

# VESPASIANUS MILITARIS: PROFILE OF A ROMAN COMMANDER (27-69 AD)

## VESPASIANUS MILITARIS: SEMBLANZA DE UN COMANDANTE ROMANO (27-69 AD)

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### Abstract

The overall scholarly consensus portrays Vespasian as an effective and successful commander. However, it is a conclusion that seems to either be taken for granted, or else placed at the feet of those which Vespasian selected to surround him (i.e.: the *partes flauianae*) focusing on his accession to power in Rome. This paper seeks to contribute to the study of Vespasian by presenting a qualitative analysis of his military career through the lens of four Roman concepts, namely: *gloria*, *labor militaris*, *uirtus* and *auctoritas*. This approach will give us a more complete account for Vespasian's military success that the modern scholarly world lacks. Additionally, it will be argued that there was a difference in perspective regarding Vespasian between Roman political elites and the soldiers, challenging his alleged bad reputation. Finally, all of the above will permit a re-evaluation of the soldiers' willingness to follow Vespasian in his bid for power in Rome.

### Keywords

Vespasian; Roman Empire; Roman Military History; *gloria*; *labor militaris*; *uirtus*; *auctoritas*

### Resumen

El consenso académico es que Vespasiano fue un comandante efectivo y bien sucedido. Todavía, es una conclusión o tomada acriticamente, o colocada a los

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pies de aquellos que formaban parte de su «partido» (i.e.: *partes flauianae*), con un enfoque en su subida al poder en Roma. Este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir al estudio de Vespasiano a través del análisis cualitativa de su carrera militar mediante el uso de cuatro conceptos Romanos, a saber: *gloria*, *labor militaris*, *uirtus* y *auctoritas*. Esta aproximación nos dará una explicación más completa para el éxito militar de Vespasiano que hace falta en el mundo académico moderno. Adicionalmente, será argumentado que existía una diferencia de perspectiva sobre Vespasiano entre las élites políticas Romanas y los soldados, desafiando su supuesta mala reputación. Finalmente, todo esto nos permitirá reevaluar la inclinación de los soldados a seguir a Vespasiano para tomar el poder en Roma.

### Palabras clave

Vespasiano; Imperio Romano; Historia Militar de Roma; *gloria*; *labor militaris*; *uirtus*; *auctoritas*

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

Scholars tend to attribute Vespasian's success to factors beyond himself, most commonly to the *partes Flavianae*, focusing on his accession to power in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Although this is true in a broader political perspective and for Roman high society, it is an unsatisfactory explanation when looking at his military command and his relation to the soldiery. There is a tendency to conflate Vespasian's political stance with his military stance, committing the error of concluding that the political elites' view was the same as the soldiers' view; this would lead us to the conclusion, which is common amongst contemporary and ancient historians alike, that Vespasian suffered from a bad reputation.<sup>3</sup> However, this «bad reputation» is a partial view based on factors that were only relevant for Roman political elites.<sup>4</sup> A soldier would not give too much importance to that, instead he would focus on Vespasian's military record and generalship, both of which were excellent.<sup>5</sup> This means that at the soldiery level Vespasian most likely had a good, and not bad, reputation, as even the allegedly negative periods of his life, could be construed as positive by the soldiers, as we shall discuss.

In my view, one should look at Vespasian's inner traits to answer the question of why he was successful at a military level, which in turn will also help us to understand his rise to power, as one should not forget that it was, first and foremost, a military operation. Therefore, in this article I intend to further our understanding of Vespasian's military career and success through the assessment of his inner traits, to challenge the notion that he suffered from a bad reputation by placing the discussion on the basis of a shift of perspective between social groups, and finally to address his rise to power in Rome as a result of the former and the latter.

I will begin with a short review of the academic work done on this topic. This will be followed by the establishment of a few of the necessary premises for the present analysis. Namely, the importance of the role of the commander with regards to the success of a military force, highlighting the human factor (which is to say, in this context, the emotional factor); that Vespasian was in fact successful

2. Levick, Barbara: *Vespasian*. London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 59-74; Nicols, John: «The Emperor Vespasian», in Zissos, Andrew (ed.): *A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2016, pp. 60-75.

3. Suetonius (*Ves.*, 2, 4 et 7) mentions Vespasian's unimpressive first career stages, allegations regarding his handling of money, the «slowness of his birth and name» and later of the lack of «authority and a certain majesty», all of which are described in the context of Roman high society and that would only tarnish his reputation amongst the elites; Nicols, John: *op.cit.* p. 60; Levick, Barbara: *op.cit.* p. 61.

4. I am referring to Vespasian's origins; first career steps; his administration of Africa that ruined his economies, making him have to resort to retail trading; his lack of tact in the context of Roman imperial court; among others; all of the above were either irrelevant or most likely positive amongst the soldiery.

5. Goldsworthy, Adrian: *Generais Romanos: Os Homens que construíram o Império Romano*, Lisbon, A Esfera dos Livros, 2007, p. 374; Melo, Tiago Maria Líbano Monteiro Rocha e: *Vespasian's Way of War: a military biography of Titus Flavius Vespasianus (9 A.D. – 79 A.D.)*, (MA diss.), FLUL, 2024, pp. 42-101. Mary Beard (*SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, London, Profile Books, 2016, pp. 404-6) makes a similar point, although referring to the emperors' vices, in general, in relation to the inhabitants of the empire in general.

militarily, with an overview of his achievements as a commander; and the systematization of the choice of traits and values that will guide our analysis. Then I will analyse Vespasian's military trajectory all the way to his taking of power in Rome through the lens of the chosen traits and virtues in order to answer the aforementioned objectives of the study. The paper will be concluded with some final considerations centred around the same topics.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of work done around the figure of Vespasian is overwhelmingly profuse to be dealt with in the amount of space reserved for this review. Therefore, we shall focus only on the scholarship that directly addresses the concerns of the present paper. In fact, when we restrict our perspective to those works which analyse Vespasian's military career, and that include his inner traits as an integral part of their approach, we find that the body of scholarly work slims down considerably.

