

The Nature and Function of *auspicia* in Roman Religion and Roman Political System

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Abstract: This paper intends to explain the significance of *auspicia* in the ancient Roman political and religious systems. The subject of *Auspicia* has been studied by a plethora of subjects. Here in this paper, we deal a brief historical sketch of Roman religion and state politics as well as a detailed definition of *auspicia* and its evaluation of the importance in the society is also made.

Keywords: Antiquity, Ancient Rome, *Auspicia*, Religion, Politics

1. Introduction

Auspicia, the reading of birds' behavior by religious figures, became officially accepted during the Roman Republic. The subject of *Auspicia* has been studied by a plethora of subjects. Academics in history, sociology and religious studies are intrigued by the development and impact of *auspicia* on the Roman political and religious systems.

As with any art, there are a number of interpretations and theories that surround *auspicia* in Rome. Due to the interest from such diverse specializations the number and depth of interpretations is vast.

However the problem of knowing is amplified with this study for two reasons. First, the time period creates an additional dimension of difficulty for any analysis. Second, the lack of concrete evidence allows for abundant explanations and conclusions. Since these interpretations do not always coincide, the task of the historian is to evaluate and analyze the strongest arguments.

In this essay I intend to explain the significance of *auspicia* in the Roman political and religious systems. To do this I will first give a brief history of Roman religion and state politics. Then a more detailed definition of *auspicia* will be given and finally an evaluation of the importance of *Auspicia* in the society will be made.

2. Religion and Political System In Roman Society

A crystallized image of Roman religion in its early phase (Early Phase includes the time period from its foundation in 753 B.C. till 44 B.C.) has proved to be difficult for the academic community. The main reason for the ambiguity surrounding religion at this time is lack of meaningful evidences and reliable sources. There is a scarcity for both artifacts and written records.

From archeological excavations only a few documents were found. However these findings were inconclusive and did not strongly enhance our understanding of the ancient Roman society and particularly the role of religion in it.

Besides the general lack of information, there is a further problem of interpretation and translation. Only a few of the documents survived in their original form. Most evidence have been quoted and translated, this amplifies the risk of inaccurate understandings. (Mary Beard, *Religions of Rome*, (U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Vol.2 p.1)

It has been generally accepted that Quintus Fabius Pictor, (b.254 BC) was the first Roman to write a history of Rome in prose (Hans Beck, *The Early Roman Tradition*, In 'A Companion to Greek & Roman Historiography' (ed) John). Thus the evidence that is available was not written from people who lived during this era. The problem of interpretation bias is therefore magnified greatly. Due to the lack of documentation at this time, historians are left to analyze ancient Rome through the lens of other historians such as Virgil (b. 70 BC), Ovid (b. 43 BC) and Livy (b. 59 BC).

Under such circumstances dealing with the analysis of social, religious and political system of ancient Rome, has always been a complicated matter for academic *intelligentsia*. These shortfalls, however, have not deterred the curiosity and awe of academics about ancient Roman history. From the available sources, it is clear that religion played an integral part of the Roman political system. The influence of religious authorities had a tremendous influence upon the Roman society. Hence both political and social structures were influenced by and dependent on religious entities.

It is very hard to define and explain Religion in that era as compare to the analysis of Roman political system of that period. The reason behind this lays beneath the fact that Roman religion (apart from the discussion about its essence and structure, how was it?) was under a continuous process of evolutionary development, both from internal & external trends. But as a matter of fact one cannot deny the fact about the divination and prophecy as a focal point of their religion throughout its different phases of development.

The divination and prophecy was directly connected to different colleges of priesthood, especially in the late Republic. There were three major colleges of priests':

1. The Pontiffs (Pontifices)

Volume 4 Issue 7, July 2015

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2. The Augurs (Augures)
3. Duumviri, later on called "*Decemviri Sacris Faciundis*" when their numbers increased from 2 to 10.

These priestly colleges were supposed to perform different tasks according to their own field of expertise and independent of the other two fields. The basic rule for all of them was that each college had their own area of concern within which the others never interfered (For further details, see; Beard, *Religions of ...*, Vol.1, p.20.).

Other small groups of priests also existed and performed ritual duties on particular occasions. However, in contrast to the major three colleges, these smaller groups were not officially consulted on points of religious laws (Ibid.) While all three colleges had a complete understanding on religious matters within the sphere and structure of their own specialization, however, religious decision making was not controlled within these three organizations alone. Instead authority was diffused among different Roman sectors, mainly political and social.

The Roman political system, in that particular era, was consisted of two major cabinets; the 'Senate' and the 'City Magistrates' (For details; Leonard Schmitz, "*Senatus*" in 'A dictionary of Greek & Roman Antiquities', (Ed.) William Smith, (London: John Murray, 1875), p.1016). The Roman Senate was an assembly of elders and the magistrates were also members of this organization. All these magistrates and senators had to play a very crucial role in Roman political system (Tim Cornell, *Atlas of the Roman World*, (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), p.18.). Due to the interconnectedness of Religion and State, these political entities were also actively involved in the Roman religious system. Each of priestly colleges had their own detailed, and somewhat complex, structures. However, for the purpose of this essay, I will focus solely on the 'College of augur'.

3. Augurs

The College of Augurs was an important religious organization known for their expertise to establish the will of gods by 'taking the auspices' (*Auspicia*). The experts, known as 'augurs', used the technique of *auspicia* to interpret divine signals through birds.

