TITUS FLAVIUS VESPASIANUS
9-79 CE

VESPASIAN: POWER AND PRESENTATION

The series of papers on the reign of Vespasian (AD 69-79) which appear in this volume of Acta Classica owe their existence to a day-long conference held at the University of Queensland in November 2009. One aim of the conference was to mark the 2000th anniversary of Vespasian’s birth in AD 9. A more personal aim for those in attendance was a desire to honour the work of Brian Jones and Bob Milns, whose lifelong interest in Rome’s Flavian emperors has greatly influenced many scholars, and in particular those who offered papers on the day.¹ As the day unfolded, discussion centred repeatedly on the ways in which Vespasian presented himself and his sons to the inhabitants of the Empire, and especially to the Senate and people of Rome. It would be no easy task to supersede the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and certainly Vespasian could not rely on armed might alone. His power had to be presented in ways which responded to a variety of tensions and sensibilities. His success in establishing a new dynasty in a difficult environment can hardly be denied, so his management of these tensions deserves credit. In different ways, the six papers which follow may be seen as providing insight into some of these tensions, and into Vespasian’s management of them.

The first three papers focus on Suetonius’ biography. David Wardle examines the ways in which Suetonius carefully navigated through positive and negative portrayals of episodes from Vespasian’s early career, eventually

arriving at a point of despair and trepidation for the subject which is dramatically relieved by his unexpected elevation to the principate. Vespasian is portrayed as a remarkably passive figure who becomes the recipient of empire through no planning of his own. Suetonius takes a positive view of Vespasian overall, but his treatment shows the problems caused retrospectively by Vespasian’s rise to power under emperors as difficult as Caligula and Nero. Suetonius distances Vespasian from negative aspects of the Julio-Claudians and simultaneously emphasizes the excellence of his actions.

Bob Milns analyses the topic of Vespasian’s humour, to which Suetonius devotes one-twelfth of his biography. Among several prominent themes, that of Vespasian’s *avaritia* stands out. Vespasian was fundamentally good-natured, but there is a particular association between his humour and the disreputable manner in which he made money. According to Suetonius (*Vesp*. 23.1), humour was used in this connection ‘in order that he might lessen the animosity in the case of unseemly profits.’ In general, the emperor’s *dicacitas* or ‘biting wit’ was not ‘gentlemanly’ and was seen as being appropriate to money-lenders or tax-collectors. At times, however, Milns finds that Vespasian employed humour that *was* appropriate to a gentleman, especially his use of jokes or *bon mots* derived from Greek classics (Suet. *Vesp*. 22). In combination, Vespasian’s humour was that of a no-nonsense, well educated business person. Milns concludes that the emperor was not masking or making light of his family background in money-lending, tax-collecting and mule-trading. He was actually flaunting it (cf. Suet. *Vesp*. 12), much as Cato the Elder once advertised his *parsimonia* and origins among the Italian bourgeoisie.

Michael Charles and Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides question whether Vespasian’s wife, Flavia Domitilla, was in fact born a slave or freedwoman, as is widely believed. Their reading of Suetonius’ passage on her origins (*Vesp*. 3) concludes that she may well have been freeborn while also of Junian Latin status. Thus her marriage to Vespasian would no longer be controversial from the point of view of her citizenship. Once more, the source material seems to have been shaped profoundly by ancient criticism of Vespasian’s family background.

The final three papers are concerned above all with archaeological, topographical and numismatic evidence. Rashna Taraporewalla investigates the

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construction of memory under Vespasian. In particular, she outlines various ways in which the so-called ‘Templum Pacis’ perpetuated the public’s memory of Vespasian’s achievements, especially memory of the Jewish triumph, which otherwise might have been an occasion of ephemeral importance. Her paper provides insight not only into ‘how’ this was done – through the mnemonic contexts of place, objects, ritual behaviour and textual narratives – but also into ‘why’ it was done – as a means of involving the people of Rome in constructing an enduring memory of the Jewish War and its consequences for the Empire which would validate the Flavian claim to power. In essence, Vespasian deserved to rule because the Flavian victory brought peace, stability and abundance to the empire. These achievements were subsequently celebrated in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* and Josephus’ *Jewish War*, which concludes with a mention of the swift construction and inauguration of the Templum Pacis.