Any literature review regarding Vespasian needs to begin by mentioning Levick's (2017) biographical masterpiece. The insight given by Levick concerning Vespasian's origins and its possible impacts on the construction of his character are very valuable. However, the discussion of his inner traits is primarily focused on Suetonius in the context of Roman high society and seldomly applied to his military dimension, which is naturally understandable, given the nature of Levick's work. Both Levick and Nicols (2016) share the propensity, which is common in modern scholarship, to discuss Vespasian's traits either in terms of what he lacks or in terms of what others add to him. Nicols, following the arguments put forward in an earlier work of his (1978), focuses primarily on the *partes Flavianae*, highlighting their combined role in contributing to Vespasian's success and accession to power in Rome, thus placing Vespasian's ability to choose the right people for the right «jobs» as his foremost quality. Of course, this is a vital skill if one wants to be an effective emperor, and it undoubtedly was essential in his struggle for power, but once again keeps the discussion amidst the Roman political elites and focused on this short, albeit crucial, period of his life (i.e. years 67-70). Nicols (1978) does, however, go a bit further in his analysis of Vespasian by introducing some aspects of his generalship as important to the overall discussion, namely his experience, leadership skills, siegecraft abilities and prudence, although mostly in reference to his later career and applied to his *coup d'état*.

Mason's (2016b) investigations on the Jewish War discuss Vespasian's traits as a commander only in passing, since his overall objective is to challenge the common narrative regarding this conflict. His rejection of the existence of an actual war in Galilee and the exaggerated diminishment of every conflict prior to the siege of Jerusalem, could present some objections to an analysis of Vespasian's command. However, although persuasive at points, Mason's narrative is not

convincing overall, for he basis his arguments on a few assumptions that are at the very least debatable, most importantly: that Galilee and Jerusalem/Judaea are separate entities in the conflict; that there is a need for an official and/or majority consent of the enemy for them to become participants of a war; that there was a clear distinction between civilians and military personnel in Galilee, which means an expectation of a «professional» army on the part of the enemies of Rome; and that somehow the dominion of one over the other means there was no conflict to begin with, in other words, that the fact that the Jewish did not or could not put up much of a fight is equal to not having been involved in bellicist opposition to the Romans.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, even if we grant the arguments and reject the idea of a war for that of an «aggressive and violent peacekeeping», for example, it was still an event with countless instances of military conflict where we can observe Vespasian's command abilities in action, thus representing no real objection for the purposes of this paper. Other fatal flaws in Mason's arguments are exposed by Rogers (2021) in his own analysis of the Jewish War which offers a more balanced view of the conflict, starting with the question of why would the Romans dispose of such a heavy force (50,000 to 60,000 men, including three legions) on account of such an allegedly minor threat.<sup>7</sup> Rogers does not prolong himself on reflections regarding Vespasian's character or inner traits, as his focus is tied more directly to the progression of the entire war, evaluating causes, strategy and tactics. Nonetheless, he does infer some general notions from the analysis of Vespasian's command, namely his experience, prudence, competence and leadership skills (noting displays of *uirtus* as vital, although referring to both Vespasian and Titus), but also an unexplored mention of a potential hidden cruelty.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Mason, Steve: *A History of the Jewish War: AD 66-74*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016b, pp. 335-401. There are other issues with this interpretation, namely Mason's unfortunate and unreasonable diminishment of certain conflicts and incidents to give his overall argument more weight. One example is Mason's claim that the burning and raising to the ground of towns and villages did not amount to a war (Mason, Steve: *op.cit.* p. 365), however, despite being highly debatable on its own, one needs to look at the cumulative evidence in order to reach that conclusion; by applying this same perspective to Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812, one would be forced to claim that there was no war in the time period between the battles of Smolensk and Borodino. Another example of Mason's downplaying is his analysis of the siege of Gamala, where Mason seems to argue that because the siege was over quickly, it's indicative of a lack of resistance and/or evidence of no real conflict between Rome and the Jews of Galilee (Mason, Steve: *op.cit.* pp. 382-4). However, even if we agreed that it was a quick siege, which is highly debatable (Mason does not even explain against what background he is making that comparison, otherwise being just his subjective and unfounded impression), Josephus' description makes it clear that the Romans paid a high human and material cost to the taking of that rebel stronghold (J. BJ, 4.11-53 et 4.62-83), therefore, even if it had been fast, it was definitely gruelling and bloody. Besides, this ignores that it was Roman military practice, overall and especially for this period, to opt for an aggressive posture when it came to siege warfare, which means that the sieges would typically not be too prolonged, as opposed to a dragged out siege by way of encirclement (Campbell, Duncan B.: *Aspects of Roman Siegecraft*, (PhD diss.), University of Glasgow, 2002, pp. 61-4 et 210-3) growing in intensity and tactics as the siege progressed (Levithan, Josh: *Roman Siege Warfare*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2014, pp. 47-79), so what the siege of Gamala actually illustrates is Vespasian's competence, the soldiers' effectiveness and the Roman military's knowledge of *poliorketika*.

