut. *De esu carniū*, 997a

¹⁵⁸ Plin. *HN*, 10.26. The story of Lacydes and his faithful goose is repeated in Ael. *NA*, 7.41

and/or a future mating partner.”¹⁵⁹ Poultry farmers would have been aware of such behaviour, but it was not studied experimentally and explained until the 1870s, so until that time people made their own reasons. For the Romans, that reason was love and a sensitivity to wisdom, when really the goose was just following the human who had raised it, and whom it saw as a mother figure, mate, or both. The animal behaviourist Konrad Lorenz made the most famous studies on imprinting, and could often be seen with an imprinted brood of goslings or geese devotedly following him. Birds raised by humans, though affectionate, are sexually stunted, for they become fixated on humans rather than their own kind. It is little wonder that the ancients blamed such behaviour in birds on love. One even wonders if the ability of the goose to ‘love’ is partly responsible for its association with Eros and Aphrodite, as Greek iconography often depicts the love deities riding geese.



Figure 27: Aphrodite on a goose. Kylix, made in Athens, c.460 BCE. Held in the British Museum.

¹⁵⁹ Birkhead 2011, 94



Figure 28: *Cupid and a goose. Villa Oplontis, first century CE.*

Goose liver was a favourite delicacy among the Romans. Allegedly also it was used to foretell the future and could be offered as a sacrifice.¹⁶⁰ In contrast to those previous sentimental stories, Pliny says:

Nostri sapientiores qui eos iecoris bonitate novere. fertilibus in magnam amplitudinem crescit, exemptum quoque lacte mulso augetur.

“Our countrymen are wiser [than the Greeks], and know the goose by the excellence of its liver. Cramming the bird makes the liver grow to a great size, and when removed it is soaked in honeyed wine and milk.”¹⁶¹

Foie gras was all the rage from the late Republic onward. During the Empire, Romans became particularly adept at force-feeding geese to swell the liver to outrageous proportions.

Aspice quam tumeat magno iecur ansere maius!
Miratus dices: "Hoc, rogo, crevit ubi"?

“Behold the liver that’s swollen larger than the goose itself! Marvelling, you’ll cry, “where on earth did this grow?”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Petr. Sat. 136; Ov. Fast. 1.453-4.

¹⁶¹ Plin. HN, 10.27.

¹⁶² Mart. 13.58; see also Juv. Sat. 5.114-6 and Stat. Silv. 4.6.9-10.

The cramming was commonly done by enclosing the choicest and fattest goslings of the gaggle in a small pen and feeding them barley-meal and flour soaked in water. Varro stresses the importance of cleaning out the enclosure after every feeding, adding wryly that though geese love a clean place, wherever they go they leave nothing clean. After two months, they were ready for slaughter. On average, they were about six months old, and very tender, when butchered.¹⁶³ Geese could also be crammed with figs, and were sometimes made to drink mead directly before being slaughtered, ostensibly to give the flesh a sweeter flavour.¹⁶⁴ To maximise production, geese were sometimes hatched under hens.¹⁶⁵ Pliny records that geese were bred en masse in Gaul and marched on foot to Rome each year, where they were presumably fattened before being slaughtered.¹⁶⁶ One imagines this was done during their annual moult in summer, when geese lose their flight feathers and are grounded until new ones grow in.

Apart from its liver, the goose was not especially beloved by epicures, though Pliny records a recipe of geese feet grilled with cocks' combs that was in vogue.¹⁶⁷ Apicius lists a few recipes, most importantly for a special astringent sauce that would make the greasy flesh more palatable.¹⁶⁸ Though it was common, the goose was expensive. In Diocletian's price edict they are worth 200 denarii fattened and 100 denarii unfattened.¹⁶⁹

In contrast to elites breeding intensively and eating the choicest and fattest livers, the impoverished kept their geese alive, as they did with chickens, in order to eat their eggs.¹⁷⁰ Ovid gives us a touching scene of generosity and compassion in his tale of Philemon and Baucis, an elderly couple who offer hospitality and shelter to gods in disguise. Their extreme poverty is indicated by the fact they can offer nothing but vegetarian fare and a few pieces of stringy dried meat.¹⁷¹ Determined to show hospitality they offer to kill their goose, the guard of their humble cottage, on which they depend for eggs. At this show of generosity, the gods reveal themselves and the goose is spared.¹⁷² For the poor, the goose was an essential and

¹⁶³ Varro, *Rust.* 3.10.7; Columella, *Rust.* 8.14.10-11.

¹⁶⁴ Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.88, Plin. *HN*, 8.77.

¹⁶⁵ Columella, *Rust.* 8.14.6

¹⁶⁶ Plin. *HN*, 10.27

¹⁶⁷ Plin. *HN*, 10.27

¹⁶⁸ Apicius 6.5, 6.8.

¹⁶⁹ Diocletian, *Edict of Maximum Prices*, 4.21, 22.

¹⁷⁰ Petr. *Sat.* 65.

¹⁷¹ Compare to Simulus, the peasant character of the *Moretum*, whose poverty is indicated by the lack of meat in his diet.

¹⁷² Ov. *Met.* 8.647-50

precious animal. The goose produced other valuable products, namely feathers and grease. Farmyard geese could be plucked twice yearly in spring and autumn, a process which Columella compares to the shearing of sheep.¹⁷³ The best feathers came from wild-caught geese in Germany. This goosedown was so valuable that Pliny claims commanders of auxiliary cohorts on the frontiers were often reprimanded for sending men to go fowling for the birds. The down was used for bedding, particularly pillows, and he complains that even the male neck cannot do without goosedown bedding these days.¹⁷⁴ As for goose fat, it was fine enough to be used as an ingredient in medicine or as an aphrodisiac.¹⁷⁵ Goose grease was often mixed with fragrant herbs to create a soothing salve that could treat minor afflictions such as sprains, aches, or nipples chafed from breastfeeding. This mixture was prepared at the beginning of winter and stayed hard in the cold months for easy storage and use.¹⁷⁶ All in all, the goose was a versatile animal. It had value alive, as a watchdog and producer of eggs and feathers, and dead, for its flesh and its fat. Elite consumption points to a predilection for young, fattened animals and foie gras, while on a subsistence farm geese functioned as loyal companions that formed strong bonds with their owners.

3.5 Ducks

Ducks represent an interesting case study, since the poor could more easily procure them from the wild. The raising and fattening of ducks was generally attempted on larger farms, for Columella informs us that duck enclosures required a similar amount of attention as goose pens, but they were more expensive.¹⁷⁷ The enclosure had to be surrounded by walls 15 feet high and a net or lattice frame was fastened over the top to prevent the ducks from flying out and raptors from flying in. The wall was plastered over inside and outside to deter vermin and predators, and in the middle of the yard a pond two feet deep was dug. This was to be as large as the dimensions of the enclosure would allow, while still retaining room for a grassy lawn and nesting boxes. The edges of the pond were plastered over and sloped gradually downwards to allow a graceful descent into the water. Stones were rammed into the plaster to stop vegetation from growing, but the middle of the pond was left unplastered so vegetation could be grown from the soil. The pond, therefore, was cleared for swimming around the outside, but

¹⁷³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.13.3

¹⁷⁴ Plin. *HN*, 10.27

¹⁷⁵ Plin. *HN*, 10.28; 28.261. 30.131

¹⁷⁶ Plin. *HN*, 29.55; 30.131.

¹⁷⁷ The following description is taken from Columella, *Rust.* 8.15.1-6.

the centre was cultivated as a sort of shady marsh. The plants grown here were not for eating, but for providing a pleasant habitat that would suit the birds. Columella's charming description of the scene is worth quoting here:

Nec ob hanc tamen causam totus locus silvulis occupetur, sed ut dixi, per circuitum vacet, ut sine impedimento, cum apricitate diei gestiunt aves, nandi velocitate concertent.

“For this reason, though, you should not cultivate the whole pond with plants, as I have said, but leave the circumference vacant so that without impediment, cheered by the sunshine, the birds can battle to see who swims the fastest.”¹⁷⁸

The Romans plainly understood what many factory farms today do not – that ducks need water to grow and thrive. This description shows that real effort was made to recreate the ducks' natural habitat, and they allowed them to swim and dabble among thickets as they pleased. As a result, the farmer raised happy, healthy ducks. Varro even tells us that several species of waterfowl kept in such duck ponds did not need to be crammed – providing a fine enclosure and a steady diet caused them to become deliciously fat on their own.¹⁷⁹ The landowner who possessed a natural pond was considered fortunate, for he could provide for his ducks without going to much trouble, and in Roman art there are plenty of mosaics that show ducks splashing happily in the water.¹⁸⁰ Part of the joy of raising ducks plainly came from watching them paddle in ponds, natural or otherwise. Their low price in Diocletian's price edict confirms that the Romans produced a steady supply, but this may also be due to wildfowlers catching the birds in large numbers.¹⁸¹ The average Roman could enjoy duck for dinner, while the gourmet could say:

*Tota quidem ponatur anas, sed pectore tantum
et cervice sapit: cetera redde coco.*

¹⁷⁸ Columella, *Rust.* 8.15.4.

¹⁷⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.11.1-4.

¹⁸⁰ Farrar 1998, 64

¹⁸¹ Kron 2014, 125.

“A whole duck should be brought out, but eat only the breast and neck and return the rest to the cook.”¹⁸²

As for duck eggs, there does not seem to be much enthusiasm for their consumption. On this point it is worth noting that salmonella infection is more easily transmissible through duck eggs than chicken eggs, and bacteria is more likely to accumulate on the shells since the ducks will return to the nest to brood while damp from swimming.¹⁸³ Chicken eggs were the safer, more accessible option.

The banks of the duck ponds were cultivated with grass, and the nesting boxes were placed against the high walls. These were a foot square and made of stone covered with smooth plaster. Box trees and myrtle were planted next to them to provide shelter and security. In the month of March, when the nesting season began, the farmer took care to scatter stalks and twigs in the pen so they could build their nests. Interestingly, Columella qualifies that anyone wishing to set up a duck pen for the first time should collect wild ducks’ eggs and hatch them under barnyard chickens. This would produce a docile flock accustomed to farm life that would breed more willingly than wild-caught adult birds. Pliny records how the surrogate mothers felt about the situation:

super omnia est anatum ovis subditis atque exclusis admiratio prima non plane agnoscentis fetum, mox incerti singultus sollicite convocantis, postremo lamenta circa piscinae stagna mergentibus se pullis natura duce.

“Strange above all is the behaviour of a hen which has had ducks’ eggs placed under her and hatched; first wonder when she looks upon her offspring, then her uncertain sobs as she anxiously calls to them, and finally her lamentations around the margins of the ponds as instinct leads the ducklings to the water.”¹⁸⁴

Chicks, unlike ducklings, can easily drown. One feels a pang of sympathy for the mother hen running rings around the duck pond, fretting for her delinquent water-loving children. It is also difficult for mother hens to communicate with ducklings, as they do not understand the hen’s

¹⁸² Mart. 13.52.

¹⁸³ Smith 1971, 43-5

¹⁸⁴ Plin. HN, 10.76

calls to food or shelter, which explains why Pliny remarks on the unusual quality of the mother's unheeded clucks.



Figure 29: Mosaic of cat with ducks from the Via Adreatica. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.

Roman aquaculture allowed them to provide artificial duck ponds with a constant stream of fresh, flowing water through a single channel. Into this channel the ducks' food was dumped once a day, and the water carried it into the pond so they could forage and dive as they would in the wild. Millet, pulse and barley formed the bulk of their diet, but this could be supplemented with any food that was in local or seasonal abundance, such as grape husks and acorns. Small freshwater fish and crabs could also be added, but this was expensive if one could not take them from a nearby river.

Mallards, teals, pochards, shelducks, wigeons, coots, purple gallinules and even partridges could be kept in these enclosures. Other species of waterfowl may have been kept at one time or another, but since the mallard is depicted most frequently in Roman art it was probably the mallard that was most favoured by Roman farmers. However, this preference would have been subject to regional variations across the Empire, especially where eggs were taken from wild ducks, as the farmer could only take eggs from the species that bred naturally in his area. If one did not already have access to naturally swampy ground or a river, constructing a duck enclosure as these writers describe would not have been a feasible option

except for the very wealthy landowner. The average farmer may have kept a small flock to his liking, but we should not confuse large commercial practices with common practice. Overall, ducks were less common as barnyard animals than geese and chickens. For many, it would have been easier to hunt them according to seasonal availabilities than raise them. But as we see from the examples of Strabo and Varro, waterfowl were valued as handsome additions to the ornamental aviary. The ability to keep and fatten ducks in a custom-built pond advertised wealth, but duck consumption was seldom viewed as a luxurious act because it was so easy for poor to hunt these birds in the wild.



Figure 30: Nile scene. Such variety would not be out of place in the Roman duck pond. From the House of the Faun, Pompeii.

3.6 Pigeons

Pigeons have been kept for a very long time in Italy and, like chickens, were assumed to be present on the average farm in Cato's time. They were prolific and easy to rear for profit, and they were also well-loved for their sweet natures, which made them popular as pets. Their small size and ability to forage for themselves, breed all year round and live on roofs made it easy for farmers of all means to keep them – even city-dwellers could do so if they had a mind. Yet pigeon-raising was subject to the same pressures as other forms of animal husbandry, and we see elites farming intensively for eggs and squabs from the late Republic onward.

General Roman attitudes to pigeons were overwhelmingly positive. Primarily because they formed lasting, monogamous relationships, they were dedicated to Venus.

*Ne violes teneras periuro dente columbas,
tradita si Gnidiae sunt tibi sacra deae.*

“Don’t violate tender doves with a perjuring tooth if you’re initiated in the mysteries of the Cnidian goddess.”¹⁸⁵

We should note there is no real zoological distinction between doves and pigeons. ‘Pigeon’ is generally applied to the larger species and ‘dove’ to the smaller ones, but they are from the same family, Columbidae.¹⁸⁶ The Romans did not distinguish by name between doves and pigeons, but called both *columba*, while the wood pigeon, the largest bird in the family, was known as *palumba*, and the pretty, pinkish turtle-dove was the *turtur*. For all our hatred of pigeons as feathered rats, Romans showed a keen appreciation for their beauty and sweet temperaments. One of the few surviving snatches of Emperor Nero’s poetry even mentions pigeons. Seneca quotes:

Alioquin, ut ait Nero Caesar disertissime, "colla Cytheriacae splendent agitata columbae" et uariis coloribus pauonum ceruix, quotiens aliquo deflectitur, nitet

“Besides, as Nero Caesar so eloquently puts it: “the necks of Cytherean doves glisten with movement” – and the peacock’s neck glitters with varied colours when moved this way or that.”¹⁸⁷

Large town houses had dovecotes to provide squabs and eggs for the table. There is one in the garden of the House of the Faun at Pompeii, and Martial wrote of a dovecote in his garden.¹⁸⁸ Rural villas might have a freestanding dovecote, or they might incorporate one into the villa’s tower.¹⁸⁹ Such dovecotes were a source of pride for the Roman estate owner.¹⁹⁰ The towers and turrets built for the birds were circular, with conical roofs, and rows of nesting holes. Pigeons were believed to like the colour white, so they were painted white and kept scrupulously clean.¹⁹¹ It was also believed one had to keep it clean and airy or the birds would abscond and

¹⁸⁵ Mart. 13.66.

¹⁸⁶ Allen 2009, 20

¹⁸⁷ Sen. *QNat.* 1.5.6.

¹⁸⁸ Mart. 12.31.6; 3.58.18–19. See also: Ov. *Pont.* 1.6.51.

¹⁸⁹ Bowe 2004, 53.

¹⁹⁰ Gaál 2017, 12

¹⁹¹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.83; Ov. *Tr.* 1.97-8

never return once given the opportunity.¹⁹² Columella, following Democritus' advice, describes a rather morbid method of ensuring a pigeon would remain in their dovecote. Kestrels, he says, commonly nest on buildings. If you take chicks from the nest and enclose them alive in pots covered in plaster, then hang them on the corners of the pigeon-houses, it will cause the pigeons to love the dovecote and never leave it.¹⁹³ Pliny repeats the recipe, and cites that the reason is because the presence of kestrels discourages hawks from visiting dovecotes. The way he describes it suggests that kestrels were encouraged to live and nest near the dovecotes to keep the pigeons safe. Kestrels can kill pigeons, but more typically fly against mice, voles, and small passerines, so do not pose a huge threat to them. Whether they would actually frighten much larger hawks away is unclear, though protective nesting parents might make a hawk think twice.¹⁹⁴ The value of pigeon dung was another reason to keep the cotes clean. It was considered the best fertiliser and could be sold or spread generously on the fields.¹⁹⁵ Pigeon guano was so valuable the Romans even placed a tax on pigeon houses.¹⁹⁶

Three types of pigeon appeared to fall under the name *columba*. There were the wild rock doves, almost identical to modern feral pigeons, which settled on the turrets and gable-ends of farmhouses, flying from the fields and back to their towers as the fancy took them. Then there were domesticated white doves, gentler and more at home with people, which were content to scrounge about on the doorstep. A third hybrid species was produced by breeding the two. These were kept for profit and housed in what Varro calls a *peristeron*. This he describes as a large building with a vaulted roof, one narrow door and windows with double lattice that filled the structure with light. The interior and exterior were covered in smooth plaster to keep out pests. Round nests were made for each breeding pair, side by side and in rows that climbed to the height of the building. The nests had little walkways leading to them and one small entrance and exit. Fresh flowing water was provided so they could drink and bathe. They ate from troughs filled with barley, wheat, peas, beans, millet and vetch. On average, once a month the droppings were cleaned out. Any injured birds received treatment. Any dead birds were removed. Brooding birds were removed to a separate area partitioned by

¹⁹² Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.6

¹⁹³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.7

¹⁹⁴ Plin. *HN*, 109.

¹⁹⁵ Cato, *Agr.* 36; Varro, *Rust.* 3.7.5; Houlihan 1986, 103

¹⁹⁶ Lichtheim 1957, 110.

a net. These birds were granted the liberty to fly in and out as they chose. This assisted their health, and because they had young it ensured they would return.¹⁹⁷

When the squabs were covered with down, it was time to fatten them. They were stuffed with chewed bread; when they fledged, their legs were broken and they were left in the nest with their parents, who would continue to feed them. Pigeons breed multiple times a year, making this industry a profitable one. A fattened squab can be as large as a bantam chicken, with meat accumulating particularly around the pectoralis and flight muscles. Despite the economical ways one could raise these largely self-sufficient creatures, it is worth noting that Apicius only records two pigeon recipes, versus eighteen chicken recipes, perhaps an indication of the latter bird's pre-eminence as a table bird.

Such methods, with intense management, a freestanding cote, and attention to breeding the most profitable birds was generally done near urban areas. Those who lived near cities could not let their flocks forage for themselves or they would lose their stock to the traps of the bird-catchers, so they were shut up in the manner Varro describes.¹⁹⁸ A single dovecote could house as many as 5000 birds.

Turtle-doves do not breed in captivity, so the Romans caught them wild and fattened them. They bulked up quickly in summer but languished in winter and had to be placed on a richer diet. Their enclosures were built to prevent them from flying, as this would make them thin. Hempen mats allowed them to waddle about their enclosure. They were only given the purest water as a means of disease prevention. Their dung was valuable and collected often.¹⁹⁹

Plump turtles were eaten with relish:

*Cum pinguis mihi turtur erit, lactuca valebis;
et cocleas tibi habe. Perdere nolo famem.*

¹⁹⁷ Varro, *Rust.* 3.7.1-11.

¹⁹⁸ Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.1-3

¹⁹⁹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.9.1-3

“While I have fat turtle-doves, away with that lettuce, and keep your snails too. I don’t want to ruin my appetite.”²⁰⁰

A special prestige is attached to turtle-doves, perhaps due simply to their taste and perhaps due to their scarcity in comparison with ordinary pigeons. Turtle-doves migrate away from Italy in the winter. The enterprising farmer who caught them and fattened them until winter, when they could no longer be caught wild, stood to make a handsome profit; we often see high prices paid for birds out of season.

Wood pigeons were caught wild and fattened, though the bird is common enough that even the poorest could catch one for dinner. They made a fine meal, but Martial turns his nose up at them:

*Inguina torquati tardant hebetantque palumbi:
non edat hanc volucrem qui cupit esse salax*

“Collared wood pigeons hinder and deaden the private parts: he who desires sex should not eat this bird.”²⁰¹

So much for the luxury market. It is likely that most *columbaria* were in rural areas, housing free-flying pigeons that could forage for themselves in the fields. Given that wild pigeons will nest in dovecotes without prompting it is no wonder that the practice of constructing towers was so widespread. The addition of a small cote on a pre-existing structure is enough to tempt birds, which could then be managed with relatively little effort. On small holdings, pigeons were likely left to their own devices and the squabs eaten by the household. The intensive breeding and feeding we see described by our agricultural writers is directed to those running enterprises with access to urban markets, where fattened birds could net a profit. Although *columbaria* were quite common on farms and townhouses, the habit of building them in towers or atop upper storeys have resulted in few examples surviving. The Roman period town of Karanis in the Egyptian Fayoum contains some well-preserved examples of *columbaria*. As described by Columella and Varro, these towers had pottery jars built into the walls of the

²⁰⁰ Mart. 15.53.

²⁰¹ Mart. 13.67.

columbaria to provide nesting niches for the birds, with larger niches intended for raising squabs. Many of the towers at Karanis are quite large, easily capable of housing birds in the thousands, again in line with the commercial production espoused by our authors.²⁰² In Juvenal 3.201-2, we also have mention of doves nesting under the eaves of houses, though it is not clear whether these birds are wild or part of an owned flock. As birds kept by rich and poor alike, we see prestige attached to the consumption only of fattened squabs and rare, difficult to keep turtle-doves as opposed to ordinary pigeons and the easy-to-catch *palumba*.

3.7 Peafowl

The peacock is a richly symbolic bird. Consumption and ownership of this animal was monopolised by elites, and their proliferation occurs at the same time that aviary-keeping was evolving as a whole to cater to the luxury markets. Originally from India, peacocks were beloved by the Romans for their pride and beauty.²⁰³ They were extremely rare in the early and middle Republic, but in the imperial period it was exceptional *not* to see a tame peacock strutting about a rich man's house.²⁰⁴ The “extravagant beauty” of the peacock was reproduced often in Roman paintings, and common reproduction on villa walls probably indicates that real peacocks once roamed there.²⁰⁵ Oppian sang that the gods had made nothing more beautiful on earth for man to look at.²⁰⁶ There are stories of these fowl falling in love with humans and choosing to display their beautiful feathers for their darlings alone.²⁰⁷ And while the soul of a dead emperor was conceived as being borne by an eagle, from the Flavian period onwards a deified empress was associated with Juno's bird, the peacock.²⁰⁸ 42 coins altogether use the peacock as a symbol of the Roman Empress. It is curious that despite the extreme sexual dimorphism of the species and the male bird's predominance in art and iconography, it was consistently associated powerful females - with Juno, Hera and the Empresses – rather than powerful males.²⁰⁹

²⁰² Husselman 1953; Lewis & Llewellyn-Jones 2018, 261-2.

²⁰³ Ov. Ars am. 1.627.

²⁰⁴ Ath. 14.654d-e

²⁰⁵ Zeitlin 2013, 72-3.

²⁰⁶ Oppian, *The Chase*, 2.590-8.

²⁰⁷ Ath. 8.606c

²⁰⁸ Mattingly 1967, 147.

²⁰⁹ Gilbert 2016, 58



Figure 31: Eros and a peacock. From Asia Minor, 150-100 BCE. The image of the bird, often in the company of gods or goddesses, spread far and wide before the bird itself did.

It was in Varro's lifetime that peacock farming became all the rage. He distinguishes between those who keep peacocks for pleasure (who acquire far more male birds), and those who keep for profit (who acquire females).²¹⁰ The fad of eating peacocks was begun by Cicero's rival Hortensius, who served them at a feast in 70 BCE.²¹¹ The trend caught on like wildfire, to the point that it was a bold man who would throw a banquet without a peacock as the centrepiece.²¹² Once the fashion for eating peacocks kicked in, aviarists began to raise them commercially in huge numbers. The operation was a profitable one; the peacock was always

²¹⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.6

²¹¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.23.45; Ael. *NA*, 5.21

²¹² Cic. *Fam.* 9.20.2.

one of the most expensive birds on the market. Varro tells us raising peafowl was far more profitable than raising chickens.²¹³

According to Diocletian's price edict, one bird could fetch 300 denarii.²¹⁴ Pound for pound, they were marginally more expensive than wild boar, 50% more expensive than goose and half as expensive as thrushes, turtledoves and partridge, though peafowl bones have been identified at fewer sites than many other game birds.²¹⁵ However, Gilbert calculates that the cost of peacocks had risen exponentially by Diocletian's time. A single bird cost 6% of a legionary soldier's annual salary in the Augustan period. This rose to 15-33% of a legionary soldier's annual salary by the time the price edict was written. The steady rise in price was probably driven by elite demand for peafowl at luxury banquets.²¹⁶ Peacock eggs were equally valuable and also eaten.²¹⁷

Peacock flesh is not especially palatable, and its place on royal tables was probably assured by the decorative value of its feathers. The peacock was served feathers and all, which is probably why a male bird cost a third more than a female bird in the Edict. Pageantry was part of the feasting process. Cooks dressed up the meat for display before carving.²¹⁸ The bird's beauty when alive made some cringe when they saw it dead:

*Miraris, quotiens gemmantis explicat alas,
et potes hunc saevo tradere, dure, coco?*

"You marvel whenever he spreads his jewel-like feathers, so how can you consign him, cruel man, to the pitiless cook?"²¹⁹

Others raged against the senseless opulence:

*vix tamen eripiam, posito pavone velis quin
hoc potius quam gallina tergere palatum,*

²¹³ Varro, *Rust.* 3.4.1

²¹⁴ Diocletian, *Maximum Price Edict*, 4.39

²¹⁵ Kron 2014, 127

²¹⁶ Gilbert 2016, 57

²¹⁷ Ath. 2.58b; Macrobian. *Sat.* 3.13.2

²¹⁸ Zeuner 1963, 456

²¹⁹ Mart. 13.70.

