The ancients were habitual takers of oaths, both personal and corporate, in private and in public, and their literature abounds in examples. The social and religious significance of oaths is of general interest, but for the historian it is those periods when oaths had a more direct political importance which attract particular attention; and amongst these the oaths of allegiance sworn to the Roman emperors deserve careful study by students of the early Empire. We are in a relatively favourable position to do this, because the considerable literary evidence for the period about vows and oaths of this type has been paralleled by the discovery of a number of inscriptions with the actual text of oaths taken in a variety of places in the provinces of the Empire. A number of questions naturally arise. How much impact did these oaths of allegiance have on the minds and attitudes of the civil and military officials who administered them in the emperor’s name, and on the ordinary citizens who assented to them? Can we form any judgment on how many actually participated in such formal ceremonies? What contribution did the regular oath-taking make to imperial solidarity, when compared with the rites of the emperor cult, the propaganda of the coinage and the honorific inscriptions set up in so many public places throughout the Empire? What signs are there of conscientious objection to the taking of oaths in general as well as to these particular oaths of allegiance? These are large questions, and the aim of this article is to review briefly some of the literary and the documentary evidence for the period and to stimulate responses to them.

We need not doubt that most Romans took seriously the whole apparatus of oaths, vows and prayers by which it was hoped that the gods would reward both individuals and the state with their protection and with prosperity. For the Republican period Livy provides ample evidence of the different types of oaths used amongst the Romans, and the narrative of Book XXII, at the centre of the Hannibalic campaign in Italy, will serve as an illustration. At the time prior to Cannae when the Roman forces were supplemented by those of the Latin allies, Livy notes that the solemnity of this juncture in the war was marked by the requirement that the allies should take a formal oath at the instance of the military tribunes. They pledged themselves to obey the consul’s command in the field as long as the campaign lasted. This action, described as ‘legitima iuris iurandi adactio’, is

1. XXII.38.
compared with the sacramentum which had sufficed for military discipline before that time, the voluntary oath of allegiance to one's commander which recruits swore when they first joined their unit. Its terms were 'not to depart in order to take flight or through fear, nor to retreat from the line except to recover or obtain a weapon, strike a foe or rescue a friend'. It will be noticed later that military oaths were an important constituent in the civil oaths of allegiance in the Empire.

Later in the same Book there is an example of the individual oath. At Canusium after the Cannae disaster P. Cornelius Scipio burst in upon the nobles who were gathered with Metellus to plan their escape from Italy and, brandishing his sword, swore a solemn oath: 'I swear from my heart that I shall not desert the republic of the Roman people, and shall not allow any other Roman citizen to desert her. If I knowingly swear falsely, may you, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, afflict me, my house, family and estate with the worst of deaths.' Here are characteristic elements—the adjuration by Jupiter and the curse for perfidy—of the imperial oaths of allegiance discussed below. But it was the practice of the late Republic which set the precedents, the increasing political use both of military and civil oaths and a tendency to combine their functions. The sacramentum remained basic on the military side; behind the oath of loyalty to one's commander stood one's loyalty to the Roman Senate and people, by whose authority the commander held his appointment. A more comprehensive act was the military coniuratio, whereby a body of men swore obedience to their leader in an emergency in response to the challenge 'let him who wants the salvation of the Republic follow me.' In this category may be placed the oath taken to M. Livius Drusus by his adherents in the Social War in 91 B.C., a command not sanctioned by the Senate. The terms as given by Diodorus resemble those of the imperial oaths later: 'I swear by Capitoline Jupiter, by the demigods who became founders of Rome and by the heroes who extended her suzerainty to reckon the same friend and foe as Drusus, and not to spare my life or the lives of my children or parents if this is not expedient for Drusus and those who have taken the same oath. If I swear truly, may I enjoy prosperity; if I forswear myself, the opposite.' A further political extension of the practice was the taking of an oath to abide by a commander's acts by those who wielded less power; thus Sulla as proconsul obliged Cinna when he took up the consulship to swear loyalty 'with oaths and curses', an action full of portents for the future. Loyalty to an im-

