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By: Luuk Hans

Since Roman times a lot has been known about poultry. Moreover a lot of our present day wisdom was already known in those days. Roman authors used to describe the way of poultry keeping. Also cock fighting was a popular pastime.

I will quote some Roman authors to show how these writers described various topics of poultry keeping. Some thoughts are still alive today, so sharing these with you is like quoting platitudes. Nevertheless, I will take the chance this time.



Mosaïque
COMBAT DE COQS

Roman authors

As far as poultry breeding is concerned, four Latin writers are of importance; Cato, Varro, Columella and Palladius. The oldest writer is Cato (the elder) who lived around 200 B.C., Varro lived between 116 and 27 B.C. Columella lived during the reigns of emperors Tiberius and Claudius (around the turn of the calendar). Palladius lived around 400 A.C.

About poultry farming their discussion is purely economic, not for pleasure, apart from cock fighting. Cock fighting already existed in those days. As early as the second century B.C. cock fighting took place in the Roman Empire.

In Columella's time there were professional cock-trainers, who might lose all their outlay on their birds in gambling, should another cock win the bet. A relief, at Smyrna, shows a victorious cock strutting forward to the left and holding a

large palm-branch.

Above: Drawing of the Mosaic showing cock-fighting, from the House of the Labyrinth, Pompeii. See original mosaic at

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/modules/cx254/pompeianhouses/mosaicspaintings/>



Above: A Proto-Corinthian statue of a rooster, dated 600 B.C. Photo: Aviculture Europe.

Right: A terracotta rooster, probably 1st century (A.C.). Photo: Luuk Hans.

A cock-fight in which four birds are engaged- one is already dead – is vividly portrayed in a painting at Pompeii. Common farmyard poultry were kept in the country. Breeds imported into Italy imported came from Tanagra, Chalcis (both in Greece) and Media in Persia and were noted for their beauty and suitability as fighters.



Superstition

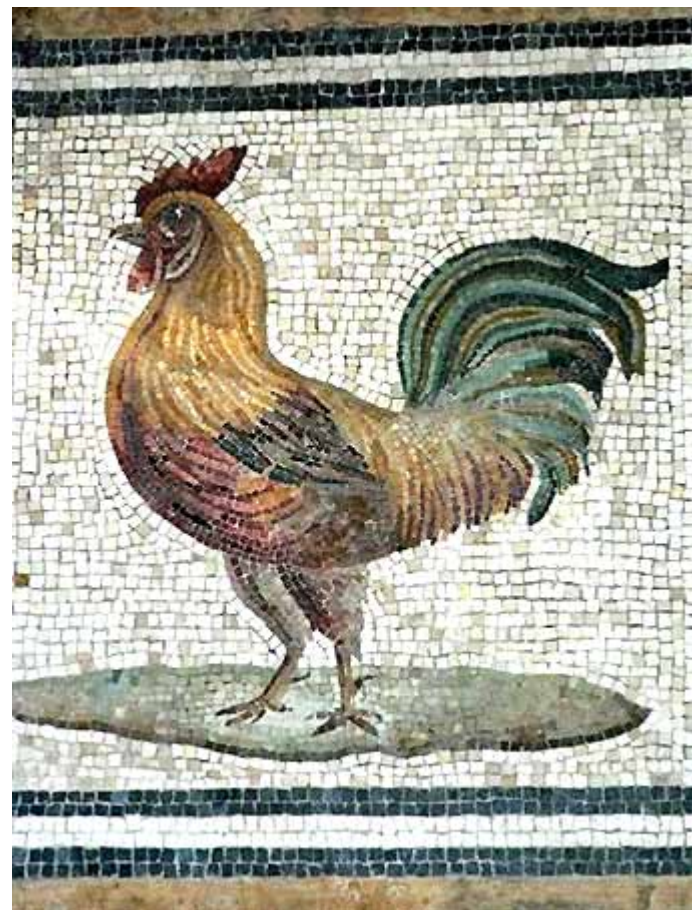
Chickens were also used to tell the outcome of events. They predicted the outcome of battles and fights by the way they pecked their feed (or not).

There is a story on Publius Claudius Pulcher and consul at the time that he was in command of the Roman fleet during the First Punic War. He lost the battle against the Carthaginians, supposedly because he ignored a bad omen when the sacred chickens refused to eat. According to Valerius Maximus, Claudius got angry and threw the chickens into the sea, *ut biberent, quando esse nollent* ("so that they might drink, since they refused to eat").

Right: Mosaic Rooster, Museo Nazionale di Roma in Rome, Italy. Photo by Mary Harrsch.

Roman knowledge

Apart from violent and rude matters the Romans are also known for bringing peaceful progression. The Dorking is a breed that is believed to have originated in Italy during the period of the Roman Empire. One of the earliest known mentions of this breed was by





the Roman writer Columella. In his text, *Rei rusticae libri*, he described the breed as "square-framed, large and broad-breasted, with a big head and small upright comb... the purest breed being five-clawed". From there it was introduced to Great Britain by the Romans at an early date, where much of its development continued to take place. They appeared at the first British Poultry Show in 1845.