7. Rogers, Guy Maclean: *For the Freedom of Zion: The Great Revolt of Jews against Romans (66 – 74 CE)*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 9, 205-9, 261-2 et 462. The idea that Vespasian was essentially just wasting time in Galilee, waiting for things to resolve themselves, is also put down by Rogers (*op.cit.* pp. 281-2 et 284-8).

8. Rogers, Guy Maclean: *op.cit.* pp. 203-5, 288, 296 et 453.

Finally, it is important to highlight Damon's (2006) comparative study of Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian, that even though it is focused solely on Tacitus' *Histories*, it provides valuable insight, albeit not explicitly and again focusing on the civil war of 69, regarding Vespasian's *auctoritas* and *labor militaris*. The remainder of the works that deal in some way with Vespasian under the conditions set forth at the beginning of this literature review, do not offer any substantial material that would justify an in-depth critical analysis at this point. Suffice to say that the aforementioned works either have a focus that lies beyond the purposes of the present paper and therefore dedicate little attention to the latter, such as Jones (1984 and 1992), Webster (1993), Southern (1997) and Frere (2001), or focus solely on Vespasian's *auctoritas* and/or the *partes Flavianae*, once again in the context of Roman high society and consistently highlighting Vespasian's rise to power in Rome, such as Waters (1963), Shotter (2004), Andress (2010) and Acton (2011).

## 2. WAR, COMMAND AND VICTORY

Napoleon famously stated that «À la guerre les trois quarts sont des affaires morales, la balance des forces réelles n'est que pour un autre quart», and although he is more than a thousand years in the future with regards to the historical period that concerns this paper, his assessment of war bears a universal quality.<sup>9</sup> It has become increasingly clear that more than strategy, tactics and logistics, what made an Ancient Roman commander successful was his ability to manage his soldiers' morale, psychology and emotion.<sup>10</sup> It was the capability to control the soldier's fears (fear of death being the most obvious and terrifying when talking about war), to instil courage in them, to earn their loyalty and to display Roman military virtues to serve as an example, what ultimately constituted the basis of effective and successful Roman military leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Vespasian was a successful commander, which implies that he at least displayed some of the qualities and abilities referred to above. However, before systematising the traits which are to be the object of analysis in the context of Vespasian's command, it is important to present an overview of the latter's military

9. Napoléon, *Correspondance*, vol. 17, p. 472, n° 14 276, translation proposed by the author of this article: «In war, moral factors account for three-quarters of the whole; the balance of material strength accounts for only one quarter.»

10. Goldsworthy, Adrian: *The Roman Army at War (100 BC - AD 200)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 149-67; Campbell, Brian: *War and Society in Imperial Rome (31 B.C. - A.D. 284)*, London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, pp. 39-45; Rosicky, Łukasz: *Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity: A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, pp. 172-216. The other responsibilities of the commander referred to above were, of course, still very important (Kagan, Kimberly: *The Eye of Command*, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 2006, p. 7).

11. See Rosicky, Łukasz: *op.cit.* pp. 172-216, on the evaluation of some of these topics for the Late Roman period. See also Goldsworthy, Adrian: *Generals Romanos...* pp. 267-356, for an analysis of some of Rome's most successful generals of the 1st century AD.

achievements. We can trace Vespasian's first military post to around the year 27 in Thrace, where he served as a tribune in one of the Moesian legions.<sup>12</sup> Although it was a minor command position, it was Vespasian's initiation into a type of warfare in which he would excel: siege warfare. This, because we know the military training of the aristocracy to be «(...) traditionally informal, carried out through the socialization of youth by those with a military background (...)», and the latter had, at that time, recently been involved in a conflict that challenged their siegecraft abilities, as evidence from the siege of Mons Haemus (carried out by C. Poppaeus Sabinus in the year 26) demonstrates.<sup>13</sup> This was followed by Vespasian's two major commissions, first as legate of *II Augusta*, participating in the invasion of Britain of 43, and later as commander of the armies of Judaea, in charge of crushing the Jewish revolt of 66. More will be said of these two campaigns in the subsequent section. However, one needs but to mention three factors in order to establish Vespasian's military competence. First, that all the evidence confirms that Vespasian was ultimately victorious in all his encounters with the enemy, even though there were minor, temporary, setbacks on rare occasions. Second, that he was publicly recognised for those achievements: the *ornamenta triumphalia* and double priesthood following his efforts in Britain. Third, that he was given the command to crush the Jewish revolt as a recognition of his competence, not just as a commander, but also with an expertise in siege warfare.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it is important to establish the concepts that will guide our analysis of Vespasian's command. The Romans ruled their lives, both individually and socially, on the basis of a series of values, concepts and ideas. These values, some of Roman origin and others of Greek influence, permeated all dimensions of Roman society, from socio-political to religious and military.<sup>15</sup> They, of course, did not exist in a vacuum and were intertwined with one another in most situations. However, for the sake of the distinctively Roman pragmatism, this paper focuses on a select few of these values that are more closely related to Vespasian's military command and that are more evident in the available sources (referring

12. Nicols, John: *Vespasian and the Partes Flaviana*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978, pp. 2-3; Levick, Barbara: *op.cit.* p. 10.

13. Roth, Jonathan P.: «Josephus as a Military Historian», in Howell, Honora, et Rodgers, Zuleika (eds.): *A Companion to Josephus*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2016, p. 200; Goldsworthy, Adrian: *Generals Romanos...* pp. 12-3 et 17; Lee, A.D.: *Warfare in the Roman World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 90; Gilliver, C.M.: *The Roman Art of War*, Charleston, SC, Tempus Publishing, 2001, p. 13; this was complemented with the reading of military literature. For the siege of Mons Haemus, see Tac. *Ann.*, 4.49-51 and Campbell, Duncan B.: *op.cit.* p. 295.