2. Servius on Verg. Aen. 8.1. For the text and further references see Stefan Weinstock, Divus Julius p.224 n.1.
3. Diod. 37.11.
perator was superseding loyalty to the state.\textsuperscript{4}

It was clearly the use by Julius Caesar of the apparatus of oaths, vows and prayers which led to the imperial practice, Augustus proving himself an apt pupil in this regard. Although he had earlier used them to advantage, it was in the last two years of his life that Caesar surrounded himself more openly with these manifestations of power. Public prayers were offered annually for his safety, in acknowledgement that Rome’s salus and in\-columitas were now centred on that of the dictator.\textsuperscript{5} When magistrates entered office they had to swear to support his acta both past and future. Curiously, we lack direct evidence of a voluntary oath of allegiance sworn to him at the same time, but because of the regular practice of Augustus and his successors it is reasonable to believe that this oath was indeed taken, and that the terms resembled those used by Drusus as mentioned above and, it seems, repeated in the oaths of the early Empire. Caesar’s name will have been invoked alongside those of Jupiter and other deities, a most significant adumbration of the imperial cult. In addition, Caesar fostered the growth of a more personal cult; oaths were taken by his Fortune (Fortuna or Tyche) and probably by his Genius. A public sacrifice was instituted in honour of his birthday. At his funeral, according to Suetonius, Antony got a herald to read the texts first of the decree which had bestowed on Caesar ‘all honours human and divine’ and then of the oath taken by all Senators ‘pro salute Caesaris’.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Augustus: the Paphlagonian and Samian oaths}

As triumvir Octavian along with the lesser magistrates publicly took the oath to observe Caesar’s acta, but it was at the expiration of the triumvirate, when it was essential to appear as the legitimate Roman leader against Antony and Cleopatra, that in 32 B.C. he took the boldest step with the coniuratio Italiae. By this oath he bound to himself (still a faction leader in reality) the Roman forces of the West, for all these provinces with Africa were included.\textsuperscript{7} How voluntary was it, as Augustus later claimed? Syme comments ‘When an official document records voluntary manifestation of popular sentiment under a despotic government, a certain suspension of belief may safely be recommended.’\textsuperscript{8} However, the Caesarian veterans settled in the coloniae formed a solid nucleus, and it may be conjectured that the municipal senates, perhaps over a period of months, passed resolu-

\textsuperscript{4} Weinstock op.cit., p.222 compares Sulla's action with Caesar's binding of candidates for office by an oath while he was in Gaul. For Sulla, Plut. Sulla 10.6.
\textsuperscript{5} Cass. Dio. 44.6.
\textsuperscript{6} Caes. 84.2.
\textsuperscript{7} Res Gestae 25.2.
\textsuperscript{8} Roman Revolution, p.284.
tions incorporating the terms of the oath upon the motion of the resident *clientes* of both Caesar and Octavian.

With the *coniuratio* we are but a short step from the imperial oaths of allegiance, and it is natural to conclude that its terms, which have not survived, were very similar to those discussed below. In all provinces after Actium the legionary recruit took the *sacramentum* to him personally, whose *imperium* surpassed that of all other commanders. Augustus' name was included in all the prayers offered by priests on behalf of the Senate and Roman people, and magistrates together with senators swore to abide by his *acta*. On the personal side, libations were to be poured to him at private as well as public banquets, and oaths by his Genius and Fortuna were extended to the cult of the *numen Augusti*.

These developments provide the background for the important inscription from Paphlagonia, discovered at Phazimon-Neapolis and dated 3 B.C. shortly after the annexation of the area to the province of Galatia. The text is that of the oath sworn at Gangra, the capital, with the information at the end of the inscription that along with all the inhabitants of Paphlagonia the people of Phazimon took this same oath 'at the altars of Augustus in the temple of Augustus'. The preamble states that the resident Roman businessmen took it with the provincials.

