



Religion: public display & private worship

Auspices, augury and interpretation

The Romans deciphered the will of the Gods by reading the flights of birds. Auspices showed Romans what they were meant to do, or not to do; giving no explanation for the decision made except that it was the will of the gods. An augur would read the auspices before any public decision was made. Augurs had a huge amount of power. If they read that the auspices were unfavourable laws wouldn't be passed, assemblies wouldn't be gathered, and armies wouldn't go to war. The problem was that the auspices could be very easily manipulated and there are many anecdotes of augurs misreading the auspices to give the answer that was wanted.



Above: the liver of Piacenza, an Etruscan life-size model of a sheep's liver used for interpreting entrails for divination.

The most important auspices from: **ex caelo** (from the sky) *observing thunder and lightning, particularly taken to come from Jupiter.*

ex avibus alites (from the birds in flight) *observing the flight of birds.*

ex avibus oscines (from the calls of birds) *watching the songs and eating patterns of birds, often chickens, particularly on military expeditions: if the birds would not eat, it was a bad sign - if the birds ate so greedily that scraps would fall from their mouths, this was favourable.*

ex quadrupedibus (from four-legged animals) *signs from animals being found in strange places or crossing a person's path,*

Abnormal events like strangely timed sneezing or stumbling could be considered omens too. All omens had to be interpreted and confirmed by the augurs. 

Cicero *On Divination* 2.73 (translation B. Thayer, adapted)

Then, how can there be anything divine about an auspice so forced and so extorted?

[Cicero talks about the **tripudium**]:

There might be an auspice if the bird were free to show itself outside its cage. In that case it might be called '*the interpreter and*

satellite of Jove.'* But now, when locked up inside a cage and tortured by hunger, if it hungrily seizes upon a morsel or scrap and something falls from its mouth, do you consider that is an auspice?

*a lofty phrase, taken from Homer

Why does Cicero suggest that the readings of augurs have lost their meaning in this passage?

Does he seem to doubt the power of augury inherently here?

Auspices were only taken to be a sign from the gods if taken and confirmed by the augurs: religious officials, who were often also politicians. Under the empire the chief augur, in his role as *pontifex maximus*, was the emperor. Cicero in the *On Divination* questions how the leading men in Rome have manipulated the form of the augury to for their own benefit:

Cicero *On Divination* 2.73 (translation B. Thayer, adapted)

We regard lightning on the left as a most favourable omen for everything except for an election, and this exception was made, no doubt, from reasons of political expediency so that the rulers of the State would be the judges of the regularity of an election, whether held to pass judgements in criminal cases, or to enact laws, or to elect magistrates.

What point is Cicero making about the interference of politicians in the reading of omens?



This coin from the reign of Augustus shows the head of the goddess Venus on one side (from whom Augustus claimed to be descended), with Augustus' titles. On the reverse are:

(top left) a **simpulum**: a ladle used by priests for pouring libations to gods.

(top right) a **lituus**: a curved staff used by augurs.

(bottom left) a **tripod**: a piece of religious furniture at which libations were commonly performed.

(bottom right) a **patera**: a libation bowl.

The coin closely associates the emperor with religious rites, including the reading of omens through augury (through the depiction of the **lituus**).

To what extent do you think the readings a tool of political control?

Do you think anyone, including the augurs themselves, believed in the readings?

Further reading:

For a comprehensive overview of augury see http://www.societasviaromana.net/Collegium_Religionis/augury.php