

Not Just by Jove: The Emperor in Roman Oaths

With the advent of the empire, Romans began to swear oaths not by the traditional gods but by the reigning emperor. Crucially, they did not just swear by his name. Some identified him as descendant from a god or as a god himself, such as the Egyptian who swore by “the god emperor Caesar son of a god” (BGU 2590: θεὸν Αὐτοκράτορα Καίσαρα θεοῦ υἱόν). Others placed him alongside the gods or swore not by his name but by his *genius*, as we see in this oath from a Roman in Egypt: “by Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the spirit of the most sacred emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus” (W. Chr. 463: *per Iovem Optimum Maximum et genium sacratissimi Imperatoris Caesaris Domitiani Augusti Germanici*). Those details make oaths evidence as to how everyday Romans understood their ruler. This paper explores the image of the emperor as it appears in oaths and how that image developed from Augustus to the end of the third century. I draw upon the papyri collected and analyzed by Seidl (1933) along with hundreds of later discoveries and the tablets from Herculaneum and Pompeii. Those tablets show regional variation in oaths and diverge from the papyri, especially in the uniform inclusion of the traditional gods and the chronology of *genius* oaths.

Seeing who was included in oaths shows which of the government’s messages Romans heard. Some messages came through loud and clear: all twelve oaths by Augustus describe him as the son of a god, i.e. Caesar. Many doubtless learned that identification from the coins that trumpeted it. Even where adherence to official messaging seems strongest, though, the people did more than simply parrot the emperor’s rhetoric back at him. Though Augustus never claimed divinity for himself, six of the twelve oaths identify him as a god. Later, beginning with Vespasian, some emperors, all ruling in the aftermaths of civil war, received oaths by their

children's names as well as their own. This reflects the role those children—and the stability they promised—played in imperial self-presentation.

Yet who failed to appear in oaths tells us as much as who did. Emperors saw oaths as a tool to emphasize their ancestry via their deified predecessors (*divi*) and women of the imperial family. When Septimius Severus depicted himself as Pertinax's avenger, he demanded Pertinax's name be used in prayers and oaths (DC 75.4.1). A century and a half earlier, Claudius used Livia, his grandmother and Augustus' wife, as a way to connect himself to Rome's first emperor, and so he insisted that women swear by Livia (DC 60.5.2). Romans, though, largely ignored these dictates. People rarely swore by deified predecessors and, when they did, they swore by them as an undifferentiated mass. Women, meanwhile, do not appear at all in the attested oaths. These failed messaging initiatives show the intensity of the focus on the emperor alone, a focus that can also be seen in how even the traditional gods make only rare appearances in the papyri.

Divi and imperial women were not the only aspect of oaths that emperors tried regulating. The cult of the emperor's *genius* remains controversial in scholarship and was controversial in the early empire, for such worship was likely seen as a servile act (Bömer 1966; Flower 2017: 299-311; Gradel 2002: 73-109, 162-98). Caligula allegedly killed those who refused to swear by his *genius* (Suet. *Cal.* 27.3), while emperors like Trajan who strove to appear more like a *civilis princeps* than a *dominus* forbade attention to their *genius* (Plin *Pan.* 52.6). The relevant oath documents come too late to sort out the cult's contested early chronology. Though every Latin oath is by *genius*, none predate Caligula, and the papyri before Titus do not include oaths by *τύχη*, the Greek equivalent of *genius*. But once they started appearing, *τύχη* did not parallel the cult's development as it comes to us from other sources. Once people began swearing by the emperor's *genius*, the proportion of such oaths only grew, regardless of a particular emperor's

stance on the matter. Ordinary Italians and Egyptians do not appear to have greatly minded whether *genius* oaths bespoke servility or not. This is a salutary reminder that those who swore oaths did not merely copy the regime's messaging and that their concerns were often not those of Pliny and other elite writers.

Bibliography

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