

Vespasian's Power

An Analysis of Vespasian's Use of the Sources of Social Power

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“The empire, which for a long time had been unsettled and, as it were, drifting, through the usurpation and violent death of three emperors, was at last taken in hand and given stability by the Flavian family.”¹ Thus Suetonius opens his biography of Vespasian, a general with a modest background who gained the rule of Rome and stabilized it in a time of intense crisis. After Nero’s death, Rome was thrown into chaos and in one year saw four emperors: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Vespasian survived and succeeded where the others failed, holding control of the state and peacefully passing control to his son Titus at his death. The ancient sources and modern commentaries provide clues to why Vespasian was so successful. Tacitus’ war-focused *Histories* provide the clearest, most detailed account of Vespasian’s rise to power, while Josephus’ history of the Jewish revolt and Suetonius’ colorful biography provide other useful details. Coins and inscriptions, especially the “*Lex de imperio Vespasiani*,” offer valuable insight into Vespasian’s time as emperor. The sources undeniably show that Vespasian was brought to power by the military might of his own legions and the legions which came to support him. However, Vespasian was ultimately successful because he went further and also employed political, ideological, and economic power, using each to solidify different aspects of his rule.

¹ Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus,” The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, and New York: The MacMillan Co., 1914), II.281-321, edited by J. C. Rolfe, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/suetonius-vespasian.html>.

Vespasian's bid for control of the empire was primarily based on military power, and it was fitting that the army should first declare him emperor. Vespasian's legions were quite loyal to him, as Tacitus illustrates by describing their silence as Vespasian officially swore allegiance to Vitellius, and Tacitus further suggests that the whole army was already leaning in allegiance toward Vespasian out of dislike of Vitellius' troops.² Mucianus, the governor of Syria, urged Vespasian to make an imperial bid, pointing out Vespasian's vast military resources—legions, fleets, and battle experience—and Vitellius' example of how "an Emperor can be created by the army."³ While Tacitus may have invented this speech, it nevertheless reveals the supreme importance of military power.⁴ The next step was to have the legions officially declare for him. This happened first in Alexandria where the governor Tiberius Alexander administered the oath to his soldiers, and then the Judean legions hailed Vespasian as emperor just days later.⁵ Tacitus attests, "All this was done by the impulsive action of the soldiers without the preliminary of a formal harangue or any concentration of the legions."⁶ Josephus adds further color to the story, describing the soldiers' fear that the Senate would choose an emperor that they, "the saviors of the empire," would hate,⁷ and he further shows the soldiers threatening to kill a reluctant Vespasian if he does not accept imperial power.⁸

² Tacitus: *The Annals and the Histories* (New York, 2003), Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodrigg, *The Histories* II.74, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/stanford/Doc?id=10039135>.

³ Tacitus, *The Histories* II.76.

⁴ Kenneth Wellesley suggests that Vespasian yielded to Mucianus out of duty to his country and on account of his sons, Titus and Domitian, who could share the power. See Kenneth Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69* (Boulder, 1976), p. 121.

⁵ Tacitus, *The Histories* II.79 and Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" VI.

⁶ Tacitus, *The Histories* II.79.

⁷ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, "The Jewish Wars," Translated by William Whiston, A.M. Auburn and Buffalo, John E. Beardsley, 1895, 4.10.3, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=J.+BJ+toc>.

⁸ Josephus, "The Jewish Wars," 4.10.4.

While the soldiers were most likely prepared beforehand,⁹ these accounts reveal how Vespasian's bid for the empire was driven from the start by the military.

Vespasian's military power grew increasingly formidable as he laid his plans for the imperial bid. In her analysis of Vespasian's success, biographer Barbara Levick attests, "Vespasian's power grew out of the possession of three victorious legions with associated auxiliaries, and from being a proven fighter."¹⁰ Vespasian had superior, battle-hardened troops, which together with the Egyptian legions made up "nearly a third of the imperial establishment."¹¹ This power was soon dramatically increased as the legions of the Danube, under Antonius Primus, joined Vespasian, primarily out of hatred for Vitellius.¹² At the same time, Vespasian also began to raise troops from retired veterans and those removed from the Praetorian Guard by Vitellius.¹³ Despite these strengths, Vespasian moved slowly and made his base in Alexandria, according to Josephus because of its legions and defensibility,¹⁴ but in another interpretation because of Egypt's corn supply.¹⁵ This had a military rather than economic purpose. By stopping the corn supply and threatening Vitellius with a force under Mucianus as powerful as Vitellius' army, Vespasian hoped to achieve victory without bloodshed.¹⁶ He recognized that the threat of force was an important facet of military power which he could use to his advantage.

