

Omens versus Merit in Regime Change:
How an Emperor Retains Power

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by

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“Οί τότε Ρωμαίοι τούς τε τώ άξιωματι προήκοντας ήδούτο” (Dio, 45.16)

When Augustus established the position of emperor, religious imagery and stories of omens and signs relating to his fortune were ubiquitous. The coins which people used to purchase food bore his image in various human and divine manifestations; the stories people heard involved eagles dropping bread in Augustus' waiting hands and of the young Octavian silencing the frogs at his grandfather's villa with a word. The omens that were propagated in this way were, however, but one feature of a complex ideological method that was constructed to justify the new political system which grew up around the first princes. In another vein, he was the savior of the state from civil war, the man who reversed decades of decline, made of Rome a suitable capital for the empire, and effectively created a government where there had not been one before. The practical and ideological images of Augustus' were propagated in different circles and in different ways—his *Res Gestae* offered a list of deeds extolling his greatness compiled at the end of his life, a much earlier autobiography appears to have been designed to celebrate his attachment to Julius Caesar (a theme to some degree sublimated in later years), while all of the images of him displayed throughout the empire made him appear divine and plainly displayed symbols of additional divine figures. In evaluating the interplay between these two sides of an emperor which were valued by his contemporaries, it is valuable to compare Augustus' struggle for power and eventual success to the struggles which took place in Rome in the year 69AD. The actions of the prospective emperors of 69 offer, sometimes consciously, sometime perhaps less so, a reading of the image of Augustus as it survived in the imagination of his subjects.

The principle events of AD 68-69 take their direction from the demise of the last of Augustus' biological descendants, and conclude with the victory of a man whose family was not part of the governing class at the time that Augustus died. Vespasian the senator was a coincidental product of the Augustan system that opened a path to high office for men of talent from peninsular Italy; the victory of Vespasian owed something to his understanding of the way that Augustus had risen to power. Like Augustus, Vespasian had built up a reputation of being in the favor of the gods, on top of his already existing fame in terms of his supreme abilities. What was it about these two men that allowed them each to establish a dynasty which, for a substantial amount of time, allowed the empire to run smoothly? The other contenders in the Year of the Four Emperors were not despised when they sought the seat; on the contrary, they were encouraged, sometimes by the people or even the senate. Galba had a history riddled with predictions of a rise to power, Otho was viewed as one who might restore the country's government and liberty, and even Vitellius had a few omens to his name, yet none of them succeeded in holding the throne for much more than half a year. Only by Flavius Vespasian was a new regime established and maintained by descendants as Augustus' line had been before. But even in the personalities of the two emperors who managed to secure support for their dynasties, there cannot be identified any specific omens or virtues which won the hearts of the Roman people. What was more necessary—divine sanction or the simply the ability to conquer all predecessors? A good propaganda machine or the ability to manage the economy? I plan to show that while it is necessary for an emperor to successfully circulate an image of the combination of his good qualities along with positive signs and prophecies of greatness in order to achieve emperorship, it is the

emperor's ability to control the soldiers, senators, and empire as a whole which allows him to retain his position of power. In this era, the man's merit is ultimately what determines the length and quality of his reign and its memory.

Octavian's Transition to Augustus

In the late-Republic, it became increasingly evident that the main source of power was the military, and consequently its allegiance became coveted by the senate and generals alike. Sulla and Gaius Julius Caesar showed that the republic could be won and controlled as long as the soldiers were well-paid, an example not lost on all the emperors to come. The legendary fear of kings, while perpetuated even by Augustan historians like Livy, does not actually seem to have been very prevalent except among the nobles who were accustomed to having the power for themselves and were determined to keep it. Caesar bought the loyalty of his soldiers with coin and land, and the love of the people with temples, games, and bread. The soldiers and plebs watched him accept various *honores nimios*¹ without protest—none of them cared whether or not he planned to make himself king as long as they were well-fed and hearing fine stories of his successes. But it was a mutual relationship; in some ways he was as much their subject as they were his—their support which kept him in power was incumbent upon his constant lavishing of something or other upon them. And since he fulfilled his promises, they were in his hands. After Caesar's assassination, they did not know on whom they should bestow their loyalty, and it is clear from the result that the traditional and sometimes-beloved republic did not call to them any more than the other options. The urban poor was enticed and cajoled by speeches and promises and especially swayed by the comet that shone for seven days at the funeral games of Caesar which *creditamque est animam esse Caesaris in caelum recepti*.² This prodigy proved to them that not only had the great general fulfilled their needs, but that the gods smiled upon him. Comets were not usually

¹ Excessive honors. Suet. *Iul.* 76.1.

² And it was believed that the spirit of Caesar was accepted into the sky. Suet. *Iul.* 88.

seen as positive omens, but Octavian spun it that way and later put a star on the head of Caesar's statue so that it would not be forgotten.³ Julius Caesar had been the *exemplum* for the kind of leader that the plebs and soldiers wanted and the stage was set for someone to fully establish the role of an emperor. This person would have to continue the traditions which Caesar had established and which the soldiers and plebs had come to expect as well as find ways to constantly indulge the mob.

The struggle for succession developed between Mark Antony and Octavian. After they defeated the conspirators, who had neither the gods nor even all of the nobles on their side, they had to contend with each other. Their competition was not only between armies but about who could win the favor of the people—a competition of ideas. Around the time of the Battle of Actium, Octavian put coins in circulation which portrayed him as the typical, nude Greek hero⁴ and at the same time he began to claim that Antony's will bequeathed everything to Cleopatra and their children. He made the message clear: Octavian was the ideal person to bring peace to Rome, whereas that Antony, a drunken fool, wished only to cavort with his foreign family and take all the riches of Rome elsewhere to foreign people. As Octavian's propaganda spread, there was outrage that Antony was not properly focused on Rome, and consequently the people had no one to look to but Octavian to take control and bring peace.

Around the time of his conflicts with Antony may also have been when Octavian would have tried to propagate further the omens and predictions which had surrounded him since his birth.⁵ One of the most impressive tales was the story of his conception. Suetonius claims to have read, in a book by Asclepiades of Mendes called

³ Zanker, Paul. *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Tr. Alan Shapiro. (Ann Arbor, 1988), 35.

⁴ Zanker. *The Power of Images*. 54-5.

⁵ Zanker. *The Power of Images*. 50.