14. Nicols, John: *Vespasian and...* pp. 24-6; Rogers, Guy Maclean: *op.cit.* pp. 203-5; Melo, Tiago Maria Líbano Monteiro Rocha e: *op.cit.* pp. 99-102. There were political factors at play (Levick, Barbara: *op.cit.* pp. 32-3), but these cannot be separated from the military dimension referred to above, which was essential even for the prosecution of those political goals (Acton, Karen Louise: *Vespasian Augustus: Imperial Power in the First Century CE*, (PhD diss.), University of Michigan, 2011, pp. 122-3; Rogers, Guy Maclean: *op.cit.* pp. 203-5; Melo, Tiago Maria Líbano Monteiro Rocha e: *op.cit.* pp. 99-102).

15. Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *Estudos de História da Cultura Clássica: Cultura Romana*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2009, pp. 338-9.



to other values or concepts of relevance when deemed necessary). Those being: *gloria*; *labor militaris*; *auctoritas* and *uirtus*.

*Gloria*, sometimes seen as a higher degree of *honor*, for the purpose of this paper, will be defined as the public recognition of a man's qualities and achievements, although in this case, highlighting the military qualities and achievements.<sup>16</sup> *Labor militaris*, will be seen as military labour, this in the perspective of one who toils honestly and relentlessly to earn his military post and to become worthy of his community.<sup>17</sup> *Auctoritas*, a quality which was deeply linked to Caesar Augustus, and in the military world to *imperator*, is an intrinsic value that can be simplified as status or authority, it is predicated on *uirtus* and can be related to a series of conditions set by Cicero: «(...) but on his age there are many things which confer authority [*auctoritas*]; genius, power, fortune, skill, experience, necessity, and sometimes even a concourse of accidental circumstances.»<sup>18</sup> It depends on social recognition and it is deeply linked, in a relation of complementarity and not opposition, to both *potestas* and *imperium*, being the moral authority to the effective power of the two.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, *uirtus*, which can be defined as the state of being a man (not in terms of age, but of quality), will be mostly used in this paper for its original meaning of valour and courage, as that was almost exclusively the way it presented itself in military contexts, and less for the meaning that it gained from the influence of the Greek *arete*, which is better observed in a societal environment.<sup>20</sup>

These are, and I would argue not coincidentally, almost exactly the qualities prescribed by Cicero: «For I think that these four qualities are indispensable in a great general,—knowledge of military affairs, valour [*uirtus*], authority [*auctoritas*] and good fortune.» The «knowledge of military affairs» did not imply formal education, and was being referred to by Cicero as knowledge acquired through practical experience, which is another way of saying «through *labor militaris*».<sup>21</sup>

16. See Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* pp. 331-5, for a deeper analysis of this concept.

17. See Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* pp. 388-97, for a deeper analysis of this concept.

18. Cic. *Top.*, 19.73. See Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* pp. 351-8, for a deeper analysis of this concept and see Domingo, Rafael: *Auctoritas*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1999, pp. 11-5, for the origin of the concepts of *auctoritas* and *potestas*.

19. Mora, Francisco Javier Casinos: «El Dualismo Autoridad-Potestad como Fundamento de la Organización y del Pensamiento Políticos de Roma», *POLIS: Revista de ideas y formas políticas de la Antigüedad Clásica*, 11 (1999), pp. 90-1, 98 et 107-8.

20. This does not mean there were two, or more, contradicting concepts of *uirtus*, but simply that the latter evolved through time, gaining a depth and scope that does not exclude the original meaning, but builds upon it, going from the battlefield to the heart of society, which is what Seneca implies when he writes that *uirtus* is found in temples, in the senate, in the forum and on the battlefield (Sen. *Vit.*, 7.3; Evenepoel, Willy: «The Stoic Seneca on *virtus*, *gaudium* and *voluptas*», *L'Antiquité Classique*, 83 (2014), p. 53). Grimal, Pierre: *A Civilização Romana*, Lisboa, Edições 70, 2019, p. 72; Lee, A.D.: *op.cit.* pp. 62-3 et 66-7. See Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* pp. 397-407, for a deeper analysis of this concept.

21. Cic. *Man.*, 10.28; Lee, A.D.: *op.cit.* pp. 89-90.



## 2.1. ON THE PATH OF *GLORIA*

«For this should not be concerned, which cannot possibly be kept in the dark, but it might be avowed openly: we are all influenced by a desire of praise, and the best men are the most especially attracted by glory [*gloria*].»<sup>22</sup>

It was in this grandiose way that Cicero defended the pursuit of *gloria*, a task best suited for the best of men. Exactly one hundred years after his death, a young legate by the name of Vespasian was, in Britain, taking his first steps on the path to achieve it.

*Gloria* meant having one's excellence publicly recognised, it meant leaving a mark in History and effectively beating mortality; in this context, Cicero's assertion that all men are in some way haunted by it, rings true, and Vespasian does not seem to have been any different. His way of achieving such a goal was through the military, which was perhaps the most common way to do it.<sup>23</sup> Vespasian's first encounter with *gloria* was in the context of the invasion of Britain of 43. A legate debutant in search of recognition in a highly competitive political context. Vespasian's first chance to show his worth was in the battle of the river Medway, where he in fact played a major role in securing victory for the Romans. However, his efforts were overshadowed by his colleague, Gnaeus Hosidius Geta, who ended up collecting all the praise.<sup>24</sup> Vespasian's breakthrough came shortly after, when he was entrusted with pacifying the South-West of Britain.<sup>25</sup> He was sent alone with his legion, which meant that he bore all the responsibility in case of failure, but that at the same time there was no one who could steal the spotlight in case of utter success. We know that this campaign was tremendously successful for Vespasian, so much so that he was awarded the *ornamenta triumphalia*.<sup>26</sup> The triumph symbolised the epitome of the consecration of *gloria*, however, since the Principate that this honour was reserved for the emperors alone.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the emperors did not leave the generals empty handed, and would award the *ornamenta triumphalia* as a form of recognition for the very best of them.<sup>28</sup> This is illustrative of the significance of such a commendation, as it was the highest

