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## Roman Augury: Etruscan Origins and Unique Elements



In Cicero's work *On the Nature of the Gods*, representatives of three philosophical schools discuss the gods' nature and relationship to the world. Balbus, representing Stoic philosophy, cites prophecies and predictions as evidence of the gods' active involvement in the human world.<sup>1</sup> He tells the story of Publius Claudius, a general in the First Punic War. As Balbus describes it, sacred chickens used to obtain the auspices for going to battle refused to eat for Claudius. This refusal was an unfavorable sign, indicating that going into battle was inauspicious. Claudius "ordered them to be thrown into the water to make them drink since they were unwilling to eat."<sup>2</sup> Although the story took a humorous tone, to Balbus it showed the divine

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *The Nature of the Gods* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

power in augury as Claudius's fleet suffered a crushing defeat afterwards.<sup>3</sup> Balbus strengthens his argument by referencing Lucius Junius, Claudius's contemporary. Junius "lost his fleet in a storm because he had not observed the auspices."<sup>4</sup> Balbus's stories could be seen merely as Roman tales selected to create the literary Stoic's argument, but they actually reveal an important aspect of Roman religion: augury, the ritualized observation, primarily of the behavior of birds, to determine the gods' will on a particular course of action or event.<sup>5</sup>

The Roman practice of augury must be understood within the context of Roman cultural exchange with the Etruscans – a people who also inhabited the Italian peninsula and who reached the apex of their wealth and power when Rome was beginning to grow between the late eighth to mid-sixth centuries B.C. The Etruscans also practiced augury. Through trade and migration, the Romans adopted this practice and modified it in multiple ways.

The incorporation of Etruscan augury into Roman religion likely came about because of the geographic closeness the two groups. The Etruscans, at the height of their power in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C., controlled large areas of land south and directly north of Rome.<sup>6</sup> Etruscan kings, specifically the Tarquin dynasty, ruled Rome from at least 616 to 509 BCE and oversaw many years of Rome's early development.<sup>7</sup> Etruscan rule and proximity meant that by the sixth century B.C., "Rome was part of a civilization dominated by the Etruscans" religiously and

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 2.7-2.8.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 2.7.

<sup>5</sup> Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A History* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12; Green, Steven J., "Malevolent Gods and Promethean Birds: Contesting Augury in Augustus's Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 139, no. 1 (2009): 147–67. doi:10.1353/apa.0.0019.

<sup>6</sup> *Etruscan Life and Afterlife: A Handbook of Etruscan Studies*, ed. Larissa Bonfante (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), xx-xxi.

<sup>7</sup> Baker, Grame, and Tom Rasmussen, *The Peoples of Europe: The Etruscans*, ed. James Campbell and Barry Cunliffe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2000), 139.

culturally.<sup>8</sup> Within Etruscan culture, augury was one of the major forms of divination.<sup>9</sup> Another, more famous example of Etruscan divination involving examination of the entrails, particularly the liver, of sacrificial animals was practiced by the Etruscan *hauruspices*, priests skilled in this form of divination.<sup>10</sup> The Romans often called on the *hauruspices*, but considered their form of divination a “foreign” religious practice.<sup>11</sup> Augury’s prevalence in Etruscan art reveals its prominence. Figures looking upward, commonly interpreted as practicing augury, are found in Etruscan tomb paintings and on other artifacts.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the works of Roman authors suggest the sophistication of Etruscan augury. In his *Natural History*, Pliny mentions that some birds described in *Etrusca disciplina* were no longer seen, a passage traditionally interpreted to refer to Etruscan illustrations of birds of augural importance.<sup>13</sup> In the same work, Pliny also mentions several Etruscan augurs, such as Labeo and Nigidius, suggesting that Etruscan augurs actively recorded their augural observations about different birds to create the augural guides Pliny mentioned.<sup>14</sup> From what has been gleaned about augurs in Etruscan society, augury appears to be intended to discern the gods’ will communicated through the flight and behavior of birds.<sup>15</sup> The behavior of birds was believed to convey the desires of the gods about a particular event, and augury ritualistically observed those messages to determine the will of the gods.<sup>16</sup> The ancient Romans adopted this aspect of Etruscan augury into their own practices.