*corruptus vanis rerum, quia veneat auro
rara avis et picta pandat spectacula cauda:
tamquam ad rem attineat quidquam. num vesceris ista,
quam laudas, pluma? cocto num adest honor idem?
carne tamen quamvis distat nil, hac magis illam
inparibus formis deceptum te petere esto:*

“Nevertheless, if a peacock is served, I shall hardly understand why you would prefer to rub it across your palate than a hen. You are beguiled by emptiness - just because the rare bird costs gold and makes a spectacle with spread, painted tail. As if that has anything to do with it! Do you eat the fine feathers you praise? Does the bird seem as graceful cooked? There is nothing different in the meat, but to think you prefer one, having been deceived by appearances!”²²⁰

Alive, the peacock was cherished. Dead, he became a symbol of Roman decadence and slothfulness. Snapshots of this come to us through satirical works:

*num esuriens fastidis omnia praeter
pavonem rhombumque*

“Why, when you’re hungry, do you disdain everything except peacock and turbot?”²²¹

*cum tu deponis amictus
turgidus et crudum pauonem in balnea portas*

“When you undress and waddle into the bath, belly swollen with undigested peacock meat...”²²²

So it is that when someone inevitably yearns for the good old days, they say that people used to derive pleasure from live peacocks instead of dead ones.²²³ The notoriously extravagant

²²⁰ Hor. Sat. 2.2.23-30

²²¹ Hor. Sat. 1.2.115-6

²²² Juv. Sat. 1.142-3

²²³ Ov. Fast. 6.175-7.

Emperor Vitellius served up the novel dish of peacock brains.²²⁴ To top it off, the feathers were turned into fashionable fly-flaps.²²⁵ Single feathers fetched a fine price, perhaps for this purpose, or perhaps for personal ornamentation. Peacocks moult their feathers yearly, and happily they do so before the feathers become too tatty. Thus an intrepid landowner with a single ornamental bird could still make a smart profit by collecting fallen feathers. Peacocks are quite long-lived, with males surviving in good condition for twenty years or more. A single breeding pair could be a fine investment.



Figure 32: Peacock from a wall painting. Villa Oplontis, 1st century CE. Common depictions of peacocks in domestic settings might indicate that real peafowl strutted around many villae.

Peafowl were often raised by those who lived close to the city, but one who lived in the countryside might keep a small flock to cheer his garden and delight visitors. Those who had villas on small wooded islands off the coast of Italy were able to inexpensively raise great flocks of peafowl. Left to run wild and protected from predators – both human and animal – by the sea, they foraged for themselves, raised large broods, and their human carers only had to summon them once a day to give them supplementary feed and count them.

²²⁴ Suet. Vit. 13.2.

²²⁵ Mart. 14.67.

Those without a private island for protection had to construct a domed building made in proportion to the number of peafowl that would inhabit it. Each bird had its own private sleeping box, and the middle was kept clear so they could emerge to eat and stretch. Their attendant kept the place clean by regularly removing droppings, which were used as fertiliser. Smooth plaster prevented pests and snakes from entering.²²⁶ It is later advised to place removable perches in the enclosure so that the birds do not step in their own dung, and so the perches can be taken out, the floor cleaned, and the dung collected.

It was common practice to place a clutch of peafowl eggs under chickens, which encouraged the peahens to lay again. Peahens could be trusted to incubate about three eggs themselves, and foster mothers took the rest. Every egg was precious. At laying times they were watched to ensure they laid only in their nesting boxes. They allowed only the most trustworthy chickens to hatch the eggs, and it seems the chickens did a fine job of caring for their foster children. It was said that one should not allow chickens raising chicks to look upon another chicken with a brood of peachicks, for they would become so envious of the peachicks' size and beauty that they would hate their own brood.²²⁷ In Varro's time, no other breed of fowl brought in so great a profit: one could amass a small fortune with 100 birds.²²⁸

Despite the abundance of peacocks that are found in art and literature, the picture is complicated by a dearth of peacock bones found at Roman archaeological sites. Thus far, no peafowl bones have ever been found for the Roman period in Italy; they have only been recovered from the north and west of the Empire. Such evidence may be the result of unequal archaeological investigation, but it may also indicate that certain areas predominated in peacock breeding or consumed more peacocks. But, as Gilbert points out, peacock imagery spread uniformly across the Empire. Their ubiquity in art represents an obsession with their beauty but does not necessarily confirm a common presence. Like the lion, the peacock took on a number of symbolic meanings that made it important even to peoples who were completely unfamiliar with the living bird. The peacock as a symbol or simply a decorative motif was far more widespread than the bird itself, which remained rare and expensive from the beginning to the end of the Empire.²²⁹ That peafowl were still being consumed in late antiquity is attested

²²⁶ Varro, *Rust.* 3.6.4-6

²²⁷ Columella, *Rust.* 8.11.1-17

²²⁸ Varro, *Rust.* 3.6.6

²²⁹ Gilbert 2016.

by St Augustine, who wrote that he was served roast peacock. He then claims that he experimented with the meat and put it away for over a month and was amazed when it showed no sign of putrefaction.²³⁰ Later Christian art and symbolism commonly used the peacock to express the idea of resurrection and immortality due to the belief that peacock meat did not spoil. The bird was also associated with the Virgin Mary. This was, perhaps, a continuation of its traditional association with the Queen of Heaven. In all, the peacock was a powerful symbol of wealth and luxury that graced only the tables and gardens of the most privileged members of Roman society.

3.8 Pheasants and Guineafowl

Having treated peacocks, we come now to pheasants and guinea-fowl, similarly rare and prestigious table birds. Pheasants were originally imported from Colchis, land of the River Phasis at the south-east corner of the Black Sea. They were rarities in Greece from the 5th century BCE, and also in Ptolemaic Egypt, where they were bred as table and ornamental birds.²³¹ When exactly the Romans got hold of them is unknown. Neither Varro nor Columella allude to the intensive breeding of pheasants, but Columella does speak of extravagantly priced game birds from Phasis.²³² They were among the catalogue of birds thought fit to be sacrificed to Caligula's godhood.²³³ Vitellius ate their brains alongside those of peacocks.²³⁴ Pliny tells us that along with the guinea-fowl, the pheasant is "now" found in Italy.²³⁵ Martial catalogues them among the rare birds kept by his friend, so we may assume that by the late 1st century CE, they were being bred on farms.²³⁶ It is not until the Flavian dynasty that they really developed a foothold, with Statius informing us they were among the birds distributed to spectators at a festival. Later, pheasant breeding was more widely spread. The pheasant is priced a little higher than the goose in Diocletian's Edict, and in the 4th century Palladius gives us a detailed description of how to care for them. That he includes cramming methods tells us this was a table bird.²³⁷ It has often been suggested that the bird displayed as a fabled phoenix under Claudius in 47 or 48 CE was a golden pheasant brought to Rome from the Far East.²³⁸ It would

²³⁰ August. *De civ. D.* 21.4.

²³¹ Jennison 1937, 109

²³² Columella, *Rust.* 8.8

²³³ Suet. *Calig.* 22.3

²³⁴ Suet. *Vit.* 13.2

²³⁵ Plin. *HN*, 132

²³⁶ Mart. 3.58.16.

²³⁷ Palladius 1.29.

²³⁸ Plin. *HN*, 10.5; Beagon 2014, 426.

appear that the expanding luxury market of Rome encouraged farmers to try their hand at raising this strange, foreign bird, and they made quite an impression when served at banquets.

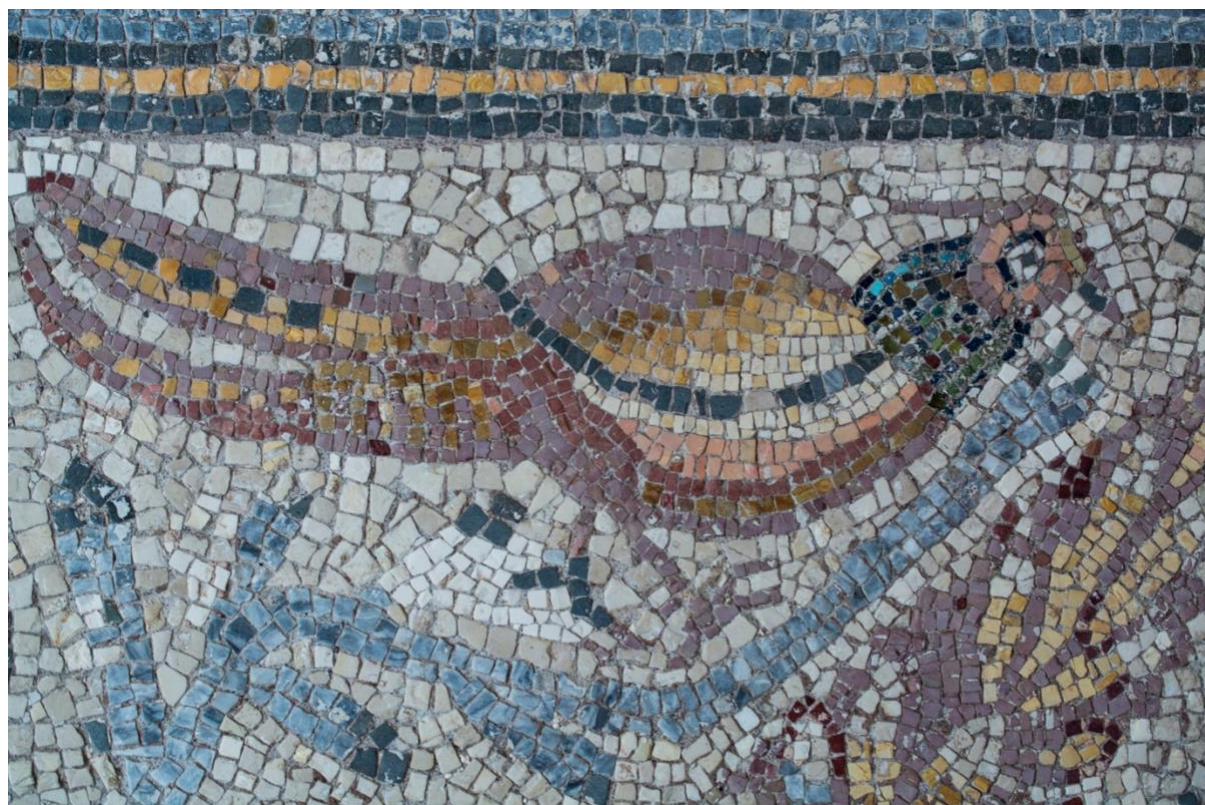


Figure 33: Detail of a pheasant. Mosaic from Rome, end of the fourth century CE.

Guineafowl are in similar straits, and are widely attested as gracing the tables of the wealthy.²³⁹ According to Pliny, *Meleagrides* were the last birds to be enclosed by the Roman palate.²⁴⁰ This name derives from their supposed connection with Meleager. As birds from North Africa, they were commonly referred to as *Numidica gallina* – ‘Numidian fowl,’ or more simply as African fowl.²⁴¹ They were newly popular in the late Republic, with Varro advocating for breeding to be taken up to capitalise on the sudden fad for the speckled birds.²⁴² Despite initial demand coming from the luxury market, there are indications that the guineafowl had a more widespread appeal and trickled into more modest farms. The birds are temperamentally flighty and difficult to contain – if care is not taken they are wont to wander away to make their own fortunes. However, this independence means they are excellent foragers and very self-sufficient. The thrifty farmer could pen them with his chickens at night

²³⁹ Wilkins & Hill 2006, 150.

²⁴⁰ Plin. *HN*, 10.74.

²⁴¹ Bodson 2014, 559. Hor. *Epod.* 2.53; Petr. *Sat.* 93; Juv. *Sat.* 11.142-434; Mart. 3.58.15, 13.45.1.

²⁴² Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.18-19.

and let them forage in the fields during the day. They are also excellent at eradicating weeds, seeds, small rodents, snakes and other undesirable pests.²⁴³ Pausanias described a spring and autumn festival to Isis at Tithorea in Phokis. When time came for sacrifices to be made, the wealthy sacrificed oxen and deer, while the poor sacrificed geese and guineafowl.²⁴⁴ This would indicate that they were valuable to the poor, but not so valuable as to be beyond their means to possess. Guineafowl bones have been found as far afield as a Roman *limes* camp called Saaburg in the Taunus mountains of West Germany.²⁴⁵ Guineafowl died out as table birds in Europe following the decline of Rome. Several African communities domesticated them, and Europeans reintroduced them from West Africa at the same time the turkey was brought back from America. In Tudor England, the two birds were even initially confused.²⁴⁶



²⁴³ Johnson 1968, 10.

²⁴⁴ Paus. 10.32.15-16.

²⁴⁵ Zeuner 1963, 457.

²⁴⁶ Cocker and Tipling 2013, 37.

Figure 34: Guineafowl (top right) presented alongside fruit, a rooster and partridges. End of the second century CE. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.

3.9 Conclusion

The transition from Republic to Principate was a period characterised by high levels of trade and production, with many farmers seeking profit rather than subsistence. Birds play an important part in this story, as farming methods became more intensive and sophisticated, allowing poultry to be raised en masse to service urban markets. Greater demand for luxury goods saw a spike in the raising of exotic and fattened birds as elites sought to impress at more and more lavish banquets. Peacocks, pheasants and guinea fowl are all examples of foreign birds that were enclosed in the Roman palate as part of these extravagant displays. Elites attempted to one-up each other by serving stranger and more expensive dishes, and the competitive nature of such banquets meant that serving an unfattened hen as opposed to the expected peacock dressed in its feathers – even if the chicken was more palatable – was unthinkable, unless one was trying to make a grand show of austerity. Birds communicated a great deal about status and wealth, and although the skewed evidence has forced us to concentrate on elite behaviour, we can still see snatches of how the poorer citizens related to their birds. Small flocks of chickens and geese provided eggs. Ducks and wood pigeons could be caught wild and eaten, leading to elites turning their noses up. Their pigeons were free-flying and foraged for themselves, where birds meant for market were enclosed in massive coops and crammed. Poorer citizens might not be able to engage in the intensive farming practices of the larger farms, but the existence of urban markets and the demand for fowl in general saw them have access to a greater variety of birds than had been around in Cato's time, and selective breeding saw animals become bigger and more productive. If they could not breed birds for profit, the poor had the opportunity to catch wild birds and sell them – a matter we shall treat in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Wildfowling

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we considered how farming and aviculture intensified in response to market forces. It is worth reiterating how drastically urbanisation was changing the Roman world. At its peak around 150CE, Rome held 1,200 000 people on eighteen square kilometres. Food was drawn from greater and greater distances to supply urban demand.¹ Feasting was common, and in this climate fowling and farmers stood to make huge profits. Important individuals might throw a banquet upon their accession to office, or upon their arrival in the City.² Communal feasting was commonplace among *collegia* throughout the Empire. The charter of the college of Aesculapius and Hygia in Rome (mid-second century CE) records seven dinners in its list of meals. Here, rank is shown to determine the share of food each of the 60 members received, with college leaders and patrons taking the lion's share and remaining members receiving lesser portions according to rank.³ Martial's complaints ring all the truer for knowing that apportioning better food according to status was a candidly documented reality.

*Aureus inmodicis turtur te clunibus implet,
ponitur in cauea mortua pica mihi*

"You get a beautiful turtle-dove with a fat arse while on my plate there's a jay that died in its cage."⁴

Frequent feasting in urban centres coupled with the ways in which one could use the dinner table to reinforce status was having as much an effect on humble fowling as on large-scale food producers. Fashions dictated which birds were hunted to beautify the tables of nobles. In the City, an industry sprang up to service demand. Varro tells us that in Rome, *macellarii* (butchers) had reserves both within and without the City where they could obtain birds to sell at the market.⁵ Fowling could therefore work as itinerant vendors and sell catches themselves or journey to the City and sell to the *macellarii* depending on what suited them.⁶ Not just the

¹ Hoffman 2014, 41

² Suet. *Vit.* 13.2

³ Kron 2015, 164-5

⁴ Mart. 3.60

⁵ Varro, *Rust.* 3.4.2

⁶ Frayn 1993, 73

professional *auceps*, but also the poor could catch wild birds to make money. For example, at the turn of the first century CE, Dio of Prusa wrote of a peasant family that farmed in the Euboean hills. They were self-sufficient, and catching game and selling vegetables allowed them to make a meagre supplementary income.⁷ Since bird-catching could be done virtually anywhere, by anyone, and with simple tools, wildfowl provided an important source of meat in otherwise sparse diets.⁸ In wildfowl we can measure the extremes of Roman consumption patterns and lifestyles. Yet although we might suppose that the poor and itinerant stood to gain the most from urban demand for wildfowl, wealthy elites soon constructed special enclosures wherein they could house game birds for fattening, with special emphasis on capturing migratory birds so they could sell them out of season when wild catches were no longer available.

Watson, who wrote on birds in Pompeii, claims there is little evidence to show exactly how birds were hunted in Roman times.⁹ But in actuality there is an abundance of evidence available. Fowling was practised from the earliest days in Italy and there are records of birds being hunted with glue traps, nets, decoys and slings. Thurmond notes that thanks to the migratory patterns of Mediterranean birds, eating fresh fowl was a “feast or famine” scenario, but adds that our Roman sources fail to illuminate us on this point.¹⁰ Again, this is untrue, for our Roman sources *do* show a keen awareness of seasonal changes in the availability of birds. The concept of migration—that birds travelled to live in more favourable climates when the weather changed—was admittedly not fully understood. In Roman texts we see birds hailed as harbingers of changing seasons, but awareness of where they went and why is less complete.¹¹ For some birds their movement was proverbial, as when Pompey criticised his enemy Lucullus’ property at Tusculum, saying it was unsuitable for winter. Lucullus simply laughed in his face and asked if he believed he had less sense than cranes and storks, and did not think to change residence according to the seasons.¹² Aristotle and Pliny mention that swallows migrate in winter, retiring to nearby sunny places, although they also offered hibernation as another explanation. Blackbirds, thrushes and starlings were said to migrate to neighbouring districts, while the turtle-dove was believed to moult and hibernate.¹³ The cuckoo’s annual

⁷ Dio Chrys. *Or.* 7.

⁸ Chandezon 2015, 139

⁹ Watson 2002, 358.

¹⁰ Thurmond 2006, 208.

¹¹ Gill 1994, 287.

¹² Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 39.4.

¹³ Plin. *HN*, 10.35-6.

disappearance was even blamed on it transmuting into a different bird entirely.¹⁴ But regardless of whether bird migration was fully understood, Roman attention to seasonal fluctuations is key to understanding hunting methods and appreciating the significance behind wildfowl consumption. Morley stresses the importance of ecology and its effects on trade and economic. One region will have a certain resource in abundance and a dearth of another, affecting demand for goods on a regional scale.¹⁵ We can relate this to birds in not only a regional but also a temporal sense.

In the Roman period, birds were caught in many ways and for many reasons.¹⁶ Fowling had its peak seasons, but it could be done year-round. In general terms the easiest time to catch birds was when they migrated in Autumn. Peak trapping periods were October and November, when birds gathered in huge numbers and in predictable places as they prepared to journey to warmer climates. Birds are especially fat at such times, loaded with fuel for the journey.¹⁷ Once winter set in, fowlers hunted the Italian winter residents like thrushes, fieldfares and blackbirds. Palladius tells us December to March was the best time to catch birds:

tempore hoc per humiles silvas et bacis fecunda virgulta ad turdos ceterasque aves capiendas laqueos expedire conveniet. Hoc usque in Martium mensem tendetur aucupium

“At this time it is appropriate to set snares in thickets and berry-trees and brush to catch thrushes and other birds. This bird-catching extends right to the month of March.”¹⁸

In summer (July-August), waterfowl such as ducks, geese and swans moult their flight feathers and cannot fly, making them easy to corral and capture in nets.¹⁹ Such seasonal considerations are key when investigating how wildfowl consumption could betray status and social stratification.

¹⁴ Arist. *Hist. an.* 8.16.600A16; Plin, *HN*, 10.70. See Plin. *HN*, 10.11 for the cuckoo.

¹⁵ Morley 2007, 20.

¹⁶ Kron 2008.

¹⁷ Birkhead 2014, 14.

¹⁸ Palladius 13.6

¹⁹ Zeiler 2013, 379-381

4.2 Legalities of Hunting

Before we get into details surrounding individual birds, it is worth exploring the laws recorded in the *Digest* that relate to bird-catching to get a sense of who hunted birds, where they were permitted to hunt, and why they hunted. One law specifies that the purchase of a catch of birds remains valid even if the fowler's efforts are unfruitful. That is, a fowler paid to bring home storks, for example, would still be paid even if no storks could be found.²⁰ This should indicate that those with the means were in the habit of making contracts with fowlers to supply birds for the table. Another law specified that wild birds automatically became the property of the person who caught them, excepting those cases where they were fulfilling a contract.²¹ Ownership applied even if the birds had been caught on another person's land, although if a fowler trespassed without permission, the owner had the right to ban him from doing so again.²² Poaching does not seem to be a concept; trespass is the issue. A rescript issued by Antoninus Pius declared that fowlers had to gain permission *prior* to hunting on another person's land, which might indicate that some complained of fowlers and hunters straying onto their property.²³ There was no concept of having ownership over wild animals on one's land unless certain prerequisites were met. Bees swarming in a farmer's tree could not be considered his, but they became property if they were housed in his hive. A bird nesting in a tree was not his, but a pigeon that chose to nest in his dovecote was, which meant a fowler could be made liable if he caught a pigeon on another person's land.²⁴ Wild birds kept in cages were owned so long as the owner kept control over them, but ownership was lost if they escaped.²⁵ For animals universally considered wild, but which had been tamed or were in the habit of returning, ownership was retained so long as the instinct to return remained. Peacocks and pigeons were acknowledged to have wild natures, but since they always returned the status of ownership was clear. If a bird classed as 'wild' lost its inclination to return, it could be seized by the first taker. This is in contrast to poultry and geese, which were considered to have tame natures. If chickens or geese ran or flew away, they remained the property of the owner, even if he had no idea where his flock was.²⁶ In contrast to the Middle Ages, there were no formal restrictions on hunting. Anyone could hunt birds in woods, meadows, or waterways, though

²⁰ *Dig.* 18.1.8

²¹ *Dig.* 41.1.1

²² *Dig.* 41.1.3

²³ *Dig.* 8.3.16

²⁴ *Dig.* 41.1.5

²⁵ *Dig.* 41.2.3

²⁶ *Dig.* 41.1.44; 41.1.4; 41.1.5

this would not have extended to privately-owned game enclosures.²⁷ It was not possible to poach wild game from another's land, but domestic poultry, tame flocks and pigeons that nested in a man's dovecote – even if they were browsing away from his property when caught – were off-limits. Conceptually, wild birds belonged to all and all were free to hunt and catch them however they wished, provided they did not commit trespass along the way.

4.3 Hunting Methods

Fowling has long been practised in the Italian peninsula, with pre-Roman peoples developing their own specialised methods of hunting. For example, the Etruscans were said to have used music when hunting, and the Tomb of the Leopards (Tarquinia, c.470 BCE) depicts a flute player surrounded by birds, a possible depiction of the Etruscan method of attracting prey.²⁸ In the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing (Tarquinia, c.510 BCE) we see a boy using a sling to bring down waterfowl.²⁹



Figure 35: Fowling with a sling. The Tomb of Hunting and Fishing.

The labour of bird-catching was considered sweet because it involved no risk of personal harm and involved no dangerous weaponry.³⁰ Swords, spears and arrows were generally not used to hunt birds, except for the very largest like ostriches. They did not possess the blunt-headed arrows, or bird-bolts, that were employed by fowlers in the medieval and early modern periods. Scenes of bird-hunting with arrows occur in heroic scenes in literature,

²⁷ Fischer 2013, 260.

²⁸ Keller 1975, 50.

²⁹ Lulof and Van Kampen 2011, 102.

³⁰ Oppian, *The Chase*, 1.57f

such as the shooting contest in the *Aeneid*, but this does not seem to be typical.³¹ A bow and arrow was serviceable to one who had the skill, but the arsenal of the *auceps* typically included nets, decoy birds, nooses, traps and springes.³² The usual weapon of choice was the limed reed, the *harundo*.³³ While listing the different types of *harundo*, Pliny mentions that reeds used in fowling must be of a considerable length and strength, and that the reeds best suited to the task came from Palermo.³⁴ As for hunting nets, they were made of flax, and it appears that imported flax from the Spanish provinces were the best for the task. The flax of Comae in Campania had a reputation for making superb fishing and fowling nets, being incredibly strong and yet fine enough that a net large enough to encircle a wood could be passed through a ring. Each string consisted of 150 threads.³⁵ This betrays a certain sophistication and refinement to the basic technology they used.

Liming a bird typically involves smearing a twig or cane with lime so a bird's legs and feathers become stuck when they roost, but the Roman technique of using a *harundo* involved the fowler actively attempting to smear the birds' wings, causing the feathers to stick together and either forcing it to the ground or leaving the feathers stuck fast to the cane.

Non avis utiliter viscatīs effugit alīs

The bird cannot flee when its wings are limed.³⁶

It is attested that fowlers would hide in bushes, attract birds with decoys, and suddenly lunge from hiding to smear the wings while the bird was distracted.³⁷ Another description of the limed reed reveals that it was jointed, and could be gradually extended, rather like a fishing pole.³⁸ In Roman art we see representations of men (sometimes Cupids) preparing the sticky lime. This would be applied to fine, straight rods at home, prior to setting out. Once in the field, it was attached to the end of the extendable pole and slowly, carefully poked into the top branches of a tree or bush. If a bird perched on it or brushed its wings against the lime, then it would become stuck and the hunter would collect his prize.³⁹ The 'Small Hunt' Mosaic from

³¹ Verg. *Aen.* 5.485f. See also Soph. *Phil.* 285-92.