Theologumena, that Octavian's mother was impregnated by Apollo—disguised as a serpent—while she was sleeping in his temple.⁶ This sort of myth indicated to a Roman the idea of a divine ancestry, which, combined with the image of Octavian as the adopted son of the divine Julius Caesar, left no question about whether or not Octavian was descended from Gods. What is especially interesting about the conception myth is that it came from a foreign source—Egypt. Suetonius said that “Augustus showed great respect towards all ancient and long-established foreign rites,”⁷ and with a story like this he showed how open he was to foreign myths and propaganda in their relation to his own life. Further, he would have been able to impress people of different origins and make himself appear divinely sanctioned by gods of various traditions. Besides absorbing the approval of all gods and peoples, with this story Augustus elevated himself to the level of two historical figures of immense power since the same story had been told of Alexander and Scipio Africanus. This propaganda not only impressed the lower classes, but it also reached the nobility who knew how significant the conception story had been in relation to men in power from the past. It was reasonable for Augustus to be put on the same plane as those men, and the attribution of this myth to him from a foreign source further emphasizes how successful his propaganda campaign was.

It is impossible to tell what Romans considered more important—divine approval or proven merit, much like how now it is hard to judge whether issues take first place in favoring one potential leader over another or what kind of church he or she attends. But Cassius Dio shed some light on this issue when he described the reaction of the senate and people to the triumvirs returning after their victory over the conspirators. He tells of

⁶ Dio. 45.2. also Suetonius. *Aug.* 94.4.

⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 93.1.

the mingled reactions which the Romans had and the unease at having to obey such a strange set of rulers. He wrote that “great fear was upon them because of these very acts and still greater fear because of omens.”⁸ Dio claimed that people were more moved by omens than by soldiers in the streets and proscription lists. There is no doubt that pieces of armor rising to the sky with clashing noises would have made someone afraid, but more so than the possibility of his name being on a death list? Dio wanted it to be clear how much of an effect these portents had on the levels of fear among the populace, though the comparison itself must be hyperbole. But no matter how much of an exaggeration his statement was, it shows that the people and the triumvirs knew what an influence omens could have and one of the triumvirs began to increasingly twist all events and signs to his own ends.

If Octavian wanted people to believe that the gods wanted the Roman Empire to have a sole ruler at that time, he had to go out of his way to prove it. To Romans at that time, prodigies reflected the view that the gods were taking of contemporary events;⁹ so a child being sired by Apollo in some sort of divine, Eastern-style conception would surely be proof that someone in the heavens had a vested interest in this child becoming extremely important. On top of this, the very day that Octavian was born, Publius Nigidius, a senator who was known for his work in astrology, announced that *dominum terrarum orbi natum*.¹⁰ These events would have happened long before Octavian took power, but they would have surely been publicized mostly afterwards, when he needed to distinguish himself from Antony and all others who came before him. And even after he

⁸ Dio. 47.2.

⁹ Potter, David. *Prophets & Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*. (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 144.

¹⁰ The master of the world was born. Suet. *Aug.* 94.5.

had defeated Antony, more stories would probably have kept emerging in order to perpetuate his divine status and stabilize his new regime. In fact, when Augustus finally had power and was enacting various laws, he restored many ancient religious practices and was known for taking dreams and omens seriously.¹¹ And according to some scholars, the imagery and omens which specifically referenced mythology were not only propaganda, but ended up shaping Octavian's own view of himself and affecting his behavior so that he really came to think of himself as a protégé of Apollo.¹² That the propaganda was so pervasive that it influenced even its creator to think he was on his way to being a god is perhaps a bit too much to believe, especially if we assume that Augustus was truly as devoted to the gods as he claimed. Nonetheless, the images and stories were certainly considered important and valuable, judging by how prevalent they were in the ancient texts.

However, though many other signs which took place during Augustus' life are reported by historians and despite the reports of how seriously he viewed divine matters, none came to us directly through Augustus himself. Neither in his *Res Gestae* nor in Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus* (which some scholars think must have been largely a copy of Augustus' autobiography) were there any of the omens which are ubiquitous in other historical accounts. Did Augustus want to downplay his divine aura or did he feel it was less important than the things he accomplished through his own will and ability? The *Res Gestae* is full of deeds that Augustus attributed to himself (even if Mark Antony may have actually been responsible for some of them) and there is a great deal about how much money he gave out to various Romans. Augustus, in describing his

¹¹ Suet. *Aug.* 91.1, 92.1.

¹² Zanker. *The Power of Images.* 44.

life and reign, emphasized the very traditions that were largely responsible for bringing his father and himself into power—military conquest and money. If it is true, as Greg Rowe claims, that “what Augustus had established was the rule not of one man but of a dynastic house,”¹³ then it makes sense that he would leave something of an instruction manual for his descendants describing the acquisition and retention of power. The *Res Gestae* is a list of great things that Augustus said he did which may or may not have been believed by the majority of Romans. But it was emblematic of how he portrayed himself, and he did it that way for a reason. The image he created for himself would later become the deified *exemplum* of the perfect emperor who made sure that history had a record of his actions, if not the mystical stories surrounding his life.

If those practical and successful deeds are what Augustus wanted to be remembered for (or to at least pretend that those things mattered most), his straightforward account of meritorious actions could not have been enough for the Roman people. We can tell this by the sheer quantity of fantasy that circulated and survived. Signs from the gods were a crucial part in their faith in Augustus, so much so that Suetonius devoted seven of the 99 chapters of his biography of Augustus almost entirely to dreams and prodigies. He began chapter 94 with a straightforward heading: *Et quoniam ad haec ventum est, non ab re fuerit subtexere, quae ei prius quam nasceretur et ipso natali die ac deinceps evenerint, quibus futura magnitudo eius et perpetua felicitas sperari animadvertique posset.*¹⁴ In Suetonius’ account and those of others it is clear that many supernatural stories existed about Augustus and were considered important by historians. The emperor most assuredly knew how important it was for him to have the

¹³ Rowe, Greg. *Princes and Political Cultures*. (Ann Arbor, 2002), 1.

¹⁴ At this point it might be well to list the omens, occurring before, on, and after the day of Augustus’ birth, from which his future greatness and lasting fortune could clearly be prognosticated. Suet. *Aug.* 94.1.

divine sanction, else he would not have had Julius Caesar declared a god. It can also be assumed that many of the stories came from him one way or the other to increase his divine aura. Why then would he not include at least the more important ones in his autobiography? It is almost certainly because the approval of the gods is meant to be in the background—it needs to exist as a base for all that Augustus does, but what he really wants to be remembered for is how he used his power and what he accomplished with the position he was chosen for.

Communication and the Contemporaneous Value of Omens

Augustus

These omens and stories were presented and accessible for all to experience, and Augustus knew it. How did they reach the public of Rome and the provinces? The mechanisms were varied and sometimes so subtle that it now seems overly speculative to assume that they were purposeful. All of the pervading images of the time made people think of a certain message, but who crafted it and what was it?

