

XV.—*Vota publica pro salute alicuius*

LLOYD W. DALY

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

In the history of Roman religion the taking of vows in times of stress, trouble, and danger is a feature as characteristic as it is ancient. Individuals had always, among the Romans as among the Greeks, sought to win the favor of their gods, when faced by perils such as those of warfare, shipwreck, or sickness, by promising to make specific offerings if their prayers should be heard. The innumerable ex-votos from temples bear witness to the practice. So too the Roman state, as a corporate entity, took vows for its preservation from the threats of war, plague and the like. Such *vota publica* were also early taken *pro salute rei publicae* at five and ten year intervals (*vota quinquennalia* and *decennalia*) and also annually on the first of January when the new magistrates took office.¹

Thus, for the Republic we know of private vows for the welfare of individuals and public vows for the welfare of the state, but in the Empire the two practices combine in public vows for the welfare of an individual, the emperor. We first encounter such vows among the honors paid Caesar. Dio (44.6) states that vows were taken annually on Caesar's behalf. The practice did not become firmly established until the time of Augustus. In the *Res Gestae* (§ 9) Augustus reports that the senate decreed that vows for his health (*valetudo*)² should be taken by the consuls and priests every fourth year (*quinto quoque anno*), an observance which was begun in 28 B.C. and regularly repeated but not extended beyond Augustus' reign.³ Augustus does not, however, mention the annual *nuncupatio votorum pro salute imperatoris* which was established apparently in the year 30.⁴ The taking and fulfillment of these annual vows was continued beyond Augustus and becomes a commonplace of the *Acta*

¹ Cf. in general Marquardt-Wissowa, *Römische Staatsverwaltung* (Leipzig 1885) 3.264-9 and J. Toutain, "Votum," *DS* 5.975.

² The restoration is probably correct in this detail. While one might expect *salutis* (so Bergk), the Greek has *σωτηρίας*, and the well known fact of Augustus' frail health, referred to by Suetonius (*Aug.* § 81), could easily justify the use of *valetudinis*.

³ Cf. Mommsen, *Res Gestae*, p. 42.

⁴ Cf. Mommsen, *CIL* 1², p. 305. The date is based on Dio (51.19) who reports, under the year 30, that Augustus was included in the vows on behalf of the people

Fratrum Arvalium under his successors. Public sentiment would, it seems, have been inclined to extend this form of flattery to other prominent but private individuals, as in the case of Sejanus (Dio 58.2.8), but this practice, like that of swearing by the genius of the emperor, fell under the law of treason.⁵

These annual *vota pro salute imperatoris* had, then, become conventional and routine, but there were other *vota publica* which may be described as *extraordinaria*. Such notably are those recorded by the Arval Brethren on occasion of the birthday of the emperor and of members of the imperial family, or on occasion of the emperor's arrival in the city. Into this class fall the vows taken for the recovery of the emperor from ill health. In the passage of the *Res Gestae* immediately following the one previously mentioned, Augustus reports sacrifices made *pro valetudine mea*, and while those sacrifices are not described as votive they are obviously closely related if not identical. We cannot identify any of the occasions on which such sacrifices were made, but Augustus was ill frequently enough, e.g., at the time of the dedication of the temple of the deified Julius in 29, and again at the celebration of the votive games in 28, so that he was unable to participate in the ceremonies.⁶ It must remain something of a question in the case of the Augustan vows whether *valetudo* has any special significance or whether the word is used in its neutral sense as a synonym for *salus*.

There is a somewhat clearer instance of such vows taken for Claudius as recorded in an entry of the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* which is dated between 50 and 54. There we read: "Neronem Clau[dium etc. s]alvum incolumemque con[serves et in reliquom malae v]aletudinis primo quoque [tempore praestes expertem]." In the year 54 again, when Claudius was on his deathbed, Tacitus says⁸ that the senate was convened and that the consuls and priests took vows *pro incolumitate principis*. So also for Nero the *Acta* record under the year 66: "propter [..... et valet]udinem C[ae]sar[is] Augusti vota nuncupavit in C[apitolio]." ⁹

and the senate, but it is not usually noted that in the statement which introduces this list of honors, Dio says: ἐν δὲ τούτῳ καὶ ἔτι πρότερον . . . οἱ ἐν οἴκῳ Ῥωμαῖοι ἐφηφίσαντο κτλ.

