

The reign of vespasian

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When the Julio-Claudian dynasty crumbled and civil war ensued, one man was able to gain control of the empire and to cement his position sufficiently to found a new dynasty. Titus Flavius Vespasian was born on the 7th of November in 9AD. His father, Titus Flavius Sabinus, was a tax collector and died when Vespasian was still young; his mother was one Vespasia Polla. His origins were therefore rather lowly, there may have been a knight in his father's family and his maternal grandfather was definitely equestrian and his uncle senator. Still, he was by no means part of the Roman aristocracy.

He began his military career as a tribune in Thrace, he then moved along the ranks of quaestor, aedile, and praetor until he was given a high post in the II Augusta in Upper Germania under Claudius. He then gained a suffect consulship in 51AD as well as two priesthoods, including the augurate. He was then made proconsul of Africa, a successful placement for the end of a career. But in 66 Nero needed someone to put down the Jewish revolt in Judea and Vespasian was chosen to lead the three legions, more due to Nero's paranoia than to Vespasian's previous success in the field.

Not only was Vespasian not related to any big family in Rome that might be persuaded to turn against Nero, but he had even married unambitiously. His wife, Flavia Domitilla, a Junian Latin by birth, gave him a daughter, who died young, and two sons, Titus and Domitian, before dying young herself. Yet from this position, Vespasian was able to further his career to the ultimate point and become the ruler of the known world. After Nero's suicide in 68AD concerning the Vindex affair, Galba at first took over. But the legions rebelled against him and Otho was successful in his coup.

Otho however was unable to remain in power and Vitellius with a little help from his legions in Germania saw his chance. After the first battle of Cremona, Vitellius was victorious, Otho committed suicide and by April 69AD, Vitellius was in charge at Rome. On the first of July of that same year, Tiberius Julius Alexander, and the two legions of Egypt in Alexandria proclaimed Vespasian emperor. A few days later his own three legions in Judea followed suit. They were followed by the three legions of Syria, commanded by Mucianus, as well as the client kingdoms of the area (in whole interest it was to help the up and coming should they succeed).

Soon the Danubian legions under Antonius Primus too rebelled and defeated Vitellius at the second battle of Cremona. Soon after this Vitellius was found dead. Upon this news Vespasian immediately sent Mucianus, without a doubt his most important ally, and Domitian, his son, to Rome. He sent Titus back to Judea to finish off the war there (only Jerusalem was still withstanding the Roman attack) and Vespasian himself stayed in Alexandria. Vespasian remained in Alexandria until late 70 AD, almost a year after his recognition as emperor in Rome.

Many have speculated as to the reasons behind this prolonged absence of the new emperor from Rome. It is undeniable that Egypt was a very important province to the Romans, both financially, through its grain, and strategically, in its location, yet both our sources and our common sense tells us there was more to Vespasian's prolonged stay than that. His absence from Rome during the establishment of his rule allowed him to disassociate himself from all the bloodshed that was inevitably linked with this, like the

senatorial bickering about who betrayed Nero and Galba and the cruel execution of the young son of Vitellius.

By the time Vespasian returned things were stable in his favour and he was able to punish some of his powerful allies, claiming they had acted outside his knowledge. This was both a handy way to remain popular with Rome as well as a way to rid himself of allies too powerful, like Antonius Primus for example. Another important aspect of Vespasian's stay in Alexandria was the control of corn. Our literary sources see this as a threat of starvation to Rome, but it might well have been the opposite, as during those days the main bulk of Roman corn was imported from North Africa, where Vitellius had a large amount of supporters.

So perhaps Vespasian ensured that Rome did not starve by sending it Egyptian corn. Yet the most unusual reason for Vespasian's stay given to us by the sources is that he remained in order to build up a mythical legend around his name and person. A number of stories are left to us, for example that he returned vision to a blind man and rendered the use of his limbs to another, who was a cripple. This could be seen as a metaphor for his "healing" of the empire. A number of visits to temples and divine predictions and benedictions of his reign are also relayed to us.