**Hugh Lindsay** notes Vespasian’s emphasis on the Capitol in place of Julio-Claudian emphasis on the Palatine. He depicts the Flavians as populists and underlines Flavian messages that the new dynasty was better at aiding the Roman plebs than its predecessors. The Colosseum, for example, was built for the plebs in place of an impressive lake associated with Nero’s Domus Aurea, which subsequently became symbolic of a highly indulgent lifestyle. Other constructions or restorations in this vein included the Templum Pacis, the Temple of Honos and Virtus at the Porta Capena, the Temple of Claudius on the Caelian, and the Capitol, which had been devastated by fire in December 69 in an episode of the civil war which resulted in the death of Flavius Sabinus and the narrow escape of Domitian. Restoration of the Capitol added traditionalism and imperialism to Vespasian’s populism. It was the ultimate destination for the Flavian triumph over Judaea in AD 71 and perhaps Rome’s prime link back to her origins.

**Tom Stevenson** examines the appearance of personifications on Vespasian’s coinage. He finds that there was more innovation than has previously been allowed, that a conscious effort was made to emphasize Vespasian’s adherence to the model for a good emperor provided by Augustus, and that there was a consistent, reassuring emphasis on the Flavian dynasty, in the person of Vespasian’s sons Titus and Domitian. The first finding indicates a new concentration on charismatic imperial power rather than personal achievement. Such power could be wielded by a ruler who was not a member of the Julio-Claudian family. Alternatively, such a conception of the imperial power and office could endure in spite of individual or dynastic change. The second finding shows the ongoing importance of the legacy of Augustus for reassuring Roman society that Vespasian would respect *mos maiorum*, especially the traditional order of Roman social and political classes. There would,
at any rate, be no large-scale executions, confiscations, or infusions of outside elements. The third finding can be seen as a method for underlining future stability, given that Vespasian’s sons provided reason for believing that civil war could be kept at bay beyond the current generation. Flavian rule would not be transitory like the failures of AD 68-69. The numismatic personifications, then, probably deserve more attention than they have received of late.

As mentioned above, participants at the conference discussed various topics related to Flavian presentation. Suetonius’ attitude to Vespasian was seen as being fundamentally positive, but more nuanced than perhaps had been thought by many at the start of the day. There was interest in describing the *Life of Vespasian* as a site for contestation of differing interpretations, especially in respect of the crucial early events analysed by David Wardle. Suetonius’ use of devices such as the unexpected, turning points, and techniques derived from historical narrative drew comment too. Then, of course, there was the place of humour within the *Life*. To what degree is humour a literary tool that perhaps overestimates the emperor’s affability? If he remains basically affable, as participants largely wanted, should more attention be given to the different types of humour which appear, such as the *bons mots* from Greek classics, in respect of differing aims and audience? More problems than solutions soon became apparent, though a lasting impression was given of Vespasian dealing with challenges as an Italian rather than a Roman of noble republican heritage, such as the Julio-Claudian emperors or Galba.

The Julio-Claudian legacy had to be handled with care by the Flavians. Augustus, of course, remained a model of fundamental importance for imperial style. Even Nero remained popular with some Romans, who decorated his tomb in spring and summer, set up statues of him on the Rostra, and posted edicts as though he were still alive (Suet. *Nero* 57.1). On another level, the Julio-Claudians represented the idea that dynasty was the solution to civil war. As was noted by participants, the idea of a new dynasty was pushed heavily by Vespasian, who emphasized the roles of his sons Titus and Domitian from the very beginning of his reign. They served as guarantees that Flavian rule would not be fleeting as were the reigns of Galba, Otho, and Vitelius. Rome had well and truly moved on from the world of the Republic.

There were, of course, formidable men in the Senate like Helvidius Priscus, who were ready and able to assert themselves (e.g. Tac. *Hist.* 4.9), but Vespasian was alive to the social and political sensibilities of such men, and of Romans in general. The archaeological, topographical and numismatic evidence seems to show time and again that Vespasian understood fully the
need to find a justification for his rule which dwarfed the realities of civil war. He found it largely in the Jewish War, along with the peace and prosperity which resulted from it, according to monuments such as the Templum Pacis. The opportunity to contemplate such evidence at length was one of the impressive aspects of the conference. Vespasian’s power was depicted in terms that were military and traditional but also charismatic. He encapsulated the best of Rome’s traditions – from the city’s origins through her republican and Julio-Claudian periods.

In combination, then, these papers illustrate various important methods employed by the new dynasty for creating an era of stability out of an age of upheaval. Vespasian managed circumstances of great tension with considerable skill. It seems ultimately fitting that the Queensland ‘Vespasian 2000’ conference should end with a positive assessment of the founder of the Flavian dynasty at the university which employed two of that dynasty’s most devoted researchers – Brian Jones and Bob Milns.

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