The oath embodies virtually all the elements found at lesser length in the other imperial examples—the invocation of Jupiter and all other deities, the personal pledge of loyalty to Augustus and his house, the total commitment to protect his interests, reckoning the same friends and foes; the undertaking to lay information against potential enemies, and to pursue and punish Augustus' foes 'by land and sea, with weapons and sword'. The oath concludes with the pronouncement of a solemn curse upon the oath-taker and his descendants if he fails to fulfil his word. It is noteworthy that 'Augustus himself' is added to the list of deities, and the swearing of the oath at the Caesareion in each Paphlagonian town shows how the oath of allegiance and the emperor cult were strongly linked from the beginning. Although Augustus resisted deification, it is evident that in the East he was counted as divine.

In 1960 the substantial but fragmentary text of a decree at Samos was

12. The extant texts of the oaths were conveniently printed in Appendix 1 of Peter Herrmann, *Der römische Kaisereid* (pp.122-6). A translation of the present one (ILS 8781 = EJ 315) appears in N. Lewis and M. Reinhold, *Roman Civilization II: The Empire*, pp.34-5.
13. cf. the Latin of the Aritium and Sentinum oaths, 'armis belloque internecivo terra mairique' (infra).
published, which also belongs to the Augustan period. Most of what sur-
vives is from the honorific decree rather than the oath, but it is clear that
there were processions, sacrifices and a banquet and the oath of allegiance
seems to have been administered by the strategoi at a formally convened
meeting of the citizen assembly. It was resolved also to send an embassy to
congratulate Augustus (on the anniversary of his accession?), its leader to
be ‘the priest of Imperator Caesar Augustus and of his son Gaius Caesar
and of Marcus Agrippa’. Copies of the decree were to be set up on marble
pillars in the shrines of Augustus and of the goddess Hera. Again we
observe the close links between the oath of allegiance and the imperial cult,
which is here extended (as in fact was the oath) to include Augustus’ family.

Tiberius: the Cypriot oath

For the remainder of the Julio-Claudian period we have the evidence of
Tacitus on oaths to add to that of Cassius Dio and Suetonius. The taking of
the oath to Tiberius in A.D. 14 is put by him in the context of ‘servitude’ (at
Romae ruere in servitium consules, patres, eques) but he gives the fullest
details we have for Rome—first the consuls swore the oath, then the
prefects of the praetorian guard and of the corn supply, then ‘the Senate,
army and people’. In spite of Tacitus’ deep scepticism about Tiberius’ pro-
fessed reluctance to assume power on the death of Augustus, in a later
passage he notes that the emperor declined to accept the oath of loyalty to
his own acta when the Senate tried to enact it, on the grounds that the
more powers he was given, the more precarious his real position became.
But he insisted on the recognition of the deified Augustus in this manner
and took that oath himself. These two types of oath, in nomen Augusti
and in acta Caesaris are of course closely related, but it is the former, the
pledge of personal loyalty, with which the surviving inscriptions are con-
cerned. According to Dio, who gives a much more favourable account of
Tiberius’ motives, the manner of taking the oath of allegiance at Rome was
for a single senator to swear it on behalf of all, with the others assenting by
voice, and the only occasion when they returned (voluntarily) to the old
method of individual pledges was after the discovery of Sejanus’ con-
spiracy, as a gesture of reassurance to Tiberius. He claims also that
Tiberius would not allow oaths by his Fortuna or the observance of his birth-
day with vows and sacrifices, but we may well doubt whether this lasted

14. P. Herrmann, Annales du Midi, 75, 1960, 70ff. He proposed a date 6/5 B.C.
17. Ann. 4.42 (removal of a senator for refusing to swear).
more than the first short period of his principate.