⁹ It is likely that the soldiers were prepared beforehand for this act and that "reluctance was expected," so that the pressing need for Vespasian to assume power might be shown. See Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (London, 1999), p. 43.

¹⁰ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 53.

¹¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 54.

¹² Tacitus, *The Histories* II.85-86.

¹³ Tacitus, *The Histories* II.82 and Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Josephus, "The Jewish Wars," 4.10.6.

¹⁵ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 119.

¹⁶ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, pp. 119, 125.

Despite these careful plans, Vespasian's ultimate victory employed military power in its most basic form: armed violence. Antonius Primus, acting on his own initiative, led the legions of the Danube to a decisive victory against Vitellius' forces at Cremona, and he then advanced to Rome, taking over and leaving Vitellius dead.¹⁷ This can be seen as the culmination of Vespasian's military preparations: the army had met the enemy and defeated it, proving that his force was superior. However, at the end of the campaign, military power also showed itself in a terrifying form: the army became uncontrollable. Tacitus describes in detail the grisly slaughter and rape at Cremona as the army went on a rampage,¹⁸ and he writes, "The soldiers in fact were not under the control of the generals, but the generals were themselves constrained to follow the furious impulses of the soldiers."¹⁹ The fact that their own generals could not control them shows the terrible power contained in the army. This devastation also shows how far gone the days of the Republic were. Roman soldiers were pillaging and raping innocent civilians in Italy itself, the very heart of the empire which they had sworn to serve. With its authority to institute emperors, the army had become an increasingly independent power with little true loyalty to the empire as a whole.²⁰ As the army moved into Rome, the Senate rushed to approve Vespasian as emperor, showing an "indecent haste" because they feared a "vacuum of power."²¹ Thus even the Senate gave way to the power of the military. Vespasian's military strength had gained him an empire.

¹⁷ Tacitus, *The Histories* III.15 and 44, also Josephus 4.11.3-4.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *The Histories* III.33.

¹⁹ Tacitus, *The Histories* III.49.

²⁰ It was especially favorable that Vespasian was absent at this time. He gained the empire as a result of the military victories, but his hands remained clean from the bloodshed. See Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 53.

²¹ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D.* 69, p. 214.

With the goal of empire achieved, Vespasian now faced the challenging task of controlling it and stabilizing it after the brutal civil wars. T. E. J. Wiedmann observes, “Otho’s failure shows that an emperor had to have control over his armies; but Vitellius’ failure shows that military power alone was not enough to maintain control over the empire.”²² Unlike his three short-lived predecessors, Vespasian was able to rule the empire because once in command he also drew on the other sources of social power. The most important evidence of Vespasian’s political power is the “*Lex de imperio Vespasiani*,” a bronze tablet containing part of a document which specifically delineates Vespasian’s power as emperor.²³

Tacitus notes that the Senate “decreed to Vespasian all the honors customarily bestowed on the emperors.”²⁴ This connection to prior emperors is also found in the “*Lex de imperio*,” which cites Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius as precedents for imperial rights.²⁵ It is significant that these “good” emperors are cited, while the badly remembered Gaius and Nero as well as the three short-lived emperors of 69 A.D. are left off the list.²⁶ By this Vespasian connects himself with grounded tradition and portrays himself as the successor to these well-remembered leaders.

The first clause of the law allows Vespasian to make treaties,²⁷ which also frees him from having to consult the senate on these matters.²⁸ The next clauses allow him to personally convene the senate, to have senate meetings convened at his wish, and to

²² T. E. J. Wiedemann, “From Nero to Vespasian” in Alan K. Bowman et. al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, second edition, volume X (Cambridge, 2000), p. 269.

²³ For a picture of this tablet, see Levick, *Vespasian* Plate VII.

²⁴ Tacitus, *The Histories* IV.3.

²⁵ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian” in Robert K. Sherk (ed.), *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 124-125; translated by Robert K. Sherk.

²⁶ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 207.

²⁷ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 1-2.