³² Verg. *G.* 1.139-40; Ov. *Rem. am.* 501-2.

³³ Prop. 4.2; Bion, *Idylls*, 4; Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 2.19

³⁴ Plin. *HN*, 16.66.

³⁵ Plin. *HN*, 19.2.

³⁶ Ov. *Ars am.* 1.391

³⁷ Mart. 14.216

³⁸ Satyrus, *Anth. Pal.* 10.11.

³⁹ Parker 1988, 204

Piazza Amerina in Sicily (4th century CE) shows fowlers standing under a tree with limed rods upon their backs and small capes over their shoulders, upon which perch their decoy birds.



Figure 36: Fowlers and their decoy birds. Detail of the Small Hunt Mosaic, Piazza Armerina, Sicily. 4th century CE.

An *oscilium* recovered from Pompeii shows liming in action, as a fowler lunges from hiding to smear a bird with glue:



Figure 37: *Oscilium with fowler. Late first century BCE, from the House of Caecilius Iucundus, Pompeii.*

Bird lime was made from mistletoe berries, hence why the word *viscum* denotes both mistletoe and the viscous glue that could be made from its berries. Mistletoe is a parasitic bush and its seeds are naturally sticky to help it cling to the trunk of a host tree when distributed by birds or animals. The Romans observed that birds (particularly the mistle thrush) would eat the berries and spread the seeds by defecating onto trees.⁴⁰ Turner, an authority on birds in the 16th century, records that mistletoe berries were still used for making lime in his day, and cites the ancients on their wisdom. He quotes the following ancient proverb and explains:

“Turdis ipse sibi malum cacat – the thrush shitteth mischief for herself. She shitteth out the miscel berries well prepared in her body, and layeth them upon the tree; the

⁴⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 6.205-6; Plin. *HN*, 16.93.

berries grow into a bush, and the bush bringeth forth berries, and of the berries the fowler maketh birdlime, wherewith afterward he taketh the thrush: and so the thrush hath shitteth out her own destruction.”⁴¹

Isidore of Seville says the same, referring back to the wisdom of the ancients:

Turdela quasi maior turdus; cuius stercore viscum generare putatur. Vnde et proverbium apud antiquos erat, 'Malum sibi avem cacare.'

“The *turdela* (mistle thrush) is bigger than the *turdus* (song thrush). It is said to beget mistletoe through its shit. Among the ancients there was the proverb, ‘the bird shits trouble for itself.’”⁴²

Mistletoe bears fruit in late autumn and winter, hence its association with Christmas. Since thrushes were resident in Italy during winter, the berries were an important source of food for them. But winter was also the appropriate season to go fowling. A statue that depicts the

⁴¹ Turner 1562, 598.

⁴² Isid. *Etym.* 12.7.71

personification of winter features five Cupids fishing and fowling in a river as an expression of this connection.

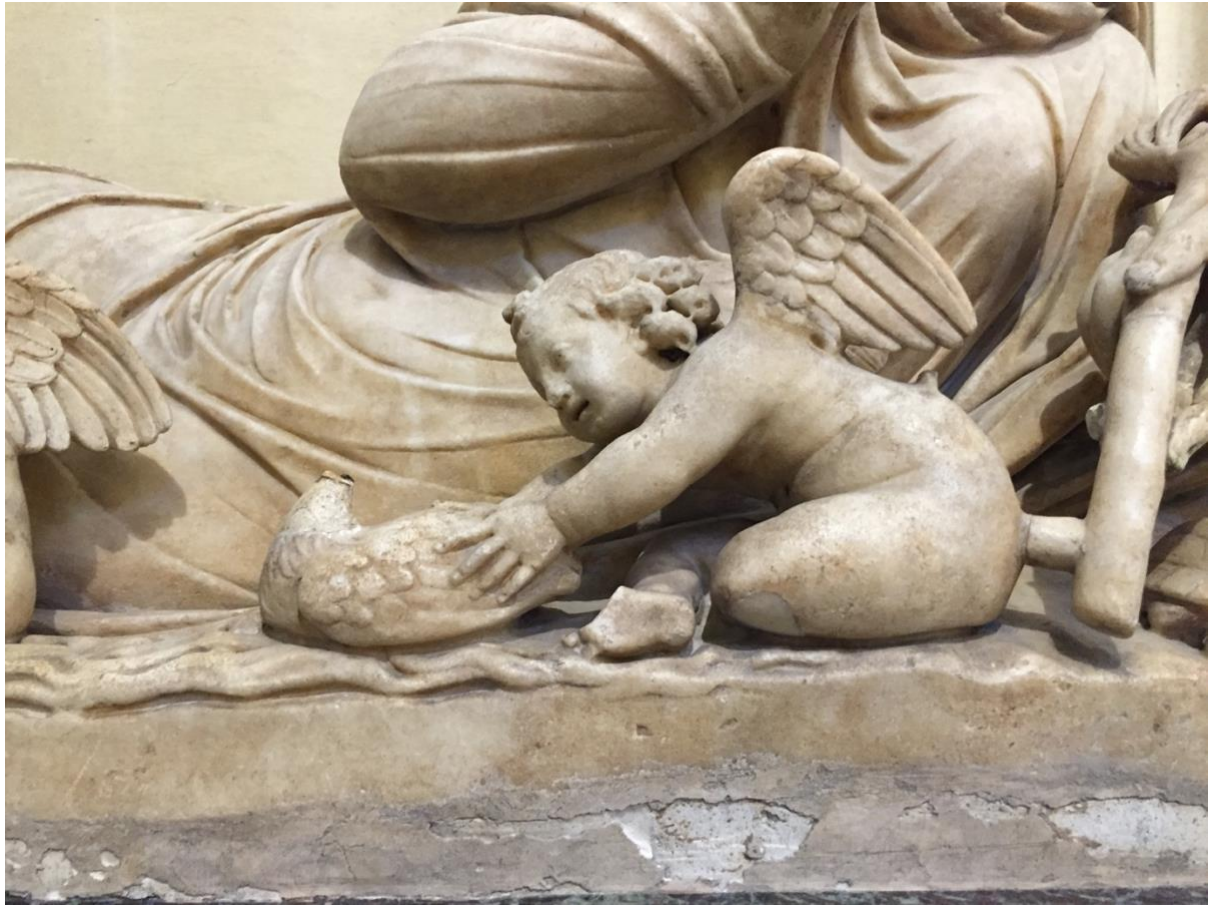


Figure 38: Detail. Personification of Winter. Vatican Museum, inv. 663.



Figure 39: Detail of a fowler holding his catch. Personification of winter from the Palatine Stadium, early fourth century CE.

In a Greek source, Xenophon describes a young man's dedication to bird catching, and how he would get up on cold winter nights to lay traps and snares before the creatures were awake.⁴³ The irony that birds were sustained by the same berries that furnished man with the means to catch and eat them was clearly not lost on the Romans.

Pliny describes the process of making bird lime:

Viscum fit ex acinis qui colliguntur messium tempore inmaturo; nam si accessere imbres, amplitudine quidem augentur, visco vero marcescunt. siccantur deinde et aridi tunduntur ac conditi in aqua putrescunt duodenis fere diebus, unumque hoc rerum putrescendo gratiam invenit. inde in profluente, rursus malleo tusi, amissis corticibus interiore carne lentescunt. hoc est viscum pinnis avium tactu ligandis oleo subactum cum libeat insidias moliri.

⁴³ Xen. Cyr. 1.6.39

“Bird lime is made out of mistletoe berries harvested while they are unripe. For if the rainy season has begun, although they grow in size they lose their viscosity. They are then dried and when quite desiccated they are beaten to a pulp and allowed to putrefy in water for about twelve days. In this case alone does something become pleasing by rotting. Then, having been pounded again, they are placed in running water where they lose their skins and the flesh within becomes sticky. This becomes lime when mixed with oil, and is smeared by ambush on the wings of birds when one wishes to catch them.”⁴⁴

A formula for even stickier birdlime involved chewing the berries to remove the skins rather than letting them rot off. Superstitious advice accompanied this recipe, with recommendations that it should ideally be gathered from an oak tree, at the new moon, without the use of iron, and without letting it touch the ground. This might indicate that fowlers practiced magical rituals to help ensure the success of the hunt.⁴⁵

Under the Empire, fowlers did a roaring trade. Pompeii and Herculaneum yield beautiful wall paintings of dead fowl meant for the dinner table. In them we see mallards hanging, ready for eating, chickens, dead thrushes, partridges, and a whole host of others.⁴⁶ The presence of game birds in Campanian paintings indicates that wealth and prosperity could be expressed through appetising images of both domestic and wild-caught birds.⁴⁷ Demand for wildfowl, particularly rare and exotic breeds, led men to go fowling as far afield as Numidia and Ethiopia. Reflecting on simpler times, Pliny laments that not even legendary dangers could deter men from hunting birds abroad, and in fact this made the game more prized.⁴⁸ There are a number of sepulchral epigrams recorded for the fowler with his limed reeds that suggest the man who got his living by this trade was poor, but happy in his work, and that the skill was passed down through families.⁴⁹ Above all else, a talent for fowling required patience, dedication, and a great deal of hiding in bushes.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Plin. *HN*, 16.94.

⁴⁵ Plin. *HN*, 24.11. See also Ar. *Av.* 1077-83 and Bonner 1925, 210.

⁴⁶ Guidobaldi & Esposito 2012, 102, 276-7. These pieces are now held in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv. 8759, 8753 and 8647.

⁴⁷ Watson 2002, 357

⁴⁸ Plin. *HN*, 19.19.

⁴⁹ *Anth. Pal.* 7.156, 7.171.

⁵⁰ Ov. *Ars am.* 1.47

4.4 Consuming Wildfowl

With such a fantastic variety of birds on offer, we should consider how they made their way to elite tables. Bird consumption communicated status, but effective communication required strict adherence to the complex yet unwritten rules that governed the ‘correct’ way to consume, which could distinguish the “true aristocrat” from someone who merely had the money to live like one.⁵¹ Petronius’ social satire, the *Satyricon*, includes an extended scene at the dinner of a wealthy freedman Trimalchio. This freedman’s constant attempts to awe and impress his guests includes serving up birds, and one of the passages gives us an idea of what a sumptuous, over-the-top feast might have been like:

Interim dum ille omnium textorum dicta inter lusum consumit, gustantibus adhuc nobis repositorium allatum est cum corbe, in quo gallina erat lignea patentibus in orbem alis, quales esse solent quae incubant ova. Accessere continuo duo servi et symphonia strepente scrutari paleam coeperunt, erutaque subinde pavonina ova divisere convivis. Convertit ad hanc scenam Trimalchio vultum et: "Amici, ait, pavonis ova gallinae iussi supponi. Et mehercules timeo ne iam concepti sint. Temptemus tamen, si adhuc sorbilia sunt." Accipimus nos cochlearia non minus selibras pendentia, ovaque ex farina pingui figurata pertundimus. Ego quidem paene proieci partem meam, nam videbatur mihi iam in pullum coisse. Deinde ut audivi veterem convivam: "Hic nescio quid boni debet esse", persecutus putamen manu, pinguissimam ficedulam inveni piperato vitello circumdatam.

“Meantime, while he was saying all sorts of things over his game and we were still preoccupied with the hors d’oeuvres, a tray bearing a basket came forth, in which a wooden hen sat, her wings in a circle, as they are accustomed to do when incubating eggs. At once two slaves approached and the musicians played as they began to search the chaff. Drawing out peahens’ eggs, they divided them among the guests. Trimalchio turned his face to this scene and said, “friends, I ordered that bird to sit on peahens’ eggs. And by Hercules, I hope they are not ready to hatch! Nevertheless, let’s try them, and see if they are still soft.” We took up our little spoons (which weighed no less than half a pound each!) and cracked the eggs, which were made from rich dough. I nearly

⁵¹ Morley 2007, 48; Veyne 1961; Edwards 1993.

threw my part away, for it seemed to me like the chick was already formed. But then I heard an old guest say, “there’s bound to be something good,” and so I searched the shell with my hand, and discovered the plumpest little fig-pecker, all peppery and covered in yolk.”⁵²

The joke is that peahen eggs were often hatched under hens, and Trimalchio has had his cooks create fake peahen eggs, placed them under a fake hen, and ‘hatched’ from them the *ficedula*, an even more expensive dainty.⁵³ *Ficedula* translates as fig-pecker, and denotes a variety of garden warbler still known as *beccafico* in Italy today. These warblers typically subsist on insects, but switch to a fruit-based diet when they are preparing to migrate for the winter. As the name suggests, figs are a favourite of theirs, though Martial asks, with characteristic cheek:

*Cum me ficus alat, cum pascar dulcibus uvis,
cur potius nomen non dedit uva mihi?*

“Since sweet grapes nourish me as much as figs, why did the grape not give me my name instead?”⁵⁴

Unfortunately for the little warbler, this fruit-based diet makes them taste delicious, and their migratory preparations made it easy for fowlers to catch them in large numbers when they were at their fattest. These delicious morsels were beloved by the upper classes, and it’s said that a rich boy would be brought up on dainties like quails and fig-peckers.⁵⁵ A visual representation of the fig-pecker may be seen at the Villa of Oplontis. According to Martial, the *ficedula* was best enjoyed seasoned with pepper.⁵⁶

⁵² Petr. *Sat.* 33.

⁵³ Juv. *Sat.* 14.7-10 mocks a wealthy glutton for bringing up his child on dainties such as fig-peckers.

⁵⁴ Mart. 13.49

⁵⁵ Juv. *Sat.* 14.7-10.

⁵⁶ Mart. 13.5



Figure 40: Bird pecking figs. Villa Oplontis, first century CE.

Thrushes were another type of wild bird treasured for their taste. They were caught in huge numbers using nets and those famous limed reeds. Another episode in the *Satyricon* shows the fowlers in action. Trimalchio's cook cuts open a boar, and:

ex cuius plaga turdi evolaverunt. Parati aucupes cum harundinibus fuerunt, et eos circa triclinium volitantes momento exceperunt. Inde cum suum cuique iussisset referri

"(...) from the gash thrushes flew out. There were bird-catchers prepared with limed reeds, and they caught them as they flew around the dining-room. Trimalchio ordered each guest be given their own bird."⁵⁷

The fashion of presenting a complete beast at dinner was popular during the Empire.⁵⁸ Wild boar is among the most prestigious kills for a hunter, and thrush among the most prized hauls for a fowler. Combining the two, and even hunting and catching the birds in front of the guest

⁵⁷ Petr. *Sat.* 40.

⁵⁸ Plu. *Mor.* 658 A

so the living and dead mingled in the same space, served to bring the prestige of the hunt into the dining room, though this was all, apparently, in poor taste.⁵⁹

Turdus was a catch-all term, and could refer to four different birds: the redwing (*Turdus iliacus*), the song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), the mistle thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) and the fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*). Mistle thrushes are the largest and generally solitary, though they sometimes gather in groups. These were probably hunted using the *harundo*. The fieldfare is next in size and, at least today, they are far commoner. These birds gather in flocks and would have been hunted with nets. The song thrush is third in size, followed by the redwing, and these can also be hunted with nets and caught in large numbers. Blackbirds, we are told, made fine table birds and were caught in the same manner as thrushes.⁶⁰ Martial declares:

*Inter aves turdus, si quid me iudice certum est
inter quadripedes mattea prima lepus.*

“If my judgement is certain, among birds the thrush is the best, and among quadrupeds the hare.”⁶¹

The thrush is elsewhere called fit to grace the rich man’s tables.⁶² Thrushes were considered suitable gifts between the wealthy.⁶³ Ovid advises us.

*Quin etiam turdoque licet missaque columba
Te memorem dominae testificare tuae*

“It is also encouraged to send a thrush or a pigeon to prove you are thinking of your mistress.”⁶⁴

Whether such gifts were intended for the beloved’s dinner table or her birdcage is unclear. Song thrushes and pigeons can make delightful caged companions, but in this context one suspects the way to a lady’s heart may have been through her stomach. Complaining about how

⁵⁹ Chandezon 2015, 138

⁶⁰ Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.91; Hor. *Ars P.* 458-9; Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.1-2.

⁶¹ Mart. 13.92. See also Epigram 13.51.

⁶² Petr. *Sat.* 65.

⁶³ Plin. *Ep.* 5.2.1; Hor. *Sat.* 2.5.10

⁶⁴ Pliny, *Ars am.* 2.269-70.

picky women are, Propertius says that in the good old days, one could woo a girl by giving her simple gifts like grapes, apples, or a bird of dappled plumage, but they are no longer impressed by such dainties.⁶⁵ Thrushes also made fine gifts between friends.⁶⁶ The Sabine region was said to attract the largest flocks of *turdi* (probably fieldfares) which were fattened in leased enclosures nearby.⁶⁷ The text is ambiguous as to who owned these enclosures, but it seems the city poulterers were the ones who leased them, preparing their birds for sale at the markets.

Thrushes do not breed in captivity, so the Roman *turdarium* – thrush-cote – was a place where thrushes and similar birds were fattened after being snared in the wild. Fieldfares, mistle thrushes, redwings, song thrushes and blackbirds would have made the bulk of the flock, caught in winter and held until they were ready to be sold, with birds like quails occasionally held there too.⁶⁸ The practice of fattening thrushes reportedly began in the late Republic. Plutarch tells us Lucullus was the trendsetter, much to the chagrin of Pompey, and he relates the anecdote that one summer's day, Pompey fell ill and his physicians prescribed that he eat a thrush. Since thrushes had all migrated from Italy at this time, the only place he could find a thrush was in the *turdarium* of the decadent Lucullus, his mortal enemy. Finding death preferable to buying into Lucullus' luxury, Pompey ordered his physicians to come up with another cure, which they did post-haste.⁶⁹

Plutarch's story indicates that it was not only profitable to fatten the birds before selling them, but that it was good practice to keep them in captivity so they could be sold in the warmer months when fowlers were unable to procure them from the wild. Varro and Columella describe huge structures in which thousands of birds could be kept indefinitely and fattened to order. Though they were kept plump in the cotes, twenty days before sale the necessary numbers were removed and placed in smaller coops, where they were fed intensively to make them fit for market.⁷⁰ It may well be that thrushes were eventually available all year round thanks to such large-scale enterprises, provided one could afford them. But while the ordinary farmer might have kept a few thrushes in a miniature cote, either for his own consumption or to make a little extra money, the massive cotes our writers speak of would only have graced

⁶⁵ Prop. 3.13.32

⁶⁶ Plin. *Ep.* 5.2.1

⁶⁷ Varro, *Rust.* 3.4.2

⁶⁸ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.2

⁶⁹ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 40.

⁷⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.4

villas specialising in aviculture. The presence of such enormous operations indicates how lucrative aviculture became in the first century CE, and how one could make an extravagant display by eating birds out of season.

When the practice was still relatively new, Varro recommended keeping thrushes in an enclosure that sounds very similar in design to a dovecote. It was a round, domed structure, broad but not high. To keep out vermin and predators, it was covered with plaster within and without. A steady supply of running water ensured the birds had clean drinking water at all times. Wooden rods were set into the walls, and gratings were leaned against the wall to provide perches. There were no nesting boxes (the birds did not breed), and it had few windows, which kept the interior in semi-darkness. Interestingly, the door to access the cote was at the end of a curved passageway – called a *coclia* to denote the spiral shape. This would have helped keep light to a minimum, and would also have prevented the birds from winging to freedom when the door was opened. Exactly how little light was admitted is best indicated by Varro's recommendation that the birds should not be able to see trees and birds through the windows, for the sight of them, he says, makes them grow thin from yearning. This passage should rather indicate that the darkness was intended to inhibit excessive activity and make them dull and lethargic. They were only permitted enough light to see food, water, and their perches. In this way, it was believed, they would grow fat more quickly.⁷¹

Death rates in these enclosures must have been high, for by Columella's time the recommended *turdarium* had evolved into something more distinct. It was still scrupulously defended from predators, but it was much more wholesome, and filled with light and fresh air. Columella is sensitive to how delicate these birds can be, and to bolster survival rates he advises that the farmer should mix newly-caught birds with thrushes that had been captive for a long time. By watching the veterans, they would learn how to eat and drink within the enclosure, and it would help keep them calm as they became used to captive life. Like Varro, Columella recommends a diet of dried figs mixed with millet. In the wild, thrushes are fond of berries, and the figs had to be carefully crushed for their consumption, or ideally chewed, though Columella acknowledges this is not an expedient solution. Fig-chewers were expensive and could not be trusted to abstain from swallowing the figs they chewed. But thrushes demanded variety, and this basic diet was supplemented by beech nuts, as well as other forms of wild

⁷¹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.1-6.

harvest – myrtle seeds, ivy berries, wild olive and strawberry-tree fruit.⁷² Columella’s advice about thrushes stood the test of time, for Palladius adheres closely to his recommendations in the late 4th and early 5th century CE. Trial and error ensured that Varro’s dank and dark enclosure was quickly redesigned in favour of something light and airy, with the walls at least partially formed by netting.⁷³

When the fattened thrushes were finally taken to the marketplace, they fetched a fine price.⁷⁴ What is astonishing is that as supply increased from the late Republic onwards, prices increased too, as if they could never quite meet demand.⁷⁵ To give a sense of their value, in 301 CE, Diocletian fixed their price at 60 *denarii* for 10, higher than for any other songbird. However, this does not necessarily mean they were the most valuable birds on the market – fig-peckers and ortolan buntings, which are much smaller and provide only a mouthful of meat at most, went for 40 *denarii* for 10.⁷⁶ These batches of ten were fastened to a wicker wheel called a *corona*. Hence Martial’s joke:

*Texta rosis fortasse tibi vel divite nardo,
at mihi de turdis facta corona placet.*

“A crown woven of roses or of costly nard might please you, but I delight in a crown of thrushes.”⁷⁷

⁷² Columella, *Rust.* 8.10.1-6; Plin. *HN*, 17.6.

⁷³ Palladius 1.26

⁷⁴ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.8.

⁷⁵ Johnson 1968, 45.

⁷⁶ Diocletian, *Maximum Price Edict*, 4.27, 34, 36.

⁷⁷ Mart. 13.51; see also Epigram 3.47.10.



Figure 41: Hanging thrushes. Late 1st century CE. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, inv. 2005911

Work on the early Roman site of Pollentia (modern-day Mallorca) by Alejandro Valenzuela has revealed evidence of urban consumption of thrushes. Valenzuela investigated the refuse dump of a food shop, a *popina* very similar to the eateries uncovered at Pompeii.⁷⁸ The recovered faunal assemblage consisted of different mammals, fish and birds that had probably been cooked and consumed at the spot. Thrushes were among the most abundant bird species recovered. Notably, the skull, wings and legs were most commonly recovered, ‘non-meaty’ parts that represent food waste. In addition to these, a high proportion of sterna were recovered from the dump, which Valenzuela attributes to the use of a particular cooking method, wherein the sternum is removed and the bird is ‘butterflied’ so it can be roasted flat on a grill. It is impossible to tell whether these birds were fattened, but this faunal assemblage at least shows the context in which they were consumed – at a food shop – and how they were cooked – flat,

⁷⁸ Holleran 2012, 142.

on a grill, in a way that would have preserved moisture while facilitating quicker cooking at the same time.⁷⁹



Figure 42: Dead thrushes with herbs nearby, ready for cooking. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 8634.

Thrush-cotes containing thousands of birds produced another asset: dung. Varro states thrush-cotes produced the best dung, which was suitable both as fertiliser and as fodder for pigs and cattle.⁸⁰ In contrast, Columella places thrush dung third on his list after pigeon and chicken dung.⁸¹ Pliny, who read both testaments on bird dung, is driven to muse on morality:

M. Varro principatum dat turdorum fimo ex aviariis, quod etiam pabulo boum suumque magnificat, neque alio cibo celerius pinguescere adseverat. de nostris moribus bene sperare est si tanta apud maiores fuere aviaria ut ex his agri stercorarentur.

⁷⁹ Valenzuela 2018.

⁸⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 1.38.2

⁸¹ Columella, *Rust.* 2.14.1

“Marcus Varro gave first rank to dung from thrush aviary, which he even esteems as fodder for cattle and swine, declaring no other food fattens them more quickly. If our ancestors had such large aviaries that they supplied fertiliser for the fields, perhaps there is hope for the morals of our own time!”⁸²

Keeping aviaries and dining regularly on birds seem to be tied inextricably with excess and decadence, and this is another example of how bird-keeping grew in popularity and sophistication to satisfy the burgeoning luxury trade in the late Republic and early Empire.

4.5 Recreational Fowling and Rarer Birds

As a leisure activity, bird-catching was principally enjoyed by landowners who could afford to keep a few acres for game, and who also had the free time to devote to such pleasures.⁸³ Ovid tells us that hunting quadrupeds afforded the greatest pleasure, but that:

*lenius est studium, studium tamen, alite capta
aut lino aut calamis praemia parva sequi*

“It is a milder joy – yet still a joy! – to seek a humble prize, and catch birds either with net or limed reed.”⁸⁴

⁸² Plin. *HN*, 17.6.

⁸³ Plin. *Ep.* 2.8.1.

⁸⁴ Ov. *Rem. Am.* 207-8. Oppian, *The Chase*, 47f elucidates the differences between the three types of hunting, with big game hunting touted as most impressive.



Figure 43: Hunting scene. Roman mosaic from Utica, Tunisia, early 3rd century CE. Various kinds of birds are enclosed within the hunters' nets along with dangerous big game.

Fowling ranked below hunting but above fishing as a recreational pursuit. Big game hunting was dangerous and brought the greatest prestige, as we see when Propertius writes to his girlfriend admitting that he might not be manly enough to take on a lion or a boar, but at least he can shoot a bird or catch a hare.⁸⁵ Horace describes hunting activities carried out in the colder months, and affirms that hunting birds was a secondary delight to the chase because it was less thrilling and dangerous. Importantly, however, despite its lower status, it was still a perfectly acceptable pursuit for men of his standing. This is in contrast to Greek thought, which disapproved of the free men hunting birds as it was beneath their dignity. Hunting was only acceptable if it was against game that required dogs and horses to pursue.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Prop. 2.19.21-4.