As an average Roman walked through the streets of Rome during the reign of Augustus, he might have strolled past the Theatre of Marcellus or the Temple of Mars Ultor. Did these buildings make him recall Rome's magnificent victories under the blessing of Mars, or the last spectacle he saw in the theatre and how it was provided by the imperial family? Did the multitude of figures on the Ara Pacis make him feel a peaceful sense of devotion to Roma and the Julio-Claudian family, or make him remember the glorious traditions of the Republic? Probably not very often; few people are really stimulated to such conscious thoughts by things they see every day, at least not every time they see them. Just as when people now see their country's flag they are not always stirred to feelings of patriotism, nor do they get an excited feeling of devotion every time they see their beloved team's logo. But the genius of good propaganda is how symbolism infiltrates each person's view of the world. None of the monuments or buildings that Augustus erected made people knowingly feel how much their daily existence depended on him, but their lives gradually became more centered on the emperor and paying tribute to him. The symbolism inherent in the structures somehow encapsulated what the world was like, how one ought to have behaved in it, and the

emotional life it supported.¹⁵ Whether Augustus' greatness was subtly implied in a grandiose building or overtly illustrated on a coin, it invaded every person's psyche. Augustus took up several building projects and ideas left unfinished by Julius Caesar, which allowed him to absorb his predecessor's perceived greatness into his own. The Temple of Venus Genetrix, for example, was a magnificent symbol of the older Caesar's divine ancestry, and therefore that of the younger as well. Augustus did not need to converse with every Roman and describe to him how he was descended from Aeneas or how Fortuna smiled on him because it was painted and chiseled in images all over the city.

However, that is not to say that he did not try. Augustus used many methods to spread certain information to the masses. He was known to give speeches directly to the plebs and soldiers in *contiones*. With this straight-forward communication the people could respond more directly to Augustus as an individual. In fact, he would give a separate speech to them and to the senate.¹⁶ This allowed him to convey one set of promises to the nobles and probably a more simple, practical sort to the common people. These discourses not only elevated the commoners to a level nearer the nobles, but it also gave them the feeling that he looked after their interests in the way the senate had failed to do during the Republic.¹⁷ And certainly, the Roman who saw the Ara Pacis and did not overtly think, "O, Augustus truly values Mother Earth" also did not believe every promise Augustus made to him. Because of this, Augustus also employed Tribunes of the Plebs as intermediaries between himself and the people to walk around the streets

¹⁵ Geertz, Clifford. "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (New York, 1973), 127.

¹⁶ Sumi, Geoffrey. *Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome Between Republic and Empire*. (Ann Arbor, 2005), 120.

¹⁷ Sumi. *Ceremony*. 6.

telling them whatever Augustus wanted the commoners to think and know.¹⁸ The Tribune, a man much closer to the average Roman's level than the emperor, appealed to him in a more subtle way that did not involve as much ceremony. In a broader sense, the propaganda of the state was created by Augustus centrally, and he found a number of ways to diffuse it both among the plebs of Rome and throughout the provinces by way of religion and public officials.¹⁹ In fact, the senate itself also bought into and broadcasted the imperial ideology in order to increase its own visibility and strength.²⁰ Augustus and his aides could craft whatever messages they wished and the official sources would spread them to the provinces while he, in one way or another, took care of the people in Rome. In these speeches and messages Augustus could have communicated anything he wanted from stories of prodigies to how much grain everyone would receive; whether or not everyone believed what they heard, the information was readily available.

The group of people who were privy to information of a more private nature was slaves. There are many examples of knowledge that historians should not have been able to obtain but which they reproduce identically to the detail; it can only be explained by the gossip of slaves. For example, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Cassius Dio all tell the story of Otho's suicide with perfect agreement and no contradictions—they describe how he spoke to his comrades and burned his letters; then how he put the sharpest of two daggers under his pillow and, after a good night's sleep, stabbed himself at dawn. The historians all make a point of how he sent everyone away to be alone, so how else could they have come across the story if not from a slave? Rumor and gossip were surely as prominent in

¹⁸ Sumi. *Ceremony*. 224.

¹⁹ Rowe, Greg. *Princes and Political Cultures: The New Tiberian Senatorial Decrees*. (Ann Arbor, 2002), 175.

²⁰ Rowe. *Princes*. 66.

the Roman Empire as they are now, if not more so, and the slaves in the palace must have been in high demand for stories. The historians did not even make a show of having more credible sources. Dio, for example, stated that he would include hearsay in his work.²¹ We could speculate for ages as to how much of the circulating information came from official sources and how much was gossip, but it is obvious that a mixture of both survived—though stories of a more private nature would probably have originated from, say, scandalous conversations between a cook in the imperial house and his butcher. Augustus could not have hoped to stop anyone from spreading rumors, since he knew that any slave of his would be a sought-after source of information about intimate details. So we must assume that he lead the humble, pious lifestyle which he would not have minded anyone gossiping about. There should be no delusions about him perpetually playing his role since he admitted as much on his deathbed—he referred to his existence as *mimum vitae* and joked about his performance in that comedy.²² Only when he was on the brink of death could the emperor be truthful about a life lead to be a true *exemplum*. As much as he could all the way until his death, Augustus tried to wield power over all the stories about him, whether formal or not.

However, Augustus was not in control of all the sources and the information which became mainstream. For example, on his return from Apollonia, as he came over the hill to the awe of all watching it appeared as though a shining halo was glowing above his head. He did not orchestrate this—it was some sort of atmospheric light effect which ended up working in his benefit.²³ By the simple fact that this story is so well-known we can assume that the plebs and soldiers eagerly believed what omens they saw

²¹ Potter. *Prophets and Emperors*. 133.

²² Suet. *Aug.* 99.1.

²³ Sumi. *Ceremony*. 128.

and took it upon themselves to tell others. A sensation very different from divine awe would have been felt by everyone after the slaying of Julius Caesar due to their own emotions and amplified by the weather at the time. An ancient writer named Julius Obsequens had a list, which he extracted from Livy, of all the portents in the year 44BC before and after the Ides of March, and it is quite impressive—after the dictator’s murder there were frequent earthquakes, flooding, animals behaving strangely, and generally terrible weather.²⁴ This undeniably contributed to the feeling that killing Caesar had been a terrible mistake, and played a large role in Antony and Octavian’s ability to turn matters against the conspirators.

