David Walsh, "Entry on: Eagle's Egg by Victor Ambrus, Rosemary Sutcliff", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1499. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Victor Ambrus , Rosemary Sutcliff

Eagle's Egg

United Kingdom (1981)

TAGS: Agricola Calgacus Eboracum Roman Army Roman Art Roman Britain





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Eagle's Egg
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1981
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *Eagle's Egg*, ill. Victor Ambrus. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981, 94pp.
ISBN	9780241106204
Official Website	Rosemary Sutcliff (accessed: August 3, 2022).
Genre	Historical fiction, Short stories
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Victor Ambrus , 1935 - 2020
(Illustrator)

Victor Ambrus was born László Győző Ambrus in Budapest in 1935 and studied at Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts (1953–1956). In 1956, as a result of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 he fled from Hungary to Austria and then Britain, where he joined Farnham Art School, later moving to the Royal College of Art on a Gulbenkian Scholarship. In his last year at the college, Ambrus drew illustrations for the Times Literary Supplement, and went on to spend many years working for Oxford University Press where he illustrated the works of various historical fiction writers, including Hester Burton and Rosemary Sutcliff. He is the winner of multiple awards, including two British Library Association Kate Greenaway Medals. Ambrus also featured as a cast member in the TV series *Time Team*, for which he often provided illustrations

Sources:

Martin, Douglas, *The Telling Line: Essays on 15 Contemporary Book Illustrators*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1989, 83–105.

Victor Ambrus: A Time Team Tribute, available on Time Team Official YouTube channel (accessed: August 3, 2022).

Bio prepared by David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992
(Author)

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Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

Award winning and internationally well-known children's writer Rosemary Sutcliff was born in Surrey, UK on December 14th, 1920. Her father was a naval officer and she spent her childhood in Malta and other naval bases. She suffered from Still's Disease, a form of juvenile arthritis, and was confined to a wheelchair for most of her life. She did not attend school or learn to read until she was nine years old, but her mother introduced her to the Saxon and Celtic legends, Icelandic sagas, the works of Rudyard Kipling, and fairy tales that became the basis for her historical fiction and other stories. After attending Art School and learning to paint miniatures, she turned to writing. She published her first book, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, in 1950, followed soon after by her best-known novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), about the Romans in Britain. It is still in print today and been adapted into a film, TV, and radio series.

She wrote over 60 books, predominantly historical fiction for children. Her stories span settings from the Bronze Age, the Dark and Middle Ages, Elizabethan and Tudor times, the English civil war to the 1800s. In 1959 she won the Carnegie Medal for The Lantern Bearers, and was a runner up for other books. She was a runner up for the Hans Christian Andersen medal in 1974. In the same year she was made an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to children's literature, and was promoted to a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1992, the year she died. Two works based on Homer's epics, *Black Ships Before Troy* (1993) and *The Wanderings of Odysseus* (1995), were published posthumously. Sutcliff spent much of her later life in Walberton, Sussex, in the company of her father, house-keeper, gardener and various dogs. In her memoirs, *Blue Remembered Hills* (1983) she recounted her life up to the publication of *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Source:

Official website (accessed: October 20, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com and David Walsh, University of Kent,

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D.J.Walsh-43@kent.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

The story begins with Quintus recounting to his grandchildren how as young man he was posted to Eburacum (York) as the standard-bearer for the Ninth Legion. There, at a well next to the Temple of Sulis, Quintus had encountered Cordaella, who had come from Lindum (Lincoln) with her brother Vedrix after he had been hired to lay a new mosaic floor in the town council chamber. As time passed, Quintus and Cordaella had fallen in love, but because Quintus was below the rank of centurion they could not marry. While pondering what he should do, Quintus was suddenly informed that the Ninth Legion were to be deployed as part of Agricola's campaigns in Caledonia and were to leave immediately.

In Caledonia the legion spent most of their time building a line of forts up to the Highlands, where the local tribal leader Calgacus was holding out. Wintering at the incomplete fort of Inchtuthil, the Ninth Legion grew mutinous, and when the situation threatened to boil over Quintus had been ordered to present the legion's standard to the men to remind them of their loyalty. Standing before the mutineers, Quintus had produced an egg from his pocket, and joked that the commotion had caused the eagle to lay it, which broke the tension and quelled the dissent. When the campaign resumed after the winter, Agricola and Calgacus' forces had met in the Grampians, and the latter was largely wiped out, although the Romans also suffered losses, including a centurion of the Ninth Legion. For his role in quelling the mutiny, Quintus was promoted to the vacant role of centurion, and upon his return to Eburacum was reunited with Cordaella who he can now marry, revealing that Cordaella is the grandmother of children to whom he is speaking.

The story includes twenty-seven full-page illustrations by Victor Ambrus, with nearly every scene depicted.

