



## Otho, Vitellius, and the Propaganda of Vespasian

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## NOTES

### ARE THEY DANCING?

READERS OF the *Classical journal* are very much indebted to Cornelius Vermeule for his interesting and beautifully illustrated articles on Greek and Roman art which have appeared from time to time. I was particularly attracted by the description, *CJ* 59 (1964) 200-04 and Figs.11 and 12, of a fine black-figured hydria in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Vermeule suggests that the five women there depicted at a fountain-house "stand or work or dance," and he later speaks of them as "dancing maidens"(p.204).

Of the five women, the one at the extreme left stands before a lion-headed spout, quietly filling her hydria or water jar. The woman at the extreme right, with one foot resting on a step, likewise quietly fills a hydria—this time from a donkey-spout. The second woman from the left balances a filled hydria on her head, and obviously is to be interpreted as walking away from the fountain-house.

Of the two women in the center, the one on the left is clearly balancing a heavy filled hydria on her raised left knee, preparatory to lifting the jar to her head. There remains but one woman—immediately to the right of the latter figure—who might conceivably be thought of as dancing. This woman carries no hydria. I should like to suggest that a close scrutiny would indicate that she, too, is

not dancing, but is rather stepping quickly away, with left arm raised in alarm, for fear that the precariously held hydria of her neighbor may tilt and spill or flick water upon her "spangled robe" (p.200). The motif of "starting away in alarm" is seen frequently in vase paintings; further, a dance in a busy—and slippery—fountain-house would seem a little out of place.

I believe, therefore, that there are not really any "dancing maidens" on the Boston hydria.

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### OTHO, VITELLIUS, AND THE PROPAGANDA OF VESPASIAN

SO MUCH HAS BEEN written on the various aspects of the propaganda of Vespasian that at first glance it would seem superfluous to add more.<sup>1</sup> It has long been

<sup>1</sup> Important works for the propaganda of Vespasian are M. P. Charlesworth, "Flaviana," *JRS* 27 (1937) 54-62; P. Derchain et J. Hubaux, "Vespasien au Sérapéum," *Latomus* 12 (1953) 38-52; J. Gagé, "Vespasien et la mémoire de Galba," *RBA* 54 (1952) 290-315; L. Herrmann, "Basilides," *Latomus* 12 (1953) 312-15; R. Lattimore, "Portents and prophecies in connection with the emperor Vespasian," *CJ* 29 (1934) 441-9; K.

known that his propaganda was directed on several levels, eastern provincial, Egyptian, and Roman. One important aspect of the Roman phase of Vespasian's propaganda, however, has been virtually ignored: why did Otho and Vitellius occupy such a prominent place in the propaganda of A.D. 69 and then drop entirely from the picture after the success of Vespasian's revolt? Vespasian's treatment of his two immediate predecessors sheds some light on the nature of his government and on his own political acumen.

In a recent article G. E. F. Chilver has shown good reason to believe that the revolt of Vespasian on July 1, A.D. 69, was a well planned and organized venture which received its impetus and direction from the top, not from an undisciplined and discontented soldiery.<sup>2</sup> This gives added importance to Vespasian's first propaganda trick, the circulation of a forged letter, supposedly from the dying Otho to Vespasian, in which Vespasian was urged to avenge his fallen emperor and to come to the aid of the empire.<sup>3</sup> This letter became for a while the official justification for the revolt.<sup>4</sup>

Vespasian championed Otho for purely practical reasons. The Danubian legions, the First Adjutrix in Spain, the Fourteenth Gemina in Britain, and the Praetorian Guard which Vitellius had disbanded in Italy were fanatically loyal to Otho.<sup>5</sup> By

claiming that he had been endorsed by Otho, Vespasian hoped to win the adherence of the Othonian legions, and he was quite successful.<sup>6</sup> Tacitus described the activity of Vespasian's adherents in this respect with these words: "Scriptae in Britanniam ad quartadecimanos, in Hispaniam ad primanos epistulae, quod utraque legio pro Othone, adversa Vitellio fuerat; sparguntur per Gallias litterae; momentoque temporis flagrabat ingens bellum, Illyricis exercitibus palam desciscitibus, ceteris fortunam secuturis."<sup>7</sup> Thus a large measure of Vespasian's support came from the legions formerly loyal to Otho.

Vitellius could not escape the barrage of propaganda unleashed by Vespasian. The luxury and cruelty of Vitellius were legendary.<sup>8</sup> Vespasian and his faction emphasized those faults to the extreme. It is reported that Mucianus commented publicly on the sloth, ignorance, and cruelty of Vitellius.<sup>9</sup> The propaganda against Vitellius was so strong and effective that no unqualified favorable comment can be found about him in the works of Tacitus or Suetonius.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For the legions, their placement, and their loyalties at the outbreak of Vespasian's revolt see B. W. Henderson, *Civil war and rebellion in the Roman empire, A. D. 69-70* (London 1908) 132-8.

<sup>3</sup> According to Tacitus (*Hist.* 2.67), the Praetorian Guard became the *robur Flavianarum partium*. The fact that one of the Danubian legions had formerly been under the command of Mucianus in Syria helped Vespasian's cause immeasurably (Suet. *Vesp.* 6.3).

<sup>4</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 2.86.

<sup>5</sup> Suet. *Vit.* 13-14; Tac. *Hist.* 2.90; Dio 64.2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 2.77.

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus (*Hist.* 2.86) mentions his *simplicitas ac liberalitas*, but hastens to add that these are qualities which could ruin their possessor if unchecked. Suetonius (*Vit.* 5) admits that Vitellius served well as proconsul of Africa, but in the same paragraph charges him with theft in the conduct of his city offices. Dio (64.6), separated from the Flavians by a longer period of time, gives an unqualified list of Vitellius' virtues.