⁵ Mommsen, *Staatsrecht* (Leipzig 1888) 2.811.

⁶ Dio 51.22.9 and 53.1.6.

⁷ *CIL* 6.2034; Henzen, p. LVIII.

⁸ *Ann.* 12.68.

⁹ *CIL* 6.2044 g and h; Henzen, p. LXXXIII.

In general, then, one gets the impression that vows including the name of any individual are a phenomenon peculiar to the Empire, something closely allied to emperor worship, and part of the ritual of flattering pomp and circumstance that mushroomed so rapidly on the decomposing soil of the Republic. One need not necessarily suspect the sincerity of vows for the health of Augustus, but vows for the health of Nero in 66 are surely a perversion of what had once been an honest form of pious prayer for the welfare of the state. Such epiphenomena of the process of decline are worth investigating in their own right.

The whole point is that the beginning of this perversion of public vows is to be found in the late years of the Republic. After Caesar's death the first instance, to which attention seems not to have been called in this connection, is the taking of public vows for the recovery of A. Hirtius. In the seventh *Philippic* (§ 12) Cicero says of Hirtius: "Aequum, credo, putavit vitam, quam populi Romani votis retinuisset, pro libertate populi Romani in discrimen adducere." And again in the tenth *Philippic* (§ 16) he says of him: "nondum ex longinquitate gravissimi morbi recreatus quidquid habuit virium, id in eorum libertatem defendendam contulit, quorum votis iudicavit se a morte revocatum." That vows were taken for Hirtius' *valetudo* or *salus* is clear from these passages. Hirtius had been seriously ill since the summer of 44¹⁰ and was not entirely recovered by the beginning of the next year.¹¹ It might be supposed that the vows referred to by Cicero were taken on the first of January 43 as a continuation of the annual honor so paid to Caesar, but it seems rather unlikely that, in the brief interval between the first of January and Hirtius' departure for Mutina, enough improvement in his health could have taken place to justify Cicero's attribution of it to the effect of the vows. It is much more likely, then, that these were *vota extraordinaria* and that they were taken sometime in the second half of the year 44. If we can interpret Cicero's words in the first *Philippic* (§ 37) as referring to these *vota*, as I feel sure we must, then they were taken before the beginning of September, on which date that oration was delivered. There Cicero says: "hoc contemnitis, quod sensistis tam caram populo Romano vitam A. Hirti fuisse?" He is comparing this public demonstration on behalf of Hirtius, whatever it was, with the applause for Brutus at the *Ludi Apollinares*, and sees in it something

¹⁰ Cic. *Fam.* 12.22.2.

¹¹ Cic. *Phil.* 7.12. Delivered in January. Cf. Gelzer, "Tullius," *RE* 7A (1939) 1062.

much more impressive than the applause. The vows suit the situation very well, and if we do not believe that it is the vows to which Cicero here refers, we must suppose that there was some other public demonstration of which we know nothing. The fact that Caesar's name had already been included in the public vows would make it more natural that this should be done for Hirtius, and the hope that was at the time being reposed in the consul designate would have lent a tone of real sincerity to the prayers for his recovery.

