

Omens and Superstitions

A Superstitious Society: The Romans

Compared to modern society, the Romans seem extremely superstitious. However, today's major religions have all throughout their past discouraged, even combated, superstitions. Also our sciences and our technological world allow little room for superstition.

The Romans lived in an era previous to this. Their world was full of unexplained phenomena, darkness, and fear. To Romans these superstitions were a perfectly natural part in the relationship between gods and men.

The Roman habit of interpreting natural phenomena as signs from the beyond stemmed from the Etruscans. The Etruscans, who developed reading omens and auspices into a form of science, knew different means of divination. In their beliefs the signs they read were sent to them by a mythical boy called Tages, who in their mythology, was to have been ploughed up from the earth. They would seek to read the future by examining the entrails of sacrificial animals, the liver being of special importance for that purpose. They would observe lighting and interpret its meanings. They would try and put meaning to any unusual phenomena which occurred.

The belief that objects or living beings could possess special spiritual properties was widespread in primitive societies. The Romans were no strangers to this idea. Stones, trees, springs, caves, lakes, swamps, mountains - even animals and furniture - were all deemed to be hosts to spirits (*numina*). Stones in particular were often seen to contain spirits, especially if they were boundary stones, dividing one man's property from the other. It is very telling that the Latin word for such a boundary is *terminus* and that there actually was a Roman god called Terminus. This odd deity took the form of a huge piece of rock which rested in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. Apparently several attempts to move the bolder when constructing the temple had failed; so it remained within the temple, because it had refused to move, even for Jupiter.

Roman superstitions did not end there. Children were told stories of nasty creatures who'd come to eat them if they did not behave. From the Greeks they had *Mormo*, a terrifying woman with donkey legs. The Roman *Lamia* roamed around looking for children to eat. Children were by far not the only ones to fear such creatures. The ghosts of the dead (*lemures*) roamed in all kinds of dark places. The Romans believed that some houses were visited by ghosts because the house had been the scene of a crime or murder. Nobody dared live within such haunted walls; few would even go near the place.

Werewolves (*verspilles*), men who would turn into wolves and roam with the real wolves, would attack herds at night before turning back to human form were also a belief known to the Romans. Furthermore, there was the belief that some old women knew the art of changing their form into birds. The stormy north seas were also said to be teeming with ghastly

monsters, some being shaped half man- half beast. Witches and vampires would sneak into house of a dead man to rob and mutilate his corpse. Obviously, the bodies of the dead were well-watched over during the time before they were buried.

Many Romans also wore amulets and lucky charms to avert the “evil eye.” Marriages were planned for certain days and certain months to prevent them from being overshadowed by a bad omen. One was to take care to cross the threshold of a house with one's left foot. It was an omen of disaster to have a black cat enter the house, have a snake fall from the roof into the yard, or for a beam of the house to split. To spill wine, oil, or water could also be the sign that bad things were about to happen. Another prophecy of bad luck was to meet a mule in the street carrying an herb called *hipposelinum* which was used to decorate tombs.

Another strange superstition was that one could stop oneself from having unpleasant thoughts by moistening a finger with saliva and rubbing it across the skin behind the ear. If a cock would crow during a party, either the correct magic spell to overcome the bad omen needed to be cast or nothing was eaten that day. To stumble over the doorstep when leaving one's house was considered a bad omen. Many would choose to read this as a sign and hence spend the day at home. Never should one mention fire at a banquet. Although if it was done, one could remedy it by pouring water on the table.

Not all in Roman society were subject to superstitious. The educated upper classes were generally more enlightened. Few of them believed in ghosts. Most superstitious fears only had a hold over the generally uneducated lower ranks of society; although the upper classes were anything but immune to many of the widespread superstitions. Nightmares were generally seen as omens of bad luck. A bad dream might be reason enough for a lawyer to ask that his case be adjourned.

The Historian Pliny the Elder tells of a M. Servilius Nonianus, who was one of the leading men in Rome, and who was terribly worried about losing his sight. To prevent this from happening he wore a lucky charm around his neck consisting of the two Greek letters *alpha* and *rho*. Consul Mucianus, too, suffered from the same fear of losing his eye sight. He sought to prevent it by carrying with him a live fly in a white cloth. Pliny the Elder reports that both methods were very successful in preventing the men from going blind.

Auspices and Omens

Disasters were seen by Romans as manifestations of divine disapproval, and unusual phenomena as portents of catastrophe. To hear of such phenomena could create panic in a society riddled with superstitions particularly in times of crisis. The very power of the Sibylline Books in Roman society, illustrates just how seriously the relationship between Roman and the spiritual world was taken. No official state business was ever really held without the taking of omens and/auspices (auspices: signs from birds). For this purpose an augur would be present. He would mark out a square on the ground with his staff, from where the omens should be observed. Significantly though, he was not the man to actually take the sighting. This was left to a state official. The augur acted as his advisor. So, if the official would make out for example some birds flying by, then he could call upon the augur to help interpret their meaning. For this many things would be of importance. What type of birds were they, where had they been, how high were they flying, how fast were they flying, and to where were they flying? Even the army resorted to taking auspices. They carried with them cages with sacred chicken. When cake was crumbled onto the floor before them, would they eat or not? Depending on that, the omens were either good or bad. At the sea battle of Drepanum in 249 BC, the consul Claudius Pulcher is said to have thrown the sacred chicken overboard, once they refused to eat their cake. He commented that if they did not eat, they could at least drink. It was clear that his subsequent catastrophic defeat in battle by the Carthaginians was blamed on his having ignored the auspices.

State business was fraught with difficulties, regarding omens. New laws might even have to be declared invalid if the omens hadn't been observed. Naturally this also offered reason to manifold possibilities purposes. If a bad omen had been observed then one could raise this matter at the beginning of the meeting of the senate or other political assembly and house might well decide to close for business for the day. In 59 BC, during Caesar's consulship, the other consul, Marcus Bibulus, tried to stop Caesar's laws from being passed on religious grounds. He announced he would be staying at home and looking out for omens. Bibulus' attempt succeeded in making the assembly nervous, but it did not manage to defeat Caesar's legislation. Caesar eventually won the day and his laws were passed, yet they were regarded with some suspicion.

Aware of the cynical way in which politicians might exploit omens, which they would report to the house, there was a clear distinction made between omens reported by others and such which revealed themselves suddenly, such as a sudden bolt of lighting in the sky or an epileptic fit by someone in the assembly. These could indeed be seen as grave matters. If lighting was observed during the taking of the auspices, then it was in fact deemed a good sign. But thereafter it was seen as bad. Epileptic fits were always seen as serious—so much so that some members might actually pretend to have one in order to hinder political plans of their opposition during these meetings.

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