The other major contributor to the public’s feelings against the conspirators was the enormous spectacle of Julius Caesar’s funeral. Antony knew how to rile up the crowd from his wife who happened to be the widow of Clodius, whose massive and emotionally charged funeral she had planned. After Caesar’s body had been publicly burned, as Clodius’ had been to a dramatic result, with people mourning and holding vigil over it, Antony went out onto the Rostra holding the slain dictator’s bloody toga and spoke fiery words which drove the plebs into a frenzy. The theatrical nature of the funeral coupled with the already-existing emotions toward Caesar created a heightened sense of drama which drove the emotions of the crowd to a furious craze.²⁵ The way Antony manipulated the people to turn them against the conspirators with such rage and violence was a lesson to Octavian. Later, Augustus would make great use of triumphal processions and lavish games to show off his family’s wealth and ability to provide for Rome, with the implication that they would continue to do so. An enormous procession

²⁴ Osgood, Josiah. *Caesar’s Legacy: Civil War and the Emergence of the Roman Empire*. (Cambridge, 2006), 20.

²⁵ Sumi. *Ceremony*. 120.

of soldiers, rare animals, conquered enemies, and pure opulence had no trace of subtlety, and no question could stand as to the emperor's ability to impress. Augustus continued to sponsor games and festivals in the name of his family for all his life and the people continued to respond to the grandeur. Though Augustus put forth the idea that the leader was chosen by the gods, he wanted it to be clear that his success came from his own qualities and that of his family.²⁶ Large, public displays were the most obvious and pleasing way to show Augustus put his own power, which the gods wanted him to have, towards the betterment of all the Romans.

The Year of the Four Emperors

The methods of entertaining the mob and spreading propaganda had become standard during the decades in which the Principate continued after Augustus, but the stories become less and less positive. When the last of the Julio-Claudians disappeared, there was a dearth of leadership with no clear, strong figure whom the people trusted to step in. The first to succeed in claiming the title of emperor was a general in Spain who did have a history of favorable omens: Galba. He even had the fortune, as a little boy, to have Augustus say to him, “καὶ σὺ τέκνον τῆς ἀρχῆς ἡμῶν παρατρώξει.”²⁷ But even though Galba had a good amount of divine blessings, he did not end up keeping his role for much time at all. Otho and Vitellius had nary an omen to their names (though they may simply have not been recorded), much less the ability to hold power long. However, Vespasian began his propaganda campaign well before he finally got full control and successfully continued it throughout his reign. Suetonius wrote about a statue of Julius

²⁶ Zanker. *Power of Images*. 235.

²⁷ You also, my child, will taste of our power. Suet. *Galba*. 4.1.

Caesar which turned towards the east during the reign of Galba,²⁸ and of a blind man who begged Vespasian to spit on his eyes, swearing that Serapis had told him that this would make him able to see again.²⁹ These were not events which Vespasian invented and began to tell (though the statue certainly did not turn on its own), but these deeds were seen by all and passed on out of interest, not necessity. He also used a technique which Augustus had employed against Antony with great success—circulating the letters of his enemies. Augustus had shown how base and crude Antony was, and with the triumvir's will from Egypt he showed definitively that Antony cared more about himself and Cleopatra than the Romans. Since Vespasian did not actually have anything so scandalous, he forged a letter and proclaimed it was from Otho who begged the great Vespasian to avenge him and help the empire.³⁰ The letters transcended mere symbolism—they were (in the eyes of readers) stone cold evidence of how terrible the opposor, be it Antony or Vitellius, was and how much they needed Augustus or Vespasian.

Like Augustus had upon ending the civil war in his time, Vespasian also began a campaign of building statues and minting coins celebrating the peace he brought to Rome and its provinces. Through various visual symbols, the messages the men wanted to convey permeated all levels of society and came to represent the new and (theoretically) improved way of life. However, it is still unclear how much of this and private omens related to the emperor were known or considered important to the average Roman. We can tell that the propaganda was effective to some degree since so many of the structures imbued with it have lasted for two thousand years. This longevity tells us that the ideas

²⁸ Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6.

²⁹ Suet. *Vesp.* 7.2.

³⁰ Ferrill, Arther. "Otho, Vitellius, and the Propaganda of Vespasian." *The Classical Journal*. (1965), 268.

inspired by the images continued to resonate with those looking at them, and that to some degree they continued to value the example Augustus provided. Even the histories written later in time referenced and repeated the stories from earlier, repeating the omens and ideas from the past in the context of whatever time they were written. As histories continued to be written, readers began to understand less how contemporaries of the time of Augustus or Vespasian reacted to omens or the erection of new monuments, but these things are still viewed as important.

Dreams and accounts of omens abound in historical accounts written just after the time of Vespasian, but we can only guess at how many of them were known at the time by the plebs. Certainly some were reported by hired men or “first-hand witnesses,” and those would have increased the divine aura of the emperors immeasurably even if the average person only heard a fraction of the stories which were in circulation. It must be assumed that within the world in which stories and ideas of prodigies and divine approval, the public works and general success of the emperors spoke, at least in part, for themselves and created a sufficiently believable sense of well-being for the empire.

The Year of the Four Emperors

When Nero disappeared, the Roman Empire was in a unique position of expecting a sole ruler but being without one. Nero was driven from the throne for a multitude of reasons, but largely due to the complete lack of loyalty and even hatred felt for him by the soldiery. Those who were to take his place had to prove themselves more worthy than any other man in the empire; worthy enough to not be ousted by hatred or violence again. How did they go about establishing enough legitimacy and goodwill to avoid the same fate as one who was a direct descendant of the man who had founded the head office of the empire? Each emperor tried a somewhat different formula to recast peoples' expectations and images of what their leaders should be like. The winner had to create a relationship with the army and the empire as a whole without the benefit of a reputation reaching as far as that of the Julio-Claudians. The qualities which had allowed Augustus to attain his role originally are largely the same ones ancient historians attribute to Vespasian who was the next to successfully establish his dynasty.

The ancient historians devoted many chapters to this one year—the same amount as they spent on many decades in other times. Tacitus' *Histories* depicted this year with incredible detail—describing such things as the battles at Cremona for pages and pages so his readership might understand just how tumultuous the time was. Suetonius spent about 70 chapters from the beginning of *Divus Galba* to the part in *Divus Vespasianus* when Vespasian has secured power. That year and a few months took only thirty chapters fewer than the 101 he spent on the entire 75 years of Augustus' life. Even Plutarch thought that Galba and Otho warranted whole chapters in his *Lives* along with Romulus and Alcibiades. These trends make it clear that the year was a very important

one in Rome's history, and the way the historians tell the stories of those short-lived emperors sheds a great deal of light on how power was gained, lost, and finally retained.

