

Chicken did not enjoy popularity on the Roman dinner-table as it does today. The Romans preferred pheasant, swan, thrush, a variety of game birds, anything but chicken. The chicken was poor-folks' food and not eaten by anyone really respectable. The bird was found on most farms, however, and eggs were considered generally useful and even necessary and were used in a variety of dishes to thicken a sauce. Eggs were also eaten pickled, spiced and cooked in omelettes and in other egg dishes.

But if the chicken was not considered a culinary delight in itself, it was much revered as a *familia* member on the Roman farm and in the Roman household as a children's pet. The chicken provided entertainment in sporting events. The chicken was a member of the Roman government and military forces as a giver of omens and auspices. Lastly, the chicken provided many a useful ingredient for Roman medicines.

Farmyard roosters were very proud birds and strutted about perhaps because of their important position in their rural community. The rooster was the nightwatchman and rural alarm clock. This Roman nightwatchman had a knowledge of astronomy and they marked every watch (a three hour period in the Roman day—a 24 hour period of time like ours) in the daytime with crowing. They went to bed with the sun and they rose again just before daybreak to crow at the 4th camp-watch to rouse the family to their labours.

The rooster was a king in his own household, a position which he had won by fighting bravely, using his talons as weapons, against fellow roosters and either killing them or putting them to flight. Even lions were said to be afraid of the rooster. Especially fierce fighters were removed from their barnyard duties to fight publicly, and on the island of Rhodes and from the city of Tanagra, the most famous fighting-cocks were said to have come. Melos was also very famous for its production of fighting-cocks.

Despite the fierceness and pride of the rooster, however, they were very good and devoted fathers. When the mother hen died, the rooster would take over the hen's maternal and pre-natal duties and sat on the eggs until they hatched.

The rooster was a treasured pet of children, often of little boys. The roosters sometimes appear with their little boys on sculptured tombstones. Roosters were even pets of a Roman Emperor, the un-bright and chicken-hearted Honorius (395-423) who kept many in his palace at Ravenna, where he had fled to avoid barbarian invaders. When told Rome had fallen to the Goth Alaric in 410, he thought he was being told about the death of his pet rooster named Rome. He had acquired neither the brains nor the bravery from his association with his roosters.

Even ordinary chickens and subordinate roosters were proud, strutting and always looking heavenward. It was perhaps the heavenward gaze which caused the early Romans to hold chickens sacred and to revere them as members of the animal kingdom able to tell the future and to provide knowledge about the most favourable time to do official business.

Chickens gave the most favourable omens; these signs were given by their method of eating grain, greedily and in a regular rhythm, a triple time beat just as the early tempo of the ritual dances such as those danced by the Arval Brethren. Farmyard hens, it was noticed, even had religious rituals, shivering and shaking after they have laid an egg, circling around it in a dance of purification. Black hens were used in the mystery rites of the Bona Dea, precisely how is, of course, a mystery still.

Chickens, thus endowed with divine power and religious awareness, prevented or allowed the officers of state to leave for their duties at the Senate house or stay at home, the inauguration of their terms of office and the beginnings of battles. Roosters crowed out of time when impending victory was near.

Ships in the Roman Navy carried sacred chickens with them, and they were duly consulted before battles. For example, one Claudius Pulcher, an ancestor of the Emperor Tiberius and commander of the fleet during the First Punic War, being dissatisfied with the results of the chickens, threw them overboard, saying, if they don't want to eat, let them drink. Naturally for this impiety the Romans lost the battle.

Chickens had many important medicinal uses. First and foremost was chicken soup, so wonderfully efficacious that even panthers and lions were repelled from attacking whoever had rubbed their bodies with chicken soup. Pliny the Elder, in his encyclopedic *Natural History* states that the broth works even better at repelling these beasts if garlic has been boiled in the soup (perhaps the animals didn't like their would-be victim's bad breath). If the broth has been made from an ancient rooster, it is good

for quelling those suffering from prolonged fevers, paralysis, palsy, arthritis, headaches, eye infections, gas and its audible and olfactory effects, loss of appetite, liver, kidney and bladder problems, indigestion and asthma, also dysentery and constipation. Roasted liver of rooster with skin of their crop mixed with poppyseed juice and given in wine was good for stomach ailments generally (but here it was very likely the poppy which provided the cure, as it does to this very day in similar modern remedies – with no chicken parts).

Hydrophobia or rabies could be cured by eating chickens' brains and protect our mad gourmet for a full year thereafter. And a rooster's comb, well pounded, applied to the bite from a mad dog would prevent the worst of the disease, likewise a potion of red poultry dung put down in vinegar and applied to the wound. Fresh hen's dung applied to the skin will restore hair after an attack of mange, if one happens to suffer from this ailment.

A migraine sufferer could spend a day and the following night with a rooster, both going without food and the headache would be gone, provided that the migraine sufferer made a headress of rooster feathers to wear around the head.

Eye remedies could be made from preferably a white rooster's gall, diluted with water, and gall was good for cataracts and white ulcers. Red poultry dung was one important ingredient against night blindness. Hens' gall and fat would cure pustules on the pupils of the eyes. Nosebleeds could be cured by brains and blood of a cock applied to the forehead, and various chicken materials could be mixed with oil for ailments of the ear.

Roosters, it was fairly obvious, had aphrodisiac applications, and one's desire and following prowess would increase if the right testicle of a cock wrapped in ram's skin was worn as an amulet, but desire would be inhibited if these same testicles were smeared with goose-grease first, or even if they were smeared with cock's blood and placed under the bed.

Chickens were useful during a woman's pregnancy. To get a boychild, a woman should eat the testicles of a rooster. Perhaps a more palatable method was that employed by Livia while pregnant with the future Emperor Tiberius. She kept an egg between her breasts while pregnant, providing the services of a broodyhen. It worked – she had chicks and also a male child, so one can freely try this if a male child is desired, or chickens, having had the matter tested by the mother of a Roman Emperor.