Analysis

The story takes place in early 80s CE when Agricola was undertaking campaigns in Caledonia, with the Battle of Mons Graupius occurring c.83 CE. As Quintus mentions in the story, the battle is described in Tacitus' *Agricola* (29–38) and he paraphrases speeches by Agricola and the Caledonian leader Calgacus. In another clear reference to Tacitus' *Agricola* (21), Quintus also recalls how Agricola encouraged

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urban expansion across the province, hence the construction work at Eboracum.

As is typical of Sutcliff's Roman Britain stories, the central protagonist is a young man who serves in the Roman army among the lower to middle-ranks, and who is awarded for his display of loyalty and valour. Additionally, Quintus marries a local a girl and has family, much like Marcus in *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954) and various members of the Calpurnii in *The Capricorn Bracelet* (1973), demonstrating that Roman and Briton can happily integrate.

However, as is the case with some of Sutcliff's other works written after the 1950s, including *Mark of the Horse Lord* (1965) and *Song for a Dark Queen* (1978), there is a suggestion in *Eagle's Egg* of her growing uncertainty regarding the benefits of Roman imperialism, just as there was a growing realisation that the British Empire had inflicted great suffering on many of its subjects. Quintus and Vedrix engage in a discussion about the bondage that Roman 'civilisation' imposes on local peoples, while the famous line from Calgacus' speech in the *Agricola* regarding how the Romans 'make a desolation and call it peace', is also featured. In the end, the reader is still led to sympathise with the protagonist, who is a good man fulfilling his duty, but the complicated nature of imperialism cannot be ignored.

The character of Cordaella fulfills the role of dutiful wife/wife-to-be in a similar fashion to Sutcliff's other admirable female characters, such as Cottia in *The Eagle of the Ninth* and Murna in *Mark of the Horse Lord*, echoing expected gender roles in mid-late 20th century Britain. This is in contrast to queens such as Boudicca (*Song for a Dark Queen*) and Liadhan (*Mark of the Horse Lord*), who are violent and destructive forces, suggesting women in positions of power can become unstable. Notably, Sutcliff never made a female character the central protagonist of her book, which perhaps resulted from an isolated childhood that saw her grow up in a male-centric military milieu and raised in a way she thought more fitting for boys than girls. Indeed, Sutcliff described herself as 'old-fashioned', particularly when it came to the relationship between men and women (Sutcliff 1989: 124).

As is also common in Sutcliff's novels, the story features someone who suffers from a physical impairment, but they are not defined by this. In this case, Vedrix's lame leg means he cannot become a warrior, so he has become a successful artisan instead. Sutcliff's tendency to

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feature characters who suffer from some form of disability and was certainly influenced by her own struggles with Still's Disease. The character of Vedrix, an able artist who suffers from limited mobility, is arguably the most autobiographical of all such characters in Sutcliff's works, given that Sutcliff herself overcame her arthritic condition to become a successful painter of miniatures.

The character of Vedrix also raises interesting questions regarding the production of 'art' in Roman Britain. Vedrix is not classed as an artist, or even a mosaic-maker, but rather is a capable artisan who has been hired when the council's funds would not stretch to bring in a 'Roman artist'. Unfortunately, Vedrix has to include a leopard in the mosaic despite never having seen one, and so bases his composition on an image decorating a cracked pot. The status of 'art' in the Roman World is open to much debate, as there does not appear to have been a distinct class of 'artists' akin to today, and it is possible figures such as Vedrix, an artisan that works with a variety of media, might have been common. Moreover, there has been much uncertainty on how to interpret extant 'art' such as mosaics, sculptures and reliefs from Roman Britain: do they represent poor workmanship or regional variation? Did the manufacturers have templates to use? Did they meet the expectations of the patron(s) (Croxford 2016)? The case of Vedrix, who must create an image of an animal he has never seen based on a depiction from a different medium, demonstrates that complexities that might have occurred in the creation of such an item.

This short-story could be read as a prequel to *The Eagle of the Ninth*, with the titular eagle the same that Quintus carried. Additionally, letters from a young Agricola to his mother appear at the conclusion of certain chapters in *Song for a Dark Queen*.

Ambrus' illustrations range from figures presented in isolation (e.g. the first illustration is Cordaella alone), to artisans at work, and battle scenes. As a result, the reader is provided with images that not only focus on the central characters, but also the wider world they inhabit. The scenes of everyday life are reminiscent of Ambrus' other works, notably for Time Team, in which he provided illustrations of life in the past.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs,

Agricola Calgacus Eboracum Roman Army Roman Art Roman Britain

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Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Authority Character traits Conflict Disability Emotions Family Gender, male Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Integrity Masculinity Resilience Values Violence

Further Reading

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Sutcliff, Rosemary, "History is People", in Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Brighton: Scott Foresman and Company, 1973, 305–312.

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Addenda

The story was later collected with another Sutcliff short-story, *A Circlet of Oak Leaves* in *Eagle's Honour* (London: Red Fox, 1995).

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