Foretelling of Power

The histories which have survived make it seem like attaining power was not very difficult, but that in order to keep it the person had to be worthy—which only Vespasian was. Though it should be noted that historians would not make the other men appear legitimate since they were writing under Flavian rule or using sources which were from that time. Despite possible biases, some good qualities and positive omens relating to each emperor survive and are used to support how they achieved success in the first place. In the case of each of those short-lived emperors there exists a story of someone foretelling that he would reach that level. Such stories must have survived for some reason, be it keeping a divine mystery around the office of emperor or simply peoples' love of supernatural stories. Not only do they survive, but each tale fits well with the message about each emperor which the historian wishes to convey. Vitellius, for example, was told by astrologers that he would become emperor, and he scoffed at them. Cassius Dio emphasized the pitiful character of Vitellius by his response to this prediction: "Certainly they know nothing when they declare that even I shall become emperor."³¹ This fits with the incredibly negative image of Vitellius that all the authors propagated—emphasized by such extreme tales of gluttony and decadence which become even more unbelievable with latter accounts. The fact that Cassius Dio gave more details about Vitellius' wild and hoggish behavior than his predecessors goes to show that whatever negative propaganda Vespasian had spread grew and increased in degree over the years, since it seems unlikely that Suetonius would pass up something as juicy as Vitellius' habit of eating until he vomits simply because he likes the feeling food passing

³¹ Dio. 64.4.

in and out of his body, which we find in Dio's report.³² Vitellius, much more so than Galba or Otho, was treated as one who had nothing to do with attaining his office. Tacitus informs us of how he became "popular by doing nothing"³³ and we do not even get a record of him doing something positive for the people. He did send guards to patrol for gossip about Vespasian, however, since he was incapable of leaving any positive impression of himself, but he knew it was important to remove his competitor.³⁴ So while no building projects of his survived, the fact that some astrologers predicted his rise to power did.

Otho also had an astrologer make the same prediction for him, and promptly rewarded him with some money. These predictions, which involved measuring heavenly bodies and interpreting their positions based on an incredibly complex matrix of symbols, seem to allow room for interpretation. In fact, the system was so complex that the odds of two different men coming to the same conclusion from measuring the same thing seem slim. Nevertheless, this practice was viewed as important and significant and was taken very seriously by many, though whether in a positive or negative way depended on the person and the time. Augustus had also put into circulation much of what was predicted about him, so the reading of horoscopes was clearly well-established and well-respected in this era.

Otho was obviously very glad to hear a man who called himself a professional in horoscopes declare that his path would go towards that of emperor, whereas Vitellius, a man of equal education, deemed it ridiculous. It does not seem out of the question that an astrologer could interpret the horoscope of any man of a certain class in such a flattering

³² Dio. 65.2.

³³ Tac. *Hist.* 3.86.

³⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 2.96.

way. As long as the numbers and symbols fit his prediction, the horoscope was ready to be circulated among all those members of the upper class who claimed to understand the practice, and they would believe that the bearer of the good news was destined for greatness. With this possibility being ever-present, some emperors, including Vitellius and Vespasian, decided to expel all astrologers from Rome. They would presumably have kept the one who was finding things in their favor, but other astrologers who might suggest that better fortune would befall another man could incite people to follow that man instead of the emperor himself and should be gotten rid of. The extreme measure of banishing these men shows just how much power they had in shaping public opinion, and how hungry for this information people may have been. These predictions were widely believed, and this level of importance explains why no emperor took power without someone saying that it would happen in advance.

Galba's warning was different: it came in a dream from Fortuna, which he did not immediately take seriously. Romans did not view dreams as definitive predictions; it was common knowledge that they could be deceptive. One of the main factors which influenced belief in the dream's validity as a prophecy was whether or not it was followed by some sort of favorable sign, or conversely, a negative one.³⁵ It is no coincidence then that in the Galba stories this element exists. After Galba dreamed of Fortuna urging him to hurry and seize his promising fate, *evigilavit aperto atrio simulacrum aeneum deae cubitali maius iuxta limen invenit*.³⁶ If Suetonius had simply told about the dream, readers would not necessarily have believed that it truly came from

³⁵ Harris, W.V. "Roman Opinion about the Truthfulness of Dreams." *The Journal of Roman Studies*. Vol. 93, 2003. 22.

³⁶ He woke up and, with the door being opened, found a copper image of the goddess being a cubit-high next to the threshold. Suet. *Galba*. 4.3.

the goddess or was really going to affect the real world, but the physical icon sitting outside Galba's door was the proof which was needed in order for the dream to be a legitimate impetus for action. This story is not as essential for Galba as the astrologer's predictions for Vitellius and Otho since so many other reports of omens and predictions were floating around him, but this is the one which is most concrete and comparable in its lack of ambiguity. Galba was surrounded by omens—a mule bearing young, an incense-bearer's hair suddenly going white, twelve axes being recovered from a lake which was struck by lightning—but none of them were as specific as a goddess telling him to seize his rightful place as emperor. Be that as it may, all of this divine activity was not enough to make up for the fact that Galba was worthless as an emperor. While the dreams and omens were influential, judging by the fact that the historians report it all in such detail, it was clearly not enough to stop a rebellion from taking place a few months after he got to Rome.

In Vespasian's case, the person who first surprised him with the idea of becoming emperor was a prisoner, Josephus, he captured during the Jewish wars as the doomed man was about to be sentenced. This case and that of the astrologers can be explained with wanting favor in the eyes of someone more powerful, so there is no reason to believe the stories were fabricated, though they were certainly propagated more than their value was worth. There are conflicting reports as to whether or not certain individuals were supported due to simply paying off soldiers or by some sort of merit, but there are no contradictions about positive omens foretelling their rises to power and negative ones foretelling the downfalls; on those matters all are eager to agree so that the sense of divine control remains constant.

It is somewhat curious that the words spoken by Josephus as he was preparing to die became so popular. The other three emperors were favored by distinctly Roman divinities or with Roman methods, but Vespasian employed a variety of different religions in his propaganda campaign—a turning statue, healing people with the favor of Serapis, and the prediction of a Jew. Similarly to how Augustus had employed Egyptian religious imagery to aggrandize his own divine approval, Vespasian absorbed all cultures into his arsenal. An inclusive and broad supply of heavenly involvement was necessary to gain power and hold it. Not only was it necessary, but it also gave Vespasian an edge over others. He alone of the contenders for emperorship had Eastern prophets saying that their gods also supported him, whereas Vitellius had none of this. The Romans were willing to believe the legitimacy of other cultures' religions, as evidenced by the inclusion of their predictions in various histories, and welcomed external legitimacy for their leaders. As rumors of various omens spread gradually through the empire, starting as early as during Galba's reign, people's attention turned towards Vespasian—they knew who he was and thought that the gods also did. Immediately after Cassius Dio explained why all people liked Vespasian, he cited the “portents and dreams... pointing to his sovereignty long beforehand.”³⁷ Vespasian could certainly have conquered Rome simply by withholding the grain supply until there was no option but to adopt him as emperor, but this did not guarantee a lasting reign, a fact which the previous three men to hold the throne were examples of. But by turning the minds of members of all sorts of different religions, he was able to create a divine aura on top of his reputation of competence and prudence which allowed him to keep his throne until he died naturally.