This is the literary context for an important inscription discovered near Palaipaphos in Cyprus in 1959 and published by T.B. Mitford the next year.\(^{20}\) It contains most of the text of the Cypriot oath of allegiance to Tiberius in A.D. 14. Amongst the deities invoked are Aphrodite 'our own Maiden', Apollo and the Dioscuri, with Augustus' name alongside them (as the descendant of Aphrodite) and also Rome. The Cypriots swear to obey and to worship Tiberius and all his house, to reckon the same friends and foes and intend (it appears from the fragmentary ending) to vote divine honours to Rome, Tiberius and 'the sons of his blood'. One interesting detail is the space left after the second occurrence of Tiberius' titles, presumably for the later insertion of 'Autokrator' (Imperator), from which Mitford concludes that the oath was to be regularly administered. Here is more evidence of the deification of the living emperor which was natural to the Hellenistic cities of the East.

**Gaius: the Assos and Aritium oaths**

Both Dio and Suetonius testify to the efforts made by Gaius upon his accession to emphasise his autocratic power, in spite of his scrupulous adherence to Augustan precedents in some areas. He annulled Tiberius' will and refused to have oaths sworn to his *acta*, but included his own with those of Augustus.\(^{21}\) More than this, he inserted the names of his sisters not only in the public prayers for his welfare and that of Rome, but in the oath of allegiance itself. Senators once more swore the oath individually.\(^{22}\) According to Suetonius, Gaius made it compulsory to swear by his Genius, on pain of execution, and he encouraged the worship of his *numen* and even himself swore by the *numen* of his dead sister Drusilla.\(^{23}\)

Whatever the accuracy of this in detail, there is no mistaking the general picture, and it is appropriate that the documentary evidence of oaths accords with it. The decree and oath of A.D. 37 found at Assos in the Troad show the same features as those already cited, with some interesting variations in the text and setting.\(^{24}\) The decree is on the motion of the *demos* as a whole, but stood in the names of the Council and the resident Roman businessmen as well as the assembly. Like the rest of the Roman world, Assos is eager to set eyes on the god, 'now that mankind's most joyful age is established', and has appointed a loyal embassy (consisting of four Greeks

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20. JRS 50, 1960, 75ff. See also his contribution 'Roman Cyprus' to H. Temporini (ed.) *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II. 7.2 esp. p.1347ff.
and a Roman) to cement further the links created in person by the visit of the emperor’s father Germanicus with his young son twenty years previously.

The oath itself is short and to the point. It invokes Zeus, the deified Augustus and Athena, with the pledge of loyalty to Gaius and his house, keeping the same friends and foes, with the usual curse at the end upon perjury. Included in the embassy’s duties were the offering of public prayers and a sacrifice while in Rome to the Capitoline Jupiter.

Our only complete Western example of the oath of allegiance comes from Aritium in Lusitania and is also dated to the beginning of Gaius’s principate (in fact, two months after his accession). Instead of the consular names for the year as at Assos, it begins with the name of the Roman governor before whom the oath was sworn—C. Ummidius Durmius Quadratus; a precise date and the consular names are at the end, together with those of the local duoviri. What the Western oath may lack in fulsome Greek flattery and in explicit worship of Gaius, it makes up in its thorough-going terms. Gaius’ enemies will be pursued until they have paid the due penalty, the salus Caesaris is to surpass that of their own families, and if a false oath is sworn Jupiter and the deified Augustus with all the gods are to take revenge, the language repeating the fortuna and incolumitas familiar from the imperial prayers.

We may here mention the largely parallel Latin text found at Sestinum in Umbria. Its dating is uncertain, and must rely on the comparison of the language with other oaths, particularly of course the Aritian. Some scholars assign it to Gaius, others later because of the terminology which is broader, or the variations may be of local origin and not representing a development. The following expressions are included—‘I shall not cease to hate or bestir (his foe) until he shall have paid the penalty for his crime of parricide . . . his enemies I shall reckon as implacable foes . . . their impious and wicked (counsel) . . . ’ The Sestinum text, fragmentary as it is, at least reminds us that the oaths of allegiance underwent changes of form due to time or locality or both.

