

He belonged to a family of ancient repute at Tibur, so it can be conjectured.<sup>56</sup> It had already produced a senator.<sup>57</sup> For Ambivius a *patria* might be sought in old Latium or in the Sabine country, given the shape of his name.

For this procurator, high favour is manifest with the rulers of Rome. Not only with Augustus but with the partner and successor. Ti. Caesar was addicted to polite letters – and also, although austere, something of an epicure, as is disclosed by sporadic notices in Pliny.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Judaea, recently in insurrection, demanded in a governor some military experience gained in officer posts. And familiarity with the lands of Greek speech would help.

Emphasis has gone to the distribution of the uncommon nomen, not missing C. Ambivius Balbus, to whom Athens paid honour.<sup>59</sup> Hence a chance that M. Ambivius himself belongs to the Italian diaspora. If so, predecessor to Vergilius Capito (prefect of Egypt under Claudius Caesar), who was on prominence at Miletus, and to Gessius Florus of Clazomenae, the last and the worst of the procurators in Judaea.<sup>60</sup>

In any event, retrieved through the parent, Marcus Ambivius aggregates to a numerous company of wealthy equestrians who, proficient in finance and in economic enterprise, and not refusing the refinements of life, are already on parade in the closing epoch of the Republic. They go on to lend their talents to the service of the Caesars, and some to be progenitors of senators.

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<sup>56</sup> Cicero, *Pro Balbo* 52. To the rubric add *ILS* 3700: 'Feliciteati | T. Cauponium T. f. | C. Aufestius C. f. | aed.'.

<sup>57</sup> Viz. the father-in-law of P. Silius Nerva (Velleius 2.83.3).

<sup>58</sup> On which, *Historia* 23 (1974), 491 = *RP* (1984), iii.947.

<sup>59</sup> *IG* ii<sup>2</sup> 4166.

<sup>60</sup> R. Stiglitz, *RE* VIIIA, 2419ff.; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> G 170.

### VIRGIL'S 'WHITE BIRD'

Optima vinetis satio, cum vere rubente  
candida venit avis longis invisa colubris

(*Georgic* 2.319–20)

Best sow your vineyards when in blushing Spring  
Comes the white bird long-bodied snakes abhor.

(James Rhoades).

'Candida avis' is usually assumed to be the white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*). T. E. Page, the Loeb editors and others give a footnote to this effect. T. F. Royds in *The Beasts, Birds and Bees of Virgil* (Oxford, 1914) says of 'Candida avis':

'This is by common consent 'Ciconia alba', the white stork. It is a migrant in Mediterranean countries... a most useful bird feeding chiefly on snakes and other reptiles'

He then cites Pliny (*N.H.* 10.31) and Juvenal (14.74–5) 'serpente ciconia pullos nutrit' to confirm the snake-eating propensities of the stork.

Virgil's ornithological mystery is not, however, quite so easily resolved. There is another contender for 'candida avis', one more convincing both on a textual and an ornithological basis – *Circaetus gallicus*, the short-toed eagle.

The short-toed eagle is the only European snake eagle, its diet being almost exclusively snakes. Lizards, and much less frequently small mammals or birds, may also be taken. There are several reasons why it is to be preferred in the present context:

**(1) Appearance**

*Circaetus gallicus* is readily identified by its generally white underparts: 'On the wing – viewed from below in bright light, extreme whiteness both on the body and wings often strikes the observer immediately' (R. Harkness and C. Murdoch, *Birds of Prey in the Field*, Witherby, 1971); 'No other raptor in the west palearctic shows almost wholly whitish underparts' (S. Cramp and K. E. L. Simmons (edd.), *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol. II, 1980).

The head and breast tend to be of a darker greyish brown, but the extent of this varies so that two colour forms are recognised in the adult. In a pale-phase individual the breast and belly are pure white, apart from some faint longitudinal streaks on the throat. Immature birds tend to be even paler than the adults, but all birds have black tips to the primaries. A light-phase short-toed eagle can look dazzlingly white when seen from below (the usual view), especially in bright Mediterranean sunshine. When perched it would be conspicuous by its white foreparts and glaring yellow eyes. The upper parts are brown, tinged pale grey or buff with black flight feathers. White patches are often visible at the base of the primaries. The bird is often on the wing and is conspicuous by its habit of frequently hovering in search of prey. It is also extremely vocal and therefore easily noticed.

It is worth remembering that the white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) is far from being entirely white. The primaries, secondaries, greater coverts and long scapulars are black, so that in flight it presents a distinctive pattern of black and white.

