

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Word of the day:

AUGURY

The twin brothers had begun not to like one another at all. Each one was trying to become the sole ruler of the new settlement they were building. So they decided to call upon the gods to decide the issue. They went with their soldiers to the top of one of the seven hills in and around the city, and they had one of the priests beg the gods for a sign. Which of the men shall govern? Which shall give his name to the place? Shall it be Romulus, or Remus?

I must tell you something about the people who spoke the language from which English, Latin, Greek, Russian, Irish, Iranian, Hindu, and many others descended – the great-great-great grandmother tongue for us all. They lived in what you'd call the middle of nowhere, but it was a great and vast middle of nowhere. It was the steppes of Eurasia, flat grasslands for thousands of miles east and west, with hills here and there, but



otherwise nothing but the land and the open sky. It was as if Kansas stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic. Those people naturally looked to the sky for their gods, associating the greatest of them with the bright light of the day. When they left the steppes and settled somewhere else, they brought their habits with

them, and that included their sky-gods. So when Romulus and Remus were arguing about who should be the chief, it was the sky gods that they consulted.

But how do you do that? Well, let's think about it. If a sky-god wanted to give you a sign, what would he use?

Something that comes from the sky. It might be a clap of thunder – maybe on a day with no clouds in sight, and then you'd better pay attention. It might be a thunderbolt. It might be something that spends a lot of time in the sky: *birds*.

That's right. When Romulus and Remus consulted the gods, they asked for a bird-sign.

They both got one. Remus got his first: it was six vultures. Romulus got his second: it was twelve vultures. Then Remus and his soldiers said that they had won, because their sign came first, but Romulus and his men said that they had won, because they got twice as many birds. So, the legend goes, they fought anyway, and Romulus killed his brother Remus, and Romulus named the city after himself: ROMA, which is in English ROME.

The Romans had special priests called AUGURS, whose job it was to look at the flight of birds and tell from it whether it was a good day to begin a battle, or to pass a new law, or to send ships out for trade, or to begin work on a bridge or road or temple or aqueduct. If the bird-signs were good, then they went ahead, but if the bird-signs were bad – let’s say, you didn’t see any birds at all, or you saw an eagle in deadly combat with a heron – then you said, “We’d better wait till tomorrow, and see what the AUGURY says then.”

The Latin word AVIS (say it: AH-wiss) means BIRD, and an AUSPEX is a BIRD SPECTATOR, a man who watches birds. That did not mean that he went around with binoculars, looking for the Yellow Bellied

Sapsucker. There were no binoculars in those days, though there were Yellow Bellied Sapsuckers. It meant that he watched the birds in order to tell what the gods had in mind for the future. If the AUSPICES were good, you might go ahead with your plan, and buy that farm you’ve wanted. If the AUSPICES were bad, you’d keep your money and do something else.

“If the AUSPICES were good, you might go ahead with your plan, and buy that farm you’ve wanted. If the AUSPICES were bad, you’d keep your money and do something else.”

We say that a thing is AUSPICIOUS if it looks hopeful; so if the football game is tied, but you have the ball with a minute to go, and you are three yards away from a touchdown and the lead, that is AUSPICIOUS. But if you are losing by a point, there are ten seconds to go, and you are

ninety yards away, that is INAUSPICIOUS, which means that things don’t look very hopeful for you. The vultures are gathering overhead.

Sometimes in a chapel devoted to the Virgin Mary, you will see the initials A.M. That does not mean that it’s morning. It does not mean that Mary’s name begins M.A. It’s short for AUSPICE MARIAE, meaning Under the Hopeful Protection of Mary. That is, you ask Mary for her favor. It does not mean that you are looking for Mary’s parakeets!



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.