Claudius to Trajan: the later literary evidence

In order to assess the importance of oaths of allegiance over a longer period in the early Empire, it is useful to sketch the evidence after Gaius. Claudius showed a restraint similar to that of Tiberius in the acceptance of
honours and in the development of the emperor cult. As incoming consul for AD 42 he took the oath *in acta Augusti* along with the senators, but did not permit its extension to his own; three years later he is recorded as ‘having sworn all the usual oaths’, but reverted to earlier practice in having one representative of each magistracy swear on behalf of his colleagues.\(^2\)\(^9\) Claudius’ attempt to forbid his deification in the East is illustrated by the *Letter to the Alexandrians*, but the habit of swearing by his Genius or Fortuna continued alongside the observance of the cult, and in the eyes of many provincials any fine distinctions between the emperor’s near and actual divinity must have been meaningless. As for Nero, despite his proclaimed observance of Augustan models in AD 54 he soon exploited all the means, oaths of allegiance included, of strengthening his despotic power.

More interesting for our purpose are some of the events of the Civil War following his death. In the struggles for power amongst the provincial commanders the taking of the oath assumed a new importance. In the case of Galba, the oath-taking by the legions of Upper and Lower Germany did not take place until early January of 69, by which time Vitellius who held the latter command was himself plotting for the supreme power. The taking of the oath was protracted and difficult, with only ‘a few voices from the first ranks’ responding and the rest holding back in the hope that some would boldly reject it. The legions in Upper Germany did go further; refusing to swear the oath to Galba but not wanting to be seen throwing aside their respect for the Empire, they took it in the ‘forgotten names’ of the Senate and people of Rome. This provided Vitellius’ supporters with their opportunity and he was saluted as imperator.\(^3\)\(^0\) There was a special irony in the events in Egypt three months later, when Vespasian, who was now weighing his own chances, was so strongly supported by his troops that as he read out the *sacramentum* and offered all the prayers for Vitellius’ success they responded with complete silence. Vitellius will have been informed that the oath had been duly administered, but on the first of July Vespasian was saluted in Alexandria and the troops in Egypt took the oath to him.\(^3\)\(^1\)

The *sacramentum* became a political weapon in such a turbulent period, but it was only one part of the apparatus of oaths, vows and prayers by which acceptance of imperial power needed to be displayed. With Pliny, governor of Bithynia-Pontus under Trajan c. AD 110-2, we have the fullest literary account for the period, at a time of relatively stable conditions in the provinces. Pliny’s careful performance of his ceremonial as well as his administrative and judicial duties is recorded in the tenth book of the Letters, those *ad Traianum. Ep.* 35 reports the *sollemnia vota* on behalf of the

emperor and his house at the beginning of Pliny’s second year of office; these were the prayers offered on 3 January in Rome and the provinces, and Pliny seems to have been in Nicomedia, the capital of Bithynia at the time. Sherwin-White plausibly suggests that a meeting of the koinon (provincial council) may have coincided with this.\(^{32}\) Trajan acknowledges, and the same exchange is made in *Epp.* 100-1 a year later from Pontus, probably at Amastris. This time soldiers as well as provincials participated. Pliny also reports his celebration of the emperor’s birthday, no doubt with the customary festivals (*Epp.* 17a, 88-9).

A more important date in the province was Trajan’s *dies imperii*, 28 January, and Pliny reports for two successive years his faithful execution of duties (*Epp.* 52-3, 102-3). These were firstly the celebrations which included the prayers *pro incolumitate* (also offered at the beginning of the month) and more significantly the administration of the oath of allegiance, the text of which will have been similar to those which survive for the Julio-Claudian period. Both soldiers and civilians took the oath, with enthusiasm Pliny claims.\(^{33}\) How many provincials actually took the oath? The Assos inscription of A.D. 37 assumes that the local magistrates administered it to the citizens en masse, and we may conjecture that in Pontus an assembly was also convened for this purpose.\(^{34}\) In other centres, where Pliny was not present in person, the oath may well have been taken at meetings of the Council, on behalf of the inhabitants.

