

# PRIESTS AND PHYSICAL FITNESS

## A NOTE ON ROMAN RELIGION

IN his magisterial *Religion und Kultus der Römer* Georg Wissowa made the statement that a Roman man or woman seeking a priesthood had, among other things, to be free of physical defects.<sup>1</sup> This has since become the *communis opinio*, sometimes in the form in which Wissowa expressed it, sometimes involving rather the idea that a priest or priestess could be deposed for such defects acquired after entry into the priesthood, and sometimes embracing both concepts simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> But it is not simply that the issue has become confused. Though 'the rule that a priest of any sort must be free from noticeable bodily infirmities is widespread',<sup>3</sup> such comparisons can be pushed too far. Even if we were to assume the existence of the rule in Rome, we would still find no mention whatever of health in the requirements for pontiffs and augurs laid down in the *lex coloniae Genetivae Iuliae*.<sup>4</sup> But as it is, there is no good reason to suppose that such a general rule was observed by Romans. Only five passages from ancient authors can be adduced in support of Wissowa's contention or the variations thereon, and not one of them actually justifies the wide scope favoured by modern scholars. Finally, there are serious obstacles in the way of the basic hypothesis which seem never to have been mentioned. Hence the purpose of this note is to show that while freedom from physical defects was a requirement for prospective Vestal Virgins and (perhaps) for the prospective priests of the *curiae* supposedly created by Romulus, there are no convincing grounds for maintaining either that this requirement was applied to other prospective priests in Rome, or that there was any rule deposing priests or priestesses who suffered bodily infirmities after they had taken up their duties.

Two of the five ancient references mentioned above refer specifically to the Vestal Virgins. Gellius and Fronto make it clear that a girl could not be chosen a Vestal if she had a speech impediment, a hearing problem, or other physical defects.<sup>5</sup> So there can be no doubt that such a rule was indeed applied to prospective Vestals. But we can scarcely generalize from this. The Vestals, after all, were subject to regulations enjoined on no other Roman priesthood, most notably the duty of chastity and the penalty of burial alive for unchastity.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*<sup>2</sup> (1912), 491. I wish to thank the anonymous referee for his comments on a draft of this paper. [All dates are B.C. unless stated otherwise.]

<sup>2</sup> Wissowa's view is repeated without modification by P. Riewald, *R.E.* i A (1920), 1643, and G. J. Szemler, *The Priests of the Roman Republic* (1972), 31. More sweeping views—based on Seneca Rhetor, *Controv.* 4. 2, to be discussed below—are espoused by A. Brelich, 'Il mito nella storia di Cecilio Metello', *S.M.S.R.* xv (1939), 34; S. F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (1949), 103 f.; and T. Köves-Zulauf, *Reden und Schweigen:*

*römische Religion bei Plinius Maior* (1972), 75 ff.

<sup>3</sup> H. J. Rose (ed.), *The Roman Questions of Plutarch* (1924), 199; cf. Köves-Zulauf, op. cit. 75.

<sup>4</sup> *C.I.L.* ii. 5439, 66 = *I.L.S.* 6087. Not that this is enough to prove the existence of the same situation in Rome; there were other differences between the priestly procedures of Urso and Rome, discussed most recently by G. Criffo (*Latomus*, xxi [1962], 689–710).

<sup>5</sup> Gellius, *N.A.* i. 12. 3; Fronto, p. 149 Naber.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Numa* 10. 4–7; *Q. R.* 96; Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* 2. 67. 3–4 and 9. 40. 3; cf. C. Koch, *R.E.* viii A (1958), 1747–52.

The rule makes sense, if only because so high a premium was set on purity. At the same time, however, a reference in the younger Pliny shows us that when a Vestal suffered a severe illness after her installation, she could be suspended from duty, but she was most definitely not deprived of her priesthood: *nam uirgines, cum ui morbi atrio Vestae coguntur excedere, matronarum curae custodidaeque mandantur* (*Epist.* 7. 19. 1). And here, one could say, the purity of the place is more important than the purity of the priestess.