⁸⁶ Pl. *Leg.* VII 823b-824a



Figure 44: Detail of a hunting scene on a sarcophagus. Surrounded by game such as boar and hare, this fowler brandishes his catch and his harundo. Vatican Museum, inv. 879.

Horace's description of the winter hunt is worth exploring further:

*at cum tonantis annus hibernus Iovis
imbris nivisque comparat,
aut trudit acris hinc et hinc multa cane
apros in obstantis plagas
aut amite levi rara tendit retia
turdis edacibus dolos
pavidumque leporem et advenam laqueo gruem
iucunda captat praemia.*

“But when thundering Jove brings the wintry time with rain and snow, with a pack of hounds one either drives fierce boars into waiting nets, or with smooth poles stretches wide nets – cunning trick for greedy thrushes! – or else he nooses the timid hare or catches the interloping crane, a sweet prize!”⁸⁷

The crane was a passage visitor in winter and difficult to catch, so its alleged sweetness as a prize is probably due to its rarity. Romans sometimes kept demoiselle cranes for their beauty.⁸⁸ We have a report of cranes being displayed in the arena, where they allegedly fought one another.⁸⁹ It is more likely that this was a display of their mating dance, which looked like fighting to ancient eyes. A study of zooarchaeological finds from central Europe (near Hungary) reveals that crane bones are found in much greater abundance on sites from the Roman period, sharply increasing from the Iron Age before dropping off again in Byzantine sites. It has been suggested that this directly correlates to Romans keeping cranes as pets or using them as food, though we should be careful not to generalise the findings to the rest of the Empire.⁹⁰ Until the 20th century, cranes nested in Hungary, which is not typical of Italy.⁹¹ Hungarian peasants did not breed the birds, but they were able to collect young cranes in the breeding season and keep them as pets. They served as guards, signaling the arrival of intruders with the sound that gave them their onomatopoeic names in most European languages (*grus*, *grue*, *grulla*, *Kranich*, *trana*, crane, *zhuravl*, *daru* etc.).⁹² Roman pet or ornamental cranes may have done the same. The enduring legend that cranes appointed sentries who held stones in their feet, to keep them awake since they would drop them if they dozed, may have its origin in practices such as these.⁹³ Dionysius’ *On Birds*, probably written in the first century CE, describes various fowling techniques. He lists two odd ways to catch cranes; the first was to fill a hollowed gourd with lime and place a beetle inside. Attracted by the buzzing, the crane stuck its head into the gourd and became blinded and immobilised by the lime. The second method involves snaring using a noose trap.⁹⁴ The first method seems rather bizarre, but the second method may indeed be a true description, since Virgil describes winter as the season for snaring cranes. In the Greek Anthology, Antipater also refers to noose snares for cranes.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Hor. *Epod.* 2.29-36

⁸⁸ Zeuner 1963, 474

⁸⁹ Dio (Epitome), 66.25.

⁹⁰ Bartosiewicz 2005, 260

⁹¹ Bartosiewicz 2005, 262

⁹² Bartosiewicz 2005, 262

⁹³ Plin. *HN*, 10.59.

⁹⁴ Dionysius, *On Birds*, 3.11

⁹⁵ Verg. *G.* 1.307; *Anth. Pal.* 6.109.

Literary evidence shows the crane was eaten at feasts, though some frowned on killing the bird.⁹⁶ Reportedly, crane meat tastes foul and must be prepared thoroughly before it becomes palatable.⁹⁷ This is reflected in the way the Romans fattened cranes and had recipes dedicated to correctly cooking and seasoning them. Apicius' method of tenderising the tough crane flesh consisted of boiling the crane whole, except for the head, which remained outside of the pot. It was then wrapped in a hot towel and the head was pulled off in a way that drew the tough sinews with it, leaving only palatable meat and bones behind.⁹⁸ Apicius' crane recipe also implies that the dish was valued for its visual appeal rather than its flavour. Like the peacock, taste had nothing to do with demand for the bird. It was meant to make a sensational banquet centrepiece and advertise the capabilities of the host in procuring such a rare and impressive bird.

The stork was in similar straits as the crane. In the *Satyricon*, the following quotation against luxury was recited, apparently written by Publilius:

*Luxuriae ructu Martis marcent moenia.
Tuo palato clausus pavo pascitur
plumato amictus aureo Babylonico,
gallina tibi Numidica, tibi gallus spado.
Ciconia etiam, grata peregrina hospita
pietaticultrix, gracilipes, crotalistria,
avis exul hiemis, titulus tepidi temporis,
nequitiae nidum in caccabo fecit modo.*

“Luxury with belching brings down Mars’ walls. Your palate encloses Babylonian peacocks, feeds on birds mantled in golden plumage, the guinea fowl, the capon cock, and even the stork, that lovely foreign wanderer furnished with piety, long-legged, rattling like castanet-dancer, banished in winter, honoured in warm months – for your evil delectation, he goes into your cooking pot, nest and all.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.87; Mart. 13.74.

⁹⁷ Albarella & Thomas 2002, 23.

⁹⁸ Bartosiewicz 2005, 263; Apicius 6.213

⁹⁹ Petr. *Sat.* 55

While cranes were winter visitors in Italy, storks were only seen in summer. This passage reveals that the revulsion towards eating storks was centred on the fact that, as Varro notes, they bred when they arrived in Italy, and therefore could only be caught while nesting.¹⁰⁰ Whether the Romans ate the young or simply trapped the parents or the chicks or both is unclear, but the repeated mention of the nest implies the chicks were stolen.¹⁰¹

Pliny tells us:

Cornelius Nepos, qui divi Augusti principatu obiit, cum scriberet turdos paulo ante coeptos saginari, addidit ciconias magis placere quam grues, cum haec nunc ales inter primas expetatur, illam nemo velit attigisse

“Cornelius Nepos, who died in the principate of divine Augustus, when he wrote how the practice of fattening thrushes was introduced a little before his time, added that storks were much more in vogue than cranes, whereas today the latter bird is all the rage and nobody will even touch the former.”¹⁰²

Part of the joke in the Satyricon passage may have been that the freedman was inveighing against a form of excess that was no longer fashionable or acceptable anyway – as Pliny says, eating storks had long been abandoned. The distaste for the slaughter of storks in the wild may be related to Roman attitudes towards hunting. Hunting was encouraged because it improved stamina and bravery, but there was a general rule against slaughtering the newly-born offspring of harmless species, and by extension the mothers that cared for them. These were left for Diana.¹⁰³ One wonders if the loss of appetite for stork was effected by a humane impulse, or whether the fad simply died naturally when another took its place. It is noteworthy that storks are often shown killing snakes in Roman art, and they were known as destroyers of snakes.¹⁰⁴ This motif is based on real behaviour. In Thessaly, storks were protected because they kept the viper population under control.¹⁰⁵ Storks were also symbols of piety. The stork was called *pia avis* – the pious bird.¹⁰⁶ It was common lore that storks fed and cared for their parents when

¹⁰⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.6

¹⁰¹ See also: Hor. *Sat.* 2.2.49-50.

¹⁰² Plin. *HN*, 10.30

¹⁰³ Bodson 1983, 315

¹⁰⁴ Juv. *Sat.* 14.74; Plin. *HN*, 10.62.

¹⁰⁵ Bodson 1983, 314; Thomson 1988.

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, *Hex.* 5.16.53-4.

they grew old.¹⁰⁷ They were auspicious if seen at nuptial auspices because they ‘married’ and raised children together.¹⁰⁸ Striking use of the pious stork imagery comes from coinage for the Antonine Party in Cisalpine Gaul that supported Lucius Antonius, who took up the cause of those dispossessed by Octavian’s settlement of veterans. Lucius, consul in 41 BC, took the cognomen Pietas to show support for his brother. On the aureus minted in that same year is the goddess Pietas depicted holding a rudder and cornucopia with a stork at her feet. On the obverse is the head of Antony.¹⁰⁹

It was observed that storks always came back to the same nest when they returned from migration.¹¹⁰ This is borne out by modern observation; storks might not mate for life, but they are loyal to their nests. They are also comfortable nesting in urban areas and probably nested on columns and roofs, where their return was noted each spring. As a comparison, swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) nested frequently on Roman houses. As guests that were friendly to man and sharing his house, it was appropriate to extend Homer’s laws of hospitality to the swallows.¹¹¹ They tolerated and even welcomed these summer migrants and did not kill them out of respect.¹¹² Ovid says explicitly that they do not harm swallows because they are gentle.¹¹³ We might account for the squeamishness around eating storks to the positive view Romans took of the birds, and the fact they probably also shared their domiciles with them.

¹⁰⁷ Arist. *Hist. an.* ix 615b 23; Ar. Av. 1355 – 1358.

¹⁰⁸ Ael. NA, 1.44.

¹⁰⁹ Carson 1978-81 (Vol.1), 75

¹¹⁰ Ael. NA, 3.23

¹¹¹ Ael. NA, 1.52; Hom. *Od.* 15.72-4

¹¹² Ael. NA, 1.58.

¹¹³ Ov. *Ars Am.* 2.149-50. In Latin, *mitis* – mild, meek or gentle.



Figure 45: Storks on an oil lamp. 1st-2nd century CE, from Verona.

A taste for flamingo tongues was another infamous fad.¹¹⁴ Martial says:

*Dat mihi pinna rubens nomen, sed lingua gulosis
nostra sapit. Quid si garrula lingua foret?*

“My red feathers give me my name, and my tongue the gluttons adore. But what if my tongue could sing?”¹¹⁵

Pliny credits Apicius with the creation of this fad. There are in fact two recipes relating to flamingo (6.6.1-2). Both of them are sauces that can be served with the whole bird, so we can be assured that it was not only the tongue that was enjoyed. In Juvenal a whole large flamingo is served at an extravagant meal.¹¹⁶ Flamingos live in the wetlands of southern Europe and once lived on the Tiber meadows too.¹¹⁷ They were rare and beautiful birds, and when Caligula established a cult to his own godhood he named flamingos and other rare birds as acceptable sacrifices to himself. Later he is recorded sacrificing a flamingo with his own hands.¹¹⁸ There

¹¹⁴ Plin. *HN*, 10.133.

¹¹⁵ Mart. 13.71.

¹¹⁶ Juv. *Sat.* 9.139.

¹¹⁷ Dembeck 1965, 205

¹¹⁸ Suet. *Calig.* 57.

can be no surer sign that the flamingo was a coveted status symbol. Presumably the birds were netted wild in Italy and abroad, though Martial claims that a friend's estate, stocked with all manner of rare birds, boasted red-winged flamingos.¹¹⁹ Given the Romans' skill at constructing duck ponds, there is no question that they could have created a suitable habitat for the birds, but there is no evidence that this ever became common practice. Consuming flamingo was a type of excess that came under fire multiple times. Vitellius was said to eat flamingo tongue along with pheasant and peacock brains.¹²⁰ In the Life of Elagabalus, the emperor is accused of eating flamingo brains and parrot heads.¹²¹ When describing the antics of particularly despised emperors, it is not enough for them to indulge in eating of luxurious birds. They also have to eat only the brains, or only the tongue, in order to generate additional outrage. This act of eating only the choicest parts of the choicest animals was part of the "stereotyped concept of the table luxury of a tyrant."¹²² The act of killing so many precious birds for a scanty morsel was a display of wealth and power, pure and simple.

Finally, distinct from the hunting of small birds was the hunting of ostriches, a dangerous and thrilling pursuit. Pliny opens his book on birds in the *Natural History* with a fairly accurate description of the ostrich, linking it to Africa or Ethiopia and claiming it is taller and faster than a man on horseback.¹²³ The ostrich does indeed stand over two metres tall and can outpace horses with ease, making it sporting quarry for a hunter.¹²⁴ The Gladiator-Emperor Commodus fought ostriches in the arena. According to Herodian, he would shoot them with crescent-shaped arrows. This decapitated them, and the headless bodies would run on for a time, to the amusement of spectators.¹²⁵ The existence of such crescent arrows is substantiated by carvings on a sarcophagus that depict Cupids shooting at ostriches with crescent arrows.

¹¹⁹ Mart. 3.58.14

¹²⁰ Suet. Vit. 13.

¹²¹ SHA, *Heliogab.* 20.6

¹²² Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1972, 16.

¹²³ Plin. *HN*, 10.1-2

¹²⁴ Laufer 1926, 24

¹²⁵ Herodian, 1. 15. 3-6.



Figure 46: Detail from Sarcophagus. Capitoline museum, inv. 307.

Dio gives another version, stating that on one occasion the emperor decapitated an ostrich with a sword. Taking up the head, he approached the senators (Dio among them) and smiled eerily at them, sending the message this was what he intended to do to them.¹²⁶ Compared to a bear or a lion, ostriches might not seem particularly dangerous, but they are formidable creatures. If provoked they lash out on clawed feet with enough force to disembowel or break bones. That ostriches were hunted in the wild or in private game enclosures is clear from iconographic evidence. Hunting scenes often depict an ostrich in amongst big game animals like leopards and deer. According to Aelian they were hunted on horseback and chased in wheeling loops until they became exhausted, whereupon they were speared. Another method was to surround an ostrich's nest with spears, so that when the parent bird returned to her young she would injure herself trying to reach them, allowing the hunter to easily take both mother and chicks. Both the birds and their eggs were eaten, and stones taken from their stomachs (which they swallow to grind food in their gizzards) were sold as charms to aid digestion.¹²⁷ The idea that Pliny relates, and which survived well into the early modern period, that ostriches are capable of digesting anything, including iron, likely came

¹²⁶ Dio (Epitome) 72.10.3.

¹²⁷ Ael. NA, 14.7.

from observation of it swallowing stones and other seemingly indigestible objects to aid its gizzard. Ostrich bones and eggshells are commonly found in North African sites in the Greco-Roman period.¹²⁸

There is no definite evidence that ostriches were kept permanently in Italian aviaries, but the possibility is there. They had been imported for the Roman shows since at least Plautus' time.¹²⁹ Amusingly, it was first called *marinus passer* – sea sparrow. Of course, what was meant was that it was not a sea bird, but a bird *from* overseas.¹³⁰ Later, the Greek name 'strouthokamelos' took its place – 'camel sparrow'.¹³¹ If the *Life of Elagabalus* is to be believed, the young emperor served ostrich heads at banquets, sometimes hundreds at a time, and made ten ostriches a prize for guests in a lottery.¹³² Aelian, who lived around this time, describes the ostrich accurately and remarks upon its flightlessness, its running speed, and its thick, fluffy feathers.¹³³

Dubious though such sources may be, it is not too much to assume that ostrich imports were flourishing, and that there was room in Roman aviaries or game enclosures for ostriches, either to hunt, to eat, or to show off to guests. Even in the early 5th century CE we have reports of ostriches being shipped from Cyrene to Rome.¹³⁴ The ostrich was probably only eaten rarely, although its eggs were enjoyed. Apicius gives us two recipes (6.1.1-2), and these seem to be the earliest written sources for ostrich eating.¹³⁵

4.6 Decoys

Already alluded to is the use of decoy birds. Xenophon mentions decoy birds used by a young fowler, which were left in the open to attract birds while the fowler lay hidden, waiting to jerk the nets and trap the birds.¹³⁶ The decoy birds employed were numerous. As has been mentioned, a captured owl was used to inspire 'mobbing' behaviour and attract birds to instinctively attack it. Aelian describes the scene, seeing owls as witches that use a kind of

¹²⁸ MacKinnon 2013, 175

¹²⁹ Plaut. *Persa*, 198.

¹³⁰ Bodson 2014, 557

¹³¹ Arnott 2007, 334. See: Plin. *HN*, 10.1, Sen. *Constant.* 17.1, Petr. *Sat.* 137.4.

¹³² SHA, *Heliogab.* 22, 1; 28, 4; 30, 2.

¹³³ Aelian, *On Animals*, 2.27

¹³⁴ Synesius, *Ep.* 134

¹³⁵ Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1972, 14.

¹³⁶ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1.6.39

magic to summon birds, even beguiling their human captors, who carry them around like pets or charms, sometimes on their shoulders.¹³⁷ Martial describes a scene where birds are drawn by song:

*Non tantum calamis, sed cantu fallitur ales,
Callida dum tacita crescit harundo manu.*

“Not only by reeds but also by song are winged creatures deceived while the limed reeds are stealthily brought forth by sly hand.”¹³⁸

Partridges were useful as decoys and both sexes could attract other partridges with their garrulous calls.¹³⁹ The Romans distinguish between three types of partridge, but they possibly had more than that.¹⁴⁰ Rock partridges and red-legged partridges are both natives of Italy, with the rock partridge being the easiest to tame. Grey partridges are more common in northern Europe, and Chukar partridges may have been imported from the eastern part of the Empire. For the Greeks, the rock partridge was common on the mainland, while the Chukar was the resident on the Aegean Islands and in Turkey. Rock and Chukar partridges are visually similar, but the ancients noted the differences in their cries. Graves describes the hunting method thus:

“Partridges become so deeply absorbed in their dance that even if a man comes up close and kills some of the dancers the rest continue undeterred; a habit of which the ancients took full advantage. In the mating season they used to put a decoy cock-partridge in a cage at the end of a long narrow winding brushwood tunnel and gave it corn to eat. Its lonely cry, combining the call to love with the call to food, attracted hens along the tunnel, and when they reached the cage and it uttered its usual challenge call, other cocks would come running up, only to be knocked on the head by waiting hunters as soon as they emerged from the tunnel.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ael. NA, 1.29. The ‘Small Hunt’ mosaic from Piazza Armerina shows men with decoy birds on their shoulders. We can assume some had tethered owls, which no doubt alarmed passers-by.

¹³⁸ Martial, *Epigrams*, 14.216

¹³⁹ Aelian, *On Animals*, 4.16.

¹⁴⁰ Aelian, *On Animals*, 4.13

¹⁴¹ Graves 1948, 289.

Pliny relates that a single decoy could attract a whole flock of belligerent males. Around breeding time, a decoy female would also attract other females who wanted to hustle her out of their territory.¹⁴² Due to their use as decoys and fighting birds, they were sometimes derided as simple, lusty and pugnacious creatures. Aelian, while praising the virtues of the monogamous, affectionate pigeon, compares them unfavourably to partridges for their sexual licence and lack of self-control.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, partridge hunting would have been a profitable exercise, since the bird was expensive and considered a dainty among the wealthy.

*Ponitur Ausoniis avis haec rarissima mensis:
hanc in piscina ludere saepe soles.*

“This bird is only rarely placed on Roman tables, and only often if you’re accustomed to splashing in fancy swimming pools.”¹⁴⁴

Recorded in the *Greek Anthology* are a number of mournful epitaphs for favourite cock-partridges. Though we should be wary of calling decoy birds pets, fowlers obviously grew attached to their beautiful – and valuable – hunting companions. Apparently, these creatures often met their end in the jaws of a household cat.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Plin. *HN*, 10.60.

¹⁴³ Ael. *NA*, 3.5

¹⁴⁴ Mart. 13.65. See also Epigram 13.76, where it is preferred not for its taste, but because it is expensive.

¹⁴⁵ *Anth. Pal.* 7.203, 204, 205, 206.



Figure 47: A (pet?) partridge. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 9986.

Inquisitive birds could be caught with oil-traps. Aelian tells us that when men wanted to catch jackdaws, they would approach where flocks were feeding and arrange basins full of oil. A curious jackdaws would approach, settle on the rim, and look at its reflection. Seeing itself, it would attempt to reach the supposed other bird, and in doing so scatter oil on itself, rendering it unable to fly.¹⁴⁶ A similar method worked on quails. During the mating season a noose and mirror were set up so the bird would run headlong into the snare as it attempted to fight its reflection.¹⁴⁷

According to Pliny, quails were not much esteemed as a foodstuff. He cites a belief that they fed on poisonous plants, making it risky to eat one.¹⁴⁸ The presence of quails meant for

¹⁴⁶ Ael. NA, 4.30. This is corroborated by Greek sources, from which Aelian may have taken the information. This may have been a Greek hunting method rather than a Roman one. See: Ath. 393ab; Dionysius, *On Birds*, 3.18-19.

¹⁴⁷ Ath. 393a.

¹⁴⁸ Plin. HN, 10.69.

the table in Roman art might indicate that most paid little heed to this advice. Fattened quails certainly fetched a good price.¹⁴⁹ Their migratory arrival was observed closely and they arrived annually in huge numbers.

Non ut advenae volucres pullos faciunt, in agro ciconiae, in tecto hirundines, sic aut hic aut illic turdi, qui cum sint nomine mares, re vera feminae quoque sunt. Neque id non secutum ut esset in merulis, quae nomine feminino mares quoque sunt. Praeterea volucres cum partim advenae sint, ut hirundines et grues, partim vernaculae, ut gallinae ac columbae, de illo genere sunt turdi adventicio ac quotannis in Italiam trans mare advolant circiter aequinoctium autumnale et eodem revolant ad aequinoctium vernum, et alio tempore, turtures ac coturnices immani numero. Hoc ita fieri apparet in insulis propinquis Pontiis, Palmariae, Pandateriae. Ibi enim in prima volatura cum veniunt, morantur dies paucos requiescendi causa itemque faciunt, cum ex Italia trans mare remeant.

“[Thrushes] do not raise their chicks here as others do – like the storks in our fields or swallows under our roofs. And though the name *turdus* is masculine, there are nevertheless females too. The case is the same with the *merula*, which has a feminine name though there are males. But I digress - of birds that are partly migratory, such as storks and swallows, and partly native, like hens and pigeons, thrushes belong to the first category, and each year arrive in Italy from across the sea around the time of the autumn equinox, and go back where they came from around the spring equinox, while in another season, turtle-doves and quails come in great numbers. This may be seen in the nearby islands of Pontis, Palmaria and Pandateria. When they first arrive from migration, they remain to rest for a few days, and do the same thing when they leave Italy to return across the sea.”¹⁵⁰

Sheer exhaustion from their long journeys, made them easy prey at this time, and they could be caught in the thousands by stretching nets along the coastline.¹⁵¹ That Varro advised keeping them with thrushes probably indicates that farmers held onto the birds until they migrated away from Italy, and sold their fattened birds at a high price when wild-caught quails were no longer

¹⁴⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.2. They were fattened with thrushes and ortolans.

¹⁵⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.7. See also Diod. Sic. 1.60.

¹⁵¹ Cocker & Tipling 2013, 56-7.

available. Eating fattened stock was not just a matter of consuming something that was tastier than anything an ordinary person could procure from the wild. It was about eating something that had become rare and expensive because it was no longer seasonally available.



Figure 48: Mosaic of cat catching a quail. The various birds and fish here give the idea of bounty and plenty. Naples Archaeological Museum.

4.7. Falconry – Or Lack Thereof?

It is worth noting that one form of hunting that the Romans did *not* have was falconry.¹⁵² The sport of hawking and falconry was so popular in medieval Europe that we might find it surprising the tradition did not stretch back to the classical world; indeed, if this fact were pointed out to medieval people, they would have found it surprising too, since their art and literature portrays ancient nobles with raptors on their hands.¹⁵³ Pictorial evidence exists to

¹⁵² Contra. Watson 2002, 358, who interprets a vague etching as depicting a man with a tethered falcon on his wrist.

¹⁵³ For example, in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the prince of Troy rides forth to the Greek camp "with hawk on honde" (book 5, line 65). See: Oggins 2004, 112.

suggest the Assyrians may have hunted with hawks or falcons.¹⁵⁴ The earliest literary reference to hunting with birds of prey in the classical world comes from Aristotle:

ἐν δὲ Θράκῃ τῇ καλουμένῃ ποτὲ Κεδρειπολιὸς ἐν τῷ ἔλει θηρεύουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι τὰ ὀρνίθια κοινῇ μετὰ τῶν ἱεράκων· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἔχοντες ξύλα σοβοῦσι τὸν κάλαμον καὶ τὴν ὕλην ἵνα πέτῳνται τὰ ὀρνίθια, οἱ δ' ἱέρακες ἄνωθεν ὑπερφαινόμενοι καταδιώκουσιν· ταῦτα δὲ φοβούμενα κάτω πέτονται πάλιν πρὸς τὴν γῆν· οἱ δ' ἄνθρωποι τύπτοντες τοῖς ξύλοις λαμβάνουσι, καὶ τῆς θήρας μεταδιδοῶσιν αὐτοῖς· ῥίπτουσι γὰρ τῶν ὀρνίθων, οἱ δὲ ὑπολαμβάνουσι.

“In the part of Thrace once named as belonging to Kedriopolis men hunt the small birds in the marsh in partnership with the hawks. The men hold sticks and stir the reeds and brushwood to make the small birds fly, while the hawks from above appear overhead and chase them down. In fear they fly down again to the ground; the men strike them with the sticks and take them, and give the hawks a share in the prey: they throw them some of the birds and the hawks catch them.”¹⁵⁵

In his *Natural History*, Pliny appears to repeat Aristotle’s tale:

In Thraciae parte super Amphipolim homines et accipitres societate quadam aucupantur: hi ex silvis et harundinetis excitant aves, illi supervolantes deprimunt rursus; captas aucupes dividunt cum his.

“In a part of Thrace above Amphipolis, men and hawks have a kind of partnership for catching birds. The men chase the birds from the woods and rushes, while above the hawks fly and drive them down; the captives are then divided between the fowlers and the hawks.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Epstein 1943, 498-9

¹⁵⁵ Arist. *Hist. an.* 620b. Translation by D.M. Balme, LCL 439.

¹⁵⁶ Plin. *HN*, 10.10; see also Ael. *NA*, 2.42. See Plin. *HN*, 10.18 for a story about a maiden in Sestos who raised a young eagle and hunted with it until she died and the bird immolated itself on her pyre. It is a quaint story but not concrete enough to act as evidence for widespread falconry.

Though this represents a planned and co-ordinated hunting effort that utilises hawks, Dobiat points out it cannot be termed falconry in the modern sense, which employs a trained bird.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, this is an effective means of hunting, and we have descriptions of such methods being successfully employed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Quails, larks, partridges and other small fowl could be taken in this manner.

