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VIII.13 The effect of the oath among a virtuous people

- The Spirit of Law - Book VIII. On the corruption of the principles of the three governments -

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VIII.13 The effect of the oath among a virtuous people

There has been no people, says Livy, [1] where dissoluteness was introduced later than among the Romans, and where moderation and poverty were honored for longer.

The *oath* had such force among these people that nothing attached them more to the laws. In order to respect it, they often did what they would never have done for glory or for fatherland.

When Quintius Cincinnatus, consul, tried to raise an army in the city against the Æqui and the Volscians, the tribunes opposed it. "Well," he said, "let all who have taken an oath to last year's consul march under my flag." [2] In vain did the tribunes protest that they were no longer bound by that oath ; that when they had taken it, Quintius was a private citizen. The people were more religious than those who made it their business to lead them : they listened to neither the distinctions nor the tribunes' interpretations.

When those same people wanted to withdraw to the Mons Sacer, they felt prevented by the oath they had taken to the consuls to follow them into war. [3] They came up with a plan to kill them. They were made to understand that the oath would be none the less valid. We can gauge the notion they had of the violation of the oath by the crime they were ready to commit.

After the battle of Cannæ, the frightened people tried to withdraw to Sicily. Scipio made them swear they would stay in Rome. The fear of violating the oath overcame every other fear. Rome was a vessel secured by two anchors in the tempest, religion and morality.

[1] Book I.

[2] Livy, book III.

[3] Livy, book II.