³⁷ Dio. 65.9.

Vespasian's New Dynasty

To counter the idea that a build-up of positive messages and omens helped bring Vespasian to power, Tacitus claimed that, though the stories had already been circulating, it was only after the rise of the Flavians that Romans believed them.³⁸ This is an unusual way of admitting that divine stories are assumed to influence peoples' minds to such a degree, since he had to go out of his way to claim that they did not. However, such a contention is wholly ungrounded in any fact and seems to be opposite to what all other historians imply. In fact, Tacitus himself later referenced favorable prophecies when introducing Vespasian, but qualified it by saying that "a credulous society was disposed to regard even chance events as omens."³⁹ This completely negated his first statement, since it directly connoted that people believed all the stories they heard. All that Tacitus wanted is for the Flavian dynasty to feel more legitimate and deserved than others might have been, and he presumed that if it was achieved on the back of stories that it would lessen its validity.

That is not to say that Tacitus did not value stories relating to gods or signs. In fact, he made a multi-chapter digression about Titus visiting the Temple of Venus at Paphos, with no clear reason other than showing how a Flavian received yet another promise of good fortune also from a pre-existing institution which is independent from the Roman establishments.⁴⁰ It is the chapter directly following this in which Tacitus begins to describe Vespasian's many merits: he did not put the emperor's great qualities in the foreground, but as a follow-up. Tacitus' balancing of omens and Vespasian's personality characteristics does not seem consistent in terms of which he wants more

³⁸ Tac. *Hist.* 1.10.

³⁹ Tac. *Hist.* 2.1.

⁴⁰ Tac. *Hist.* 2.2-4.

attention placed on, except that he wants the readers to admire Vespasian. Typically, Tacitus focused much less on supernatural events (especially when compared to other historians of the age) than on actual events or perceived ideas, so the fact that he referenced prophecy at all means something. To make Vespasian seem like the worthiest of candidates, Tacitus mentioned divine approval on top of painting Vitellius as the most worthless man of the decade so that all the good that was known about Vespasian would shine even brighter.

An aspect of Vespasian's rule which had the potential to create a negative image was how, in order to get the economy back under control, he used some methods which were unpopular with the people of his time, including many new taxes. So emphasizing his skills as a general and his approval from the gods may have been easier than simply discussing his capabilities as a ruler. He also stressed the idea of destiny favoring him since he was of low birth and thus he must really have been especially worthy to rise to the position of emperor.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the multitude of positive traits gets a great deal of attention from all historians writing about Vespasian, but not at the expense of reporting omens which kept occurring throughout his reign. The propaganda had to be continually perpetuated in order for Vespasian's rule not to be questioned to the point of groups of dissenters. Cassius Dio described supernatural events which kept happening even to the point of Vespasian's death, the last one being a comet which was visible for a long time as the emperor was ill. Dio reported that when Vespasian realized he was going to die he said "θεος ηδη γίνομαι."⁴² This assertion can be attributed to Vespasian's sense of humor or, as another historian suggests, simply a play on the dying words of

⁴¹ Levick, Barbara. *Vespasian*. (London, 1999), 67.

⁴² I am already becoming a god. Dio. 66.17.

Claudius: “Oh! I think I’ve messed myself.”⁴³ But Vespasian did not joke about just anything: he had gods on his mind. All we can know is that divine matters remained important for the emperor, or at least his memory, until he died and to those reading about him forever after.

As previously discussed, Vespasian imitated Augustus in many ways not limited to a powerful propaganda machine. His building program was a high priority, and one of the buildings he gave special attention to was the amphitheatre because it was a favorite idea of Augustus’.⁴⁴ He also sponsored many games, gave gifts to the soldiers and lower classes, and instated several laws which elevated the upper class, as Augustus had done. However, the imitative moves were the ones which were politically helpful and they were not necessarily chosen to remind anyone of Augustus himself, simply of a competent ruler. Vespasian did not portray himself as a humble, pious savior as Augustus had, but simply a hard-working, able ruler with a good sense of humor. This distinguished him from the previous rulers who sought to legitimize themselves through ancestry; an important strategy since it was well-known that Vespasian was of much humbler origins. He was known for his frugal and healthy lifestyle which helped him get Rome out of the chaos into which it had descended after so many inept rulers. So were all the elements shared by Vespasian and Augustus’ rise to power and rule the ones which were necessary for success? Was Vespasian consciously imitating Rome’s first emperor? I think that from the failure of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius we can see that an image of competency must be fortified by omens and prophecies to succeed, and both must be established in advance of ruling and continue to be augmented as the man rules.

⁴³ Levick. *Vespasian*. 197.

⁴⁴ Suet. *Vesp*. 9.1.

The Failures

In his history, Cassius Dio gives a brief summary of this tumultuous year right after he described Vespasian's death.

From this it results that from the death of Nero to the beginning of Vespasian's rule a year and twenty-two days elapsed. I make this statement in order to prevent any misapprehension on the part of such as might estimate the time with reference to the men who held the sovereignty. For they did not succeed one another legitimately, but each of them, even while his rival was alive and still ruling, believed himself to be emperor from the moment that he even got a glimpse of the throne. Hence one must not add together all the days of their several reigns as if those periods had followed one another in orderly succession, but must reckon once for all with the exact time that actually elapsed, as I have stated it. (Dio, 66.17)

Dio seems to group Vespasian in with the others in terms of being culpable for seizing the throne inappropriately. This passage makes it clear that over a century later, the Year of Four Emperors was still looked back on with disgust and disdain. The men who held the throne for so short a time were not forgotten, but were remembered as negative examples of unworthy rulers. Vespasian escaped from most of the negative labels, but Dio's words aimed to take some of the legitimacy away from his title. He made no mention of what the gods wanted or what the signs showed; he simply wanted this year to be remembered as chaotic because of the ambition and greed of those men. How was it actually possible for them to get the throne so easily yet not be able to hold power? Were they all so inept that they could not follow the example of Augustus or portray themselves as something other than fools and gluttons? For each, there was a combination of factors which led him to seize the throne, and then his lack of positive characteristics or support led to his demise.