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<sup>8</sup> Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: History*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Bonfante, Larissa, Giovanni Colonna, Nancy Thomson de Grummon, Ingrid E. M. Edlund-Berry, Ingrid Krauskopf, Erika Simon, W. Jeffrey Tatum, and Jean MacIntosh Turfa, *The Religion of the Etruscans*, ed. Nancy Thomson de Grummond and Erika Simon (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: History*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Bonfante et al., *Religion of the Etruscans*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Green, Steven J., “Malevolent Gods: Contesting Augury,” 147–148.



In addition to adopting augury's purpose, the ancient Romans embraced other aspects of Etruscan religion. One specific element was the Etruscan priest's curved staff, called a *lituus*.<sup>17</sup> Several representations have been found in Etruscan art, including a bronze copy in an Etruscan tomb from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, around the same time period when Rome was developing.<sup>18</sup> The ancient Romans also implemented other aspects of the Etruscan priesthood. For instance, in a tomb painting from the François Tomb in Vulci, a figure in a richly decorated robe, indicating wealth and, likely, social prominence, appears to watch the flight of a bird, suggesting he is practicing augury.<sup>19</sup> This implies that for the Etruscans, religious power and socioeconomic status were closely linked, with priests likely having social status and political power beyond divination.<sup>20</sup> Mention of the election of Etruscan priests strengthens the existence of a strong political element in the priesthoods.<sup>21</sup> The Romans incorporated the social and political power of Etruscan priests into their own priestly colleges. The college of augurs included many socially

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<sup>17</sup>Bonfante et al., *Religion of the Etruscans*, 36.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 36, 38.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 41.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 34.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 35.

prominent and wealthy men. Romulus, the mythological founder of Rome, was an augur, while Cicero and Augustus, the first Roman emperor, were known historical figures elected as augurs.<sup>22</sup>

Etruscan practices and beliefs formed the basis of ancient Rome's understanding of augury, the socioeconomic status of priests, and the symbols priests used. However, the ancient Romans did not copy every Etruscan augural practice. Instead, many Etruscan practices and beliefs took on new significance within Roman religion and society. For instance, current archeological evidence suggests that, in Etruria, the *lituus* was associated with the priesthood and not a specific type of priest.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that priestly orders in ancient Etruria were not as rigidly structured as their Roman counterparts. However, in ancient Rome the connection of the *lituus* to augury was strengthened. In *On Divination*, Cicero writes, "And that staff of yours, which is the most distinguished emblem of the augurate... This staff of Romulus [it is a curved rod slightly bend at the top]..."<sup>24</sup> Cicero's description of the Roman augur's staff closely matches the representations of the *lituus* found in archeological evidence. Additionally, Cicero explicitly describes the staff as the augur's symbol and links it to Romulus, whom he describes as an augur in the same work.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in ancient Rome the *lituus* was explicitly linked only to the augurs, a connection that might not have been as strong, or present at all, in Etruscan religion.

In addition to uniquely Roman associations, Roman augury developed several practices and beliefs not seen in Etruscan augury. For instance, in addition to observing the behavior of flying birds, Roman augury sometimes determined the gods' will through the eating behavior of

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<sup>22</sup> Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.3; Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *On Divination*, ed. Brian Bosworth, Miriam Griffin, David Whitehead, and Susan Treggiari (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.30.

<sup>23</sup> Bonfante et al., *Religion of the Etruscans*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Cicero, *On Divination*, 1.30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 1.3.

sacred chickens. In this form of augury, readily eating and dropping food represented a favorable sign called a *tripudium*.<sup>26</sup> The eating behavior of chickens, instead of the behavior of flying birds, was likely used to increase the probability of seeing a favorable outcome.<sup>27</sup> That is, controlling and predicting the eating behavior of chickens was much easier than the behavior of wild, flying birds. This was essential to maintaining a military campaign while still upholding religious protocols.

In the Roman world, augury could not be conducted at any location. Instead, the area where the auspices were taken had to be ritually marked out and separated from the surrounding area. The ritually consecrated space was called a *templum*. It is likely that the ancient Roman procedure for drawing this *templum* was modified from Etruscan augural practices. Varro describes the procedure: “Whatever place the eyes had *intuiti* gazed on, was originally called a *templum* “temple” from *tueri* ‘to gaze’: therefore the sky, where we *attuimur* gaze at it, got the name *templum*.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, a *templum* marked out a region of the sky, and the movement of any birds within this area of the sky factored into determining the auspiciousness of an event.<sup>29</sup> The *templum* could also be drawn out on the ground. In this case, Varro states, “*templum* is the name given to the place set aside and limited by certain formulaic words for the purpose of augury or the taking of the auspices.”<sup>30</sup> Once the *templum*’s perimeter was drawn, “the four quarters are named thus: the left quarter, to the east; the right quarter, to the west; the front quarter, to the

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<sup>26</sup> Taylor, Rabun, “Watching the Skies: Janus, Auspication, and the Shrine in the Roman Forum,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 45 (2000): 1–40; Cicero, *On Divination*, 130–131; Rich, John, “Roman Rituals of War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 542–568.