The third reference is again specific rather than general. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, claiming to follow Varro, states that Romulus enacted a law whereby each *curia* should elect as its priests two men over fifty years of age, of distinguished birth and outstanding merit, of comfortable wealth and sound body; and he enjoined that these men should hold their positions for life, exempt from both civil and military duties (*Ant. Rom.* 2. 21. 3). Even if we were to suppose that this account is accurate, a moot point given the continuing uncertainty over the origins and nature of the *curiae* themselves, there is no justification for singling out one detail and claiming that it applied to all Roman priesthoods. We might just as well try to argue that every Roman priest had to be fifty years of age at the time of his appointment. Dionysius' evidence, therefore, is not merely of questionable accuracy but also of restricted scope. It proves nothing about other priesthoods in Rome, and it is the only reference which states in terms that any Roman priest had to be free of physical infirmities before he could take up his duties. Nor is this surprising: for a Roman fifty was a very considerable age,<sup>1</sup> and there was nothing to be gained by appointing a man whose health was such that he might need almost immediate replacement!

This brings us to the fourth passage for consideration, Plutarch's statement that augurs with a sore or ulcer (*ἔλκος*) were not allowed to sit and watch for birds of omen (*Quaest. Rom.* 73). It may be emphasized first that Plutarch is not reporting a rule that a priest should be without bodily defects at the time of his appointment, still less a rule that a priest *en fonction* should be stripped of his priesthood for this reason. All he says is that augurs could not perform one of their duties—admittedly one of their most important duties—so long as they were suffering from one specific affliction. Nor can this interpretation be dismissed as too narrow on the basis of a comment Cicero made to Atticus in 59. Remarking that the actions of the First Triumvirate would inevitably bring its members into disrepute, he alluded to P. Vatinius' hopes of an augurate by expressing the wish that *etiam Vatini strumam sacerdoti διαβάφω uestiant*.<sup>2</sup> This cannot be taken to prove the existence of a rule that augurs should be without defect at the time of their inauguration; for that would make it impossible to explain why Cicero failed to mention the rule again three years later, when he spent a section of the *in Vatinius* expatiating upon the horrors of Vatinius' securing that augurate.<sup>3</sup> The comment to Atticus documents only what the orator was to admit in the speech, that in his mind Vatinius and his *strumae* were inseparable.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. K. Hopkins, 'On the probable age structure of the Roman Population', *Population Studies*, xx (1966), 245–64.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *ad Att.* 2. 9. 2, adduced by Rose, loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *in Vat.* 19–20. Vatinius finally secured his augurate in 47 (see Cicero, *ad*

*fam.* 5. 10a. 2).

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *in Vat.* 39: 'strumae . . . ab ore improbo demigrarunt et aliis iam se locis conlocarunt.' Despite Lily Ross Taylor (*Athenaeum*, xlii [1964], 20), I can see no good reason for thinking that Vatinius' *strumae* were supposed to have settled on another man.

This is not all. It is in the comment he attaches to his mention of this ban that Plutarch presupposes more general rules, and it seems clear that he is guessing. Either the ban symbolizes the need for a priest to be undisturbed by pain, physical or mental; or it is a natural consequence of the idea that imperfect victims should not be used in a sacrifice—just as the victim should be free from blemish, so should priests ‘be pure, unharmed, and complete when they approach sacred matters’.<sup>1</sup> Though the first of these explanations need not detain us, the second certainly reflects a line of thought the Romans were capable of adopting. For the elder Pliny reports that M. Sergius Silus, crippled in both hands and both feet as a result of military service during the Hannibalic War, became praetor in 197 and delivered a speech recounting his exploits *cum . . . sacris arceretur a collegis ut debilis*, all this when Sergius (so far as we know) was not even a priest.<sup>2</sup> Although Köves-Zulauf apparently take this to mean that Sergius was indeed debarred from sacrificing,<sup>3</sup> the tense of *arceretur*, the tenor of the passage as a whole, and the fact that Sergius retained his praetorship point to exactly the opposite conclusion. As early as 197, therefore, the Romans were willing to let a man conduct sacrifices to the gods even when *debilis*.<sup>4</sup>

It could perhaps be objected that the situation would have turned out very differently, had Sergius been a priest. But as it happens, we know of two cases where men became augurs in spite of physical weaknesses which they were already suffering. First, there is P. Scipio, the son of Africanus. Livy states explicitly that this man became an augur in 180, and Cicero refers to his wretched health no less explicitly on three different occasions, indicating that it wavered between the precarious and the non-existent (*quam tenui aut nulla potius ualetudine!*).<sup>5</sup> So strong an expression can scarcely be written off as a description of a cold in the head or a lean and hungry look; it is sheer perversity to deny that Scipio must have become an augur in spite of physical weaknesses only too obvious to his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> The second case is more striking still. Between A.D. 8 and 14 an augurate was given to Claudius, a man whom his own mother graphically described as *portentum hominis, nec absolutum a natura, sed tantum incohatum*. We can scarcely claim that he was given special consideration because a member of the imperial family, and yet Augustus himself—model citizen and Pontifex Maximus—was prepared to countenance his inauguration.<sup>7</sup> Plutarch’s comment is worthless.