²⁸ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 86

suggest candidates to be specially considered for office.²⁹ The second of these clauses gave Mucianus “the right to be heard and heeded as the mouthpiece of the absent Vespasian,” which was extremely important since Mucianus needed to be able to run Rome during the time that Vespasian was in Alexandria.³⁰ No limit was placed on the number of candidates that Vespasian could suggest, and it is important to note that these last two clauses alone in the whole document do not cite imperial precedent, implying that they may have been new political powers that Vespasian was developing. A later clause states, “Whatever [Vespasian] decides will be in accordance with the advantage of Republic . . . he shall have the right and power so to act and do.”³¹ This clause basically allows Vespasian to do whatever he sees fit, so that “no senatorial preference could stand before him.”³²

The law continues by fully connecting Vespasian to the old emperors, allowing him any rights they enjoyed and freeing him from any laws they did not have to follow.³³ Vespasian is then given complete retroactive approval with this clause: “Whatever things before the passage of this law have been done, accomplished, decreed, or ordered by Imperator Caesar Vespasianus Augustus . . . such things shall be approved and legally binding.”³⁴ This clause is extremely important because the “retrospective validation was absolutely necessary”³⁵ for the appointments made during his campaign for the emperor; otherwise, “it might be claimed that they, like the coinage of money and

²⁹ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 3-13.

³⁰ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 208.

³¹ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 17-19.

³² Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 86.

³³ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 23-28.

³⁴ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 29-32.

³⁵ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 208.

the movement of troops, were treasonable in the autumn of 69.”³⁶ This clause also denies “the validity of the senate’s recognition of Vitellius from 1 July 69 onward,” the date when the troops hailed Vespasian as emperor.³⁷

The final clause allows this decree to override other laws, stating that other laws may be broken in order to obey this one.³⁸ The “*Lex de imperio*” is very complete and specific; this may have been necessary due to Vespasian’s humble background: “Vespasian’s standing was lower than that of any of his predecessors and the law took the place of the *auctoritas* [authority] he lacked.”³⁹ This document reveals how carefully Vespasian set in place his political power, giving himself the authority he needed to run the state.

Vespasian’s use of political power is also evident in other aspects of his reign. A shift in the use of the title *imperator* reveals the progression from military to political power. Professor Scheidel argued that *imperator* was originally a title for a military conqueror.⁴⁰ Augustus was the first to use it as title, but later Nero and Galba also assumed it.⁴¹ However, *imperator* became an official title of the Roman emperor with Vespasian.⁴² This is evidenced in *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, which dates to after Vespasian’s rule all but two examples of *imperator* referring to the Roman emperor.⁴³ Further, the earliest uses of the adjective form, *imperatorius*, to refer to the emperor are

³⁶ Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69*, p. 208.

³⁷ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 86.

³⁸ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 34-41.

³⁹ “Vespasian” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition, Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford, 1996), p. 1590.

⁴⁰ Walter Scheidel, “Military power: The backbone of empire,” April 22, 2004 (lecture).

⁴¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 66.

⁴² “Imperator,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition, Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford, 1996), p. 750.

⁴³ “Imperator,” *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, edited by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1982), pp. 842-843.

found in Tacitus and Suetonius, both writing after Vespasian's death.⁴⁴ This shift marks Vespasian's move toward political power while also showing his continued reliance on military power.⁴⁵

Vespasian also used republican offices as avenues of power, following the Augustan tradition. Suetonius describes Vespasian's eight new consulships and his tenure as censor, praising him for considering "nothing more essential than first to strengthen the State . . . and then to embellish it as well."⁴⁶ This was Vespasian's way of boosting his prestige "the traditional way."⁴⁷ These offices not only gave Vespasian the authority to accomplish certain goals,⁴⁸ but it also allowed him to introduce his sons to power, specifically Titus, who was to succeed him. By allowing Titus to also be called *imperator*, and sharing power with him in the form of consulships and the censorship, Vespasian was preparing Titus for imperial power.⁴⁹ This was important to Vespasian, who according to Suetonius once told the senate that "either his sons would succeed him or he would have no successor."⁵⁰ By having Titus succeed him, Vespasian could provide the Empire with a stable transfer of power while establishing a dynasty and preserving his memory. This would be Vespasian's ultimate political achievement.

Vespasian enhanced his ideological power in three main ways: accounts of divine omens foretelling his imperial success, a magnificent triumph for the Judean victory, and construction projects and coinage emphasizing peace and virtue. In light of

⁴⁴ "Imperatorius," *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, edited by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1982), p. 843.

⁴⁵ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" VIII.

⁴⁷ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 92

⁴⁸ For instance, he used his position as censor to discover what resources the empire had. See also Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ Miriam Griffin, "The Flavians" in Alan K. Bowman et. al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, second edition, volume XI (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 17-18.

