Vespasian

Whose to-do list is that anyhow? The Roman emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus, known today as Vespasian. Vespasian may not be as memorable as the great tactician Caesar or the paranoid Caligula, but he was the right man at the right time to put the Roman Empire back on track: he ended imperial Rome’s first civil war; he restored Rome’s economy, allowing the Roman people to prosper; he engaged in a significant rebuilding program, which included the construction of what is today known as the Colosseum; and he created a new path to the emperor’s throne.

By the spring of A.D. 68, the Roman world was in chaos. The emperor Nero had shown himself to be cruel and incapable of ruling effectively, and provincial governors decided to take matters into their own hands. The governor of Roman Spain, Servius Sulpicius Galba, declared a revolt against Nero. This action touched off a period of civil war in the Empire that saw five emperors on the throne within the space of two years and lasted until one man could bring order to the chaotic Roman world: Vespasian.

Vespasian was born in the small Italian town of Falacrina in A.D. 9, to a family neither wealthy nor powerful. Inspired by his grandfather’s successes as a minor official, as well as those of his mother’s side of the family, Vespasian’s elder brother went into public life. Vespasian himself followed only after goading and taunting from his mother. Vespasian rose through the political ranks and managed to ingratiate himself with the then-emperor Gaius Caligula by praising Caligula in front of the Senate. After Caligula’s death and Claudius’s ascent in A.D. 41, Vespasian was given command of a legion in Germany that proceeded to invade Britain. According to Suetonius, a Roman historian, this legion under Vespasian’s command “fought thirty battles, subjugated two warlike tribes, and captured more than twenty towns, besides the entire Isle of Vectis.”

For this distinguished action in Britain, Vespasian was awarded a consulship by Claudius. He went into political retirement, though, after incurring the wrath of Claudius’s influential wife Agrippina. Later, after Nero’s rise to power, Vespasian came out of retirement and was given the position of governor of Africa. Rather than engaging in the expected behavior of Roman provincial governors, collecting bribes, he used this position to gain influential friends. Vespasian continued to be favored by Nero—until, according to Suetonius, he offended Nero by either leaving one of his music recitals or by staying and falling asleep.

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Meanwhile, in the East, trouble was brewing. The Jews in Judaea had long chafed under Roman rule; in A.D. 66, they revolted, killing the governor and crushing the first Roman force sent to put down the rebellion. Vespasian was given command of the force to recapture Judaea. During this war, Tacitus, another Roman historian, tells us that

Vespasian was an energetic soldier; he could march at the head of his army, choose the place for his camp, and bring by night and day his skill, or, if the occasion required, his personal courage to oppose the foe. His food was such as chance offered; his dress and appearance hardly distinguished him from the common soldier; in short, but for his avarice, he was equal to the generals of old.4

Vespasian took back most of Judaea and destroyed Jericho in A.D. 68; Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70. However, while Vespasian was campaigning in Judaea, Rome itself had fallen into civil war. After the governor of Roman Spain, Galba, revolted and ultimately forced emperor Nero to commit suicide, Galba was declared emperor by the Senate. Galba made a fatal mistake, though, in failing to pay promised money to his soldiers. These soldiers abandoned him in favor of Otho, another influential Roman politician. Galba was killed by disgruntled soldiers in the Roman Forum. Otho’s reign was also short-lived, though: the commander of the veteran Rhine legions at the German frontier, Vitellius, marched his troops into Italy, defeated and killed Otho, and was duly declared emperor by the Senate. During this time, Vespasian and his troops in Judaea maintained a position of neutrality; after Otho’s death at the hands of Vitellius, though, Vespasian found himself in an unexpectedly ideal position to launch his own bid for the throne. He had three war-hardened legions with him in Judaea; there were four more in neighboring Syria and still more in Egypt. Following Vespasian’s visit to Egypt, all these soldiers proclaimed Vespasian as emperor.

Following this official declaration, Vespasian quickly moved to secure Egypt. Egypt was the breadbasket of the empire, and, controlling Egypt, Vespasian could cut off grain to Rome. Vitellius would be forced to the negotiating table before a drop of blood had been spilled. Events took another turn, however. The legions of Pannonia and the Danube, also in Germany, declared their loyalty for Vespasian. Led by generals Antonius Primus and Mucianus, these legions marched into Italy and defeated Vitellius’s forces in Vespasian’s name. Vespasian was declared emperor by the Senate before he set foot on the Italian peninsula.

As emperor, Vespasian faced some daunting challenges. The civil wars and the short but rapacious reign of Vitellius nearly emptied the Roman treasury. To combat this issue, Vespasian raised old taxes, created new ones, and spent money carefully.5 As a low-born man, Vespasian never forgot his humble origins. In Rome, rather than repeat the extravagance of Vitellius, Vespasian did not move into the Julio-Claudian palaces, instead living and dressing modestly. His doors were always open, and he did away with customary weapons searches. He moved about in public freely, typically in civilian dress. He didn’t make the mistakes of Otho and Nero and treated members of the Senate with respect. When flatterers tried to trace his common ancestry back to the gods, he laughed in their faces.6

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After securing the Empire’s finances, Vespasian started giving back to the people, in the form of public works. Not only did he restore buildings destroyed during the civil wars, he also initiated his own building projects. He turned the palace complex of Nero back into public space and built several large temples. His most famous and enduring building project was the construction of Rome’s first stone arena, the Flavian Amphitheater. Now known as the Colosseum, this building remains a symbol of Rome’s greatness.

During Vespasian’s reign, life was good for the average Roman. The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which occurred several months after Vespasian’s death, preserved a snapshot of Roman middle-class life. In the town of Pompeii, a booming trade in agricultural products, mainly wine, and in textiles resulted in the middle class growing bigger and richer. Soon, they too could afford opulent homes like those of the local gentry. Because the little town was running out of space, some of the very wealthy moved to the suburbs, where they built luxurious villas.7

In A.D. 79, Vespasian died after reigning for ten years. Even on his deathbed, he displayed the same humble wit which had served him all his life. According to several sources, his last words were, “Oh dear, I think I’m becoming a god.” And he did. The Senate deified him following his death.8 He was succeeded by his son Titus.

Vespasian’s reign served to return peace to the Roman Empire after civil war; by announcing Titus as his successor well before he died, he ensured a peaceful transition of power. By founding his own dynasty, Vespasian also legitimized the fact that emperors did not have to be descended from Augustus, but instead could come to power through military victory. Although this led to more civil wars in Rome’s future, it allowed emperors to be chosen based on competence rather than bloodline.

Vespasian may not be as memorable or well known as many other Roman emperors. But Vespasian’s accomplishments, as shown by his imaginary to-do list, are significant and put Rome on a footing to flourish for another three centuries.

Sources


Christiansen, Erik. A History of Rome: From Town to Empire and from Empire to Town. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1995.

8 Suetonius, p. 251.