The term *auspicia* is derived from its Latin roots "*auspicium*" from "*ausex*" which literally means "one who looks at birds" or "diviner by birds". So the meaning of "auspices" is;

1. Observation of and divination from the actions of birds.
2. Observation by an augur especially of the flight and feeding of birds to discover omens. (William Smith, "*Augure, Augurium*", in 'A dictionary of Greek ...', p.174-176. And also see, "*Auspice*" definition by Merriam Webster online dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auspice>, accessed 05-23-2015.)

Therefore *auspicia* was an 'auspices taking ceremony' performed by an augur, while reading the pattern/behavior of birds. And according to Roman beliefs, the gods sent signs through birds that could be interpreted by an augur

through the observing flight patterns, behavior and species of the bird (Ibid.).

As a matter of fact, different mindset and belief systems existed between the nations of antiquity. These differences allowed for many kinds of divination and *auspicia* to develop. Augurs also interpreted thunder, lightning and the behavior of some animals, yet taking auspices through reading the behavior of birds was the most common and widespread practice.

The *auspicia* were not directly concerned with the future, rather they were concentrated on providing guidelines for the proper way live one's life for the Roman citizens. Moreover these religious figures were not questioned in their interpretations; their readings were accepted as the will of the gods. (Ibid.)

Within the college of Augur there was further specialization; public and private. The private *auspicia* dealt with the private matters of the citizens- i.e. taking auspices before marriage and likewise other important private matters. While the public *auspicia* focused on the relationship between the state and the gods. The latter type of *auspicia* had more importance in ancient Roman society especially in their political system. Roman magistrates (A special and highly designated authority in the Roman Republic) were expected to include the auspices in public business ventures. The auspices were directly influenced by instruction and guidance and approval of the augurs. Thus, the normal procedure for taking auspices was organized by the city magistrates but supervised by an augur. The augur was responsible for the decision, whether the auspices were favorable or not (For more detail, see; David S. Potter, *Prophets And Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, (Cambridge, MA: Harward University Press, 1994), p.153, and also, Beard, *Religions of ...*, Vol., p.22.). This form of interconnectedness between the augures and city magistrates tells us about the close relationship between the State and Religion.

The auspices were based on two different types of 'signs': 'offered sign' and 'requested sign'. 'Offered sign auspices' were normally based upon those signs which might come occasionally from gods unasked, at any place and on any occasion. Conversely, the 'requested sign auspices' were initiated by the human magistrates with a particular question and issue. The observation of the eating habits of the sacred chickens was an effort to obtain a 'requested sign'. 'Requested sign(s)' were thought to follow a particular pattern of actions. The method is very well described by Mary beard, as she writes:

"On these occasions the place of consultation and direction from which the sign came were crucially important. The taker of the auspices defined a *templum* in the heaven, a rectangle in which he specified left, right, front and back; the meaning of the sign depended on its spatial relationship to these defined points. These celestial rectangles had a series of equivalents on earth to which the same term was applied." (Beard, *Religions of ...*, Vol.1, p.22.)

Usually the arrival of bird(s) from right side would consider a good and favorable sign and unfavorable if the bird(s) arrived from left. And if a decision of an augur about an auspices is challenged (which was very rare), then the college of augurs had to speak about that collectively and the senate would accept their decision, as they were the final authority to be followed in their particular field.

4. Importance of *Auspicia* in Roman Religio-Political System

The ancient sources reveal the fact that *auspicia* had its importance throughout the ancient Greco-Roman history (and even before). However, it was not until the Roman Republic that the art of *auspicia* became officially accepted. Although *auspicia* began merely as religious rituals, it became embedded in the political establishment because of the intertwined nature of Religion and State in the Roman Republic. This dependency was shared between these two sectors as illustrated by the many political leaders who also acted like priests, i.e. Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, and Antony. (Mary Beard and John North, *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, (Duckworth, 1990), p.7) In other words they dealt with gods as well as with men.

The importance of *auspicia* in early period of Rome is demonstrated in the fact that the king had to exercise political, military, judicial and religious functions but this authority could only be conferred by inauguration and the taking of auspices. (Cornell, *Atlas of ...*, p.18)

The Roman state system was a mixture of social, political and religious entities, that's why *auspicia* becomes equally important from political and social point of view. *Auspicia* got importance in the Roman political system to the extent that it would be impossible for the state officials to execute any policy or order without consulting the auspices.

Those who interpreted the auspices (i.e. augurs) had the power to interrupt an assembly once it had started by declaring ill omens; that is, they had the power to demonstrate that an assembly was not proceeding with the will of gods (Beard, *Pagan Priests ...*, p.40).

So at the end we can conclude the importance of *auspicia* that it had its significance both in private and public domain. In private realm for example, a marriage would be postponed if the auspices was not favorable and likewise in other important private matters such as starting a new business or planning for a journey. In public sphere, the validity of all decisions was seen as dependent on the correct performance of the auspices.

5. Conclusion

After this short academic passage now we might be in a position to understand the exact position of *auspicia* and its importance in the antiquity. The Romans used this art as a tool to control the public and strengthen their political power. Though officially this art is no longer exist now but still in many parts of the world, various forms and different varieties of this ancient practice are being exercised. There

are many more aspects of *auspicia* which may require more academic research, so we can grasp a holistic picture of it role in the antiquity.

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