“Finding themselves pursued by the hounds and spanels, (they) are enforst to trust to their wings, and to take to the ayre; and being there, finding themselves, molested by the Falconers and Hobbies, do make their choyse and election to become prey rather to the dogs, or seek mercy among the horse legges, and so be surprised alive, than to affie to the curtesie of the cruell Hobbies, and to be taken in their cruell talons, where they are most assured to dye the death.”¹⁵⁸

This is a more sophisticated plan of attack than the one devised by the Thracians, but it shows clearly how fowlers could take advantage of the birds’ instinctive fear of hawks, which was so strong that it prevented them from taking wing even when faced with other dangers. Merely holding a hawk up to view can paralyse a lark.¹⁵⁹ The hawks made them such easy prey for the fowlers that they could simply club them to death. While Pliny seems to record this as a kind of Thracian oddity, one of Martial’s epigrams called *Accipiter* – “Hawk” – suggests Romans at least occasionally used hawks in fowling.

*Praedo fuit volucrum: famulus nunc aucupis idem
Decipit et captas non sibi maeret aves.*

“He was once a killer of birds: now he is the little slave of the fowler, deceiving birds and grieving that they are not caught for himself.”¹⁶⁰

This implies the hawk was caged as a decoy bird. As with the owl, a hawk can inspire mobbing behaviour in small birds, especially in the nesting season when they are more defensive. Apart from this example, we do not get any indication that the Romans enjoyed raising, taming or

¹⁵⁷ Dobiat 2013 348

¹⁵⁸ Turberville, *Book of Faulconrie* (1575), p.54. See Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, 3.7.33 for a poetic description.

¹⁵⁹ Harrison 1956, 70.

¹⁶⁰ Mart. 14.216.

hunting with falcons or hawks as nobles did in medieval Europe. The particular obsession with raptors that was to sweep across the continent only began to kindle in the late Empire.

“First clear indications for the practice of falconry in central and western Europe and the Mediterranean area only appear around 400 years after the birth of Christ, but then almost simultaneously in several areas quite far apart from each other, suggesting that falconry was adopted quickly and widely. In the last decade of the 4th century, Paulinus of Pella lived near what is now Bordeaux (Gaul) and later reported that in his youth he desired nothing more ardently than to own a horse with beautiful fittings, a fast dog and a ‘well-shaped’ hunting bird. A little later – around the middle of the 5th century – Sidonius Apollinarius was also writing about his youth in what is now Clermont (Gaul), an episode equally characterised by horses, dogs and hunting birds; in his work he even mentions a nobleman skilled in the training of horses, dogs and birds of prey.”¹⁶¹

The cool indifference of the ancients towards hawking and falconry is remarked upon as early as 1531 by the humanist Thomas Elyot.¹⁶² It might seem odd that the Romans never bonded with raptors, but when we consider the references to nets fashioned for the purposes of keeping hawks away from valuable poultry, we might conclude that hawks, kites and falcons were generally seen as pests. Farmers were more interested in keeping their flocks safe from these predators than bonding with them. When interpreting dreams, Artemidorus advises that hawks and kites symbolise robbers and highwaymen.¹⁶³ This may best be explained by the fact that kites, hawks and falcons not only attacked living stock, but were known to make off with meat from sacrifices or meat from the marketplace.¹⁶⁴ Terence says that people do not bother to net birds like the hawk and kite that “do us harm” – *male faciunt*.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, a real contempt was felt for birds of prey that ate other birds, as falcons and hawks commonly do. The image of the innocent dove fleeing a brutal hawk was a common one employed in art, fable and poetry.¹⁶⁶ The Roman dislike of raptors betrays something fundamental to their thinking – they valued their domestic flocks too much to show any interest in keeping or hunting with birds as medieval falconers did.

¹⁶¹ Dobiat 2013, 348

¹⁶² Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, 18.

¹⁶³ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 2.20

¹⁶⁴ Ael. NA, 2.47

¹⁶⁵ Ter. *Phorm.* 331-2.

¹⁶⁶ Gaál 2017, 10

4.8 Conclusion

This overview of Roman fowling touches on many echelons of Roman society. On the one hand it gives us a glimpse of how the improverished *auceps* could turn a profit by catching birds, and how a subsistence farmer could take advantage of local and seasonal availabilities to catch birds for his own consumption using relatively simple tools. On the other hand we see how the ingenuity of Roman businessmen allowed them to take advantage of these same seasonal availabilities to corral wild birds in large numbers so they could fatten them and sell them out of season when demand was high and wildfowlers no longer had access to game. Roman elites exhibited demand for many different types of wild bird, with certain species rising and falling in popularity according to the latest fad. Thrushes were the most popular of the wild game birds and an enormous industry sprang up to meet urban demand for these delicious little birds, which apparently retained their popularity throughout the Empire. We have seen how hunting birds was a recreational pursuit that could be respectably enjoyed by elites, but which was not as prestigious as hunting dangerous game. By examining different hunting methods we can appreciate that although the tools and methods varied considerably, on the whole hunting birds was within the means of even the poorest citizens. With the *harundo* functioning as the tool of choice, anyone could procure sticky lime and a reed and go hunting. What really mattered was investing time and patience in the pursuit. Attention to seasonal fluctuations in bird populations grants us the most illuminating insight into the practice of wildfowling, as we begin to understand the power in the display of a statesmen eating thrushes out of season, or in the way migratory preparations make birds easier to catch or better-tasting due to accumulation of fat for the journey.

Chapter 5: Pets and Pleasure

5.1 Introduction

Now that we have covered the raising, hunting and consumption of birds, we can consider how birds as pets or objects of pleasure conferred status or otherwise communicated social meaning in ancient Rome. For a villa owner, the pursuit of pleasure was as much a motivation for keeping birds as the pursuit of profit.¹ The country villa was a place where *otium* (leisure) dominated, as opposed to the City, where *negotium* (business) ruled.² Visual representations reflect the sensorial feast that would have characterised Roman *villae*, the cacophony of birdsong from the multitude of avian guests that visited – and indeed, were encouraged to visit – their gardens.³ Birds either penned or wild brought satisfaction and joy through song or visual beauty.

A custom-built aviary was one way of deriving pleasure from birds, but another way involved cultivating a garden full of wild birds that freely came and went. Romans were a garden-loving people, and a large part of this was tied up in the appreciation of birds and song. Just as no vision of the Garden of Eden is complete without birds to inhabit it, so too was the perfect rustic idyll imagined alive with birdsong. Tibullus describes his vision of the Elysian fields thus:

*Sed me, quod facilis tenero sum semper Amori,
Ipsa Venus campos ducet in Elysios.
Hic choreae cantusque vigent, passimque vagantes
Dulce sonant tenui gutture carmen aves*

“But for me, since I always bore the touch of love lightly, Venus herself will lead me into the Elysian fields. There song and dance thrive, and birds wander here and there, singing sweet songs with their delicate voices.”⁴

¹ Littlewood 1987, 13.

² Favro 2010, 161.

³ Favro 2010, 162.

⁴ Tib. 1.3.57-60.

Closer to home, the anonymously written *Elegy for Maecenas* outlines what a joy it is to listen to birdsong in the garden:

*maluit umbrosam quercum lymphasque cadentes
paucaque pomosi iugera certa soli:
pieridas Phoebumque colens in mollibus hortis
sederat argutas garrulous inter avis*

“He prefers the shade of the oak and falling waters, and a few sure acres of fruitful ground. Cultivating the Muses and Apollo in soft gardens, he sits talkative among the eloquent birds.”⁵

From the late Republic onwards, Rome was a city of gardens – ringed by them, with other smaller gardens within the bounds of the City. There were temple groves, gardens in house courtyards, gardens at baths, roof gardens, gardens at inns and small taverns, and outside the City there were funerary gardens too. Many people kept their own gardens, facilitated by the Augustan water program, and the poor who lived in *insulae* still had access to public gardens.⁶ The passion for gardens and nature found expression in Roman art.⁷ Through the first century BCE and first century CE in elite and middle-class house in Rome and in Campania, garden scenes flourished on wall paintings and panels. The most realistic depictions garnered the highest praise, while inaccurate or deliberately playful renditions were met with disapproval.⁸ Therefore we may use garden scenes in Roman art as evidence of what their real gardens looked like. The Roman house was a “canvas for virtual nature.”⁹ Such was the Roman fidelity to nature that Pliny even records anecdotes of birds being fooled by realistic paintings of grapes.¹⁰ The passion for bucolic scenes in art should be seen as an attempt to bring the pleasures of nature, and the pleasure of birds and birdsong, inside their own houses.

Pliny names Spurius Tadius of the Augustan age as the man who first introduced the fashion of painting walls with garden scenes and snapshots of rural life. All elements of nature

⁵ *Elegiae in Maecenatem*, 1.33-6.

⁶ Jones 2016, 25.

⁷ Bergmann 2002, 88.

⁸ *Vit. de Arch.* 7.5.3-4.

⁹ Carroll 2015, 533.

¹⁰ Plin. *HN*, 35.23, 35.65-6, 35.95.

were painted, including scenes of fishing, fowling and gathering grapes.¹¹ According to Jashemski, these garden paintings “were uniquely connected with gardens and a garden-loving culture.”¹² By extension, they were symptomatic of a bird-loving culture. Birds were common as decorative motifs in art, or as ‘filling elements.’¹³ They were indispensable to *hortus* scenes and most outdoor scenes.¹⁴ Fountains and birds were “an essential part of every garden painting.”¹⁵ Frescoes reveal that the bird population in Roman gardens was diverse and abundant. While it is important to recognise that art does not necessarily reflect reality, the accuracy with which various species were depicted is nevertheless compelling. Doves, pigeons, blackbirds, thrushes, buntings, flycatchers, golden orioles, warblers, as well as larger birds like ibises, peacocks, partridges and pheasants have all been successfully identified in Roman paintings.¹⁶ In other forms of art, they repeated favourite imagery, such as drinking doves, a cat attacking birds, herons fighting snakes, Leda with swan-Zeus, and Ganymede with eagle-Zeus.¹⁷ The original creator of the drinking doves mosaic, so popular because doves were kept as pretty pets, was Sosos of Pergamon, who designed it for the Attalid palace at Pergamon. The work inspired copies all across the Mediterranean. The most famous Roman example is the Doves Mosaic from the Villa of Hadrian at Tivoli, now held in Rome’s Capitoline Museum.¹⁸

5.2 Birds and Gardens

Widely considered the most impressive and beautiful garden mural from ancient Rome is Livia’s Garden Room at Prima Porta. This a useful case study to consider since it involves the imperial family, who were necessarily preoccupied with exhibiting status and exclusivity. The Garden Room represents an attempt to give the viewer an immersive, three-dimensional view of a garden, replete with no less than sixty-nine birds, of various species and in a multitude of different poses.¹⁹ The verdant garden painting may be linked to the botanical imagery of the Ara Pacis, suggestive of peace and prosperity.²⁰ It is thought that this was an underground dining room, intended to be used in the summer months when it became too hot to lounge in

¹¹ Plin. *HN*, 35.37.

¹² Jashemski 1993, 11.

¹³ Harden 2014, 31.

¹⁴ Harden 2014, 37.

¹⁵ Jashemski 1979, 81.

¹⁶ Bowe 2004, 52.

¹⁷ Harden 2014, 37.

¹⁸ Harden 2014, 55.

¹⁹ Farrar 1998, 155.

²⁰ Kellum 1994, 224.

real gardens.²¹ Livia's garden room takes realism to the extreme in one way while bending reality in others. Different types of vegetation which naturally flower at different times of the year bloom and bear fruit all at once in this painting.²² Similarly, the different species of birds present all have different migratory patterns, and yet are present at the same time. The tame bird in its cage perhaps reminds the viewer that this is a depiction of nature, but one that is better than anything nature could provide since it has been shaped by human hands.²³ While the bird is undoubtedly a songster, the painting is too faded to make out any more than that. Some speculate that the bird is a nightingale.²⁴ However, nightingales perish quickly in captivity and only sing for a few weeks in spring. A song thrush is another option. They sing most months of the year, and as winter residents they were rare and therefore valuable in summer. Many gardens and dining rooms must have featured caged songsters to provide music, but since the cages were wicker they have left no archaeological trace.²⁵ This is nature, but improved upon to best suit the human viewer.



²¹ Neudecker 2015, 392.

²² Carroll 2015, 538.

²³ Carroll 2015, 538-41.

²⁴ Reeder 2001, 88.

²⁵ Jashemski 1979, 107.



Figure 49: Views of Livia's Garden Room, lush with bird life.

Landscape paintings were intended to provide a multisensory experience. Philostratos describes roses that have been painted with scent intact, and invites people to listen for the lowing of cattle and shepherd's pipes as they admire artificial scenes.²⁶ The presence of so many small songbirds in the garden room invites the viewer to conjure up an auditory landscape as they admire it, and lends credence to the idea that a caged songbird was often a feature at soirees. Reeder describes the Garden Room as giving the illusion of being in the interior of a grotto and looking out into a surrounding grove. She compares this to the description of Varro's aviary at Casinum, where the diner seated in the central *tholos* looked out beyond the netting designed to keep the birds inside.²⁷

²⁶ Philostr. *Imag.* 1.2, 1.6, 1.12.

²⁷ Reeder 2001, 36.



Figure 50: Detail. Caged bird in Livia's Garden Room.

The areas affected by the eruption of Vesuvius provide the most information about the Roman love of gardens. Latium and Campania, like most of Italy, were covered with a “densely packed landscape of farmhouses and villas in which Roman farmers lived, worked, and processed crops.”²⁸ Farming was intensive in these areas, and gardens too were plentiful. The contrast between a garden intended for pleasure and traditional agriculture sometimes led to moral tension.²⁹ Horace deplors the changing attitudes towards land use and the way luxury buildings were constructed at the expense of agriculture. He yearns for the good old days of Romulus and Cato the Elder, who upheld traditional farming.³⁰ Excavations at the Villa of Poppaea reveal how nature was shaped in non-traditional ways. Over a dozen gardens, parks, and planted areas have been discovered in the residence.³¹ The rooms are as immersive as Livia’s garden room, depicting water, plants and foliage alongside birds and birdbaths. Many of the birds of Oplontis have faded, making it difficult to identify them accurately, but in the garden scenes small warblers and songbirds seem to be favoured, perhaps to help the viewer

²⁸ Kron 2017, 108.

²⁹ Pagan 2016, 14.

³⁰ Hor. *Carm.* 2.15.

³¹ Carroll 2015, 536.

imagine the auditory landscape that the birds would provide. The House of the Orchard in Pompeii is another example of an idyllic garden landscape complemented by a multitude of birds. The sheer number depicted in all these garden scenes, the attention to detail, and the way

they were carefully painted on top of the foliage suggests that they were made by specialised painters.³²



Figure 51: Thrush and pigeons at birdbaths. Villa Oplontis, 1st century CE.

³² Farrar 1998, int. XVI.

It is well-known that the Romans were adept at constructing water features. At villas we often find both real fountains and painted ones, so we can assume that there were living counterparts to the menagerie of painted birds on the wall.³³ The prevalence of birds drinking from fountains in art show that they were specially placed to attract birds.³⁴ In the hot Campanian summers, the real fountains would have been swarming with visitors. Herons and egrets would have been especially lovely visitors, probably the largest wild birds one could hope to entice into the garden. It is possible that the Roman predilection for bathing helped prompt them to leave out baths for their feathered visitors, and that they derived a sense of pleasure or kinship from watching the birds splash around in their miniature *thermae*. A decorative motif used in the Pompeian bathhouse is a splashing duck – happy ducks were something Romans could relate to.

Birds were sometimes turned into water features too. In the section on Automata in *Pneumatics*, Hero of Alexandria writes of Roman fountains, and describes an unusual owl fountain. In this fountain, a number of fake birds would ‘sing’ until an owl turned its head to look at them. Allegedly this was recreated some time before 1580 CE in Renaissance Italy at the Villa d’Este, Tivoli, which proves that the plans are feasible. Farrar explains how it would operate:

“The water from the fountain flows into a sealed rectangular chamber which contains a siphon. As the chamber fills with water the air it expels is piped to the birds, or at least the branches on which they sit, and produces an imitation of bird song. When the water in the chamber reaches the correct level the siphon empties it, causing the birds to fall silent, and the water falls into a lower chamber. The added weight pulls a cord that is looped around the column on which the owl stands, causing it to revolve towards the other birds until a second siphon enters the lower chamber. A weight at the other end of the cord then pulls it back and the owl returns to its former position. Hence the birds only sing when the owl is looking away from them.”³⁵

³³ Neudecker 2015, 393.

³⁴ Watson 2002, 357.

³⁵ Farrar 1998, 96.

In a previous chapter we considered the Romans' low opinion of the owl, and this fountain is a delightful illustration of that attitude. Pneumatic blackbirds are also attested in Vitruvius.³⁶

What does all this tell us about the Roman temperament? These elite sites indicate that gardens full of water features and birds were intended to provide nothing more than pleasure. Only the wealthiest – and critically, the imperial family – could afford to dedicate land and resources to non-productive land, and this was reproduced in art to intensify the effect. While we might be tempted to say that pleasure gardens and aviaries were simply means of advertising power, wealth and land ownership, the Roman, and particularly the Campanian love of birds seems to go beyond this. To illustrate this, we can look at one person who dwelt on a second storey on the Via dell'Abbondanza in Pompeii who converted their balcony into a tiny aviary roughly two metres square. The three windows were covered with netting, and nine intact watering pans for birds were found on the balcony along with fragments of others. In Jashemski's words, "Perhaps nothing speaks more eloquently of the Pompeian love of birds than this tiny aviary tucked into an upstairs apartment on a busy thoroughfare."³⁷ The impulse to entice and keep songbirds was not one monopolised by the wealthy, and it was not always motivated by a desire to advertise status. Aviaries were also kept on a small scale, tucked away in urban apartments, apparently simply for the joy they brought their owners. We see this impulse again when we look at pet birds, which could bring their owners prestige or simply pleasure.

5.3 Pest Birds

Though sweet songbirds were welcome in the Roman garden, to quote Thomas Hardy, "what is good for God's birds is bad for God's gardeners", and so we should consider what measures the Romans took to keep pesky birds *out* of their gardens. Not everyone had the luxury of dedicating land to non-productive purposes, and not everyone could enjoy the sight of wild birds in their garden. What happened when birds did not bring pleasure, but pestilence to the garden? A prayer directed to Ceres and the Earth runs thus:

neve graves cultis Cerialia rura cavete

³⁶ Vitr. *de Arch.* 10.7.4.4

³⁷ Jashemski 1979, 108.

agmine laesuro depopulentur aves

Forbid the birds, oppressive to cultivated land, to plunder the cornfields in destructive flocks³⁸

Priapus, also called Mutunus Tutunus, is an unmistakable Latin deity. He promotes fertility and protects from the Evil Eye. He also had the task of keeping the household garden safe from its most common desecrators – namely, thieves and birds. To secure his protection, the rustic Roman would set up a wooden statue of him in the garden, which functioned both as a shrine and a scarecrow. There are many references to the Priapus scarecrow in literature:

Terreat ut saeva falce Priapus aves.

“Priapus terrified birds with his cruel sickle.”³⁹

quique ruber pavidas inguine terret aves

“the red one who terrifies birds with his fearsome crotch”⁴⁰

at ruber, hortorum decus et tutela, Priapus

“the red one, Priapus, glory and guardian of gardens.”⁴¹

It’s not the sort of statue we’d put in our gardens today, but this scarlet, sickle-wielding wooden Priapus with his fearsome crotch was dearly beloved by many Roman families. A poem called *Priapea* describes Priapus as the guardian of the poor man’s garden, the rustic cottage, and warns the would-be thief to beware the farmer’s wrath as well as his own. His guardianship was entreated with sacrifice, and the statue was kept clean and re-painted regularly. As the year

³⁸ Ov. *Fast.* 1.683-4.

³⁹ Tib. 1.18

⁴⁰ Ov. *Fast.* 1.400

⁴¹ Ov. *Fast.* 1.415

progressed, his family would wreath the statue with garlands made of seasonal produce. Horace's eighth satire tells an amusing story about a wooden Priapus, which begins thus:

*Olim truncus eram ficulnus, inutile lignum,
cum faber, incertus scamnum faceretne Priapum,
maluit esse deum. deus inde ego, furum aviumque
maxima formido; nam fures dextra coercet
obscaenoque ruber porrectus ab inguine palus,
ast inportunas volucres in vertice harundo
terret fixa vetatque novis considerare in hortis*

“Once I was a trunk of fig, a worthless log, when a carpenter, uncertain whether to make a Priapus or a stool, chose to make a god. And so a god I became, the special terror of thieves and birds; for thieves, this right hand and this big red stake sticking out from my crotch keeps them in check; for cheeky birds, on the crown of my head is fixed a reed to terrify them and forbid them from landing in the new garden.”⁴²

The phrase ‘new garden’ may mean freshly-planted in this context, the object being to prevent birds eating seeds or sprouts. This passage differs from the others in that it tells us that Priapus’ enlarged genitals and the sickle in his right hand were meant to frighten human intruders, but the birds were instead frightened by a *harundo* on his head – a limed reed or twig. We cannot imagine that the *harundo* was particularly frightening to birds, and was most likely magical or symbolic in nature. The *Priapea* indicates how effective these statues were at scaring birds.

*abegimusque voce saepe, cum tibi
senexve corvus impigerve graculus
sacrum feriret ore corneo caput*

and often by shouting have we driven away the old raven and enthusiastic jackdaw who would, with horny beak, peck your sacred head.⁴³

⁴² Hor. Sat. 1.8.3-7

⁴³ App. Verg. *Priapea*, 4.11-13.

Birds become used to scarecrows if they are not moved or altered regularly, and this poem shows that in spite of Priapus' fearsome crotch and limed reed, they took no notice of him. If you wanted to keep birds away from your garden, your crops, and even your scarecrow, you had to do it yourself. In the midst of imparting sage advice to the farmer, Virgil instructs them to scare birds with noise, which implies that they shouted and used rattles to spook pest birds.⁴⁴ A sepulchral epigram in the Greek Anthology informs us that men employed to protect crops from birds would do so armed with a leather sling.⁴⁵ If a man had money, he could employ a bird-scarer to keep his crops safe, while in poorer families this task probably fell to the children. Sometimes other magic was invoked, as Pliny tells us that he heard there was a certain plant (its name unknown) which, if planted in the four corners of a field, would forbid sparrows and starlings, the scourge of Roman fields, from entering.⁴⁶ Before sowing, prayers were offered up to protect the seed from disease, beasts and birds.⁴⁷ In contrast to the imperial family and other elites who could afford to entice birds into their gardens and construct ponds and fountains for them, small-scale farmers worked hard to keep birds *out* of their precious plots of land and away from their produce. Romans appealed to Priapus for help in keeping their gardens safe from thieving birds and employed more practical measures to this effect too. There was a firm distinction drawn between delightful songbirds, welcome in ornamental gardens, and pest birds, unwelcome in the fields and gardens where families grew food. The act of appreciating wild birds and taking pleasure from their appearance on one's land was something not everyone could afford, hence the elite preoccupation with pleasure gardens.

5.4 Pleasure Aviaries

As if it were not enough to dedicate time and precious resources to non-productive pleasure gardens, the fashion for ornamental aviaries took things to the next level. Here, wild birds were not only tolerated in the garden, but special enclosures were built for the purposes of exhibiting birds. Roman tradition from the elder Cato through Varro, Cornelius Nepos and Pliny the Elder sniped at excessive household expenditure, classing it as *luxuria*, a vice of excess and folly. Cato boasted of his lack of stuccowork, Varro sneered at Lucullus for the fad

⁴⁴ Verg. *G.* 1.156.

⁴⁵ Antip. Sid. *Anth. Pal.* 7.172.

⁴⁶ Plin. *HN*, 18.45; Ael. *NA*, 17.41

⁴⁷ Scullard 1981, 68

of dining in picture galleries, and Lucullus was generally derided as excess personified. For all their moralising, however, it was impossible to escape the reality that *luxuria* was “a social necessity in a highly competitive society.”⁴⁸ A man of rank and dignity needed a house that reflected his social standing, which could admit and entertain guests, and provide hospitality as appropriate. A Roman’s house expressed social standing through decoration and quality. If it became fashionable to own a pleasure aviary, one could not afford to fall behind.

Any discussion of Roman aviaries must necessarily include Varro’s description of the *ornithon* at his villa in Casinum. This was a large, imposing structure with netted colonnades to keep the throngs of songbirds penned inside, and it was set around a duckpond.⁴⁹ According to tradition, M. Laenius Strabo was the inventor of the pleasure aviary, and Varro modelled his estate off this prototype. Huge aviaries were intended to show off architecture as well as exotic and extensive collections of birds. Some aviaries were used for dining in. Varro describes the pleasure aviary of Lucullus at Tusculum which was intended to serve as a dining room in which one could eat birds while living birds flew about and tried to escape their prison. As one might expect, dining inside an aviary was not a particularly wholesome experience. Fluttering birds might please the eye, but their dung offended the nose. In theory, it was beautiful, a feast that used birds to tickle all the senses and bring delight through song, taste and appearance. In practice, this dining room was apparently dank and filthy.⁵⁰ A failed experiment, one might think, in trying to maximise the pleasure one could derive from watching and keeping birds.

A more detailed description of Varro’s own *ornithon* runs as follows. Walking along a stream in the villa, one would come to find an aviary of 72 by 48 feet. At the end was added a domed structure. In the rectangular section was a path between fish basins enclosed by a peristyle. The outer ring was made of stone columns, the inner ring was dwarf trees. This peristyle contained all manner of birds that were fed through hemp netting that covered the entire peristyle. A rivulet supplied them with water. The tholos was netted with gut (to give a better view than hemp) and the trees behind had the lower branches trimmed to provide shade without blocking all light. In the colonnade were mainly songbirds like blackbirds or nightingales. Brackets attached to the columns served as perches. This surrounded a pool linked to the fish basins in which ducks dabbled and played. One could watch the ducks within this

⁴⁸ Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 4.