<sup>8</sup> H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman empire in the British Museum*, vol. 2 (London 1930) p. lxxvi, calls the "Paci Orb. Terr. Aug." legend of Vespasian a "deliberate echo" of the "Pax Orbis Terrarum" of Otho. Despite the similarities of the legends (Pax was, after all, common in the legends in a variety of forms), close examination reveals that the figures represented on the reverse of these coins are quite different. Otho's coins show Pax, draped and standing, holding a branch in the right hand and a caduceus in the left. On Vespasian's coins only a draped bust of a woman wearing a crown of towers is represented (perhaps Cybele, according to Mattingly). Because neither the legends nor the figures of the coins of the two emperors are the same, it is unwarranted to suggest that Vespasian's coins represent a "connexion" of his reign with that of Otho.

Scott, *The imperial cult under the Flavians* (Stuttgart 1936) 1-39 and "The rôle of Basilides in the events of A.D. 69," *JRS* 24 (1934) 138-40; W. Weber, *Josephus und Vespasian* (Stuttgart 1921) 250-58; M. St. A. Woodside, "Vespasian's patronage of education and the arts," *TAPA* 73 (1942) 123-9; and the various treatments of the coinage.

<sup>2</sup> "The army in politics, A.D. 68-70," *JRS* 47 (1957) 34-5. See also P. B. Sullivan, "A note on the Flavian accession," *CI* 49 (1953) 67-70.

<sup>3</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4. Suetonius indicates that there is some doubt about the authenticity of the letter. It has never been accepted as genuine by modern scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> After Vespasian was firmly established in power and chose to ignore both Otho and Vitellius in his propaganda, the revolt was justified on other grounds. He claimed that his revolt took place in response to the demands of his troops. This version can be found in Josephus *BJ* 4.592-604. Because of Josephus' position and the benefits bestowed on him by Vespasian (see Josephus *Vita* 422-8), this must be considered the official Flavian explanation of the revolt.

In 69 Vespaſian championed Otho and defamed Vitellius; after 69 reference to them dropped entirely from his propaganda.<sup>11</sup> That propaganda was hardly less intensive later, but it took a different turn. Vespaſian needed propaganda to implement his new conservative program. He wanted to found a dynasty and continue the principle of dynastic succession; he wanted to check the dangerous tendency toward court luxury and Oriental tyranny which had become so manifest under Nero; and he wanted to rediscipline the legions to prevent further revolts.<sup>12</sup>

After the success of the revolt Vespaſian's propaganda became highly anti-Neronian.<sup>13</sup> Since Otho and Vitellius had distinctive Neronian connections, Vespaſian could have used them in his propaganda as examples of the evils of Neronian government. Otho had taken the cognomen Nero, had set up again the overturned statues of Nero in their former posts, and had set aside fifty million sesterces to finish the Golden House.<sup>14</sup> Vitellius made funerary offerings to Nero as a means of announcing what model he chose for the governing of the empire.<sup>15</sup> Nero, Otho, and Vitellius represented currents in the atmosphere of Rome which Vespaſian, as a conscientious administrator of the empire, desired to check.

Both of Vespaſian's immediate predecessors followed domestic policies, in so far as they had any opportunity to follow domestic policies, which were anathema to the new emperor. His policy of economic conservatism might well have benefited from a propaganda attack against the luxury of Otho and Vitellius. But that attack never came.

The answer to my question—why Vespaſian ignored Otho and Vitellius in his propaganda after the success of the revolt

—lies in the intricacies of the military situation and in Vespaſian's plans for the rehabilitation of the Roman world. He preferred to forget the civil war and look ahead to reconstruction. The necessities of civil war had forced him to champion the memory of Otho in order to gain the support of the Othonian legions. After he had won, all the legions of the empire were his, and it was his task to rediscipline them. To do this he could hardly have afforded to irritate the soldiers of Otho and Vitellius who made up the majority of the existing legions. Because of the anti-Neronian tendency of his program and his propaganda after he won Rome, he could not continue his praise of Otho. Therefore both Otho and Vitellius were ignored in his subsequent propaganda.

Vespaſian's policy toward his predecessors was unique. Like Augustus before him and Septimius Severus after him, Vespaſian wished to be known as a restorer of liberty and peace. After Actium, however, Augustus would not allow the ghost of Antony to rest in peace,<sup>16</sup> and Septimius was notorious for his ruthless suppression of the faction of Albinus.<sup>17</sup> Vespaſian for his part was content to forget and ignore both Otho and Vitellius.

A rapid glance at the "restoration" issue of coinage by Vespaſian's successors shows that his policy was continued. Otho and Vitellius (also Caligula and Nero) were excluded from mention on the restored coins of Titus and Domitian. Trajan accepted the judgment of the Flavians, also, although he was constrained to add Domitian to the list of the excluded.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See L. Homo, *Vespaſien, l'empereur du bon sens* (Paris 1949) 189-202.

<sup>12</sup> The evidence is discussed by M. P. Charlesworth, *JRS* 27 (1937) 54-7.

<sup>13</sup> Suet. *Otho* 7.1.

<sup>14</sup> Suet. *Vit.* 11.2.

<sup>16</sup> See the recent note by C. L. Babcock, "Dio and Plutarch on the *damnatio* of Antony," *CP* 57 (1962) 30-2. For evidence concerning letters of Antony which were published by Augustus after Antony's death see K. Scott, "The political propaganda of 44-30 B.C.," *MAAR* 11 (1933) 47-8.

<sup>17</sup> M. Platnauer, *The life and reign of the emperor Lucius Septimius Severus* (Oxford 1918) 112-13.

<sup>18</sup> Mattingly, *Coins, R. Emp., BM*, vol. 2, 381-93, 414-17; vol. 3, 142-5.