⁵⁰ Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" XXV.

his humble background, Vespasian intentionally advertised many omens which pointed to his rise to power.⁵¹ Suetonius describes eleven omens which foretold Vespasian's rise to power, ranging from a stray dog bringing a human hand (a symbol of power) to his table to a statue of Julius Caesar turning on its own to face the East.⁵² Suetonius later describes how in Egypt Vespasian miraculously healed a blind man with his spit and a lame man by his touch.⁵³ Tacitus also includes a description of these miracles, adding that eyewitnesses still confirm the healings at the time when he is writing, "when nothing is to be gained by falsehood."⁵⁴ The fact that not only Suetonius (the biographer) but also Tacitus (the historian) includes these accounts suggests that whether true or not, they were stories commonly circulated about Vespasian. Because of his humble background, Vespasian needed stories like these to legitimate his rule. These stories make Vespasian out to be chosen by the gods, giving him the aura of a destiny which brought him from unassuming origins to the position of emperor.

The great triumph for victory over the rebelling Jews, described by Josephus, also furthered Vespasian's ideological cause. Josephus notes that while the Senate voted on individual triumphs for Vespasian and Titus, they decided to share a joint one.⁵⁵ The triumph, with Vespasian and Titus in chariots and Domitian on a fine horse, showed the entire populace the connection between the father and the two sons.⁵⁶ This image of conquerors furthered Vespasian's dynastic goals by showing his sons in an imperial light. Josephus goes on to discuss the magnificence of the triumph: the vast

⁵¹ "Vespasian," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p. 1590.

⁵² Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" V.

⁵³ Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" VII.

⁵⁴ Tacitus, *The Histories* IV.81

⁵⁵ Josephus, "The Jewish Wars," 7.5.3.

⁵⁶ Miriam Griffin, "The Flavians," p. 16.

crowds attending it, the trains of captives, the models of battle scenes, and the great spoils from the Temple in Jerusalem.⁵⁷ All of these reinforced the image of the emperor as a military conqueror bringing great glory to the state of Rome.

While showing himself as a military hero, Vespasian also sought to portray himself as a bringer of peace and stability, as his building projects and coinage reflect. Josephus records that after the triumph, “Vespasian resolved to build a temple to Peace, which was finished in so short a time, and in so glorious a manner, as was beyond all human expectation and opinion.”⁵⁸ He also rebuilt the Capitol, which had been destroyed in the civil wars. Suetonius describes Vespasian’s personal involvement in this project: “He began the restoration of the Capitol in person, was the first to lend a hand in clearing away the debris, and carried some of it off on his own head.”⁵⁹ The grandeur of these constructions and their peaceful themes emphasized stability and “constituted a declaration of normality after the civil wars.”⁶⁰ The rebuilt Capitol symbolized Rome’s resurgence and a new connection with Rome’s gods.⁶¹ This stability is further emphasized in Vespasian’s coinage, where *pax* is a principle motif.⁶² One coin, with Vespasian’s face on the front, shows Vespasian offering his hand to a kneeling Rome (embodied in a woman) and has the text “*Roma Resurgens*.”⁶³ This emphasizes Rome coming again to a time of stability. Another coin, with Titus’ head on the front, has an image of the goddess Pax with the text “*Pax Augusti*.”⁶⁴ Like the “*Lex*

⁵⁷ Josephus, “The Jewish Wars,” 7.5.5.

⁵⁸ Josephus, “The Jewish Wars,” 7.5.7.

⁵⁹ Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus” VIII.

⁶⁰ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 126.

⁶¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 126.

⁶² “Vespasian”, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p. 1591.

⁶³ Levick, *Vespasian*, Plate IX.

⁶⁴ Levick, *Vespasian*, Plate X.

de Imperio,”⁶⁵ this coin makes a powerful ideological connection to Augustus, remembered as the benevolent ruler who forged the stable Roman Empire and established the *Pax Romana*. In addition to these, many other coins were minted with similar depictions of peace, liberty, concord, and continuity.⁶⁶ All of these coins focus on traditionally valued Roman ideals, emphasizing the continuing virtue and stability of the Roman state. While these themes are relatively simple, they were extremely powerful in context. Rome was emerging from a year of devastating civil war, and the people eagerly welcomed the return to stability and peace under the leadership of Vespasian.