There remains the *controuersia* which the elder Seneca devoted to ‘Metellus caecatus’ and the proposition *sacerdos integer sit*.<sup>8</sup> In 241 the Pontifex Maximus L. Metellus (*cos.* I 251) rescued the Palladium from the burning temple of Vesta. The earlier, more reliable sources state that he escaped unharmed, but

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, loc. cit. (Rose’s translation).

<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *N.H.* 7. 105 (for the thought compare Seneca Rhetor, *Controv.* 4. 2. 2); T. R. S. Broughton, *Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, i. 333.

<sup>3</sup> Köves-Zulauf, op. cit. 75 and n. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the first Fabius to take the cognomen ‘Ambustus’ encountered similar difficulties (cf. Münzer, *R.E.* vi [1907], 1750), and perhaps he took that cognomen to commemorate his overcoming them.

<sup>5</sup> Livy 40. 42. 13; cf. *I.L.S.* 4 = Degraffi, *I.L.L.R.P.*, i. 311. Cicero, *off.* 1. 121; *Brut.*

77; *de sen.* 35 (whence the quotation); cf. Velleius Paterculus 1. 10. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Contra*, Broughton, op. cit. i. 407 n. 6; Köves-Zulauf, op. cit. 76 n. 38; Szemler, op. cit. 142 and 180 n. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Antonia’s description: Suetonius, *Claud.* 3. 2; cf. Ernestine Leon, ‘The Imbecillitas of the Emperor Claudius’, *T.A.P.A.* lxxix (1948), 79–86. The augurate: Suetonius, *Claud.* 4. 7; cf. Martha W. Hoffman Lewis, *The Official Priests of Rome under the Julio-Claudians* (1955), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Seneca Rhetor, *Controv.* 4. 2.

somehow the story grew up that he was blinded, either by the flames or by seeing what was not to be looked on by human eyes.<sup>1</sup> In any event, Seneca's declamation is the earliest surviving version of this tale, and it is regularly invoked to prove that *pontifices* had to be free of any physical infirmities. But though Lanfranchi and Bonner have demonstrated that there is far less fictional or Greek material in the *Controuersiae* than used to be thought, their main reason for considering this particular discussion a reflection of Roman usage seems to be that Seneca used the rules governing the selection of Vestals as the basis for another conundrum.<sup>2</sup> This argument is not only unsound. It also glosses over the fact that Seneca's declamation rests on a proposition for which there is no other evidence whatever, namely that a priest could be deprived of his priesthood because of bodily defects developing after his appointment. Such a provision is not even reported among the numerous restrictions which hedged about the *flamen Dialis*.<sup>3</sup> And had there been such a rule, we may be sure that many a Roman *nobilis* would have had his hands full defending a priesthood against the intrigues of his *inimici*. In a sense it is positively unfortunate that Seneca failed to choose a different *exemplum*; for nobody, I think, would be prepared to entertain seriously the idea that Octavian should have given up his position as *pontifex* because of the wounds he suffered in Illyria, although those wounds left him with a limp and a limp was considered ill-omened.<sup>4</sup> For this particular declamation, then, Seneca developed a theme which has no relation to Roman practice.

It may now be observed that just as we have found augurs inaugurated in spite of pre-existing disabilities, so there is evidence which shows—when it is read without preconceptions—that pontiffs too could suffer from physical defects even at the time of their appointment. For there is Pliny's tale of the 'Metellus pontifex' so tongue-tied that he supposedly suffered many months of anguish while he practised the formula to be spoken at the dedication of a temple to Ops Opifera: *Metellum pontificem adeo inexplantae [sc. linguae] fuisse accipimus ut multis mensibus tortus credatur dum meditatur in dedicanda aede Opi Opiferae dicere*.<sup>5</sup> True, Pliny appears to have doubts about the accuracy of this story, reporting that the man was allegedly (*accipimus*) so tongue-tied that he supposedly (*credatur*) suffered many months of anguish, and this reluctance to believe his source has been taken as a sign that Pliny knew of a rule that pontiffs