Galba began his bid for the throne even before Nero disappeared, and was supported by so many that he was immediately acknowledged as the next emperor. He

had the sufficient reputation and enough of a history of omens to be accepted. However, when he actually got his power he did not pay the soldiers nor do much of anything other than take money away from people. His portrayal at the hands of all historians included a catalogue of his omens and prophecies, a mention of his ancestry of which he was immensely proud, and a description of how he was completely controlled by his greedy advisors. Tacitus subtly illustrated how worthless Galba was in the final pleading speech made by Piso to stop the angry masses which includes absolutely nothing positive about Galba's regime but instead only denigrated Otho and revolution. Plutarch, however, suggested the worthlessness of Piso not by anything he said but by a series of negative signs.⁴⁵ His good reputation was not enough to keep the soldiers happy, so they acted as they were accustomed in an action for which there was a historical precedent. Josephus described the actions which lead to the slaying of Caligula, and the description of Galba's demise has a definite ring of familiarity to it. Josephus claims that soldiers did not believe in the republic but favored the empire, and that they felt they had the right and power to decide who their emperor should be.⁴⁶ So in the year 69 the soldiers, incited by Otho, followed the same course of action and slew the emperor and chose his successor themselves. Otho had been paying them and was promising more of the same, and since Galba had no positive traits, there was no need to hesitate. The soldiers who might have stayed loyal to Galba were the ones from Spain who had served with him and seen what good he could do, but the others did not see a good ancestry and favorable omens as enough cause for tolerating him.

⁴⁵ Plut. *Galba*.

⁴⁶ Josephus. *Death of an Emperor*. 5.162-4.

In fact, the legions in Germany rebelled against Galba independently without any provocation or incentive. However, there does not seem to have been much of a reason for them choosing to follow Vitellius other than his being their general and that fact alone giving the soldiers hope that they would be amply rewarded for bringing him to a position of power. Neither Vitellius nor Otho had anything by way of a positive reputation either in terms of their personalities or of omens. Yes, they both had the crucial prediction of their power and a few prodigies here and there, but these were probably not known to anyone at the time and were just invented or reported later to give some credence to the men who ended up holding the title of emperor. One sign which seemed to be very meaningful was the eagle which seemed to guide the soldiers of Valens as they marched towards Rome. Tacitus claimed that “for many miles the neighborhood resounded with the shouts of the exultant soldiers.”⁴⁷ Not only did this mean something to the soldiers in the moment, but it was also “interpreted as an omen clearly presaging a great and successful enterprise.” This could certainly have given heart to what seemed otherwise to be a somewhat hasty and rash enterprise, though it is basically the only positive omen which survives in the record.

Otho was even less fortunate in that, aside from a few prophecies, he had little but money to keep people on his side. Though the historians state with surprise that he was performing better than expected once he became emperor, the only deed of his which is told of in a positive tone is his suicide. Vitellius’ reign and fate were similar, in that he was described as doing nothing but eating. The only time he was said to have been generous was after some of his legions swore allegiance to Vespasian and he was desperate to get them back. The account of Vitellius was certainly skewed for the worse

⁴⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 1.63.

since he was the immediate enemy of Vespasian, but he certainly did not leave any buildings or good works which might have helped his memory despite the politics. The initial success of Otho and Vitellius can be attributed to soldiers' desires to better their own positions and the failure to their ineffectuality as leaders. What Tacitus said of Vitellius may just as well have been said about Otho: *studia exercitus raro cuiquam bonis artibus quaesita perinde adfuere quam huic per ignaviam.*⁴⁸

The Year of Four Emperors was akin to an experiment by the soldiers testing what they were capable of. Sometimes it seems they chose their leader just by convenience and turned from him when the convenience shifted elsewhere. Overall, the man who finally held his place did so because the soldiers had long-since trusted his abilities, the senators and plebs were moved by signs and probably, after a year of chaos, by a glimmer of hope for someone who would feed them. Vespasian got his role and kept it by maintaining positive propaganda and doing good works.

⁴⁸ Few commanders have made themselves so popular with the army by good actions as he did by doing nothing. Tac. *Hist.* 3.86.

The Soldiers

It could be argued that Vespasian simply won the throne by being the one with the best soldiers and winning more battles in the end. However, the behavior of the troops is far from being so predictable. The image Tacitus paints of them is that they are a greedy bunch of men who wish to do nothing unless it is at either extreme—lazing around or viciously pillaging whatever is nearest. However, the emperor who gave in most of all to the troops and handed out money with the most liberal hand was also the one who lasted the shortest amount of time. Otho started trying to buy his way into the soldiers' good graces even while Galba was reigning. The historians describe how he gave out gold to each member of the praetorian guard when he was dining in the palace and performed various other monetary favors.⁴⁹ Otho did not intend to use any devotion he may have won with his gifts to instate discipline; in fact, he simply threw open the doors of the arsenal on the day in which Galba was killed and allowed any soldier to take whatever weapon he wished.⁵⁰ He clearly believed that giving the soldiers what they asked for would keep them happy and on his side. Judging by the result, this was not enough. After losing a major battle, Otho decided to give up and commit suicide. There is speculation by historians both modern and ancient as to whether or not he could have beaten Vitellius back if he kept going, but clearly Otho did not wish to try any strategy other than appeasement.

Though he did not end up holding power, it may be argued that a group of soldiers played the largest role in allowing Otho to take the place of Galba. The soldiers hated Galba for cruel acts he had performed and for not paying the donative promised by

⁴⁹ Suet. *Otho*. 4.2.

⁵⁰ Tac. *Hist.* 1.38.

Nymphidius.⁵¹ Otho claimed that the soldiers were not the only ones who hated Galba, they were simply the ones with the power to act.⁵² He may not be the most reliable source, however, since he also claimed that when soldiers came and attacked his house during a dinner that it was because they believed some senators were planning to harm him.⁵³ While Tacitus uses that event to further emphasize the riotous nature of the soldiers, Suetonius chooses to claim that it was a sign of devotion. However that act is interpreted, it is important that nothing of the sort could be applied to Galba. Except for the possibility of dutiful bodyguards, there is really no instance of soldiers remaining loyal to him; they all chose to support the man who was paying them and promising something better. This situation resulted in a bloody coup for what seems to be the man who was brutal and did not pay the soldiers enough. Yet Otho was exactly the opposite, and his regime also did not last.

In the cases of Vitellius and Vespasian, there are recorded and emphasized occasions in which they inspected their troops' living quarters. After his initial seemingly-caring act of checking over the winter quarters, all the dealings with the troops were described in terms of what Vitellius' generals, Valens and Caecina, did instead of the emperor himself. The troops' loyalty was not depicted in a very consistent manner: there is the fact that the Moesian and Pannonian legions eventually defected to the side of the Flavians, but after this, there were other legions who "outdid one another in their expressions of loyalty" in their attempts to stop Vitellius from abdicating the throne.⁵⁴ The latter indicates that some felt loyalty to the emperor, whether because of some virtue

⁵¹ Morgan. *69 A.D.: The Year of the Four Emperors.* (Oxford, 2006), 43.

⁵² Morgan. *69 A.D.* 63.

⁵³ Suet. *Otho.* 8.1.