⁴⁹ Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.8-17.

⁵⁰ Varro, *Rust.* 3.4.3

space while the songbirds wheeled above.⁵¹ The pond had an island in the middle and a border about a foot wide, along which were ‘docks’ that served as duck shelters. On the island was a rotating platform from which food and drink could be served to *conviviae*. The text is ambiguous as to the identity of the *conviviae* – the guests. Are we to assume that this island was where humans dined, even despite Varro’s mention of how unpleasant it was to dine in Hortensius’ smelly aviary, or is *conviviae* a playful name for the ducks? According to Green, the ducks are the true guests. They own the aviary, and it is set up to deliver food to them.⁵² In either case, it is striking that ornamental ducks and other waterfowl were so central to pleasure aviaries. Small songsters above were complemented by ducks splashing and playing in the water below. Deriving pleasure from birds in such a way could only be accomplished by the very wealthy, and it was intended as part of display. Visitors would be invited to enjoy the owner’s garden and aviary, and marvel at how much he could afford to dedicate to trivial pursuits. We have seen how a small-time landowner could ill-afford such an extravagance, but there was still a drive to derive pleasure from bird ownership in more subtle ways, such as keeping birds as pets.

5.5 Pet Birds

This section will explore those birds that were kept not merely because they provided profit or were pleasing in shape or song, but because they provided a form of intimate companionship. This can reveal a great deal about Roman sentimentality, but it is also useful since the decision to keep a particular pet, and the ability to care for it, is defined by one’s means and status. Whether consciously or not, we choose to surround ourselves with animals that “communicate a great deal about the way we view the world and our place in it.”⁵³ Birds of all types were highly desirable as pets. In fact, in Latin literature there are more references to pet birds than all other kinds of pet put together.⁵⁴

The motivations for keeping a pet are varied and complicated. Caring for and thinking about animals expresses social factors as much as the act of consuming them.⁵⁵ Standards of

⁵¹ Littlewood 1987, 14-15. Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.8–17; reconstruction drawing in Van Buren & Kennedy, 1919.

⁵² Green 1997, 442.

⁵³ Reitz & Wing 2008, 286.

⁵⁴ Johnson 1968, 98; Jashemski 1979, 107.

⁵⁵ Ingold 2008.

care and attitudes towards different pets also varied.⁵⁶ What a Roman might consider a high standard of care may not actually coincide with what is best for the animal. All of this must be taken into consideration as we explore companion birds. Importantly, there is no word for “pet” in Latin the way that it exists in our vocabulary today. Animals were more generally classed as wild or tame, kept for work or pleasure.⁵⁷ The phrase that best expressed the idea of keeping a pet was *in deliciis habere*.⁵⁸ This betrays the thinking behind it – a pet was an animal that served no function except to bring delight to its master in some way. It is fascinating that those who spent small fortunes on acquiring pet birds were seen as somewhat foolish, but they were met with more tolerance than the gluttons who ate anything that hopped or fluttered:

Quamquam vel hos magis tolerabiles putem, qui oblectamenta deliciarum possidendi habendique causa gravi aere et argento pensent, quam illos qui Ponticum Phasim et Scythica stagna Maeotidis eluant; iam nunc Gangeticas et Aegyptias aves temulenter eructant.

“Nevertheless I can more easily tolerate those who pay ridiculous sums of copper and silver just for the pleasure of possessing and mastering a pet than those who clean out the river Phasis in Pontus and the pools of Scythia’s Lake Maeotis; nowadays, in a drunken stupor they’re even belching up birds from Egypt and the Ganges!”⁵⁹

Terms of endearment were derived from sparrows, hens, quails, ducks, doves, swallows and jackdaws, indicating a fondness for these birds.⁶⁰ The Greeks could be similarly sentimental about pet birds. Exotic birds made fine gifts for kings and potentates.⁶¹ Socrates had his pigeons.⁶² Penelope had her geese.⁶³ Antipater of Sidon describes the tomb of a housewife decorated with the carving of a goose to represent her care over the home.⁶⁴ Such depictions of women alongside poultry and waterfowl suggest that domestic birds were suitable companions for women.⁶⁵ Many Roman artistic representations of pet birds are based on Greek originals, betraying how the two cultures held similar attitudes. Studies of Greek art have shown that

⁵⁶ MacKinnon 2014, 328.

⁵⁷ Clark 2007, 139.

⁵⁸ Cic. *Div.* 1.76; Sen. *Apocol.* 13.3.

⁵⁹ Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.10.

⁶⁰ Bradley 1998, 537.

⁶¹ Ael. *NA*, 13.25, 13.18.

⁶² Pl. *Tht.* 197c.

⁶³ Hom. *Od.* 19.536-7.

⁶⁴ Anth. *Pal.* 7.425.

⁶⁵ Calder 2007, 69.

women and children are more likely to be shown with pet birds, probably because they spent more time at home.⁶⁶ In the Roman context, pet birds were most frequently in the company of children.



Figure 52: Terracotta group of a boy with a bunch of grapes and a predatory cockerel. Myrina. 1st Century BCE. British Museum. Children fending off hungry chickens is a common theme in art.

Studying pet-keeping among Roman children is particularly illuminating. Parents today take it for granted that it is good for the socialization and education of children to keep pets.

⁶⁶ Lazenby 1949, 249.

Caring for an animal inculcates a sense of personal responsibility while providing comfort and companionship. But how conventional was it for Romans to keep pets, and how did it factor into the upbringing of children? What was the reasoning behind giving them pets? Looking at the evidence, we have mentions of birds, dogs, cats, goats, sheep, rabbits, and geese as standard companions.⁶⁷ Children of both sexes kept pets from earliest childhood, from when they were *infantes* to when they were teenagers.⁶⁸ Hellenistic sculptures of children with pets were copied across the Roman world. Boys wrestling geese were popular, as were boys with puppies, and girls holding doves.⁶⁹ The Roman appreciation for and reproduction of the statues should indicate that it was normal for Roman and Greek children to play with pets, and that keeping animals was a part of normal upbringing. Baby boys wrestling geese were a common theme in art. A 3rd century mime by Herodas (4.20-34) mentions just such a sculpture. Pliny says Boethus, a 2nd century BCE artist, made a bronze sculpture of a boy strangling a goose.⁷⁰ In addition, children were given toys in the shape of animals to play with, including roosters and ducks.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Rawson 2003, 130.

⁶⁸ Bradley 1998, 526-7.

⁶⁹ Bradley 1998, 536.

⁷⁰ Plin. *HN*, 34.84.

⁷¹ Bradley 1998, 538.



Figure 53: Statue of a girl with a pigeon, protecting the bird from a snake. Copy of a Greek original from the 3rd or 2nd century BCE. Capitoline Museum, inv. MC0738.



Figure 54: Boy strangling a goose. Roman copy of the bronze Greek original, c.220 BCE. From the Glyptothek. Note the contrast between the demure and gentle girl with her pet pigeon and the vigorous play demonstrated by the boy.

Pets were commonly included as decorations on children's sarcophagi.⁷² The marble sarcophagus rose to prominence as a means of burial at some point in the late first century CE, supplanting cremation.⁷³ Sarcophagi were not always personalised; sculptors tended to employ the same motifs relentlessly.⁷⁴ When it came to children, they were usually shown in the company of birds or dogs.⁷⁵ If we opt for a literal interpretation of the images, we might say they depict the dead child's pets. If we opt for a symbolic interpretation, we might say the puppy represents fidelity and doves love and innocence, but we could still argue that those symbolic images were used because artists naturally associated children with birds and dogs because it was so common for children to keep them as pets.⁷⁶ Regardless of whether they were intended to be symbolic or literal, the presence of birds on children's sarcophagi betrays a connection between the two. The images are often bittersweet: a dead boy feeds grapes to a bird as he must have in life. A dead girl clutches a pigeon to her chest just as the images of living children do. Sometimes cupids gambol with birds in fanciful scenes around the rim of

⁷² Bradley 1998, 528.

⁷³ Koorthojian 2015, 286.

⁷⁴ Koorthojian 2015, 291

⁷⁵ Rawson 2003, 353.

⁷⁶ Bradley 1998, 529

the child's coffin. The image of a dead boy situated between his loving parents is shown with two birds on his shoulders. Because birds were an integral part of a child's life from the moment they were born, it is fitting that they became their companions in death.



Figure 55: Funerary relief found on the Via Cassia. Augustan period. The dead boy is flanked by thrushes as his parents bid him farewell and give him fruit for the journey. Vatican Museum, inv. 2167.

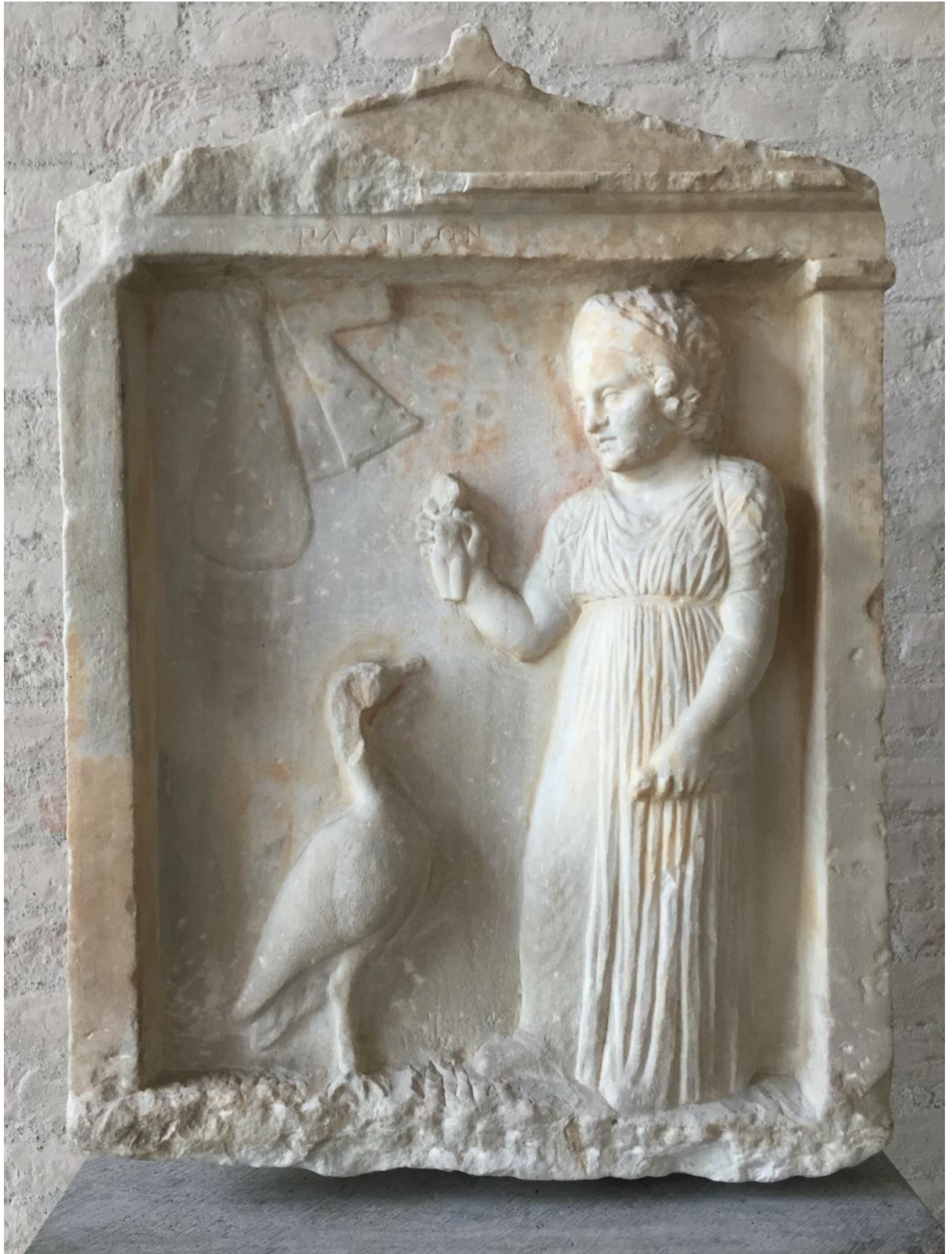


Figure 56: Grave of Plangon, 310 BCE. Held in the Glyptothek. This little girl holds a doll in one hand and a bird in the other, with a goose and possibly a toy on the far left. The trappings of childhood?

Perhaps because children were given birds when they were very young, it appears that as they grew older it became less acceptable for them to dote on their pets. A teenage boy could not neglect his education in favour of playing with animals, as we see in the story of a blithe young man who is mad for birds and spends all his time whistling to his blackbirds and nightingales and teaching his pets to talk instead of focusing on his own schooling. What is the world coming to, the author asks, when his birds are more eloquent than he is!⁷⁷ In the *Satyricon*, the firefighter Echion says:

Ingeniosus est et bono filo, etiam si in aves morbosus est. Ego illi iam tres cardeles occidi, et dixi quia mustella comedit.

My boy is clever, and a good lad, although he's truly mad for birds. I had to kill three of his goldfinches and say a weasel ate them.⁷⁸

Devotion to birds was a lovely trait in young children, but part of the maturing process involved putting aside such sentimental pursuits. This is not to say that keeping birds was unacceptable in teens and adults, merely that it had to be enjoyed in moderation, lest one fall victim to idleness and luxury.

⁷⁷ Philostr. VA, 6.36

⁷⁸ Petron. Sat. 46.



Figure 57: Boy with a gosling. 1st century CE. Copy of a Greek original from the 2nd century BCE. Held in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

Domestic poultry were most commonly given as pets.⁷⁹ In Pompeii and Herculaneum, faunal remains of chickens, geese, ducks, quails, pigeons, turtle doves and partridges have been recovered.⁸⁰ For wealthier children, these might have been companion animals alone. For poorer children, caring for a flock of hens and collecting eggs each morning was something useful they could do from their earliest days, and they might choose a special favourite. If the family had a natural pond on their property or a garden with water features, they might keep pet ducks, which were depicted with boys in art.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Apul. *Met.* 8.15; Plaut. *Asin.* 3.3.666; Plin. *Pan.* 26.7.

⁸⁰ Cooley 2014, 245.

⁸¹ Jashemski 1993, 153, 154, 165, 232.



Figure 58: Child with a bird. Vatican Museum, inv. 2709.



Figure 59: Child with birds. Vatican Museum, inv. 2774.

Then there were pigeons, suitable for children of both sexes. In one of Fronto's letters, we hear how his infant grandson has begun to show a fondness for pet chickens, sparrows and pigeons, just as he himself did as a lad.⁸² Art, too, suggests that children were very young when given birds. Most often they are little more than toddlers clutching birds in their chubby fists. Goslings, ducks, chickens and pigeons are most often seen with the very young, perhaps because they are harmless and easy to handle. As the child grew older, they might be given more exotic or delicate pets that required more care.

⁸² Fronto, *Ep.* 1.12.

*quasi patriciis pueris aut monerulae
aut anites aut coturnices dantur quicum lusitent*

“(…) just as jackdaws and ducks and quails are given to patrician boys for them to play with.”⁸³

If you could provide your child with pets that were expensive and difficult to procure, so much the better. Pliny the Younger describes the funeral of a boy:

Habebat puer mannulos multos et iunctos et solutos, habebat canes maiores minoresque, habebat luscinijs psittacos merulas: omnes Regulus circa rogam trucidavi. Nec dolor erat ille, sed ostentatio doloris

“The boy had all manner of Gallic ponies for riding and driving, he had dogs large and small, nightingales, parrots and blackbirds also: all these Regulus had slaughtered around the pyre. This was not grief, but a spectacle, a show of grief.”⁸⁴

Even at his own son’s funeral, this man was able to make a spectacle of his wealth by slaughtering expensive pet birds.

We saw above that aristocrats kept caged songbirds, beautifully illustrated by the image from Livia’s Garden Room. The nightingale is of course the best songster, but keeping them in captivity is a difficult task. Pliny waxes poetic about their beautiful song, but:

“The desire to claim ownership of this song meant that for centuries nightingales were trapped and incarcerated in huge numbers. As a cage-bird, however, the nightingale was but an ephemeral delight, for most individuals expired within a day or two and those that did survive sang for only a few weeks each spring.”⁸⁵

There was an added danger - caged nightingales were at risk of dying every autumn. As migratory birds, they attempt to act out their migration while confined and batter themselves

⁸³ Plaut. *Capt.* 1002-3.

⁸⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 4.2.3-4.

⁸⁵ Birkhead 2011, 173.

against their cage bars for several weeks, going through the entire journey in a series of frantic motions.⁸⁶ Those who wanted singing nightingales would have to buy them from fowlers each spring. It would be a very rare bird that survived more than a year or two in captivity. Part of the prestige of owning a nightingale was probably connected to the fact that they had to be procured from the wild each spring if one wanted to ready access to their song.

Pliny's discussion of nightingales suggests he believes the birds could not sing so well unless they had been trained by humans. Therefore, "trained" nightingales fetched a similar price to that of slaves. A white nightingale was sold for an unprecedented 600 000 sesterces to grace the birdcage of Empress Agrippina.⁸⁷ As children, Britannicus and Nero had talking starlings and nightingales. Plutarch also mentions talking starlings. These birds can indeed be taught to speak, but talking nightingales are more doubtful.⁸⁸ Agrippina also possessed a talking thrush; again, this is dubious. The species may have been misidentified, the seller may have duped the imperial family, or the stories might be simple fabrications, symptomatic of the desire to possess the rarest and most fabulous birds. The ability to own and display exotic creatures such as albino birds communicated prestige. Possessing wonders bestowed wonder status on rulers and cities, and this principle was extended to aspiring individuals among the elite who sought out particularly rare, talented or unusual birds.⁸⁹ Imperial interest in acquiring such birds clearly indicates this.

Goldfinches were another popular bird. Pretty and intelligent creatures, they are full of charm and personality and are harmless to even the grabbiest toddler. They whistled to their owners and could perform little tricks, one of which involved pulling on a piece of string to reach a treat.⁹⁰ This string-pulling trick is an extension of its natural way of handling grass stems, which it will pull through its feet to reach the seeds at the tip.⁹¹ During the Italian Renaissance, artwork often depicted the infant Jesus and other children holding a goldfinch. The bird had a rich symbolic meaning in art, but youngsters did keep them as pets so it was natural to equate goldfinches with children. When we look at fat Medici children holding goldfinches, we should imagine Roman youngsters doing the same.

⁸⁶ Birkhead 2014, 33.

⁸⁷ Fògen 2014, 225.

⁸⁸ Plin. *HN*, 10.120; Plut. *Mor. De soll. an.* 978A.

⁸⁹ Beagon 2014, 433.

⁹⁰ Plin. *HN*, 10.116.

⁹¹ Birkhead 2011, 106.

5.6 Fighting Birds

There is a real tenderness in the way Romans speak of birds that suggests they admired many because they were sweet and harmless:

*At caret insidiis hominum, quia mitis, hirundo,
Quasque colat turre, Chaonis ales habet*

But man lays no traps for the swallow because he is gentle, and Venus' doves have towers to live in.⁹²

Yet it would be a mistake to assume all interactions with beloved birds were sweet-natured. Bearing in mind that this is a time when beast hunts were popular entertainment, it is perhaps unsurprising that many young boys were encouraged to keep fighting cocks, which they would battle to the death. According to Pliny, sometimes fights did not end until both roosters were dead.⁹³ For any master who loved his bird, and especially for any boy, this could cause heartbreak.

Written and iconographic evidence for Roman cockfighting is not as abundant as in Greece, but it should not be argued that they did not practice the sport at all.⁹⁴ Zooarchaeological evidence from the Roman Castellum at Velsen in the Netherlands, for instance, revealed the town produced an exceptionally high percentage of cockerels to hens. Similar results were found at the Romano-British towns of York, Dorchester and Silchester. Such finds could be explained also by a preference for roosters in ritual and sacrifice, but at Silchester at least, iron cock-spurs were also recovered.⁹⁵ Artificial cock-spurs have also been found in Cornwall and Baldock in Hertfordshire. In the latter case, the iron spur was found still attached to the cock's leg.⁹⁶ Of course, regional differences must be taken into consideration. Based on Caesar's observation that Britons did not eat cocks, but used them for ritual and

⁹² Ov. *Ars am.* 2.149-50.

⁹³ Plin. *HN*, 10.47; see also Plut. *Mor. De frat. Amor.* 487E-F

⁹⁴ Contra. Morgan 1975, 121, who posits that cockfighting iconography does not reflect daily practice but had a more complex symbolic meaning.

⁹⁵ Serjeantsen 2000; Serjeantsen 2009, 329.

⁹⁶ Hingley 2006, 261

entertainment purposes, the evidence for urban cockfighting in Britain may be more indicative of how native cockfighting practices remained popular under Roman rule. Nevertheless, in the Italian context there is still enough evidence to confirm cockfighting was a Roman sport. Pompeii, for instance, yields several representations of fights taking place.

It is well attested that Greeks loved cockfighting and encouraged their male children to take up the sport. Cocks were often given to teenage boys as love tokens by older male suitors. Athens was also mad for quails and quail fighting, to the point where Socrates was quoted as (controversially?) declaring that he'd rather have a good friend than the best fighting quail or fighting cock.⁹⁷ It was apparently so normal to go about one's business with a quail in tow that Plutarch relates how Alcibiades stopped to address the Athenian Assembly with a quail tucked under his arm. The bird was startled by sudden applause, escaped, and was pursued on Alcibiades' behalf by many eager audience members.⁹⁸



Figure 60: Lentini Archaeological Museum, *Lekanis* with quail. C400 BCE

⁹⁷ Pl. *Lysis*, 211. See also: Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.14; Ar. *Av.* 1298-9.

⁹⁸ Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 10. The man who retrieved it and gave it back to Alcibiades was the sea captain Antiochus. The two remained friends from then on.

They also battled partridges. Partridge fighting was not as common in Rome, but the Emperor Alexander Severus was said to enjoy the sport.⁹⁹ Aelian gives several accurate descriptions of partridge fights that tell us it existed in the Roman context.¹⁰⁰ Cockfighting was bound up with notions of masculinity, warfare, sexual prowess and victory. Battling cocks was a way to imprint such virtues on impressionable youths. Anthropological studies have shown that wherever cockfighting is practised, it is usually crucial to the definition of masculinity within that culture. There is a close identification between men and their roosters, and the hyper-sexed, hyper-aggressive rooster symbolises what it means to be a man. Cockfighting has been found to be more common in patriarchal societies, especially where female-directed violence is relatively high.¹⁰¹ We should consider the popularity of cockfights symptomatic of the negative macho values that dominated the Greco-Roman world. Columella states the Romans had not the same passion for the sport as the Greeks. When it came to chickens, the principal aim was to use them to establish a source of income for a hardworking *paterfamilias*, not profit some trainer who was likely to lose his whole livelihood gambling on a single fight.¹⁰² Yet as much as this disapproval shows that Romans were not on the whole fond of cockfighting, we can nevertheless see it was practiced. Through the interlocutor Solon, Lucian refers to the law that all men of military age should watch cockfights and quail fights.¹⁰³ This ruling in 6th century BCE Athens must still have made sense to men of Lucian's day, indicating Romans also saw cockfighting as a way of instilling men and boys with the tenacity and aggression of roosters. Herodian comments that the rivalry between the emperor Severus' sons Caracalla and Geta went back to earliest childhood, when they battled fighting cocks. In the *Satyricon*, we see Encolpius winning sexual favours from a beautiful boy by giving him a pair of fighting cocks, indicating that cockfighting was connected to male homosexuality as in Greece.¹⁰⁴ Plutarch records that Antony and young Octavian battled quails and cocks. Antony always lost, emblematic both of their rivalry and of Octavian's ultimate victory.¹⁰⁵ Quails and partridges were usually kept as either decoys or prize fighters rather than as tame companions.¹⁰⁶ Ovid laments that Corinna's gentle parrot should die prematurely when quails can live through

⁹⁹ SHA. *Alex. Sev.* 41.

¹⁰⁰ Ael. *NA*, 4.1.

¹⁰¹ Sykes 2014a, 86-7; Cobb 2003, 69-83; Marvin 1984, 60-70; Dundes 1994.

¹⁰² Columella, *Rust.* 8.2.5

¹⁰³ Luc. *Anach.* 36-7,

¹⁰⁴ Petr. *Sat.* 86.

¹⁰⁵ Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 33.

¹⁰⁶ Lazenby 1949, 249.

countless fights to attain old age.¹⁰⁷ Pliny describes the cry of a quail during a fight, the cry of a partridge before, and the cry of a triumphant rooster afterwards.¹⁰⁸



Figure 61: Crowning the victorious rooster. Naples Archaeological Museum.

These written sources indicate that cockfighting was an acceptable pursuit for young men and boys, but among citizen men it was a low-class pursuit. A Pompeiian mosaic shows children involved in fights. As two roosters battle, a man and a boy stand on the side of the victor, the boy holding a palm aloft. On the side of the loser, another man turns away, and a boy covers his eyes as if he is weeping.

¹⁰⁷ *Ov. Am.* 2.6.27-8.

¹⁰⁸ Pliny, *HN*, 11.268.



Figure 62: A man and a boy appear to be on either side of this cockfight. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv.9982.



Figure 63: Sarcophagus from Rome, 4th century CE. Housed in the Baths of Diocletian, inv. 65200. The display of weeping on the part of the losing cock's master indicates that it was not unusual for young fighters to show sentimental attachment to their birds.

Bradley posits that exposure to cockfighting in childhood would have helped to prepare Roman children for the large-scale bloodletting they would witness in adult life, whether through acts of sacrifice, in battle, or at the beast hunts.¹⁰⁹ The violence and bloodshed that accompanies a cockfight is extreme. In every fight at least one bird would be seriously mutilated or killed. Crops could be slit open, eyes gouged out, bones broken, abdomens split, and spectators would cheer all the more upon seeing an injured bird's persistence when afflicted with hideous wounds. This was a male-oriented event, with male birds and male spectators, and it celebrated male virtues.¹¹⁰ A boy having his pet mutilated and killed before his eyes would help turn him into a man – or, like the boy in mosaic, simply drive him to tears. Such activities were a normal part of growing up, even for imperial boys, which casts a shadow over other interactions with childhood pets. The oft-reproduced statues of toddlers wrestling geese and manhandling pigeons can be taken as indications that children were not always gentle

¹⁰⁹ Bradley 1998, 555.

