

AUGURY

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 7, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *AUGURY*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66200>

AUGURY

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Religious Studies, Ancient History (Roman), Anthropology, Divination Studies

1. Core Definition

Augury refers to a specific, highly formalized system of **divination** practiced primarily in ancient Rome, focused on interpreting the will of the gods through the observation of natural phenomena, often called **omens** or **signs**. Unlike spontaneous prophecy or ecstatic religious experiences, Roman augury was a methodical, state-sanctioned process intended to determine divine approval (*auspices*) before any major public undertaking, such as the election of magistrates, the declaration of war, or the commencement of legislative sessions. The fundamental purpose of this discipline was to maintain the **pax deorum** (peace of the gods), ensuring that human actions did not violate divine mandate, thereby safeguarding the stability and success of the Roman state.

The core practice involved the observations made by a specialized priest, the **augur**. These observations were strictly regulated and centered on specific categories of natural signs. While the term augury is often broadly used today to mean any prediction of the future, its classical definition is inextricably linked to the institutional structure of Roman religion. The augur did not necessarily predict specific future events with temporal precision; rather, he interpreted whether the gods favored or disfavored a proposed action at a given moment. A favorable sign meant the action could proceed (*auspicium ratum*); an unfavorable sign meant the action must be halted or postponed (*vitium*).

The practice was considered essential to the functioning of the Republic and early Empire, granting the augural college significant, though often contested, political power. The signs interpreted were understood not as messages chosen arbitrarily by the gods, but as inherent manifestations of divine will accessible through ritualistic observance. This systematic approach distinguished augury from less structured forms of divination, such as Etruscan **haruspicy** (divination via animal entrails) or the consultation of the Sibylline Books, placing it at the heart of state religious machinery and civic governance.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **Augury** derives from the Latin *augurium*, which is related to *augur*, the title of the priest. The etymology of *augur* is debated but is often linked to the term *augere*, meaning "to increase" or "to prosper," suggesting a connection to ensuring successful outcomes. Alternatively, it is related to *avis gerere*, meaning "doing with birds," which highlights the central importance of avian signs. Historically, the practice of taking the auspices (*auspicium*) predates the establishment of Rome,

likely stemming from Italic or Etruscan traditions, but it was the Romans who formalized it into an institutionalized, powerful system of state control.

According to Roman legend, the very founding of Rome was validated by augury. The historian Livy recounts the dispute between the twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, over the site of the new city. The disagreement was settled by an augural contest: Remus saw six vultures from the Aventine Hill, while Romulus subsequently saw twelve from the Palatine Hill. Romulus claimed victory, interpreting the greater number of birds as divine favor for his chosen location. This foundational myth established augury not just as a religious rite, but as the constitutional basis for Rome's political and territorial existence, embedding the belief that the state's legitimacy rested on divine sanction confirmed by the observation of omens.

Throughout the Republican period (509-27 BCE), augury became institutionalized under the College of Augurs (*Collegium Augurum*). Initially, the office of augur was restricted to the patrician class, but gradually, due to plebeian demands and political reforms, its membership was opened to include prominent plebeians. The power of the augural college grew substantially, as their interpretations could legally delay or invalidate legislative processes, elections, and military campaigns. The college acted as the official repository of augural knowledge, ensuring the proper ritualistic performance (*ius augurium*) was maintained, which was crucial for maintaining religious purity within the state administration.

3. The Role of the Augur and the Auspices

The Roman augur was not merely a passive observer; he was a highly respected priest and often a major political figure, whose authority stemmed from his specialized knowledge of sacred law and ritual performance. The official act of observation was known as taking the **auspices** (*auspicium*), meaning literally "looking at birds." Before conducting the observation, the augur had to define the sacred space from which the signs would be sought. This space, known as the **templum**, was ritually marked out in the sky and on the ground using his staff, the *lituus*, establishing a consecrated boundary where the divine manifestations were expected to occur.

The entire process was governed by strict procedural rules. The augur would sit within the *templum*, facing a specific direction, usually East or South, and wait for the gods to send signs (*signa*). The interpretation was dependent on numerous factors: the species of bird, the direction of its flight, its cries, and even the type of weather. Crucially, the augur did not invent the meaning; he applied established traditions and formulae (*augural law*) to the observed phenomena. His declaration--favorable (*auspicio*), unfavorable, or ambiguous--was binding and carried the force of law, requiring magistrates to either proceed or desist from their proposed action.

The institutional power of the augur derived from his ability to declare a *vitium* (flaw) in the auspices. If a magistrate proceeded with an action after the augur declared the auspices

unfavorable, the action was considered religiously invalid and could be annulled retroactively. This mechanism gave the augural college a formidable veto power over the political life of Rome. Furthermore, the augur was tasked with performing the ritual of **inauguration**, which involved consecrating certain places, people, or objects (like temples, altars, or kings/magistrates) by seeking divine approval for their establishment, thus linking augury directly to the legitimacy of state institutions.

4. Key Categories of Omens (Signa)

The signs interpreted by the augurs were classified into five principal categories, though the division between these categories was sometimes fluid. The primary focus remained on **signa ex avibus** and **signa ex caelo**, as these were considered the most direct communications from Jupiter, the paramount Roman deity. The augural tradition meticulously detailed which signs were **fausta** (favorable) and which were **funesta** (unfavorable), based on the context of the observation.