⁵⁴ Suet. *Vit.* 15.3.

of his or simply because they feared change is unknown. Another group of legions was almost led into joining the Flavians by Caecina, but at the last minute they decided this was wrong and imprisoned their own commander. What is it that really drives these men to support one leader over another? There is no account of Vitellius commanding them personally or concerning himself with their well-being, so it is likely that different soldiers were of different minds as to who deserved their support. Some thought that Vespasian might be victorious or reacted to good things they had heard about them, and other simply wanted to stay on the side which was currently in power.

Vespasian did have a reputation for good generalship which was respected by soldiers in all parts of the world and was not tied into extra pay he may or may not have doled out.⁵⁵ In fact, he made a point of not paying the soldiers more once they declared him emperor than he had during peacetime. Tacitus says, “Here he set an excellent example by his strong opposition to any bribery of the troops, and this was in itself enough to secure a better army.”⁵⁶ Tacitus very clearly believed that giving the troops too much license led to disaster as evidenced by his brutal descriptions of the looting and destruction which occurred during Vitellius’ long march to Rome and that strict discipline was the way to this ideal, good army. Interestingly, he describes Galba saying “I select my troops, I don’t buy them” as a signal that he was foolish, even though Tacitus clearly believes that this buying of the troops was a reprehensible thing to do.⁵⁷ His point is that while Galba took the right stance on the issue, it was not what the soldiers wished to hear. Though Vespasian made sure they got the payment they deserved, even going so far as to levy a new tax on freedman to pay for it once he got to

⁵⁵ Morgan. *69 A.D.* 181.

⁵⁶ Tac. *Hist.* 2.82.

⁵⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 1.5.

Rome, this was not the main way in which he tried to win the troops.⁵⁸ Vespasian and Mucianus used other ways to motivate the troops, like reporting rumors about Vitellius moving them to the cold regions of Germany, instead of overtly denying them money. Style is not something that escapes Tacitus' account, but he approaches it subtly. The way in which Vespasian succeeded in gaining the support of his legions and various others was through this reputation of sharing their condition, not being overly superior or out of touch with their needs (as Galba had been), and being capable at his job. This willingness to share the hardships of your men was a long tradition in Roman accounts of good generalship, and Vespasian knew that this would win him a great deal of favor.

There is no doubt that appearing to have the divine sanction also influenced the soldiers, as evidenced by the joy of Valens' troops at the sight of the eagle which flew with them. The miracles Vespasian performed in Alexandria benefited not only the Greeks there, but also the listening troops who heard the priests swear to the truth of what was reported.⁵⁹ But even though the soldiers were indeed moved by signs and divine-seeming actions of their generals, this cannot have been the deciding factor in what made them follow their leader since all of the emperors in 69 such stories floating around. It had to have been Vespasian's successful image and prowess at battle which caused his soldiers to follow him and ultimately be victorious.

⁵⁸ Levick. *Vespasian*. 95.

⁵⁹ Levick. *Vespasian*. 68.

Conclusion

Sallust, in his introduction to *Bellum Jugurthinum*, wrote: *Falso queritur de natura sua genus humanum quod imbecilla atque aevi brevis forte potius quam virtute regatur.*⁶⁰ As he prepared to talk about a great man, he focused on how merit had become less fashionable whereas wealth and force had become the goals of the day. He barely mentioned divinity, focusing instead on men's choices and values as what should matter and what, in the end, makes them who they are. Though this was written a century before the year 69, the words seem applicable. Augustus eventually won out over Anthony with military might, but the fact that his image was perceived as more virtuous and more Roman was what brought him such lasting success. It was the same with the four emperors of 69—the last one of whom was the one who did not use simple force or wealth to reach his position, but won over the soldiers and populace with his reputation of uprightness. When Sallust, who may have been an accurate measure of a Roman noble, referenced gods, it was in saying that men must earn their protection through prudence and vigilance.⁶¹ There is, of course, an element of destiny when it comes to all things Roman which stems from astrology, but this is part of what makes a man worthy. Augustus and Vespasian built up a record of good choices on their bases of good omens and prophecies which led them to lasting and fruitful reigns.

This trend speaks well of the Roman people, in that they did not necessarily suffer incompetent leaders and had quite clear expectations as to how their leader would behave. Examining them during these interim periods, while the state was in crisis, is the best way to see what Romans truly valued and what kind of leader ultimately brought the

⁶⁰ Men have no right to complain that they are naturally feeble and short-lived, or that it is chance and not merit that decides their destiny. Sallust. *Bellum Jugurthinum*. 1.1

⁶¹ Sallust. *De Bello Catilinario*. 52.265.

chaos to an end and restored some sense of normalcy to the people. This peace they ended up with was certainly new in the case of Augustus since there had never been a principate, while in the year 69 everyone just wanted a capable man to take power who would act in a way that reminded them of their previous savior and bringer of peace. Since this expectation was obvious, he knowingly likened his image in some ways to that of Augustus, as they had both had the “duty” of saving the state from unworthy rulers.⁶² In the civil crisis, this figure of peace-bringer was exactly what the Romans wanted to see.

In terms of getting power, the army was certainly the deciding factor, but simply paying them as Otho did was not enough, and even they sought more. But in terms of holding this power, more was necessary. Omens definitely affected people’s thoughts of the future and if they were lacking, an emperor lost some credibility and faith from his subjects. After all, if the gods do not support the emperor, why should any mortal? The divine image which Vespasian propagated was related to the mythology of a savior coming from the east, which he supported with stories of miracles at the hands of Serapis and all the rest. He was not just another noble whose horoscope predicted a rise, but he rose through the ranks under the auspices of Fortune and through his own merits.

Through examining the behavior of the Romans and their leaders at this time, we can learn a great deal about what people value in those in power. There was no voting involved, so the issue of choice cannot be examined, but the images and reputations which were recorded reflect the values of the times. We can see how prevalent religious imagery and symbolism were through coins and other images, and how respected actual accomplishments were by the records we have in various histories.

⁶² Levick. *Vespasian*. 73.

These two emperors, Augustus and Vespasian, who ultimately seized a volatile position, are remembered as two of the most virtuous and successful emperors in all the time the Roman Empire existed. Their significance cannot be questioned, nor can the importance of both the religious and virtuous aspects of their images which they propagated.

In our day and nation the situation is not very different for many people. Is a picture of a candidate entering a church different from a relief sculpture in which Augustus wears a religious cloak? These religious ideas must be taken care of for the subjects in either time or nation to feel like their ruler will be valid; the belief in God or approval of the gods speaks to a proper sense of propriety and humbleness which people need to see. In looking at the Romans we can see an earlier people who seem more gullible, but are simply looking for the traditions to be upheld so that whatever abilities and virtue a man has can be in the right context.

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