**Objections to oath-taking: the non-conformists**

Within this elaborate structure of imperial allegiance, indications of any protests either in principle or in practice against oath-taking are naturally of interest. In classical literature there are occasional passages which show that oaths in general were thought to be unnecessary between men of honour; for example, Sophocles makes Oedipus respond to Theseus’ assurance of his pledge by dismissing the need for such an oath—his word alone will suffice.\(^{35}\) It is not surprising that the Pythagoreans, with their stress on the brotherhood and on moral strictness at every level, should have forbidden the practice. In the imperial period Plutarch raised the issue of why the priest of Jupiter was not permitted to take an oath. At its lowest, the reason may have been to avert the danger of a perjured priest officiating at important public rites, but more likely it was that the word of such a man, if of anyone, was worthy of trust and there was something ill-omened about the

\(^{32}\) *The Letters of Pliny*, p.613.

\(^{33}\) *Ep.* 52. *Praeivimus et comilitensibus ius iurandum more sollemni, eadem provincialibus certatim pietate iurantibus.*

\(^{34}\) Pliny’s description does not fit a council meeting only: cf. Sherwin-White, *op.cit.*, p.634.

\(^{35}\) *Oedipus Coloneus* 644-51.
curse with which oaths usually ended.\textsuperscript{36}

In Roman Stoic thought we find some expressions of dislike for oaths. Epictetus advised against them, and Marcus Aurelius commended sober language, saying that the man ruled by the divine element within him needed neither oaths nor witnesses to his word.\textsuperscript{37} But this is far removed from the realities of imperial rule, and we may be sure that Marcus knew that explicit oaths of allegiance were necessary signs of the fidelity of his legions. There is one important example, however, of a Stoic senator refusing to participate in the annual oath-taking, Thrasea Paetus. In the famous passage beginning, 'Nero, after his murder of so many eminent men, finally yearned to extirpate Virtue itself by putting to death Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus', Tacitus summarises the case brought against him by the informer Capito Cossutianus: at the beginning of the year Thrasea avoided the customary oath, he did not attend the public prayers and had never, in spite of belonging to a priesthood, offered a sacrifice for Nero's welfare. In sum, he was guilty of deliberate withdrawal and schism.\textsuperscript{38} It was inevitable that Nero allowed a trial for \textit{maiestas} to follow and that, at this point in his despotic rule, the death sentence was passed.

But this case was somewhat isolated on the Roman side, at least in the non-conformity with oaths and prayers. We may judge that Thrasea's objection was not to oaths of allegiance in principle, but rather to the unworthiness of Nero and the hypocrisy of the senatorial class in this as in so many respects. His protest was based on political and moral grounds.

Oaths of allegiance brought more fundamental problems for those religious minorities which not only refused divine honours to the emperor but rejected the Graeco-Roman deities in toto, namely the Jews and Christians. Although at this period the Jews practised a \textit{religio licita} in the eyes of Rome, which was not true of the Christians, it is obvious that the terminology of Gentile oaths as well as their content presented problems of conscience. In regard to the general issue of recognition of the emperor and the official cult, the Jews for their part were willing to go to considerable lengths, and it is to the credit of the Romans that they generally respected the limits of Jewish tolerance. In the Temple at Jerusalem a sacrifice (of an ox and two lambs) was offered twice each day 'for Caesar and the Roman nation', and special offerings were made at the accession of Roman emperors.\textsuperscript{39} Besides this, Jewish synagogues frequently displayed in their forecourts tributes and dedications to the emperors.\textsuperscript{40} But emperor-worship

\textsuperscript{36} Quaest. Rom. 44.
\textsuperscript{38} Ann. 16.21-2.
\textsuperscript{39} Josephus, \textit{Bell.Jud.} 2.10.4; Philo, \textit{Legatio}, 23, 45.
\textsuperscript{40} Leg. 2, \textit{In Flacc.} 7, 49.
was not required of them, and on those occasions when the oath of allegiance was administered we may presume that it was in terms not offensive to the Jewish conscience. Josephus records that when Vitellius the governor of Syria was staying in Jerusalem with Herod the tetrarch, upon receiving the news of Tiberius' death he administered the oath to Gaius (an ominous vow) to the populace.\footnote{Ant.Jud. 18.5.3.} Orthodox Jews, of course, were bound by the Mosaic teaching on oaths and their rightful use, and by the Roman period a large number of refinements taught by the rabbis were observed by the faithful.