Left: A Dorking cockerel.
Photo: Klaas v.d. Hoek.

Columella suggested that hens with five toes are the best layers. English writers refer to Columella when they say that the Dorking breed is an ancient breed which dates back to Roman times. Not only short legged fowls existed but also crested birds

and fowl with double comb, so-called buttercups. But also remnants of crested birds of the Roman time were found at excavations in England.

Varro and Columella have given lengthy and minute instructions about keeping, feeding and fattening of poultry in Italy; about the construction of hen-houses '*gallinaria*', and about the duties of the poultry-keeper.

Right: The rooster was sacred to Mercurius (in Greek: Hermes), same as the ram and the pig. Mercury was the God of the merchants - in this case carrying the bag of the money in the left hand and the *caduceo* (a stick with two snakes) in his right hand. Photo courtesy of www.summagallicana.it



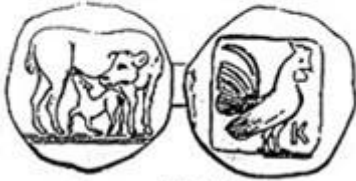
Duties of poultry keepers

Varro is most extensive on poultry breeding, some information is still useful, other information is more confusing.

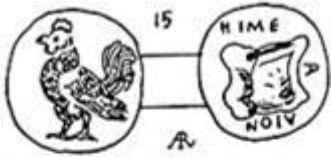
".... When the hens become broody, straw should be strewn in their nests, and when they are sitting remove the old and put down fresh straw, for fleas and other vermin are apt to breed in it and give the hens no peace, thereby causing the eggs to be unequally hatched or addled. No hen should cover more than 25 eggs, even if she has been fertile enough to lay more. The best incubation period is between spring and autumn equinoxes. Thus eggs, laid before or after those dates, or pullet's eggs, should not be put down in the nest, and those that are to be used for incubating should be set under old hens and those not having sharp beaks and claws; for the



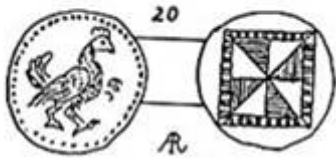
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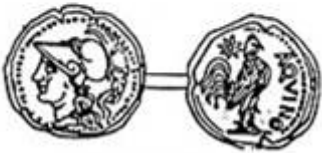
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Himera 520-482 aC



Camarina 420-405 aC



Aquino 268-217 aC

pullets should be used for conceiving and laying the eggs rather than for incubating them. Hens of one or two years old are the most suitable for breeding. If you wish to set peacock's eggs under a hen, they should be offered to incubate ten days before the hens' eggs so that they will all hatch out at the same time, as it requires twenty days to hatch chicks and thirty for peacocks. In order that the eggs shall be covered night and day, the hens must be kept shut up and only let out in the morning and evening when they are given food and water. The keeper must go around every few days turning the eggs so that they are kept heated equally on all sides.

How can we tell whether the eggs are fertile and good or not? Some say that this can be determined by plunging them in water, when the unfertile ones will float while the good ones will go to the bottom. Those who try to settle the question by shaking the eggs are wrong, because by so doing they disturb vital tissues. Likewise, there are those who assert that an egg is unfertile if it seems transparent when held up to the light.

If you wish to keep eggs for any length of time you should rub them with finely powdered salt or leave them in brine for three or four hours. They should then be wiped and kept in bran or straw.

Be careful to put an odd number of eggs under the hen. The keeper can tell four days after incubation has begun whether the eggs are fertile or not, by holding them against the light, and if they appear uniformly clear they should be discarded and replaced by others. When the chicks have hatched they should be removed from the nests and placed under hens that have only a few, and if the latter still have a few eggs, they should be taken and put under others that have not yet hatched their own; and no hen should have more than 30 chicks, for no flock should consist of a greater number."

Left: Ancient coins, all decorated with a rooster.

Right & below:
A Corinthian wine can from the VI century,
decorated with roosters.
 Photos courtesy of www.summagallicana.it



Palladius is less extensive in wording on poultry raising:

"...An uneven number of eggs should be set under each hen while the moon is waxing from the tenth to the fifteenth day. ... Lice can be got rid of with ground stavesacre mixed with wine and bitter lupin juice if applied right under the feathers...."

***Gallinaria* - housing in Roman times**

Let me quote Columella:

"..... Poultry yards should be constructed in that part of the country estate which faces the rising sun in winter; they should adjoin the bake-house or the kitchen so that the birds may be reached by the smoke which is very good for them. The structure, that is to say the henhouse, should consist of three adjacent chambers, and the entire front, as I have just said, should face east. In this front there should be only one narrow entrance to the middle chamber; and this chamber, which is the smallest of the three, should be seven feet in height and in each direction.

.... Birds should not be allowed to sleep on the floors, lest they be harmed by their droppings, which are apt to cause gout if clogged under the arches of their feet. In order not to incur this disease, smooth, round perches are fashioned that do no harm to the birds that settle on them. The perches are fixed in holes in the opposite walls in such a way that they are a foot above the platform and there are two feet between them...."