22. Cic. *Arch.*, 11.26.

23. Rogers, Guy Maclean: *op.cit.* pp. 203-4.

24. D.C., 60.20.3-5. Webster, Graham: *The Roman Invasion of Britain*, London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1993, pp. 99-100; Frere, Sheppard, and Fulford, Michael: «The Roman Invasion of A.D. 43», *Britannia*, 32 (2001), p. 47; Melo, Tiago Maria Libano Monteiro Rocha e: *op.cit.* pp. 61-3.

25. Suet. *Ves.*, 4.

26. Suet. *Ves.*, 4.

27. Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* p. 335; Grimal, Pierre: *op.cit.* pp. 143-4; Hekster, Olivier: «The Roman Army and Propaganda» in Erdkamp, Paul (ed.): *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 347; Lee, A.D.: *op.cit.* pp. 34-5.

28. Grimal, Pierre: *op.cit.* pp. 143-4; Lee, A.D.: *op.cit.* pp. 34-5.

honour that any general could hope to achieve, and officially places Vespasian as a man who successfully walked the path of *gloria*.

Vespasian was most likely not expecting to be awarded such an honour on account of his rank, but that does not mean that he was not pursuing the idea of *gloria*, the material reward was just its symbol.<sup>29</sup> Suetonius does not hide this desire when he mentions that «(...) in his old age, he [Vespasian] had been so absurdly eager for a triumph, as though it was either owed to his ancestors or had ever been hoped for by himself.»<sup>30</sup> The road to achieve it was bound tightly together with *uirtus*, Cicero goes so far as stating that «magnanimity [*uirtus*] looks for no other recognition of its toils and dangers save praise and glory [*gloria*] (...)».<sup>31</sup> Vespasian's commendation leads us to conclude that his *uirtus* was recognised, however, that is very difficult to analyse for the campaign in Britain, given the slimness of evidence. Nevertheless, what we can observe is the *labor militaris*. This is rather clear from Suetonius' description of Vespasian's achievements in Britain: «(...) he [Vespasian] was transferred to Britain and engaged the enemy on thirty occasions. He brought under our authority two very strong tribes, more than twenty townships and the Isle of Wight (...)».<sup>32</sup> The number of battles fought and of *oppida* captured, which were most likely rounded, although not necessarily up, speak to the vastness and intensity of Vespasian's toiling. Furthermore, if we place Vespasian's nomination as legate in its rightful context of a «new man» with obscure family origins, who secured this position primarily due to the influence of Narcissus, we understand Vespasian's motivation to show that he was worthy of that post and that he had a place in Roman high society.<sup>33</sup> To place this discussion amongst Vespasian's contemporaries, we find Onasander making the exact same argument, although in a general way:

«It might perhaps be expected that those men who cannot take pride in their ancestors would become even better generals; for men who glory in their forefathers, even if they are themselves failures, believing that the fame of their family is theirs forever are often too careless as administrators, whereas those who have no ancestral renown to begin with, desiring to make up for the obscurity of their lineage by their own zeal, are more eager to take part in dangerous enterprises.»<sup>34</sup>

In this way, we see how *labor militaris* marked Vespasian's command from the very beginning.

The campaign in Judaea, which was the cause of Vespasian's triumph (the final consecration of *gloria*, as we have said), offers us better insight into the workings of these virtues or concepts. The one which is more evident from an analysis of the sources is *uirtus*. The most common form of *uirtus* demonstrated by the

29. Levick, Barbara: *op.cit.* p. 23.

30. Suet. *Ves.*, 12.

31. Cic. *Arch.*, 11.28; Rocha Pereira, Maria Helena da: *op.cit.* p. 332.

32. Suet. *Ves.*, 4.

33. Suet. *Ves.*, 1 et 4.

34. Onos., 1.24.

commanders who possessed it, was to lead by example; placing themselves in front of their troops, sometimes going so far as even entering the combat.<sup>35</sup> The front line was not a common place to find a general, as that was not expected of them given their rank, so to do it was invariably seen as an example of *uirtus*. This demonstration of *uirtus* is visible in two distinct moments of the Jewish War.<sup>36</sup> The first one appears in the siege of Jotapata where Vespasian's presence near the front line seems unquestionable, because «(...) one of the defenders on the wall hit Vespasian with an arrow on the flat of the foot.»<sup>37</sup> He was close enough to the walls to be targeted by enemy projectiles, which was in itself a demonstration of courage, but after being hit, Vespasian quickly recomposed himself, and «Suppressing the pain, Vespasian made a point of showing himself to all who had been alarmed for his safety (...)»; a gesture that further reaffirmed his *uirtus* while at the same time bolstering morale.<sup>38</sup> Suetonius, in a more exaggerated way and most likely referring to this same episode amongst others, also makes a note of Vespasian's *uirtus* as a commander: «(...) he [Vespasian] engaged in one or two battles with such resolution that he received a blow on his knee from a stone and several arrows in his shield during the storming of a fortress.»; naturally, this sort of injury would only be possible if Vespasian was in fact in the front line.<sup>39</sup>

The second example comes from the siege of Gamala:

«Meanwhile Vespasian, staying all the time in close contact with his hard-pressed troops, and appalled to see the town collapsing in ruins on top of his army, had forgotten about his own safety and without realizing where he was heading had gradually reached the highest part of the town.»<sup>40</sup>

Once again, there is no doubt that Vespasian was accompanying his men from the front line, to the point of placing himself in danger. This was an explicit display of *uirtus* that was recognised by Josephus and inarguably by the soldiery. One last piece of evidence comes from Tacitus, where we can observe a summary of what has hitherto been argued:

«Vespasian was a born soldier. He marched at the head of his troops, chose the place to camp and struggled against the enemy night and day by his generalship and, if occasion required, by personal combat, eating whatever food happened to be available and dressed much the same as a private soldier.»<sup>41</sup>

35. Onasander (13 et 33) highlights the importance of the general's disposition with regards to the morale of the army, adding that the general should show courage in front of his troops, although he should be cautious not to place himself in danger. Frontinus (*Str.*, 2.8.12-3) and Vegetius (*Epitoma Rei Militaris*, 3.9) are also quite clear about the important role of the commander's example to restore and maintain friendly morale. Lee, A.D.: *op.cit.* pp. 90-1.

36. There is a third, less clear moment, where Josephus (*BJ*, 3.151) mentions in passing that Vespasian «(...) himself took his infantry to push up the slope at the point where the wall was most vulnerable.» Josephus does not shed any more light on the position of the commander, but it seems like he was at least in a position to be seen by his men in the front line.

37. *J. BJ*, 3.236.

38. *J. BJ*, 3.239.

39. Suet. *Ves.*, 4.

40. *J. BJ*, 4.31.

41. Tac. *Hist.*, 2.5.

In a military context, this is exactly what one would expect as a description of a general's *uirtus*.<sup>42</sup> Tacitus effectively gives the final verdict on Vespasian's *uirtus*' judgement. The Roman historian highlights Vespasian's soldier-like behaviour, meaning a general that led by example and that would weigh his valour against any of his men's, and by not neglecting to mention his willingness to be personally involved in combat if necessity should call. A final note should be made regarding the ever-present *labor militaris* in Vespasian's command, which is visible in this description as well; for Vespasian is characterised as one who relentlessly toils to perform his duties with distinction, even at the price of food and comfortability.<sup>43</sup> In another passage that illustrates both Vespasian's *uirtus* and *labor militaris*, Tacitus refers to the way in which Vespasian prepared his men, stating that he «(...) made inspections, encouraging efficient men by praise and spurring on the idle by example rather than correcting them (...)».<sup>44</sup>

Another one of the proposed virtues that can explain Vespasian's success as a general as well as his standing amongst the army, not to mention his rise to power in Rome, is *auctoritas*. It is a difficult virtue to assess in practical terms, therefore we have tried to perceive it from the relations between Vespasian and his men, in matters of obedience, respect and loyalty. Once again only the campaign in Judaea offers sufficient evidence to make these assertions. Although, it would make sense that only in Judaea had Vespasian achieved this elusive virtue of *auctoritas*, as he would possess at least three of the conditions set by Cicero<sup>45</sup>: age, as he was in his late 50s when he took over in Judaea; experience, after many years of service to Rome (military, religious and administrative); and skill, as no doubt Britain's *gloria* still followed him wherever he went.<sup>46</sup>

The first instance in which we can observe *auctoritas* in Vespasian, appears in the siege of Tiberias. The decurion Valerianus had been sent ahead of the army with a small cavalry detachment to propose terms to the city of Tiberias before the main army approached, after which it would presumably be too late for a peaceful resolution.<sup>47</sup> A group of Jewish rebels left the city and moved on Valerianus and his men with aggression, however, instead of giving battle, as Josephus concludes that Roman victory would be certain, Valerianus retreated, for he «(...) thought it unsafe to engage an enemy against his general's orders, even if victory were certain (...)».<sup>48</sup>

42. Onasander (1) gives a description, regarding the qualities that a good general should possess, that particularly resembles Tacitus' description of Vespasian.

43. This idea of the rejection of material goods for the pursuit of higher values is particularly characteristic of a Stoic notion of *uirtus*, as seen, for example, in the way Seneca opposes *uirtus* to *voluptas* (Evenepoel, Willy: *op.cit.* pp. 59-60).

44. Tac. *Hist.*, 2.82.

45. Cic. *Top.*, 19.73.

46. Cassius Dio (65.8.3-4) summarises this well in: «For not only was the popular feeling strong in his [Vespasian's] favour—since his reputation won in Britain, his fame derived from the war then in hand, his good nature, and his prudence, all led men to desire to have him at their head (...)».

47. J. *BJ*, 3.448.

48. J. *BJ*, 3.449-52.

This is illustrative of the level of obedience and respect that Vespasian commanded amongst his men. A reality that was not rooted on *potestas*, but on *auctoritas*, as this was a straightforward case of «self-defence», that is an unprovoked and defensive altercation, and in that way easily justifiable by Valerianus.<sup>49</sup> The conflict over Tiberias offers us yet a more convincing example of *auctoritas* in Vespasian. As consequence of the previously described dispute, Valerianus had his horses stolen by the rebels.<sup>50</sup> This was an insult to the Roman *fides*, as the decurion and his men had approached only to negotiate a surrender and had been met with aggression. The expected response, and that had been the policy in Galilee to that moment, would be to punish the city by way of a sack. The sack was both a punishment for those who offered resistance and a reward for the Roman soldiers, as that was the only moment in which they could keep the spoils.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it was not something the soldiers would give up without protest, sometimes leading to mutiny or an ignorance of the general's orders, which would obviously undermine the latter's command.<sup>52</sup> However, in the case of Tiberias, Vespasian «(...) issued orders that there was to be no looting or rape (...)», and the soldiers obeyed with no backlash; the proof of this being that the same soldiers were soon after involved in another siege with the same resolution.<sup>53</sup> The main motivation to prevent the sack of the city was to accommodate king Agrippa II, in a clear demonstration of the Roman *fides*, but that does not change the fact that in order to accomplish this while maintaining the soldiers' obedience and diligence, Vespasian needed to have an established *auctoritas*.