It remains to outline the problem of oaths and prayers to the emperors as they affected Christians, towards whom the Roman authorities showed no such deference. Here we find a basic confrontation which is historically very instructive and leads into the larger questions of church and state in the later Empire. The Christian attitudes to oaths were rooted in the teaching and practice of Jesus, and in the Hebraic tradition which also manifests itself at various points in the New Testament.\footnote{For example, in the Ep. to the Hebrews 6.13-18, 7.20.} Jesus placed himself in strong opposition to contemporary Jewish practices in oath-taking, which allowed many distinctions between what was binding and what was not; 'if anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' Oaths by the temple or by the altar or by heaven in effect, he taught, called God himself to witness.\footnote{Matt. 23.16ff.} The core of his teaching was to forbid his disciples to use oaths of any kind, because of the seriousness of using the divine name and attributes and the danger of false oaths: 'let what you say be simply Yes or No; anything more than this comes from the evil one.'\footnote{Matt. 5.33-7.} But it is noteworthy that at his trial, when the high priest 'adjured him by the living God' to say whether he was the Christ, he did not reject the demand because of the oath, but accepted the solemnity of the charge and affirmed his messiahship.\footnote{Matt. 26.63-4.}

In the letters of Paul there are direct echoes of the most solemn Jewish oaths, but more commonly what may be called asseverations rather than oaths, and the early Christian communities saw no conflict between this and the teaching of Jesus.\footnote{e.g. 1 Thess. 5.27, Phil. 1.8, Gal. 1.20, 1 Cor. 1.23.}

Our first external evidence of one kind of Christian oath comes from Pliny's correspondence \textit{ad Traianum}, in connexion with the trials of groups of Bithynians accused of professing this faith. Some who denied adherence to Christianity described to Pliny the weekly services, at the first of which
they met at dawn, sang a hymn to Christ as God, and bound themselves by an oath (sacramentum) 'not to commit some crime but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, from breach of trust and from denying a deposit when required to restore it.'

It is better to take the 'oath' here in its plain sense of a pledge than to link it with baptismal renunciations or with the eucharist, and to believe that its terms were quite simple after the manner of a Pauline asseveration.

As a test of adherence, Pliny had obliged the defendants to repeat after him an invocation of the Roman gods, to offer wine and incense before Trajan's image, and to curse Christ's name. This amounted to much the same as the customary oath of allegiance to the emperor by the names of the gods, and, it was recognised, could not be assented to by a genuine believer. Christians were regarded as 'atheists', non-believers in the Graeco-Roman pantheon, and it was this charge together with the refusal to swear by the Genius of the emperor which was central to the recorded trials of the second century. Thus when Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, appeared before the proconsul of Asia the heart of the Roman's urging was 'Swear by the genius of Caesar; change your mind; say "Away with the atheists"! . . . curse Christ.' Similarly in the case of the Scillitan martyrs, Saturninus told them 'We swear by the genius of our Lord the emperor, and pray for his safety, as you also ought to do.' It was the refusal to swear that brought execution.

It may finally be mentioned that at the end of the century Tertullian dealt at length in his works with these questions of conscience for Christians under the Roman rule. There was no reticence about 'offering prayers for the safety of our emperors to the eternal, true and living God', since it was through his choice the Caesars came to power and to him that they owed a duty to rule justly and effectively. But Tertullian was perfectly clear about the limitations—Christians could not worship the emperor nor participate in the offering of sacrifices to him; to swear by Caesar's Genius was to treat him as divine, and it was not possible to set aside lightly the invocations in oaths of the gods of Greece and Rome in whom they disbelieved. This would be 'a collusion of faith with idolatry', and Tertullian extended the principle to situations where tacit consent, either in verbal adjurations or in the written word, would amount to a denial of Christianity.