Varro stated as follows:

"...If you wish to rear two hundred fowls, you must prepare an enclosure containing two large connected hutches facing east, each about 10 feet long by 5 feet broad, and rather less than 10 feet high. Each hutch should have a window three feet by one and these should be protected with osier twigs spaced in such a way that light may enter without, however, allowing any noxious beast to gain access and harm the chickens...."

**Right: Dwarf and Rooster Mosaic at the Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy.
Photo by Mary Harrsch.**

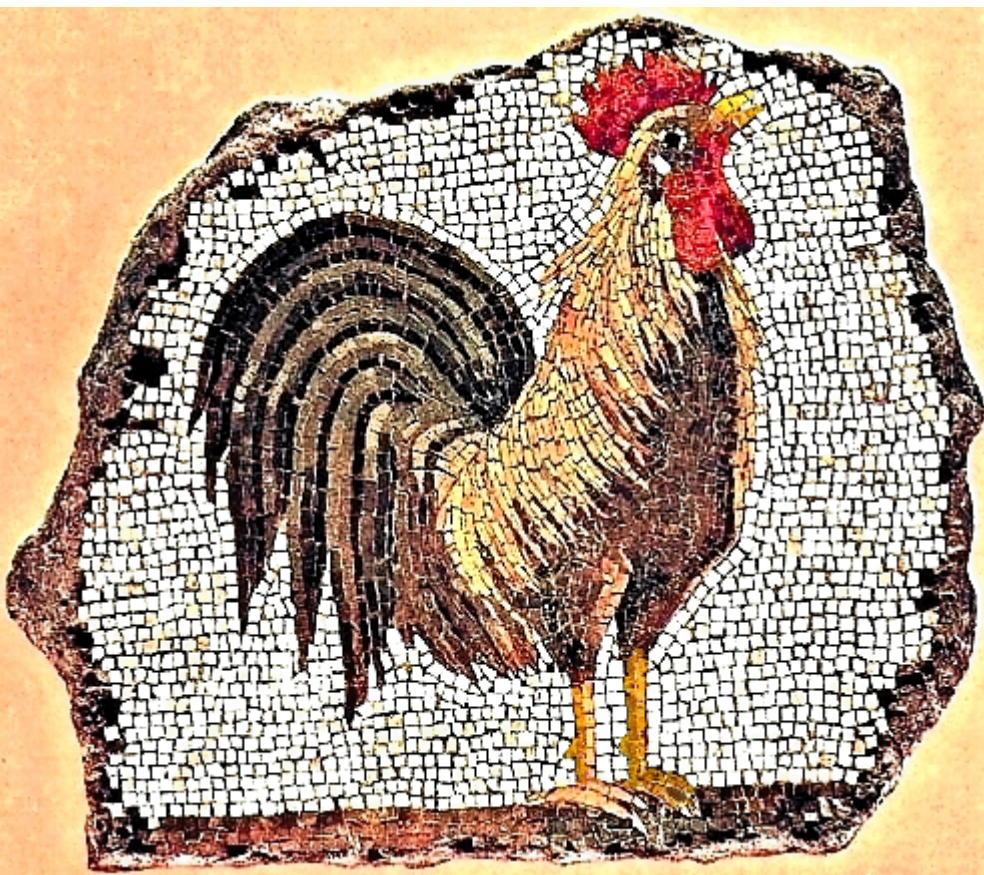
In summary

Not much has changed since Roman times. In my early youth, long after the Romans, I was taught to put always an

uneven number of eggs under a hen. As if I lived in Roman times! The same applies to eggs which have been bred for a few days. To check whether eggs are fertile we still put them in water or, better, hold them against the light (nowadays we have modern lamps).



Fortunately we have better equipment and mostly better facilities than the Romans had. The admiration for their knowledge is still large!



Left: Roman mosaic of the 1st century BC belonging to the Burrel Collection Pollok Country Park in Glasgow.

The typology of this rooster is typically Mediterranean. Columella lived in the 1st century AD. But we could think that this mosaic was performed after the reading of what he later affirmed in *De re rustica* (VIII,2,9) about the probable ancestor of the Leghorn: "The courtyard chickens have reddish or blackish feathers, while the plumes are black, the combs glowing and erect, white and great earlobes, whitish red wattles hanging like beards of elderly people."

Below: Basilic of Aquileia, Mosaic from the IV century AC – The rooster and the turtle. Some say this scene is centred on the fight between the good, represented by the rooster, and the evil, symbolized by the turtle, but there are many different versions. We have chosen this mosaic because there is a rooster pictured, and definitely a bankiva type. Both mosaics courtesy of <http://www.summagallicana.it/> - translation Elio Corti.



Sources:

A. Ghigi: Poultry Farming as described by the Writers of Ancient Rome (1939).
J.M.C. Toynbee: Animals in Roman Times and Art.
Most quotes are from the book of A. Ghigi.