<sup>1</sup> Nothing is said of injuries by Cicero, *pro Scauro* 48 and *de sen.* 30; Ovid, *Fasti* 6. 437 ff.; Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* 2. 66. 3-4; or Valerius Maximus 1. 4. 5 and 8. 13. 2. That he suffered burns is reported by Orosius 4. 11. 9 and Augustine, *C.D.* 3. 18. 2. The blindness is also reported by Seneca, *de prov.* 5. 2; Pliny, *N.H.* 7. 141; Juvenal 6. 265 (cf. *schol. in Juv.* 3. 138); and Ampelius, *Lib. mem.* 20. 11. The tale has been discussed at length by O. Leuze, 'Metellus caecatus', *Philologus*, lxiiv (1905), 95-115 and by Brelich, *op. cit.* 30-41.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca Rhetor, *Controu.* 1. 2; F. Lanfranchi, *Il diritto nei retori Romani* (1938), 286 ff.; Bonner, *op. cit.* 104.

<sup>3</sup> Gellius, *N.A.* 10. 15. (It cannot be assumed that Gellius took the provision for

granted, since he reports it of the Vestals; nor is he likely to have forgotten it, even though he introduces his list with the comment *haec ferme sunt quae commemoramus*.) Brelich, *op. cit.* 34, tries to use the story of Pseudo-Plutarch (*par. min.* 17), that Metellus lost and regained his sight, as an indication that the author was aware of the rule under discussion and was attempting to circumvent the difficulties it raised. But it is not even certain that the subject of the anecdote is Metellus: see Jacoby, *F. Gr. Hist.* iii A. 380 f.

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 20 and 80, with Cicero, *ad Att.* 1. 16. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Pliny, *N.H.* 11. 174. I have discussed this passage in detail elsewhere (*Phoenix*, xxvii [1973], 35-41).

should be free of bodily infirmities.<sup>1</sup> However, Pliny's reserve cannot be explained by supposing the existence of a rule which deposed pontiffs already installed; for he too knows the story of 'Metellus caecatus' and shows no qualms about accepting it, even though it produces a Pontifex Maximus with a disability at least as serious as that of being tongue-tied (*N.H.* 7. 141). His reluctance would fit better with the supposition that he knew of a rule debarring the unfit from becoming *pontifices* in the first place. But since we have yet to find explicit evidence for such a rule, this is too slender a foundation on which to build when, as I have argued elsewhere, his unhappiness with the tale can be explained perfectly well on quite different lines; it resulted, that is, from his believing—correctly—that the man in question was L. Metellus, the consul of 251 and rescuer of the Palladium, and from his being unable to reconcile the man's being tongue-tied with his reputation as *optimus orator*.<sup>2</sup>

To sum up our findings, then, there was no rule requiring the deposition of any priest or priestess for bodily infirmities which developed after their installation. The evidence reports only a temporary suspension from duty, and that applied only in the case of Vestals and augurs. There was a rule enjoining freedom from physical defects for prospective Vestals and—perhaps—for prospective priests of Romulus' *curiae*; in the one case we may surmise that this resulted from the emphasis placed on purity, in the other that it was conditioned by the (for Romans) advanced age at which these priests assumed their duties. But beyond this we cannot go. Even if the Romans may have preferred that their priests be 'pure, unharmed and complete', no hard and fast rule was applied to the other priests in Rome, nor should we assume one. Whatever religious scruples the Romans may have felt or would have liked to feel, there were also realities to be faced. Quite apart from the fact that most Roman priests pursued careers involving military service and the consequent risk of wounds and mutilation, they all alike lived in an environment which did little or nothing to protect them against illness, disease, and deformity.<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that so many Roman *cognomina* refer to physical defects.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Köves-Zulauf, *op. cit.* 75 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Phoenix*, xxvii (1973), 36 f. There is another suspect pontiff, C. Scribonius Curio (*cos.* 76), a member of the college from *ca.* 60 to 53 (Broughton, *op. cit.* ii. 186 f.); him somebody *quia corpore et lingua percitum et inquietem nomine histrionis uix sani Burbuleium appellabat* (Sallust, *Hist.* 2. 25 M. with Val.

Max. 9. 14. 5).

<sup>3</sup> For all its many faults J. Scarborough's *Roman Medicine* (1969) gives a fair idea of the unhealthy conditions in Rome; which lends point to Cicero's remarks about the need for mental purity (*de leg.* 2. 24).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (1965), 62 ff. and 235 ff.