¹¹⁰ Dundes 2007, 292

with animals, nor were they reprimanded for being cruel or rough.¹¹¹ It was so normal and endearing for boys to engage in rough and tumble activity with delicate birds that it became a playful motif. At the Villa Poppaea there is a fountain figure of a boy gripping what appears to be a gosling by the neck – originally, water would have squirted from its squawking beak.¹¹² Cockfighting was thick with social meaning – it was an acceptable pursuit for boys, but an adult citizen male could not engage in such activities without risking association with profligacy, the lower classes, and foreigners.



Figure 64: Mosaic from House of the Labyrinth, Pompeii, c. first century CE.

5.7 Talking Birds

The traditional association of pet birds with children came with the expectation that one would not allow such sentimental pursuits to continue into adulthood. While it was acceptable to keep pets, one could not be perceived as *in aves morbosus est* – bird-crazy. A poem by

¹¹¹ Calder 2001, 71

¹¹² Bergmann 2008, 197.

Martial satirises how sentimental people get about their strange and exotic pets. Disturbingly for us, slaves are included in this category:

*Si meus aurita gaudet lagalopece Flaccus,
si fruitur tristi Canius Aethiope;
Publius exiguae si flagrat amore catellae,
si Cronius similen cercopithecon amat;
delectat Marium si perniciosus ichneumon,
pica salutatrix si tibi, Lause, placet;
si gelidum collo nectit Cadilla draconem,
lusciniu tumulum si Telesilla dedit:
blanda Cupidinei cur non amet ora Labyrtae
qui uidet haec dominis monstra placere suis?*

If my Flaccus delights in a long-eared fennec fox, if Canius enjoys a sad Ethiopian, if Publius burns with love for a dreary little dog, if Cronius loves a monkey that looks like him, if a dangerous ichneumon delights Marius, if Lausus is pleased by a jay that says hello, if Cadilla winds a frigid snake around her neck, if Telesilla gave a tomb to her nightingale, then how could anyone not love the sweet face of Cupid-like Labyrtas when they see freaks like these pleasing their owners?¹¹³

One phenomenon that is worth exploring is the sudden fever for rare and talking birds that swept over the Empire. Clever birds were most coveted, as were birds of unusual appearance or colour. When aediles exhibited exotic animals at festivals, strange and beautiful birds were often put on display.¹¹⁴ In Varro's time, these included the parrot, and also white blackbirds.¹¹⁵ White blackbirds were apparently found on Mt Cyllene in Arcadia and nowhere else.¹¹⁶ Whether or not white blackbirds really were abundant in Arcadia, it is certain that albinos and partial albinos are among the commonest plumage aberrations. Blackbirds with white patches are "far from unusual" in Europe.¹¹⁷ It is also possible that 'white blackbirds' merely referred

¹¹³ Mart. 7.87.

¹¹⁴ Rawson 1985, 257

¹¹⁵ Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.17

¹¹⁶ Pliny, *HN*, 10.87. Pliny copies the Greek tradition here. See also Paus. 8.17.3.

¹¹⁷ Birkhead 2014, 117

to ring ousels, which are almost identical to blackbirds save for a white patch on the breast, and comparatively rare on the Italian peninsula.

Aelian speaks of priests and royals in India teaching their native parrots and mynahs to talk, which means that techniques for training birds to speak doubtless first developed there. However, it is worth noting that there is a dearth of references to talking birds in the classical world prior to the Roman period.¹¹⁸ It seems Aristotle alone discusses talking birds when he mentions the parrot.¹¹⁹ By contrast, the Romans not only had talking parrots, but talking crows and ravens as well. This indicates that Romans may have developed techniques for schooling birds independent of other cultures, using their own native corvids. Certainly, if we track the evidence, we see that in the late Republic and early Empire, talking birds were greeted with astonishment.

Sublimis Actiaca victoria revertebatur. occurrit ei inter gratulantes corvum tenens, quem instituerat haec dicere: "ave Caesar victor imperator." miratus Caesar officiosam avem viginti milibus nummum emit. socius opificis, ad quem nihil ex illa liberalitate pervenerat, adfirmavit Caesari habere illum et alium corvum, quem ut adferre cogeretur rogavit. adlatus verba quae didicerat expressit: "ave victor imperator Antoni." nihil exasperatus satis duxit iubere illum dividere donativum cum contubernali. salutatus similiter a psittaco, emi eum iussit. idem miratus in pica hanc quoque redemit. exemplum sutorem pauperem sollicitavit ut corvum institueret ad parem salutationem, qui impendio exhaustus saepe ad avem non respondentem dicere solebat, "opera et impensa periit." aliquando tamen corvus coepit dicere dictatam salutationem. hac audita dum transit Augustus respondit, "satis domi salutatorum talium habeo." superfuit corvo memoria, ut et illa quibus dominum querentem solebat audire subtexeret: "opera et impensa periit." ad quod Caesar risit emique avem iussit quanti nullam adhuc emerat.

"On cloud nine and returning from his victory at Actium, it happened that one of those that ran to congratulate Caesar was holding a raven, whom he had taught to say "Hail Caesar, victorious emperor!". Caesar marvelled at the dutiful bird and bought it for 20 000 sesterces. The associate of the trainer, who had gained nothing from the generous deal, swore to Caesar the man had another bird, and Caesar ordered it brought up.

¹¹⁸ Aelian, *NA*, 8.18; Fögen 2014, 226.

¹¹⁹ Arist. *Hist. an.* 504b, 597b

Having been brought forward, this bird spoke the words it had been taught: “Hail, victorious emperor Antony!” Unfazed, Caesar was satisfied to command that the trainer split the prize with his associate.

Greeted similarly by a parrot, Caesar ordered that the bird be bought. Marvelling at a jay with the same gift, he bought that too. Studying this example, a poor cobbler was moved to instruct a raven to give the same greeting; but when the bird remained mute he was accustomed to say “all that work and money for nothing!” Eventually, the raven began to repeat the greeting it was supposed to learn, but when Augustus heard the bird while passing by he dismissed it with, “I have greeters enough like that at home to satisfy me.” The raven then remembered hearing his master’s grumble, and concluded by saying “all that work and money for nothing!”. Caesar laughed at this, and ordered the bird be bought at a price higher than all the rest.”¹²⁰

The value and rarity of talking birds in the Augustan period is clear. A little earlier than this, the tragic actor Claudius Aesopus paid a whopping 100 000 sesterces for a meal made from the tongues of talking parrots, believing they would endow him with eloquence. The price testifies to their rarity, but interestingly, such shenanigans caused Pliny to accuse him of cannibalism in the next century.¹²¹ To kill a bird that could talk was considered an abominable thing to do, let alone to kill and *eat* it. This is clearly illustrated in the following tale of a famous talking raven. The story goes that when Tiberius was emperor, a raven chick hatched from a nest on the top of the Temple of Castor and Pollux and flew down to a nearby cobbler’s shop, where the cobbler adopted it and taught it to speak. From then on, every morning it would fly onto the platform that faces the Forum and salute Tiberius, then Germanicus, then Drusus, and finally the Roman people before it returned to the shop. It performed this feat every morning for several years and garnered some celebrity for it. Then one day the cobbler’s neighbour, stirred by jealousy (or perhaps anger at the bird befouling his stock) killed the raven. This caused such an outrage that he had to flee the district and was eventually murdered. The people thought the murder of a clever bird was worth avenging – more so than the murders of illustrious men such as Scipio Aemilianus, Pliny comments acidly. To top it off, the bird was given a public funeral. It was carried on a bier with flute-players and hundreds of mourners

¹²⁰ Macrob. *Sat.* 2.4.29-30

¹²¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.141-142

following in procession. The date was 28 March, 36 CE. Pliny ends the story with a tale of a famous talking crow in his own day. Originally from Spain it was owned by a knight and noted for its pure black feathers (a carrion crow, rather than the hooded crow common to Italy) as well as for its impressive vocabulary.¹²² By Pliny's day it was not enough that a bird could speak. To be remarkable, it had to show loquacity that was impressive in comparison to the many other chatterers around it.

These colourful stories show that lowly cobblers could possess wonderfully talented birds. Common crows and ravens were turned into valuable companions through care and attention:

docentur secreto et ubi nulla alia vox misceatur, adsidente qui crebro dicat ea quae condita velit ac cibis blandiente.

“They are taught to talk in private, where no other voice can confound them, their trainer sitting close and frequently speaking whatever phrase he wants learned while gently coaxing them with food.”¹²³

When it came to teaching birds, there was one phrase the patriotic Roman would always have them repeat:

*Psittacus a vobis aliorum nomina discam:
Hoc didici per me dicere CAESAR AVE.*

“I, a parrot, am taught by you to say the names of others: this I have learned to say for myself – HAIL CAESAR!”¹²⁴

Talking crows and ravens were so common that Martial could complain:

*Numquam dicis have sed reddis, Naeuole, semper,
Quod prior et coruus dicere saepe solet.*

¹²² Plin. *HN*, 10.121-3.

¹²³ Plin. *HN*, 10.120; see also Fògen 2014, 224.

¹²⁴ Mart. 14.73.

“You never say hello first, Naevolus, but always return the greeting. Even a raven is often accustomed to saying it first!”¹²⁵

Picae were among the common talking birds. *Pica* has been popularly and incorrectly translated as magpie for a long time now, and the mistake is even encoded in the magpie’s scientific name, *Pica pica*. The Loeb translation of Book X of Pliny’s *Natural History* by H. Rackham, one of the most readily accessible ancient sources on birds in the ancient world, repeats this mistake, informing readers that magpies are famous chatterers that thrive best when fed on acorns. Taking this translation at face value leads one to conclude that Pliny is spouting nonsense. Translated correctly as a Eurasian jay (*Garrulus glandarius*), the passage makes perfect sense. It is true that in some contexts the word *pica* can refer to the common magpie, but its default meaning is jay. The magpie was apparently something of a rarity in Italy until the 1st century CE, when it underwent a sudden expansion in territory and numbers.¹²⁶ Pliny says:

nuper et adhuc tamen rara ab Appennino ad urbem versus cerni coepere picarum genera quae longa insignes cauda variae appellantur.

“The race of *pica* called *varia* (pied), noted for its long tail, though until now rare, have recently begun to be seen in the area from the Apennines to the City.”¹²⁷

Thus *pica* means jay, while *pica varia* denotes the magpie specifically. *Pica* may have been used interchangeably without the qualifying adjective, so we should pay attention to context when translating. In Ovid’s fable about nine sisters turned into birds, for example, *picae* refers to jays rather than magpies because the sisters are guilty of the incessant chattering and mimicry jays were notorious for.¹²⁸ Similarly, jays thrive on acorns and are often seen collecting and stashing them for the winter. Their fondness for attention and love of learning words is also characteristic of a mimic, making jay the acceptable translation in the Pliny passage.¹²⁹ They are such bold little creatures that they can be befriended in the wild if one has morsels of food

¹²⁵ Mart. 3.95.1-2.

¹²⁶ Arnott 2007, 150.

¹²⁷ Plin. *HN*, 10.78.

¹²⁸ Ov. *Met.* 5.294–5, 669–78.

¹²⁹ Plin. *HN*, 10.118-119.

on hand. Jeremy Mynott corrects this long-held mistake, although he is not the first scholar to puzzle over how to identify Pliny's *picae*. In 1544, William Turner had to figure out that *pica* meant jay too!¹³⁰

Jays are acknowledged as excellent mimics in Greek sources, being capable of reproducing sounds of human speech and activity in the wild.¹³¹ Comparing the different musical notes of birds, Aelian deems the jay "talkative".¹³² A Roman pet jay appears in a story passed on to Plutarch, allegedly by multiple eyewitnesses. In the city of Rome a lowly barber possessed a jay which reproduced not only human speech, but also imitated the cries of beasts and the sound of instruments. One day, a mighty trumpet blast and accompanying applause from a crowd caused the bird to fall silent, and it remained silent for a very long time. Apparently the jay was meditating, and showed self-discipline in doing so, for the story concludes that the bird finally let forth its own spectacular rendition of those trumpet-blasts.¹³³ Though we might doubt the details of the story, we can take it as evidence that jays were often kept as pets, particularly by the poor, and that their skill in mimicry was renowned. In the *Satyricon* we get a vision of a henpecked husband when Trimalchio's wife Fortunata is described as a *pica pulvinaris* – literally, a jay on a cushion meant for the image of a deity. This charming expression might come from spoilt pet jays being notorious for their demanding natures.¹³⁴

Martial's poem about the *pica* tells us it was common to hang a jay in one's house, where it could greet guests:

*Pica loquax certa dominum te voce salute:
Si me non videas, esse negabis avem.*

"I, a talking jay, salute you as master in a clear voice. If you didn't see me, you wouldn't believe I was a bird!"¹³⁵

But in the *Satyricon*, we get this image:

¹³⁰ Turner 1544 (1903 edition), 145.

¹³¹ Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*, 3.2; Arist. *Hist. an.* 615b 19f.

¹³² Ael. *NA*, 6.19.

¹³³ Plut. *Mor. De soll. an.* 973c.

¹³⁴ Petr. *Sat.* 37.7

¹³⁵ Mart. 14.76.

*Super limen autem cavea pendebat aurea in qua **pica varia** intrantes salutabat.*

“above the door hung a golden cage in which a pied magpie greeted visitors.”¹³⁶

This is probably meant to satirise the freedman Trimalchio’s ostentatious luxury. No doubt it was more fashionable to possess a *pica varia* – rarer and more difficult to train – than an ordinary *pica*. As mimics, jays will repeat what they hear, but a magpie can only be taught to speak with great effort.

Among the rarest speaking birds was the parrot, accessible only to those who could afford it. The species was introduced from India, and its origins are traced to 327 BCE and the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Upon his return from the east, he displayed beautiful green parrots as part of his train, which are today called alexandrine parakeets in his honour. After his death, trade with India continued, and parrots continued to make their way into Europe, where they proved popular both as pets and ornamental birds. They were always associated with India and the exotic east, even after hundreds of years had passed since they were first introduced. African greys and Senegal parrots were theoretically within the trading range of the Roman Empire at its height, but there is no firm evidence that Romans kept African varieties. Parrots were always called green, Indian birds, and so *psittacus* should be taken to mean either the alexandrine parakeet or the rose-ringed parakeet only.¹³⁷ Watson points to evidence of an African grey parrot in a statue, but this is doubtful.¹³⁸ Allegedly the Emperor Elagabalus fed parrots and pheasants to his lions, and even ate parrot heads.¹³⁹ Whether this is true or not, it can be taken as an indication of how rare and valuable the birds were, and how it was treated as a shocking act to kill them so wantonly.

Aristotle calls parrots Indian birds, says they are good mimics, and declares them to be outrageous after they have drunk wine.¹⁴⁰ Pliny parrots this description:

Super omnia humanas voces reddunt, psittaci quidem etiam sermocinantes. India hanc

¹³⁶ Petr. *Sat.* 28.

¹³⁷ Boehrer 2004, 3.

¹³⁸ Watson 2002, 394.

¹³⁹ SHA. *Heliogab.* 20.6, 21.2.

¹⁴⁰ Arist. *Hist. an.* 7.597b.25-9; 8.614a.

avem mittit, siptacen vocat, viridem toto corpore, torque tantum miniato in cervice distinctam. imperatores salutat et quae accipit verba pronuntiat, in vino praecipue lasciva. capiti eius duritia eadem quae rostro; hoc, cum loqui discit, ferreo verberatur radio: non sentit aliter ictus. cum devolat, rostro se excipit, illi innititur leviolemque ita se pedum infirmitati facit.

“Above everything are birds that repeat the human voice, parrots indeed actually speaking. India sent us this bird, called *siptaces*. Its whole body is green, only varied by a red collar on its neck. It salutes Emperors and recites words it is given; it is a lush when it drinks wine. Its head is as hard as its beak. When taught to speak it is beaten on the head with an iron rod. Otherwise it would not feel pain. When it lands, it navigates with its beak, leaning on it to take the weight off its infirm feet.”¹⁴¹

Here we must take issue with a few of these assertions. Its habit of drinking wine may be due to it being released at dinner parties, where it would crawl over the couches and eat as it pleased, perhaps attempting to drink from cups or deliberately being given alcohol as a joke. But wine is not good for parrots, and alcohol can poison them.¹⁴² Melior’s parrot, which died suddenly after seeming fit and healthy at a dinner party, might have been killed by alcohol poisoning, or perhaps from eating parsley or coriander or any other common food they find toxic.

*Psittace, dux volucrum, domini facunda voluptas,
humanae sollers imitator, Psittace, linguae,
quis tua tam subito praeclusit murmura fato?
hesternas, miserande, dapes moriturus inisti
nobiscum, et gratae carpentem munera mensae
errantemque toris mediae plus tempore noctisvidimus.
affatus etiam meditataque verba reddideras.*

“Parrot, prince of birds, eloquent delight of your master – parrot, the talented mimic of the human tongue, who dashed your murmuring with so sudden a fate? Only yesterday, poor bird on death’s door, you dined with us. We watched you sampling the happy

¹⁴¹ Plin. *HN*, 10.114.

¹⁴² Boehrer 2004, 4.

tables' gifts, wandering among the couches past midnight. You cheered us by repeating your well-practiced words."¹⁴³

Then there is Pliny's assertion that a parrot must be beaten if it is to learn words. This is blatantly untrue. Teaching a parrot to speak depends on intimacy and trust. Training *cannot* be done through intimidation or physical violence or it will drive the bird to terror and psychosis.¹⁴⁴ Parrot trainers may have used an iron rod, but not for the reason Pliny describes. When training a bird with a powerful, crushing beak like the alexandrine parakeet, it can be advisable to keep a wooden rod on hand. This rod acts as a perch for the bird, and if the bird becomes aggressive it can be used to push him away and deflect the crushing bites. The bird is never hit with the rod; merely, the trainer uses it to ensure their own safety. If Pliny saw firsthand a trainer bring forth a parrot at a dinner party wielding a rod, he may have simply misunderstood its purpose. He almost talks about the parrot as if it were a little slave, and assumes that, like slaves, they were beaten when they misbehaved.



Figure 65: Detail of mosaic found on the Aventine Hill, 2nd century CE. Held in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme. Parrots often appeared in paintings, mosaics and on jewellery. If one

¹⁴³ Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.1-8.

¹⁴⁴ Boehrer 2004, 5.

could not afford the bird itself, the image of the bird would still afford a sense of wealth and eastern luxury.

Pliny imagines that the parrot navigated with its beak because it had weak feet, but parrots are adept climbers and simply use their beaks for grip and balance as they wander about. Though masters often brought them out for their entertaining shenanigans at dinner parties, these men did appear to value them for their companionship in private:

*ille saluator regum nomenque locutus
Caesareum et queruli quondam vice functus amici,
nunc conviva levis monstrataque reddere verba
tam facilis, quo tu, Melior dilecte,
reclusonumquam solus eras.*¹⁴⁵

“He, saluter of kings, speaking the name of Caesar, would be a dear friend or a gamesome dinner companion, so easily repeating words revealed to him. When you, dear Melior, let him out you were never alone.”¹⁴⁶

Women kept parrots too. Ovid writes a poem dedicated to his mistress Corinna’s dead parrot, who supposedly died saying goodbye to her.

*Ossa tegit tumulus—tumulus pro corpore magnus—
quo lapis exiguus par sibi carmen habet:
colligor ex ipso dominae placuisse sepulcro.
ora fuere mihi plus ave docta loqui.*

“A mound covers his bones, a mound as big as his body, upon which a small stone bears a poem that only just fits: “You can judge from my monument that my mistress adored me. I had a mouth skilled in speech beyond a bird.”¹⁴⁷

The birdcage in the House of Livia shows us that Romans typically made cages from wood or wicker. But parrots, of course, had to be kept in metal cages as they chewed their way out of wooden ones. Melior’s parrot was housed in a splendid cage of silver and ivory.¹⁴⁸ The curious

¹⁴⁵ Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.29-33

¹⁴⁶ Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.29-33

¹⁴⁷ Ov. *Am.* 2.6.59-63

¹⁴⁸ Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.11-12.

belief that parrots and turtle-doves enjoyed a special friendship may be attached to how they were caged.¹⁴⁹ As beloved pets, they were often kept in the same aviary.¹⁵⁰ In what must be a portrait of pets, a mosaic depicts two parrots drinking with a dove.¹⁵¹



Figure 66: Mosaic from Pompeii. National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv.9992.

As for other talking birds, another exceptional Indian speaker, the mynah, was present in the Roman Empire. A mynah is identified in the garden room of the House of the Bracelet at Pompeii.¹⁵² Analysing a passage from Aelian, Thompson interprets a mysterious, starling-sized, docile, talking bird as a description of a mynah.¹⁵³ Reportedly, unlike parrots they did not respond well to captivity, which may be why the parrot remained the preferred bird in spite

¹⁴⁹ Plin. *HN*, 10.207

¹⁵⁰ Ov. *Am.* 2.6.10-14

¹⁵¹ Watson 2002, 393

¹⁵² Watson 2002, 359.

¹⁵³ Ael. *NA*, 16.3

of the superior loquacity of the mynah. In the case of a talking blackbird mentioned later, a mynah might once again be the culprit.¹⁵⁴

In a climate where birds were coveted for beauty, rarity and cleverness, the Romans developed astoundingly effective methods for teaching birds to speak. While foreign parrots and mynahs were beloved by elite men and women alike and often provided entertainment at dinner parties, lowly shopkeepers could turn common native birds like crows and ravens into marvellous companions that were the envy even of the imperial family. Literary evidence suggests that talking birds became increasingly common from the time of Augustus. Chattering jays hung from gilded cages in grand estates or roamed about as sweet companions with lowlier masters. Teaching a bird to talk provided one with both the pleasure of a bond with the animal as well as the opportunity to mimic the opulence of the upper classes and their predilection for acquiring strange birds.

5.8 Other Companion Birds

Far and away the most common and popular pet was the pigeon. The Greeks and Romans both considered doves the gifts of lovers. In the *Metamorphoses*, Acis tries to woo Galatea by promising her bear cubs instead of the customary pair of doves.¹⁵⁵ Theocritus' fifth idyll tells us young men typically caught the birds themselves, and would become contrary and sulky if they did not receive a kiss for their efforts.¹⁵⁶ Encolpius buys a pair of doves to win favours from a beautiful boy.¹⁵⁷ The birds were, of course, sacred to Aphrodite/Venus, and symbolised friendship, fidelity and good fortune in love.¹⁵⁸ Martial brags that the dove of his friend Stella surpasses even the sparrow of Catullus.¹⁵⁹ And not only were they farmed in dovecotes and kept as companions, but feral birds existed in ancient cities just as they do today. Aelian differentiates between timid wild stock that live in the countryside, and the tame, fearless stock that swarmed freely about one's feet in the cities.¹⁶⁰ It would seem feral pigeons

¹⁵⁴ Ael. *NA*, 8.24.

¹⁵⁵ Ov. *Met.* 13.833.

¹⁵⁶ Theoc. *Id.* 5.96, 132-3.

¹⁵⁷ Petr. *Sat.* 85.

¹⁵⁸ Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 2.20.

¹⁵⁹ Mart. 1.7.

¹⁶⁰ Ael. *NA*, 3.15.

have been an essential part of any Italian city since antiquity. Even despite the way doddering pigeons are always getting underfoot, Aelian calls them the most temperate and loving of birds.¹⁶¹



Figure 67: *Drinking Doves*. Capitoline Museum, inv. 114281. Note the degree of plumage variation - wild pigeons are uniform in colour. These varied patterns come from selective breeding and are meant to be viewed as expensive companion birds.

Pigeon-fancying was a common indulgence. A handsome breeding pair of pigeons typically cost 200 sesterces, but an unusually fine couple could fetch up to 1000 sesterces in Varro's time.¹⁶² In Columella's time, some paid 4000 *nummi* for a pair – a ludicrous sum.¹⁶³ This predilection for pigeon-fancying was not a short-lived fad, either. Notes on breeding are

¹⁶¹ Ael. NA, 3.5.

¹⁶² Varro, *Rust.* 3.7.10

¹⁶³ Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.10

recorded into the fourth century CE.¹⁶⁴ Such fine birds were distinct from the commercial flocks meant for producing eggs and squabs.

One cannot mention pigeons without discussing their use as messenger birds. It does not seem to have been common practice, but it was not entirely unknown to the ancients either. Aelian relates the tale that the Olympic winner Taurosthenes of Aegina sent a pigeon from Elis to carry news home of his victory.¹⁶⁵ The detail that he chose a hen who had been brooding on eggs adds a note of authenticity to the practice. Brooding hen birds are indeed the swiftest since they can be counted upon to return to their eggs with utmost urgency. In Varro's time it was common for the masses to release pigeons at the theatre, which then flew home.¹⁶⁶ He does not elaborate on the reason. It may have been a means of communicating the results of a fight, or perhaps just a way of informing the household that the spectacle had finished, and that the owner was on his way home, rather like a courtesy phone call today. When the pet pigeon came home to roost, its owner was sure to follow on. The only other account of Romans using pigeons to communicate comes from Frontinus. The story goes that in 43 BCE, when Decimus Brutus was besieged by Antony in Mutina, pigeons took messages to Brutus from the consul Hirtius. In this instance it was not their homing instincts that the Romans exploited. Hirtius' strategy was to starve the birds and shut them in the dark. He would then tie a message around their necks and release them close to the city walls. Seeking light and food, the birds sought the highest buildings, where they were trapped by Brutus, who improved upon this strategy by deliberately setting food in certain spots and training the pigeons to alight there.¹⁶⁷ More sophisticated methods of communicating with pigeons were employed by the Assyrians and Egyptians.¹⁶⁸ It is important to note that the only birds that can be used as messengers are those that are released and will reliably return to their own nests. One must take the bird away from its nest and keep it caged until the time comes to send the message, at which point it is released. It is not a matter of training, merely of exploiting instinct. In a fascinating and delightful twist, it seems that pigeons were not the only birds used for this. Pliny relates that a man of knightly rank from Volterra, Caecina, used to catch swallows and take them with him to Rome. He would use the bird to communicate the outcome of chariot races, painting the winning colour on them before releasing them. Pliny goes on to say that Fabius Pictor employed the same trick

¹⁶⁴ Lib. 1550, 1553 W.