<sup>27</sup> Rich, *Roman Rituals of War*, 547.

<sup>28</sup> Varro, Marcus Terentius, *On the Latin Language*, ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 7:7, <https://archive.org/details/onlatinlanguage01varruoft>.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, “Watching the Skies,” 18.

<sup>30</sup> Varro, *On the Latin Language*, 7.8.

south; the back quarter, to the north.”<sup>31</sup> These directions had ritual elements because the augur, after drawing the *templum*, stood in the middle and faced one of the cardinal directions, turning the two directions on either side of him into left and right, important distinctions when taking the auspices.<sup>32</sup> The designated front of the *templum* faced south, symbolizing the perspective of the gods living in the north.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, “the auspiciousness of each quadrant [declined] as one [progressed] clockwise from the north,” making the northeast quadrant the most auspicious, and the northwest the least auspicious.<sup>34</sup> It is evident that the *templum*’s setup and interpretation of observations was based on Etruscan beliefs and practices because the quadrants’ decreasing auspiciousness was an Etruscan belief.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the *templum* was likely drawn using the *lituus*, potentially representing a new use of the Etruscan element.<sup>36</sup>

The *templum*, at its core, focused on establishing boundaries and marking out space, in the sky or on the earth, for a specific purpose.<sup>37</sup> In ancient Rome, this meant that augurs developed the additional role of marking out spaces and boundaries. All dedicated temples were built on a *templum*, which had to be laid out by augurs. Additionally, many important civic buildings, such as the Senate house, were built on a *templum*.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most important demarcation of space was the *pomerium*, Rome’s sacred boundary. The *pomerium* was established by an augur, Romulus, and altered by augurs if needed.<sup>39</sup> The *pomerium* essentially marked the boundary between Rome and the rest of the world, between the political and the militant, much like the *templum*’s boundaries differentiated the consecrated area from the rest of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 7.7.

<sup>32</sup>Taylor, “Watching the Skies,” 19.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: History*, 22.

<sup>39</sup>Taylor, “Watching the Skies,” 25.

the world.<sup>40</sup> The *pomerium*'s importance fostered augural rituals and practices distinct from known Etruscan practices. For instance, the *auspice urbana* could only be taken inside the *pomerium*, while magistrates had to take the auspices before crossing the *pomerium*.<sup>41</sup> The augurs' role in delineating and consecrating sacred space, a job that blurred the lines between religious and secular aspects of Roman life, represented a new role of augurs beyond interpreting the gods' will.

In addition to new practices, a unique perspective toward augury developed within Roman culture which placed a greater emphasis on human action and the use of augury to predict the future. Cicero explained this new viewpoint, saying that augury: "on most occasions directs us to the truth. For it stretches back over the whole of time, during which, because identical signs have preceded identical outcomes in identical ways on a number of occasions almost beyond counting, an art [that] has been constituted through the repeated observation and recording of the same signs."<sup>42</sup> According to Cicero, Roman augury usually gave the right answer because augurs had access to years of recorded observations and the events they were linked to. Given the volume of available information, any observed sign had likely appeared before, and its outcome recorded in the augur's records.

Cicero's description suggests that augury was beginning to be viewed by some Romans as a predictive discipline instead of as a method of communicating with the gods. In this viewpoint, the human action in the form of observing and recording information greatly supersedes the divine element. Cicero also doubted the ability of augury to predict the future, writing that Roman augurs "are not the kind of augurs who tell the future from the observation of

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 24.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 25; Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome: History*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Cicero, *On Divination*, 1.25.

birds and the other signs.”<sup>43</sup> Instead, for Cicero, any form of “prediction” comes from diligent, long term observation of signs and the ability to link each sign with the subsequent outcome.<sup>44</sup> This more pragmatic approach to augury appears to be uniquely Roman. However, it remains a modification of Etruscan augury because it continues to focus on the observation of birds. Additionally, the augur remains important, just like the Etruscan priest, because he has the knowledge to conduct the rituals and the access to the records linking omens to outcomes.