Vitellius is a striking example of one who did not possess *auctoritas*, and who was aware of that.<sup>54</sup> His way of gaining the Germanic legions' loyalty was through an «excessive and imprudent generosity», as Tacitus calls it.<sup>55</sup> This meant buying their support, which could take the form of promotions or regular payments and prizes, but also by indulging the legions' demands, which included executions.<sup>56</sup> Vitellius was effectively being led by his men, instead of leading them, in a clear demonstration of lack of *auctoritas*.<sup>57</sup> This culminated in Caecina's betrayal, and

49. Guy Maclean Rogers (*op.cit.* p. 242) adds that it was usually a capital offense for cavalrymen to leave their mounts behind, which supports the thesis of Vespasian's *auctoritas* argued in this paper, as Vespasian's men would, apparently, rather risk death than to disobey their commander (although a conflict of fears could be argued here), which is to say that the order given by Vespasian was a matter of *potestas*, but the soldiers' reaction to that order under the aforementioned circumstances is illustrative of the former's *auctoritas*.

50. J. *BJ*, 3.452.

51. Tac. *Hist.*, 3.19; Levithan, Josh: *op.cit.* pp. 215-6.

52. Tacitus (*Hist.*, 3.19) makes it very clear that the Flavian troops at Cremona «(...) would mutiny if they were not led onwards.», as they were looking to plunder. Later on (*Hist.*, 3.32-3) the commanders do not manage to prevent the men from sacking the city of Cremona. Caes. *Civ.*, 2.12-3 and J. *BJ*, 6.252-60, are two other instances of such events; Vegetius (*Epitoma Rei Militaris*, 3.4) dedicates a long chapter on how to prevent mutiny, showing that it was in fact a real problem; see also Levithan, Josh: *op.cit.* pp. 219-222, for a deeper analysis of this issue.

53. J. *BJ*, 3.461.

54. Nicols, John: *Vespasian and...* p. 83.

55. Tac. *Hist.*, 1.52.

56. Tac. *Hist.*, 1.52 et 1.58.

57. Tacitus (*Hist.*, 1.62) goes as far as saying that Vitellius' troops «(...) carried out the general's duties themselves (...)» instead of Vitellius, that is.

then in Vitellius' men, in Rome, refusing to accept his decision of stepping down as emperor and forcing him back into the post.<sup>58</sup> Vitellius' *auctoritas* was in shambles. Vespasian, on the other hand, is presented as the opposite of Vitellius in this passage of Tacitus' *Histories*:

«As for a bounty to the troops, Mucianus had only conjured up the prospect of a modest sum at the initial parade, and even Vespasian offered no more under conditions of civil war than other emperors had in peacetime. He was impressively resistant to bribing the troops and therefore he had a better army.»<sup>59</sup>

Vitellius conceded to the legions' whims and had gotten contempt, disobedience and treason in return. On the other hand, Vespasian held the legions' obedience, loyalty and respect without indulging them, to the point that Suetonius claims that Vespasian «(...) paid late even their legitimate rewards.»<sup>60</sup> One cannot conceive of this if not through an *auctoritas* that Vespasian had gained the hard and righteous way. Vespasian's standing amongst the soldiers was so revered that they decided to follow him in his attempt to take control of the Empire without any instant material reward.<sup>61</sup> Cassius Dio, in a passage that summarises a lot of what we have been discussing, is quite clear about this: «For not only was the popular feeling strong in his [Vespasian's] favour—since his reputation won in Britain, his fame derived from the war then in hand, his good nature, and his prudence, all led men to desire to have him at their head (...).»<sup>62</sup> The legions were living organisms and they did not have the same respect for every commander, nor would they follow any general blindly.<sup>63</sup> Vespasian's status with the army, as well as the success of his command, cannot be fairly explained without taking into consideration the role of *auctoritas*.<sup>64</sup>

This is not to say that the soldiers' willingness to follow Vespasian in his attempt to take power in Rome was solely motivated by how they perceived him as a

58. Tac. *Hist.*, 3.13 et 3.67-8. See Damon, Cynthia: «*Potior Utroque Vespasianus*: Vespasian and his predecessors in Tacitus's *Histories*» *Arethusa*, 39 (2006): p. 253, for another example of Vitellius' lack of *auctoritas* amongst the soldiers in the context of Flavius Sabinus' execution.

59. Tac. *Hist.*, 2.82.

60. Suet. *Ves.*, 8. Damon, Cynthia: *op.cit.* p. 252, mentions Vespasian's authority even at a distance, controlling the wrath of different military forces during his bid for power in Rome.

61. The role of Mucianus in motivating support for Vespasian should be mentioned (Tac. *Hist.*, 2.80); in the same way, the rumours that had been spread in the East (asserted publicly by Mucianus himself) that Vitellius was planning to move the Eastern legions to the Rhine had an obvious effect on the soldiers (Tac. *Hist.*, 2.80; Goldsworthy, Adrian: *Generals Romanos...* p. 368). However, none of these reasons are sufficient to explain the army's support of Vespasian's bid for power, and they should be complemented by his inner traits as a general, as has been shown in this paper. See Jones, Brian W: *The Emperor Titus*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1984, pp. 93-99, for a discussion of Mucianus' political relations with the Flavians.