¹⁶⁵ Ael. *VH*, 9.2.

¹⁶⁶ Varro, *Rust.* 3.7.7.

¹⁶⁷ Frontin. *Str.* 3.13.7-8.

¹⁶⁸ Jennison 1937, 104

when a Roman garrison was besieged by Ligurians. A swallow taken from her chicks was smuggled out for him to indicate by means of knots tied to a thread on its foot how many days it would be until help arrived.¹⁶⁹ Swallows were in an interesting category. They do not seem to have been caged or considered pets, but they lived in the home, and were therefore defined as being both wild and tame at the same time.¹⁷⁰ As domestic familiars they were under the protection of the household gods and observed with great fondness that could be considered companionate.¹⁷¹

Another corvid kept as a pet was the jackdaw (*Coloeus monedula*), a bird smaller than a crow with black feathers and an ashy grey patch around its head. We have heard that jackdaws were among the birds given to patrician boys, but there are notably few Roman examples of pet jackdaws when compared to their popularity in Greece.¹⁷² Readers of Aristophanes will remember that the first scene shows Euelpides with a jackdaw perched on his wrist, which he purchased from the market for a single obol. In the Etruscan record there is a unique 4th century BCE askos in the shape of a jackdaw that is believed to represent a favourite pet. The bird has a protective *bulla* necklace around its neck, of the kind usually worn by Etruscan children, and holds a white pebble in its mouth.¹⁷³ Aelian records that in Sparta a jackdaw fell in love with a boy by virtue of his beauty.¹⁷⁴ It is worth noting that jackdaws, like geese, are especially susceptible to sexually imprinting on humans when they are hand-raised.¹⁷⁵ Aelian also tells us that the inhabitants of Thessaly, Illyria and Lemnos viewed jackdaws as benefactors and encouraged their presence because jackdaws kept the locust population in check.¹⁷⁶ The Veneti of northern Italy had a different view. Every year they sought a truce with the jackdaws and left out honey cakes as a way of dissuading the little birds from digging up their newly-sown fields. They would summon the birds – huge flocks of them – with loud calls, and the birds would inspect the gifts on offer. If they rejected the cakes, famine was sure to follow.¹⁷⁷ They were proverbially fond of gold, probably due to the bird's attraction to anything that shines or

¹⁶⁹ Plin. *HN*, 10.70.

¹⁷⁰ Plin. *HN*, 8.82.

¹⁷¹ Ael. *NA*, 10.34.

¹⁷² Arist. *Gen. an.* 756b22-3; Theophr. *Char.* 21.6. Aesop's seventh fable, *The Eagle and the Jackdaw*, even features a shepherd catching a foolish jackdaw. His first instinct is to clip its wings and give it to his children as a pet.

¹⁷³ De Puma 2013, 220.

¹⁷⁴ Ael. *NA*, 1.6.

¹⁷⁵ Birkhead 2011, 98.

¹⁷⁶ Ael. *NA*, 3.12.

¹⁷⁷ Ael. *NA*, 17.16.

sparkles. Their reputation as unrepentant thieves belongs largely to the Latin tradition rather than the Greek.¹⁷⁸ *Graculus* was one name for them. Another was *monedula*, derived from *moneta* – money. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* a greedy nymph is transformed into a jackdaw.¹⁷⁹ It is interesting that despite these beliefs about their cheeky, thievish, and sometimes destructive temperaments, the birds were never viewed as anything but a friend to man.

The African purple gallinule deserves mention even though it was more of an ornamental bird than a pet, simply because it was never eaten. Pliny describes accurately its habit of eating by clutching its food in one foot.¹⁸⁰ Aelian describes its love of dust baths, its nervousness, the way it was primarily kept as a pet in opulent households, and finally adds the curious superstition that if the mistress of its house committed adultery, it would hang itself.¹⁸¹ Jennison posits that this myth may have its origin in the bird’s notorious shyness. In the presence of an interloping stranger it could injure itself in a panic.¹⁸²



Figure 68: Purple gallinules, which had more value as ornamental birds than as table birds thanks to their purple feathers. Fresco from the columbarium of villa Doria Pamphili in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.

It must have been viewed as exceedingly beautiful, for Aelian goes on to contrast it with the peacock, saying that although the peacock was not spared from the cooking pot, he

¹⁷⁸ Cic. *Flac.* 76; Plin. *HN*, 10.77.

¹⁷⁹ Ov. *Met.* 7.465-8.

¹⁸⁰ Plin. *HN*, 129.

¹⁸¹ Ael. *NA*, 3.42

¹⁸² Jennison 1937, 17.

has never heard of anyone eating a purple gallinule. Men took pleasure in looking at it and caring for it alone. The esteem for the birds' beauty was connected to the fact its plumage was, of course, rare and royal purple, a colour that was the ultimate expression of status and power.¹⁸³ That the Romans preferred purple plumage in birds is shown by a passage in Oppian, where he declares that pigeon breeders would put scraps of purple fabric next to a sitting hen in order to induce her to hatch purple-plumed offspring.¹⁸⁴ It could well be that the general love of pigeons as pets was partly influenced by admiration for their shimmery purple neck feathers. Considering how few qualms the Romans had about eating birds, it must be that the purple gallinule's colour meant it was simply too valuable to eat.



Figure 69: Purple gallinule. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 8644

5.8 The *passer*

We come at last to what is perhaps the most famous pet bird among the ancients – Lesbia's *passer*, immortalised by the poet Catullus in two legendary poems. One describes his

¹⁸³ Cocker 2013, 179.

¹⁸⁴ Oppian, *The Chase*, 1.350f

mistress playing with her pet bird to divert herself from amorous thoughts, while the other is a lament for the creature's untimely death.

*Passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
cui primum digitum dare appetenti
et acris solet incitare morsus,
cum desiderio meo nitenti
carum nescio quid lubet iocari
et solaciolum sui doloris,
credo ut tum gravis acquiescat ardor:
tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem
et tristis animi levare curas!*

“Sparrow, darling of my girl
With whom she's wont to play, and hold to her bosom
To whom, greedy, she offers her finger,
Often provoking you to a sharp nip.
When my shining desire
Wants to play with that sweet fellow,
Perhaps – I don't know, to lighten her pain –
And then, I trust, oppressive ardour abates:
If only I could play with you just as she does
And ease the cares of a sad soul!”

And now the funeral dirge:

*Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,
et quantum est hominum venustiorum:
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.
nam mellitus erat suamque norat
ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem,*

*nec sese a gremio illius movebat,
sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc
ad solam dominam usque pipiabat.
qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.
at vobis male sit, malae tenebrae
Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis:
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis
o factum male! o miselle passer!
tua nunc opera meae puellae
flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.*

“Weep, O Venus and Cupid
And all you who love loveliness!
My lady’s sparrow is dead –
The sparrow, darling of my girl,
Whom she loved more than her own eyes!
For he was sweet as honey, and knew her
As well as a girl knows her own mother.
He never moved from her lap
But hopped around her this way and that
And chirped to his mistress alone.
Now he goes down the murky road
From which they say no one has returned
Now evil be yours – you evil shadows of hell
Which devour everything beautiful
You’ve stolen the lovely sparrow away from me.
O evil deed! O unfortunate little sparrow!
Thanks to your work my lady’s eyes
Are red and swollen from crying.”

This bird has caused a slew of controversy over the years. Some are content to identify it simply as a sparrow, while others claim *passer* refers not to a sparrow but another kind of bird. Still others view *passer* as a sexual euphemism. Sir D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson sums up the

debate best when he says, “Whatever Lesbia’s ‘sparrow’ may have been, I am pretty sure in my own mind (...) that it was not *Passer domesticus*, the most intractable and least amiable of cage-birds.”¹⁸⁵ Another critic says, “There is some doubt as to what was the species of this bird. We can hardly suppose the capricious beauty to have given her affections to the most impudent, pugnacious, greedy and shrill-voiced of all European birds – the house-sparrow. It was probably one of the thrushes.”¹⁸⁶ Still another claims: “Lesbia’s passer was small and desirable, eminently tame and loving, and piped to his mistress... this should be the beautiful piping bullfinch.”¹⁸⁷

The problem with all of these propositions is that they are largely coloured by our own cultural view of sparrows and what we deem to be a suitable cage bird. To answer the age-old question of what Lesbia’s *passer* really was, we have to answer four questions:

1. What was the Roman cultural view of sparrows – did they see them as pests or pets?
2. Are there other references to *passeres* as pets?
3. Could a sparrow actually behave as Catullus describes?
4. How did Romans categorise birds – what could *passer* refer to?

While sparrows are primarily viewed as pests in our own culture, we cannot assume this was so for the ancients. Sparrows have been associated with the erotic for a long time, evident from Sappho’s *Hymn to Aphrodite* where she playfully describes the goddess riding in a chariot drawn by sparrows (*strouthoi*). Some choose to translate *strouthoi* as ‘swans’ or ‘doves’,¹⁸⁸ plainly disliking the association of Aphrodite with such common birds, but sparrows suit the love goddess well. The birds are prolific, and their sexual habits are easily observable, making them the perfect symbols of fecundity and lechery. In *Lysistrata* (723-4) the lusty women are associated with sparrows.¹⁸⁹ In Rome the birds were also considered salacious and said to love carnal pleasure.¹⁹⁰ ‘Sparrow’ could be a saucy pet name.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Thompson 1936, 162

¹⁸⁶ Geike 1912, 197.

¹⁸⁷ Jennison 1937, 117; Toynbee 1973, 278.

¹⁸⁸ For a discussion, see Castle 1958, 71.

¹⁸⁹ Putz 2014, 67

¹⁹⁰ Plin. *HN*, 10.52; Festus 410.17L; Cic. *Fin.* 2.75

¹⁹¹ Juv. *Sat.* 9.54.

Currum deae prosequentes gannitu constrepenti lasciviunt passerres, et ceterae quae dulce cantitant aves melleis modulis suave resonantes adventum deae pronuntiant.

“Sparrows follow in the train of the goddess’s chariot, frisking about with merry chirping; and all the other kinds of songbird too proclaim the goddess’s approach by delightfully sounding their sweet melodies.”¹⁹²

But *passer* could also be a term of endearment, and apparently in quite a wholesome sense since one example involves Marcus Aurelius concerning his tutor Fronto’s little daughter Gratia.¹⁹³ Along with swallows, sparrows served as domestic familiars, a role that even crops up in the Bible (Psalm 84:3).¹⁹⁴



Figure 70: Detail of a painting from a villa near Naples. 30 BCE.

So, if sparrows were viewed positively, is there evidence elsewhere of Romans keeping them as pets? *Passeres* do seem to be listed as pets in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.¹⁹⁵ Pliny the Younger refers obliquely to ‘little sparrows’ and ‘little doves’ caged as pets.¹⁹⁶ In a private letter, Fronto talks about his grandson and says:

¹⁹² Apul. *Met.* 6.6

¹⁹³ Fronto, *Ep.* 4.6.2; Plaut. *Asin.* 666; Plaut. *Cas.* 138; Apul. *Met.*, 10.22.

¹⁹⁴ See also Mynott 2018, 169.

¹⁹⁵ Apul. *Met.* 8.15

¹⁹⁶ Plin. *Ep.* 9.25.3

Avicularum etiam cupidissimus est; pullis gallinarum columbarum passerum oblectatur, quo studio me a prima infantia devinctum fuisse saepe audivi ex eis qui mihi educatores aut magistri fuerunt.

“He is enamoured of small birds, and delights in young chickens, pigeons and **sparrows**. I have often heard from my old masters and tutors that I from my earliest infancy had a love for such things too.”¹⁹⁷

House sparrows are abundant and live happily alongside humans, so it would not have been difficult to procure sparrows. It seems *passeres* were among the many birds that children played with.



Figure 71: *Passer* on a wall painting. As with the poem, this nondescript brown figure defies concrete categorisation according to modern understandings. Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 9870

If they did keep sparrows as pets, does the *passer* in the poems behave as we would expect a sparrow to? It is true that sparrows generally do not make amiable pets, which is why

¹⁹⁷ Fronto, *Ep.* 1.12.

alternative birds have been proposed over the years. Sparrows do not respond well to being taken from the wild and are difficult to train. But there is a way that Lesbia's sparrow could be as affectionate as Catullus describes – that is, if it were taken from the nest as a chick and hand-reared by Lesbia herself. This is perhaps intimated in the way Catullus says the bird knew Lesbia as well as she knew her own mother. Raising a chick would be a demanding task, but if accomplished successfully it would engender such behaviour as fluttering around and on Lesbia and only bothering to chirp for her. And since hand-reared birds sexually imprint on humans, it would also help to explain the erotic undertones, and the sense that this sparrow loves her as a mate, making him Catullus' rival. From Livia's example with the chicken egg, we know that high-born ladies could hatch birds' eggs and raise the chicks if they were so inclined. In addition, we have a description of bird-catchers going after sparrows' nests, presumably to procure eggs or chicks.¹⁹⁸ In addition, the birds only have a lifespan of about three years, which might suit the way Lesbia's sparrow was such an ephemeral delight.

Finally, we must ask what the word *passer* could refer to. We shall deal with the obvious first – was the word *passer* an obscenity? There is a small amount of evidence on this front. *Passer* could occasionally serve as a euphemism for penis.¹⁹⁹ *Strutheum* was a Greek loan that functioned as obscene, and *passero* and *passera* function as obscenities in modern Italian. The strongest example comes from a sexual scene in Apuleius:

“Teneo te,” inquit “teneo, meum palumbulum, meum passerem.”

“I am holding you,” she said, “I am holding you, my little dove, my sparrow.”²⁰⁰

Most of the sexual energy attached to the bird seems to be derived from its known connection to Aphrodite rather than the fact it was a blatant obscenity, however. The pre-existing erotic symbolism of the sparrow allows Catullus to be playful, which is why he says playing with the bird diverts Lesbia from amorous thoughts.²⁰¹ But an obscene interpretation is, on the strength

¹⁹⁸ Ael. NA, 4.38.

¹⁹⁹ Adams 1982, 31-2

²⁰⁰ Apul. Met. 10.22

²⁰¹ The *passer* is teasingly suggestive in Catullus, but in Epigram 11.6 Martial shows us what obscene looks like. He parodies Catullus, asks a boy for as many kisses as Catullus would have loved, and promises to give him his ‘sparrow’ – *donabo tibi passerem Catulli*. The punchline is twofold here. *Passer* was penis, but *passer Catulli* means the poem, or a book of Catullus' poetry – the boy, thinking he is bound to get sexual favours, is actually offered a poem instead!

of it, not particularly compelling, especially since extended allegories are not found anywhere else in Catullus.²⁰²

Leaving aside possible obscenities, we shall examine which birds fell under the umbrella of *passer*. Roman categorisation and identification of birds differed – not just to our own scientific methods, but also locally and temporally within the Roman world itself. *Passer* and *strouthos* both referred to sparrows. Aristotle says the *strouthos* dusts itself and washes, and claims there is only one, the most wanton of all birds.²⁰³ This would be the common house sparrow. Later Greek writers, Aetius and Paulus Aeginata, both of whom are medical writers, say there are three *passeres*. They mention a ‘big sparrow’ and a tiny one that lives in hedges with a cocked tail like a wren. Respectively, these probably refer to the reed bunting and the dunnoek. *Passer/strouthos* could function as a catch-all for any little brown bird. Indeed, these words could be interchangeable with ‘bird’ itself. In Greek, the ostrich was the *camelostrouthos* – camel sparrow – and in Latin the *marinus passer* – sparrow from overseas. Primarily, *passer* was a word for referring to little brown birds, of which there are many similar-looking varieties. In Roman paintings, brown birds that elude identification still look out at us. Dunnock, twite, reed bunting, linnet, tree sparrow, house sparrow, Italian sparrow – all are quite acceptable identifications. What of the alternatives proposed by scholars over the years? Do any of them stack up?

One popular identification is a bullfinch.²⁰⁴ These are delightful songsters with vivid red and black plumage, beloved as pets across Europe for hundreds of years. However, if this were the case we would expect to find some mention of his striking colours and beautiful song. Instead, Catullus gives a picture of a girl playing with her bird, of him hopping around her, nipping her, and chirping (*pipiare*), but not singing. These things would merit mention if the sparrow’s true identity were a bullfinch. Besides this, there is no evidence that Romans tamed bullfinches, for the method of taming and “whistling bullfinches” to teach them simple tunes only appears to stretch to the Middle Ages.²⁰⁵ Another popular alternative is the blue rock

²⁰² Jones 1998, 188f.

²⁰³ Arist. *Hist. an.* Bk IX, 99.

²⁰⁴ Jennison 1937, 117; Innes 1952, 78.

²⁰⁵ Birkhead 2014, 68. Admittedly, bullfinches do not have a naturally beautiful song. They must be instructed before they sing well, so it could be argued that if the Romans did not know how to ‘whistle’ bullfinches, then a pet bullfinch would cheep precisely as Lesbia’s *passer* does. But the ability to ‘whistle’ a bullfinch was the primary reason people acquired the bird in the first place. The way the evidence stacks up simply does not support the claim that Lesbia, or any Roman, had a bullfinch.

thrush, a beautiful bird that becomes deeply attached to its owner.²⁰⁶ But this bird does not chirp – it warbles and sings, and is much larger, almost the size of a blackbird. This would have been identified as a *turdus*, not a *passer*.

On the balance of evidence, the identity of Lesbia's sparrow is most likely the common house sparrow (*passer domesticus*) or the Italian sparrow (*passer italiae*). Since the differences between the species are negligible, it is not worth quibbling any further than that. It is clear that Romans kept and delighted in sparrows and there is no reason to discount the idea that Lesbia kept one. To put it plainly, sometimes a sparrow is just a sparrow.²⁰⁷

5.9. Conclusion

Studying birds as pets and pleasure-givers gives us great insight into Roman social values. Elites, especially the imperial family, cultivated gardens and aviaries full of birds that provided no tangible value beyond their beauty. While small-scale farmers entreated Priapus and brandished rattle to protect precious productive plots from birds, elites could afford to actively invite birds into their garden and enjoy the sight and sound of them, even reproducing them in art to double the effect. Elites consistently acquired rare and remarkable birds. They caged songbirds to provide music, sought out talking birds to amaze guests, and collected foreign birds as an expression of wealth. At the same time, low-class peoples were also acquiring birds. Without access to foreign talkers like the parrot, they sought out common, native birds like crows and made them extraordinary through patient instruction. They too kept birds on a small scale for pleasure and companionship, though in general one had to be careful not to show too great an attachment to one's pet or risk ridicule. Pet birds were principally associated with children, with girls often shown playing with pigeons while boys battled cockerels or engaged in rough and tumble games with geese and ducks. Sentimental attachment to birds or indulging in bird battling became suspect once one reached adulthood, but was acknowledged as a part of growing up. Romans kept rare birds, beautiful birds, singing birds and talking birds. They were prepared to spend fortunes just for the pleasure of possessing a

²⁰⁶ Fordyce 1961, 88-9.

²⁰⁷ Arnott 2007, 332-3

particular pet and they had advanced methods of training and housing them. All of this grants us tremendous insight into Roman social values.

Conclusion

This thesis has taken a broad approach to the topic of birds in Roman life and myth in an attempt to demonstrate the many ways that birds can shape and inform our understanding of the past. It is hoped that the potential for future research is evident. When we study birds in the ancient past, it is no longer enough to simply catalogue them. The presence, use and consumption of birds can reveal so much about culture and betrays social stratification and inequality in diverse ways. The potential for cross-cultural studies and reception studies is especially vibrant. I was not able to address this in the body of the thesis, but it is fascinating to see later medieval and early modern authors interact with Roman literature on birds and shape it to their own ends. Similarly, it is incredibly informative to investigate why two cultures might view the same bird in different ways. There are endless questions one could ask about how and why humans interact with birds the way we do. In a world that sees many iconic bird species currently under threat from climate change, deforestation and destructive agricultural practices, it is worth remembering how important birds are – not only to the natural world, but to ourselves. Similar to ancient Rome, there is a demand for live exotic birds that sees endangered creatures move from tropical habitats to the living rooms of developed countries. Excessive human predation for sport, pleasure or food is a problem.¹ It is worth looking to the past to see where societies have made similar mistakes, and whether they might offer solutions to our problems.

When we study the faunal remains of a Roman hen from the height of the Empire, we can see a creature engineered to be bigger, fatter and a more productive layer. We can deduce from this something about the farming practices and foodways dominating the Empire at this time. Our own relationship with poultry reveals much about us. Our table birds are stocky, meaty, and incredibly fast growing. Chickens are raised en masse and slaughtered at around six weeks of age to service our fast food systems. We may well wonder what future archaeologists will make of the vast heaps of chicken bones in our landfill.² Considering the many controversies surrounding caged egg production and intensive poultry farming, we might ask whether our antecedents can teach us how to manage our poultry farms more effectively.

¹ Gill 1994, 587-601

² Cocker 2013, 64.

The Romans were, after all, the first to intensively raise flocks for profit. Their systems, though not always humane, were usually less wasteful. They did not raise flocks in isolation, but rather alongside other crops and animals, feeding food waste to the birds and collecting their dung to spread in the fields. Today, it is common practice for male chicks to be culled upon hatching on egg farms. Conversely, Romans kept the excess males and raised them to be table birds, since their animals were dual-purpose. Laying hens are typically despatched at around two years old, once they have passed peak productivity. Romans would use these older, less productive hens as incubators and nurses. Whether it would be feasible to implement such practices today is different matter. It is enough to say that there is value in studying how ancient societies managed the task of producing a food surplus for a burgeoning urban population, and how they managed waste and avoided soil depletion. With the agricultural sector under fire from animal rights and environmental groups, it becomes more important than ever to consider alternatives and future directions for our food producers.

Throughout this thesis it has been demonstrated that the most effective way to study bird/human relationships is to approach the issue with a basic understanding of bird behaviour. In augural lore, taking a bird's eye view can help to demystify strange and arcane laws around how signs were communicated. Understanding the advantages of using caged fowl allows us to account for the existence of the so-called sacred chickens in military auspices. In the field of aviculture, we can appreciate the sophistication of Roman farming methods by comparing their recommendations to what we know of best practice in husbandry today. An investigation of fowling methods is incomplete without attention to migratory patterns and flocking behaviour, which determine how and when one can most effectively snare birds, and when they would fetch the best prices at the market. Studying bird behaviour also helps us avoid rabbit holes of quibbling, such as about what the *passer* really was. It is important that we take off our own cultural goggles and remind ourselves that Romans saw birds in very different ways to ourselves. Where we overlook sparrows and pigeons as pests, the Romans might see them as companionate animals or associates of Venus. When treating the matter of animals in the ancient world it is critically important to lay aside our personal biases.

It has also been shown that birds are an effective tool for pinpointing the existence of inequality in food systems. This is true for the ability to raise and farm certain animals, but also in the ability to eat fattened birds, young birds or birds that are not seasonally available. Consumption patterns provide a window into all the complex social meanings surrounding diet,

particularly how elites could jockey for power and position through banqueting and the procurement of rare and expensive birds. The trends in bird consumption powerfully illustrate wider economic trends of the Empire. The transitional period at the end of the Republic and the burgeoning of profit-seeking agriculture are all amply demonstrated by the increasingly sophisticated and intensive methods of Roman poultry farming. In regards to wildfowl, elites could demand birds that were not seasonally available, hire fowlers to procure certain types of game, and purchase birds that came from farther and farther away. It seemed almost no bird was safe from the Roman palate, though the exceptions betray certain sensibilities. For one, the purple gallinule was not eaten because a purple bird was simply too prestigious to eat. For another, some grumbled about the ethics of eating storks, perhaps showing a sentimental attachment to the birds, or perhaps seeing no sport in gathering up the birds from their nests. Eating a certain type of bird communicated many ideas about status, morality, wealth, and there were many factors that could add nuance to, or change, this picture.

Like consumption, bird ownership was a powerful communication tool. Elites tended to covet rare, talented, and beautiful birds, making a show of the fact that they were able to invest resources in the simple act of deriving pleasure from birds. But bird ownership was not just motivated by cynical, social factors. In many cases we see a real sentimentality emerge from Roman relationships with companion birds. A cobbler might grow fond of his talking raven. A person of middling success might dedicate precious space and funds to housing fancy pigeons, and a young man might love his prize-fighting rooster and weep when it loses a match. Illogical, emotional factors governed the impulse to keep birds, whether one enjoyed their companionship, loved to hear them sing, or merely liked looking at them. Pet birds offer insight into the Roman childhood, as we see that children were expected and encouraged to keep or play with birds. These expectations were split along gender lines, however, as boys were permitted to indulge in rough play and cockfighting, while girls had gentler relationships with hens and pigeons, birds associated with the domestic sphere. In addition, expectations were split along class lines, and certain birds were given to highborn children as indicators of prestige. It is fascinating to consider the social dimension alongside the more intangible emotional one, and consider how Romans felt and thought about birds as much as how they related to them in a physical sense.

This work only scratches the surface of what birds can tell us about the Romans and their values. While it is easy to overlook birds, they are essential to the expression of culture.

Societies interact with birds on multiple levels and form practical as well as emotional and spiritual attachments to them. From the mighty eagle standard to the augural hens, the vultures of Romulus to the woodpecker of Mars, the Capitoline geese to Lesbia's sparrow, it is clear that birds hold a special and vibrant place in Roman life and myth.

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