Perhaps as a consequence of this perspective, Roman augury placed a particular emphasis on procedure. By the Roman Republic it is clear that the proper execution of augury was meant to maintain the proper relationship between humans and the gods. Correctly performing rituals, both at the proper time and in the proper way, was viewed as critical to ensuring a good relationship with the gods.<sup>45</sup> Ignoring the appropriate rituals, or conducting them incorrectly, would potentially bring down the gods’ displeasure or cause them to withdraw their favor. Roman writers relate many stories of officials and generals who either failed to conduct the rituals at the proper time or ignored the results they obtained. Cicero’s story of Publius Claudius, who suffered defeat after going to battle when the auspices said not to, is just one example. In *The Nature of the Gods*, Cicero recounts the story of Tiberius Gracchus, a consul and an augur, who forgot to take the auspices before crossing the *pomerium* to preside over the Senate. Because of this oversight, the senior poll-clerk dropped dead during that Senatorial session. Additionally, the consuls elected during the unfortunate session had to resign their positions because the failed auspices invalidated the election.<sup>46</sup> Earlier in the work, Cicero mentions Lucius Junius, a consul and general who brought calamity down on his men when he failed to

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 1.109.

<sup>45</sup>Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome: History*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Cicero, *Nature of the Gods*, 2.10-2.11.

take the auspices.<sup>47</sup> In these cases, the grave repercussions stemmed from the breakdown of ritual or ignoring the course of action the gods demanded. Augury was how the gods “indicated whether an action could or could not be carried out on a given day.”<sup>48</sup> In Claudius’s story, the gods had deemed it unfavorable to go to war on that particular day. However, he chose to fight anyway, and by doing so disrupted the carefully maintained relationship between human and divine. Essentially, he challenged the gods themselves by going against their augural message. Thus, to the Romans, the calamities that followed were inevitable.



Roman augury borrowed, adopted, and modified many elements of Etruscan augury. However, it is not always clear how much of Roman augury is uniquely Roman and how much is Etruscan. For instance, in Republican Rome new augurs were elected in fiercely competitive public elections.<sup>49</sup> Candidates came from politically and socially prominent families, just like in ancient Etruria. However, Etruscan artifacts and documents, as well as ancient Roman writings, do not completely detail the Etruscan priesthood or its structure. Another example is the Roman

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 2.7-2.8.

<sup>48</sup>Taylor, “Watching the Skies,” 12.

<sup>49</sup>Cicero, Marcus Tullius, “Letters to Brutus I.7.” in *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 199.

procedure for drawing up a *templum*. This procedure at least partially drew on Etruscan belief, because the decreasing auspiciousness of the quadrants was an Etruscan concept.<sup>50</sup> However, because an Etruscan procedure for creating a *templum* or practicing augury has not been fully determined, it is still unclear how much of the Roman procedure is uniquely Roman or Etruscan in origin.

The full extent of Etruscan influence on Roman augury remains unclear, primarily because much remains unclear about Etruscan augury and religion. Most current knowledge of the Etruscans comes from unearthed artifacts, tomb paintings, short inscriptions, fragmented texts, and accounts of ancient Romans. Inscriptions and fragmented texts often present an overview of a concept, but details remain unclear. For instance, the *lituus*, the Roman symbol of the augur, was borrowed from the Etruscans because representations of the *lituus* have been found on Etruscan artifacts.<sup>51</sup> However, the *lituus*'s use by Etruscan priests, whether purely ceremonial or for specific rituals, is still only hypothesis.

Because of the interconnected nature of Roman and Etruscan augury, further research into Etruscan augury, and Etruscan religion in general, is important to increase understanding of both types of augury. Researching Etruscan augury will not only increase understanding of the Etruscan culture, but also further clarify the origins of Roman augury and how it evolved from its Etruscan roots. This knowledge would lead to new avenues of research and greater understanding of the social and religious exchanges between ancient Mediterranean cultures.

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<sup>50</sup>Taylor, "Watching the Skies," 20.

<sup>51</sup>Bonfante et al., *Religion of the Etruscans*, 36-38.

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