Titus went to the temple of Aphrodite on Paphos and was told in no uncertain terms that his father would be emperor. Vespasian himself visited Mount Carmel and the temple of Serapis, where both the high priests confirmed his right to reign. Without a doubt these actions had a dual effect. Vespasian's origins were a weak point, he needed a lift, in order to like his predecessors,

be associated with a particular divinity, as for example Caesar had been with Venus. The Julio-Claudians themselves obviously had the possibility to show off their links to Augustus.

Something, which even Vespasian's immediate predecessors, had attempted to make use off, however weak, like Galba utilising his link to Livia, as he had been one of the beneficiaries of her will. But simultaneously, Vespasian also impressed the locals by taking part in their cults and showing respect for their local gods. No princeps had visited Egypt since Augustus; so perhaps the image of the princeps in Egypt needed some showing off in order to keep the locals happy with those who ruled them.

Whether or not people believed the stories of Vespasian's miraculous healing of the blind and the cripple, the story was broadcast and everyone at least knew a tiny bit more about him and his claims to the post of Princeps. After the uncertainties of civil war, stability was craved all over the empire.

Vespasian's major asset was his dynastic possibility, his two sons. The importance of having the right heirs had been made very clear throughout the Julio-Claudian era, and even more so during the civil war, as Galba's fall was caused in part due to his unpopular choice of heir.

Titus was 30 in 69, and should disaster strike, Domitian was 18; so Vespasian's two sons meant he was twice as likely to be able to set up a lasting stable dynasty. The year of the four emperors had an important impact on the way a desirable princeps was viewed. Problems appeared to arise when succession was less than obvious, so simply a princeps who could restore stability, not just during his own lifetime, but also through his

children was desired. Vespasian was the first to explicitly say that his sons would succeed him, but aside from that, he put them forward in the usual manner.

Titus, being the eldest, was of course favoured for succession. First they were both made Princeps Iuventutis, not necessarily an obvious step with Titus. Titus was known as Caesar and as Imperator as well, Domitian as Caesar in the East. Titus held seven consulships with his father, was his colleague in tribunicia potestas in 70AD and joined him in the censorship in 73AD. Domitian held six consulships in his father's lifetime, and was allowed to mint coins in his likeness. The dynastic unity between Titus, Domitian and their father was very strong and the implications were clear.

As much as Titus may have appeared as his co-regent, Vespasian was still very much personally in control. His daily routine is famous from Pliny the Elder's work. Not only that, but he looked back to Nero and some of his other predecessors and made some important changes in his household. Nero had been heavily criticised for his excesses and the importance he allowed his freedmen to gain. Vespasian lived a life devoid of outward excessive pomp, as did the rest of the court. He improved accessibility to his presence and abolished the routine searches for weapons on anyone who wished to have an audience with him.

The strong-willed imperial women who had previously created intrigue and presumed assassination plots were also absent from Vespasian's court. After the death of his wife, he never remarried and was satisfied with a discreet concubine, Caenis. His freedmen no longer had the power they had enjoyed

in previous reigns. Titus personally oversaw the writing of letters and decrees, as his father's closest colleague. Upon becoming emperor, Vespasian renamed himself Imperator Caesar Vespasianus Augustus. He called himself Imperator to affirm his military background (and perhaps his debt to the army).

Although he had no formal link with the previous dynasty, he still adopted their name. Caesar was now slowly becoming a job description rather than a surname. Augustus, he perhaps adopted to highlight the similarities between his situation and that of Augustus. No doubt he also thought he might benefit from the connotations associated with this name. As he was an emperor without links to the previous dynasty, Vespasian had to legitimise his claim to power in a way that reminds us of Augustus. Vespasian was emperor because he was the best man for the job.

His relationship with the senate therefore had to be good. He made them feel useful by attending their meetings assiduously, by using them to fill important governmental posts, by granting free speech in the senate house, by being easily accessible to senators, by requesting the advice of the senate on numerous occasions, and by putting an end to treason trials. On the other hand, he celebrated his "dies imperium" on the first of July each year, thus implying that the army was the real instrument to his power, and not the senate.