62. D.C., 65.8.3-4.

63. Tacitus (*Hist.*, 3.13-4) offers a good example of how the legions were in fact living organisms by describing their reaction to Caecina's betrayal. Instead of uncritically accepting their general's decision, they first protested and, not happy with that, they proceeded to imprison their own general and to elect new leaders.

64. Suetonius (*Ves.*, 7) mentions that «Because he [Vespasian] was, so to speak, an unexpected and still new emperor, he was lacking in authority and a certain majesty.», which seems to imply that Vespasian was lacking in *auctoritas*. However, this was regarding Vespasian's standing amongst his peers, as in Roman high society, and not amongst the soldiery, where his *auctoritas* was deep-rooted and well established. See Nicols, John: «The Emperor... pp. 66-8 et 73-4, for the topic of authority amongst the elites.

commander, after all there were also material factors at play.<sup>65</sup> However, one cannot fully understand Vespasian's military trajectory, success and rise to power without acknowledging the traits he displayed as a leader of men. Suetonius' claim that Vespasian lacked *maiestas* and *auctoritas* needs to be properly contextualised in the latter's attempt to legitimise himself as *princeps* and founder of a new dynasty.<sup>66</sup> An accusation that was mainly tied to two factors: to a lesser extent, Vespasian's reputation for avarice, which has been previously discussed in this paper in the military context; and to a greater extent, Vespasian's status as a *novus homo*, which was something that had a negative weight amongst Roman political elites, but not necessarily with the military arm of the Empire.

It brings to mind the memory of Gaius Marius, himself a *homo novus* in Roman politics, of humble origins, tribune of the plebs and member of the *populares* party, who was a very skilled commander.<sup>67</sup> It is curious that both men had their name associated with the same animal — the mule. Marius, due to the introduction of the *furca* in the legions, which resulted in his men being nicknamed «Marius' Mules», and Vespasian, because he reportedly had to «stoop to retail trading» for financial reasons, leading him to be «popularly called 'the muleteer'».<sup>68</sup> Both men of obscure origins, associated with an animal that symbolised hard work, but also manual labour. For the same reason that they were looked down upon by the aristocracy, they were highly respected by the soldiery.

Finally, two other instances that pertain to Vespasian's *labor militaris* need be mentioned. One comes to us from the battle of Lake Gennesaret, a naval encounter that took place in the aftermath of the siege of Tarichaeae. Josephus reports that when Vespasian was faced with an enemy that had taken to the water, instead of allowing for their escape, as they did not represent a major threat, or waiting for them in land, he immediately ordered the construction of a small fleet to crush said enemy.<sup>69</sup> It is another clear example of *labor militaris*, of Vespasian's willingness to make the extra effort in order to fulfil his duties. The other instance is of a more symbolic nature and is related to the two new legions created by Vespasian: *IV Flavia Felix* and *XVI Flavia Firma*. Both were given the emblem of the lion, an animal that was associated with one of Vespasian's favourite deities, a demi-god who was known for his «labours» — Hercules.<sup>70</sup>

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65. See note 59 for the legions of the East. See also Nicols, John: *Vespasian and...* pp. 74-5 et 96, for other factors influencing the soldiers' decision-making.

66. Suet. *Ves.*, 7.

67. Goldsworthy, Adrian: *Generals Romanos...* p. 17.

68. Suet. *Ves.*, 4. *Furca*: «(...) a forked stick to help the soldier carry his equipment more easily.» (Roth, Jonathan P.: *Roman Warfare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 92); see Roth, Jonathan P.: *Roman...* p. 92, for more detail.

69. J. *BJ*, 3,505.

70. See Grimal, Pierre: *Dicionário da Mitologia Grega e Romana*, Lisboa, Antígona, 2020, pp. 205-23, on Heracles and Hercules. Another instance is mentioned by Damon, Cynthia: *op.cit.* pp. 256-7, regarding Vespasian's pre-civil war preparations.



### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Although a few may challenge the extent of Vespasian's achievements in the military world, the overall scholarly consensus portrays him as an effective and successful commander. However, it is a conclusion that seems to either be taken for granted, or else placed at the feet of those which Vespasian selected to surround him. Regardless, little credit has been given to the man himself, and to the military qualities he may have embodied.

In this paper, I have tried to present an analysis of Vespasian's military career through the observation of some of his traits and motivations. By shifting the focus in this way, the differing perceptions of Vespasian that were held, on the one hand, by Rome's political elites, and on the other hand, by the soldiers, become rather clear. In the same way, by placing the discussion of Vespasian's military success in the realm of his traits, we achieve a deeper and more complex understanding of the forces involved in the formation of the former. Finally, the willingness of the soldiers to follow Vespasian in his bid to power in Rome finds, under the perspective defended in this paper, a sturdier argumentative basis in which to stand.

Vespasian first demonstrated his *uirtus* and *labor militaris* in Britain, qualities that followed him to Judaea and that helped establish his *auctoritas*. Three virtues that were fundamental for the success of his generalship. Vespasian did end up having his long-awaited triumph, the final reward after a career walking on the path of *gloria*. In all, Vespasian was a «born soldier», as Tacitus says, and that seems to have stayed with him, for even when acclaimed emperor by his army, «Vespasian himself showed no sign of pride, arrogance or transformed personality in the face of his transformed situation.» and instead «(...) he addressed his men in the manner of a soldier (...).».<sup>71</sup>

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71. Tac. *Hist.*, 2.80.

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