Finally, Vespasian employed economic power to further stabilize a state in financial chaos after the civil wars and Nero’s lavish spending. This is the one aspect of his rule which the ancient sources condemn. Tacitus refers to him being “spoiled by prosperity and evil counselors” so much that he began to enact “iniquitous measures”—harsh taxes.⁶⁷ Suetonius likewise condemns his policies, providing stories of doubled taxes and accepted bribes to illustrate his point.⁶⁸ Levick sees the truth behind these stories that “Vespasian maximized revenues and was felt to be unscrupulous about their source,”⁶⁹ and she notes that the stories “show how hard pressed the Empire was to pay its way.”⁷⁰ Suetonius reflects this sentiment, describing how Vespasian attested that “forty thousand millions were needed to set the State upright.”⁷¹ Vespasian faced three main economic problems: the destruction of property and loss of confidence in the civil

⁶⁵ “Law on the imperial powers of Vespasian,” In. 23-28.

⁶⁶ Miriam Griffin, “The Flavians,” p. 14.

⁶⁷ Tacitus, *The Histories* II.84.

⁶⁸ Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus” XVI.

⁶⁹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 103.

⁷⁰ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 103.

⁷¹ Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus” XVI.

wars, Nero's overspending, and the overarching problem of "funding the empire when profitable war had ended but a standing army needed to be maintained."⁷²

Vespasian responded to these problems with new taxes, increasing taxes on provinces and taking away imperial immunities.⁷³ He instituted the *Fiscus Asiaticus* and the *Fiscus Alexandrinus*, which included a poll tax and money from sold Egyptian grain.⁷⁴ Also, Josephus describes the *Fiscus Iudaicus*, in which the two drachmai tax which once went to support the Jewish temple now financed the rebuilding of the Capitol.⁷⁵ This was a particularly harsh blow to the Jews, who had just seen their temple demolished and now had to pay for the reconstruction of a temple to a heathen god. He even went so far as to institute a tax in Rome itself on public urinals, following the "dangerous example of Gaius."⁷⁶ Yet for all the criticism Vespasian received for these measures, they did bring in capital to the state, helping to stabilize the troubled economy.

In addition to these taxes, Vespasian took back public lands which private landowners were using. A stone marker outside Pompeii from Vespasian's time records the restoration to the state of "public lands which private persons had in their possession."⁷⁷ At a veteran's colony in Orange, Vespasian took the edges of the divided plots,⁷⁸ and this restoration similarly occurred all throughout Italy and Cyrenaica.⁷⁹ These measures were ultimately very valuable for the Flavians: they kept the Flavians

⁷² Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 96.

⁷³ "Vespasian", Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 1590.

⁷⁴ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 98.

⁷⁵ Josephus, "The Jewish Wars," 7.6.6.

⁷⁶ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 101, see also Suetonius, "Divus Vespasianus" XXIII.

⁷⁷ "Restoration of public lands. Under Vespasian" in Robert K. Sherk (ed.), *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 132; translated by Robert K. Sherk.

⁷⁸ Miriam Griffin, "The Flavians," p. 29.

⁷⁹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 99.

in power and demonstrated strong centralized control of the empire.⁸⁰ Further, as Vespasian used the resources for valuable building projects, the populace could feel like the empire was improving,⁸¹ and Suetonius even concludes, “He made the best use of his gains, ill gotten though they were.”⁸² Thus Vespasian restored economic security to a struggling state while strengthening his own power.

Vespasian is remembered well in history: Tacitus describes him as being “changed for the better by power,”⁸³ and Suetonius praises the stability he brought.⁸⁴ Modern commentators likewise praise him for winning the support even of his enemies⁸⁵ and for understanding that someone with real power (based in the military) could afford to be unassuming.⁸⁶ This legacy is due to his success at restoring the empire from chaos to stability. He conquered an empire that was wracked with civil war, economic turmoil, and political instability. In this situation, he recognized that military power alone could not cope with these challenges. Instead he employed political power to solidify his office as emperor, ideological power to legitimize his rule and restore feelings of peace and triumph, and economic power to stabilize the empire’s finances. Like Augustus before him, Vespasian took command of a troubled state and left it stronger. By blending the sources of social power, he held the state together and gave it a chance to rebuild and prepare itself for the challenges which lay ahead.

⁸⁰ Levick, *Vespasian*, p.106.

⁸¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 106.

⁸² Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus” XVI.

⁸³ Tacitus, *The Histories* I.50.

⁸⁴ Suetonius, “Divus Vespasianus” I.

⁸⁵ T. E. J. Wiedemann, “From Nero to Vespasian,” p. 281.

⁸⁶ Levick, *Vespasian*, p. 208.

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