He also, in his Lex de Imperio Vespasiani gave himself power to do whatever he felt was right. The senate therefore was as little in power during the reign of Vespasian as it had been under the Julio-Claudians. Like many of his

predecessors, Vespasian extensively rebuilt Rome. The damage done by the great fire in 64 AD and the civil wars was extensive and not yet rebuilt by the time Vespasian acceded. He restored, or rebuilt, a huge amount of temples in the centre of Rome, perhaps attempting to equate the particularly Augustan and Julio-Claudian centre with equally grand and important Flavian buildings.

He reconstructed the Capitoline temple, which was destroyed during the civil wars, and the neighbouring tabularium. He finished the temple of Claudius. A predecessor Vespasian reinstated and claimed to have been on very good terms with. His Titus did the same with Claudius' son Britannicus, with whom he attended school as a boy. Vespasian rebuilt the temple of Vesta, restored the temple of Marcellus (in honour of Augustus?), and the temple of Honos and Virtus. He then built an arch to commemorate his victories in Judea and held an impressive triumph during which the spoils were paraded around.

These very spoils paid for some of Vespasian's buildings, like the Coliseum and the Templum Pacis. So Vespasian held a triumph in part to inaugurate his new buildings and to underline the reinforcement of the military authority of the Principate. There is a lot of evidence of his building both in Rome, in Italy or in the Provinces (e. g. the amphitheatre at Puteoli). He was also responsible for some military reforms, like extensive reorganisations in the communication systems throughout the empire.

Perhaps he remembered how cut-off he had been from news from Rome in those tempestuous days of 69AD. A large number of bridges bear inscriptions with his name and the roads were greatly ameliorated too. Some

legionary camps began to be constructed in stone from his reign on. It has been suggested that this was more to keep the soldiers occupied and fit than for any practical reason. After all once Vespasian was in Rome, his priority was clearly to keep the peace and his armies were perhaps a little idle.

He also encouraged the soldiers to specialise in a specific military field. A result of this was that fewer and fewer Italians joined the legions. More lucrative options were now open to them and the attraction to the military was slim. For those who did crave it, there was always the urban cohorts or the praetorian guards, which were much closer to home than the legions. Although Trajan was later still able to raise a couple of legions in Italy at the start of his reign, the practise to raise legions in Italy became much rarer as time went on.

But all this building and paying of troops cost a great deal of money and after Nero's excesses and the civil wars it is no surprise to us that the treasuries were nearly empty. So Vespasian was responsible for an extensive financial reform that gained him the reputation of being somewhat less than generous. He reorganised the collection of taxes, both in Rome and in the Provinces. He created the *fiscus Iudaicus*, *fiscus Alexandrinus* and the *fiscus Asiaticus*, to do this. He raised a few extra taxes too.

He abolished the exemptions given by Nero and Galba, like the immunity of Greece. He paid a great deal of attention to lands illegally held by individuals and reclaimed them for the state and also sold the *subseciva*, the lands undistributed in colonies etc. He was also interested in the fiscal profits the state could gain from trade and encouraged it. However his reputation is

probably exaggerated as he managed to refill the treasuries without resorting to violence and confiscations and none of his governors were found guilty of extortion.

Yet he was still able to exempt all doctors and teachers from paying taxes. Whatever the exact details of his financial policy were, it was clearly very successful. So although Vespasian started life with a mediocre parentage and an average military career, he was able, through quick thinking, powerful friends (Mucianus) and the support of the army to gain the empire for himself. The hapless state of the senate and of the empire after the civil wars no doubt aided his cause. But lady Luck too must have smiled on him.

It was imperative that he gain control of the empire in the way that was so far established, as a Princeps but simultaneously that he not give the impression that that was what he was doing. The events of the last year clearly indicated that a return to the Principate of Nero would not be appreciated. So Vespasian used his diplomacy to reel in the senators and changed certain surface arrangements but still managed to keep the Princeps on the top rung of the decision-making ladder as well as establish his dynasty clearly. And with all that, the Romans still remembered him fondly.