There is not, to my knowledge, any other or earlier instance of *vota publica pro valetudine alicuius* at Rome, but there is a familiar and highly significant incident that bears directly upon the origin of the practice. The occasion was late in 50 when Pompey was suffering from a critical illness at Naples. It became a rhetorical commonplace to exclaim how much better off he would have been if he had then succumbed and not survived to face defeat and ignominious death.¹² In any case, Naples and some of the surrounding municipalities put on quite a show of public concern for his recovery. Cicero mentions specifically Naples and Pozzuoli as well as *oppida*; with Juvenal it becomes *multae urbes*, and with Velleius *universa Italia*. The point is that Cicero tells us explicitly that public vows were made at this time.¹³ His reaction to the display was that it was utterly insincere, a silly business and typically Greek.¹⁴ Thus we see that at this time it was outlandish, if not unheard of, for a respectable Roman to receive such honors. It was, of course, by no means unheard of that Greek states should pay fulsome and effusive honors to a Roman official. The voting of public honors to individuals was an art which the Greeks had cultivated intensively at least since the time of Alexander,¹⁵ but a respectable Roman sneered at it, as Cicero did at the honors paid Verres by the Syracusans.¹⁶ We need not, however, rely on any such impressions as to the novelty and unprecedented character of the vows taken for Pompey's recovery by the municipalities of Italy. Dio tells us in unequivocal terms that this was the first time anything of the sort had been done. "So well disposed to him," says Dio, "were

¹² Cic. *Tusc.* 1.86; Vell. 2.48; Sen. *Cons. Marc.* 20.4; Juv. 10.283-5.

¹³ *Att.* 8.16.1: "municipia . . . de illo aegroto vota faciebant." Cf. *Att.* 9.5.3 as well as Velleius and Juvenal.

¹⁴ *Tusc.* 1.86 and *Att.* 9.5.3.

¹⁵ Cf. Pfister, "Soteria," *RE* 3A (1927) 1221-31 and the inscription cited there from Nesos recording the celebration in honor of the recovery of Thersippus (*IG* 12.2.645, c. 320 B.C.).

¹⁶ *Verr.* 2.2.154.

practically all the municipalities in Italy that, when, a short time before, they heard that he was critically ill, they took public vows for his recovery. That this was a great and brilliant distinction they conferred upon him no one could deny, for there is no other individual, with the exception of those who thereafter acquired supreme power, for whom such an honor was ever decreed."¹⁷ This sweeping statement leaves out of account the public vows at Rome for Hirtius, but they were obviously less famous. So too, in speaking of Hirtius, Cicero disregards Pompey. In the first *Philippic* (§ 37) he says of Hirtius: "In whose case do we recall such concern on the part of the *boni*, such fear on the part of all? Surely in none." He is thinking only of those vows taken at Rome and can disregard those for Caesar because they were annual and not extraordinary.

This, then, seems to be the history of *vota publica pro valetudine* (or *salute*) *alicuius*. The municipalities, led by the Neapolitan Greeks, pointed the way with vows for Pompey's recovery in 50. Not to be outdone, the Roman senate included Caesar's name in the old annual vows for the welfare of the state. In 44 public vows were taken at Rome for the recovery of Hirtius, the consul designate. And so we are fully prepared for the use of public vows which we find prevalent under the Empire. The whole practice is clearly part and parcel of the development of the great-man complex, which is so closely associated with the collapse of the Republic. One has only to compare the spirit in which such honors as vows were then accepted with the earlier humility of a Curius Dentatus refusing Samnite gold in order to appreciate Cicero's feeling that the vows for Pompey's recovery were a typically Greek form of flattery and unbecoming a Roman. The rapidity with which this feeling of contempt broke down may perhaps be measured to some degree by the complacency with which Cicero repeatedly refers to the vows on behalf of Hirtius' health a few years later.¹⁸

¹⁷ Dio 41.6.3-4. Velleius (2.48), if correctly interpreted, also gives the same information. He says, "Italia vota pro salute eius, primi omnium civium, suscepit," which Hainsselin and Watelet properly translate: "pour la première fois l'Italie entière faire des vœux pour le salut d'un citoyen" (*Velleius Paternulus et Florus*, Paris 1932).

¹⁸ It must, of course, be remembered that the *Tusculan Disputations* were written in 45/4, and that different opinions expressed by Cicero at different times on the same subject are as apt to represent his varying reaction to expediency as they are to represent any real change of mind or heart.