Signa ex caelo (Signs from the Sky): This category included meteorological events, most notably **thunder** and **lightning**. Lightning appearing from the East was generally deemed favorable, while lightning from the West or severe, unusual storms were unfavorable. The observation of celestial phenomena was often deemed a mandatory prerequisite for holding assemblies or elections, confirming the divine mood before the commencement of official business.

Signa ex avibus (Signs from Birds): This was the foundational category of augury. Bird signs were subdivided based on whether the birds offered information through their flight patterns (**alites**) or their cries (**oscines**). Birds such as eagles, vultures, and ravens were observed for their direction of flight--a bird appearing on the right (**dextra**) was often interpreted favorably (though the precise meaning varied depending on the ritual context), while a sign on the left (**sinistra**) was often unfavorable.

Signa ex tripudiis (Signs from Feeding): This involved observing the feeding habits of sacred chickens kept specifically for this purpose. The *pullarius* would scatter grain, and if the chickens ate eagerly and spilled grain from their mouths onto the ground (a **tripudium solistimum**, or "solemn tripudium"), the sign was deemed positive. If they refused to eat or ate sluggishly, the sign was negative. This form of augury was particularly popular and portable, often accompanying generals on military campaigns, despite being considered less authoritative than the celestial or flight signs.

Signa pedestria (Signs from Quadrupedal Beasts): These signs related to the movement of animals on the ground, such as wolves, foxes, or weasels crossing the path of a magistrate. Such encounters were usually considered negative omens, requiring an expiatory ritual before proceeding.

Signa ex diris (General or Accidental Signs): This encompassed unusual or sudden occurrences that were considered portents, such as sneezing, stumbling, or the dropping of a sacred object. While less formalized than the primary categories, these unexpected omens often

necessitated consulting the augurs or other priests for purification rites.

5. Political Utilization and Abuse

While rooted in genuine religious belief, the practice of augury was intrinsically linked to Roman politics, often serving as a powerful mechanism for control and obstruction. Since the validity of virtually all public acts--including the passage of laws (**leges**) and the election of magistrates--depended on the successful taking of the auspices, politicians frequently manipulated the augural process for strategic advantage. The most famous political application was the power of ***obnuntiatio***, where a magistrate or augur could legally halt an assembly or invalidate proceedings by claiming to have observed an unfavorable omen (such as thunder or lightning).

The potential for abuse was enormous, particularly during the turbulent late Republic. Political opponents, if they held an augurship or magisterial authority, could effectively veto rivals' actions under the guise of piety. For instance, the famous orator and statesman **Cicero**, who was also an augur, frequently discussed the political weaponization of augury. He recognized the practice's importance for maintaining social order and tradition but was deeply cynical about its practical application by politicians who claimed to "observe" divine signs at convenient moments to stop unfavorable legislation or elections.

This political usage led to significant internal conflicts and attempts at reform. Clodius Pulcher, a prominent populist, famously passed a law in 58 BCE that restricted the use of *obnuntiatio* to obstruct assemblies, reflecting the recognition that augury had devolved into a tool of aristocratic obstruction. Despite such reforms, the fundamental principle that divine sanction was required for legitimate governance remained unchallenged, ensuring that the augur's interpretive authority remained a central, if often controversial, feature of the Roman political landscape until the Imperial era.

6. Transition, Decline, and Legacy

The status and role of augury underwent a transformation with the shift from the Republic to the Empire. Under the Empire, the institution of augury did not disappear; rather, its political potency was centralized under the figure of the Emperor. Augustus and his successors typically assumed the role of ***Pontifex Maximus*** (Chief Priest), and often held memberships in all major priestly colleges, including the College of Augurs. This concentration of religious authority meant that the Emperor became the ultimate interpreter of divine will, greatly diminishing the independent veto power previously held by individual augurs. Augury transitioned from a check on magisterial power to a means of validating imperial authority and decisions.

The final decline of institutional augury coincided with the rise of Christianity. As Christianity gained official recognition and eventually became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th

century CE, traditional pagan state rituals, including the taking of the auspices, were gradually abandoned or outlawed. The sophisticated, technical system of observing and interpreting the specific signs of Roman gods was replaced by the monotheistic structure of Christian theology, which centered on different forms of divine communication (scripture and prophecy).

Despite its obsolescence as a religious practice, the terminology of augury left a lasting mark on Western language and cultural vocabulary. The most notable legacy is the word **inauguration**, which literally means "the act of the augur," referring to the solemn ritual where the augur sought divine approval for a new magistrate or temple. Today, the term is used universally to describe the formal commencement of a term of office, such as a presidential inauguration, retaining the sense of establishing a legitimate beginning. Similarly, the English word **auspicious**, derived directly from *auspicium*, maintains the meaning of being favorable or promising good fortune, linking modern linguistic usage back to the ancient system of reading the will of the gods through natural signs.

Further Reading

[Augury \(Roman religion\)](#)

[Augur \(ancient Roman priest\)](#)

[Roman Auspices and Augury: Scholarly Overview](#)