**(2) Distribution**

*Ciconia ciconia* does not breed in Italy. Nor is there any substantial evidence to suggest that it ever did so in significant numbers. 'Italy: probably bred Po Valley in the fourteenth century; has nested occasionally in the north in recent years e.g. 1954, 1959, 1960' (Cramp and Simmons [1977], i). No doubt there was much suitable habitat between the fourteenth century and the present day, and yet, as far as we know, there were no storks. To assume that they were plentiful in Roman times is therefore unwarranted. Breeding distribution is multifactorial and does not depend solely upon the presence of suitable habitat.

Gleanings from Pliny suggest that whatever population existed was quite localised. He refers to large areas of Italy where storks are never seen (*N.H.* 10.41, 61) and gives no specific breeding data.

F. Capponi's extensive discussion of classical references to the white stork in *Ornithologia Latina* (1979), 158ff., details the Romans' knowledge of the stork from Asia Minor and from captive breeding. He indicates that parts of Italy may have been used as a staging post on autumnal migration, but is unable to offer strong evidence of breeding. Capponi still assumes that 'candida avis' refers to the stork, although he admits that:

fosse possibile anche in Italia la nidificazione, per quanto fosse stata rara, a meno che il poeta latino si sia riferito ad uccelli, allevati in cattività (cf. Pliny *N.H.* 10.60)

The short-toed eagle, however, does breed in Italy and was much more numerous before the advent of the shotgun and the antipathy of the Italian 'sportsman' to any large bird with a hooked bill. *Circaetus gallicus* is a summer migrant and crosses the Sicilian Channel in significant numbers. *Ciconia ciconia*, on the other hand, shuns the open sea and prefers to enter and leave Europe through the Straits of Gibraltar and the Bosphorus, crossing the Mediterranean on two unusually narrow fronts. This habit, dictated by the stork's dependence on rising thermals, must have remained constant for centuries. 'Candida avis' is therefore unlikely to be a migrating stork.

**(3) Habitat**

The sighting of the white bird takes place in vineyards. These are usually situated on hilly slopes with trees near by. (The Romans trained their vines on trees). This is short-toed-eagle country – sunny hillsides fringed with forest, maquis, tree groves or parkland. The stork prefers damp meadows or wet lowland pastures – an entirely different habitat.

**(4) Food**

The diet of the short-toed eagle consists almost entirely of snakes (both poisonous and non-poisonous), which may be anything up to a metre in length ('longis colubris'). Prey is usually carried into the air and manipulated with the feet. The sky-dance display flight, which takes place in spring, involves significant aerial activity, with prey items being repeatedly dropped and caught. Such a spectacular event would clearly command attention.

In comparison the white stork is largely dependent upon insects and mice or aquatic organisms. Grasshoppers, crickets, locusts and frogs also feature prominently. Small snakes may be taken but they are not the main dietary component. Pellet analysis in May and June ('blushing spring') reveals mostly insects, mammals and earthworms (see Cramp and Simmons [1977] i). Prey is swallowed whole and is taken walking or running with the head or bill pointing downward – not a particularly dramatic method of hunting. The misleading association of storks with snakes probably arises from too narrow an interpretation of 'serpentes' (as in Juv. 14.74–5), as opposed to its meaning of 'creepy crawlies' in general. Storks certainly eat 'serpents', but not usually snakes. To quote Edward Topsell: 'By serpents we understand...all venomous beasts whether creeping without legges, as adders and snakes, or with legges as crocodiles and lizards, or more nearly compacted bodies, as toades, spiders and bees; following heerin the warrant of the best ancient Latinists' ('The Historie of Serpents', 1608).

**(5) The Text**

This refers specifically to a white bird that appears in spring, in the neighbourhood of vineyards, and attacks long snakes (not serpents). 'Invisa' suggests fear and hatred of a traditional foe, a natural enemy – this is no casual or opportunist encounter. The background is the cycle of the seasons, where an habitual event is needed as an indicator. Virgil may have chosen the arrival of the eagle because shortly before, in vv. 279–83, he had compared the setting out of a vineyard to the deploying of a legion for battle; an omen relevant to the standard would be appropriate.

In spite of the absence of a scientific ornithological classification, Virgil leaves valid information as to the identity of 'candida avis'. Appearance, behaviour, distribution and habitat all point towards its being a light-phase short-toed eagle, *Circaetus gallicus*, rather than *Ciconia ciconia*, the white stork.

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### VIRGIL, *AENEID* 7.620–2

Tum regina deum caelo delapsa morantis  
Impulit ipsa manu portas, et cardine verso  
Belli ferratos rumpit Saturnia postis.

Virgilian scholars appear not to have appreciated the full dramatic significance of this