47. Ep. 96.7.
48. For discussion, see Sherwin-White, op.cit., pp.702-7.
53. De Idol. 20, 23.
not shrink also from applying the same considerations to service in the Roman army; he commended the Christian brought to trial for refusing to wear the chaplet and receive the imperial largess, because of the associations with pagan rites which included vows and sacrifices to Jupiter. In the work *De Idololatria*, although frequently indicating the presence of Christians in the legions, Tertullian wrote most plainly about the conflicts in loyalty; 'there is no agreement between the divine and the human sacramentum.'

It is clear that while there is some evidence elsewhere of objections to oath-taking on moral and political grounds, it was within the Christian movement during this period that the question of swearing allegiance to Caesar became most acute, on primarily religious grounds.

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The texts of the oaths themselves are of course somewhat fortuitous survivals, and the other evidence traversed above has been illustrative only, but some initial responses can be considered to the broad questions raised. The swearing of oaths of allegiance became firmly established under Augustus, after Caesar’s use of them as one of the main symbols of his power; the oath was a vital indicator of the perpetuation of the principate. On the military side, it was a natural extension of the individual sacramentum, and the legions were well aware, especially in times of upheaval, that no princeps could consider himself safely in power until tidings had come from the provinces that the oath had been taken. Its annual renewal was part of the continuing pattern of one man’s imperium. Every commander who dictated the oath was reminded whence he drew his own authority.

As for the civilian oath-taking, we are presented with a variety of settings. At the start of each year in Rome the ceremony was an important one, in which the magistrates most conspicuously, but also the senators as a body, confirmed their loyalty, not daring except in isolated cases to fail to conform. From Tacitus’ description we might conclude, unless there was contrary evidence, that in Rome the citizen assembly took the oath, at least in the early Empire. In the provinces there was no doubt some variation in practice. The Assos inscription assumes a meeting of the ecclesia and in Paphlagonia formal sessions will have been convened at the shrines of Augustus; we note that resident Romans are mentioned in both cases. At Samos the chief magistrates appear to have presided, and the same public assembly may perhaps be assumed for Palaipaphos in Cyprus. Similarly at Aritium in Spain, where either the propraetor himself, or the magistrates in his presence, is likely to have presided. At Assos and Samos an embassy of

54. *De Cor.*
55. *De Idol.* 19.
congratulation is voted at the same time. We can of course only guess how many attended such formally convened meetings, but it is certain that the members of the local council will have been prominent, ready to display their loyalty to Rome, and it is perhaps likely that as meetings of the whole citizen body gradually fell into disuse, the councils assumed more and more a representative role in such matters. The magistrates in particular would know that the Roman governor required punctilious performance of these ceremonies.

Compared with the ‘passive’ evidence of the Roman power, the numerous inscriptions recording civic decrees involving Rome and the emperor and the use of the coinage for imperial propaganda, oaths of allegiance must have left a more active and vivid impression on the mind. Many of course were themselves inscribed on stone or bronze, but they reflected something that the council or assembly had physically done on a public occasion, and the actual terms of the oaths were uncompromising and memorable. Likewise with the imperial cult; the many inscriptions reflected things the citizens regularly engaged in and witnessed—the vows and prayers and sacrifices at the altar of the Roman ruler.

It cannot have been easy therefore to disengage oneself openly from all recognition of the temporal power and the divinity of the emperor. When, in the case of the Christians, such non-conformity was based on fundamental principles and could readily be linked with suspicions of shameful practices in their own cult, we can see how exposed they were to general unpopularity, and to prosecution when public emotions ran high against them. Thus the oath of allegiance, like the rites of the imperial cult, remained a yard-stick of conformity with the regime. The Roman rulers knew their value and ensured their observance.