



Vespasian (AD 9-79; Roman emperor AD 69-79)

Vespasian (Titus Flavius Vespasianus) was the ninth Roman emperor, in succession to Galba (AD 68-9), Otho (69) and Vitellius (69). Like Augustus, he succeeded in restoring peace and stability after a period of civil war, and founded a dynasty of emperors, the Flavian dynasty. It was during his reign that the Temple at Jerusalem was destroyed (70).

Vespasian was unrelated to the previous emperors, and was of undistinguished (not even senatorial) birth - which helped him to survive the previous reigns. He was a competent general, commanding the second legion in the invasion of Britain in 43 and conquering the south-west and the Isle of Wight.

He later rose in the senate to become consul in 51 and governor of Africa a decade later. He joined Nero in Greece in 66, incurring the emperor's displeasure by falling asleep during one of his recitals. This did not prevent him, however, from being put in charge of the suppression of the Jewish Revolt (66-70); by 68 most of Judaea was recovered, although Jerusalem remained to be taken.

During the rapid turnover of emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) following the death of Nero in 68, Vespasian quietly prepared his own bid for power. The legions of Egypt, Judaea, Syria and then the Danube all declared for him, and he sent his commander Primus ahead to secure Italy on his behalf. A major, and bloody, victory was achieved at Cremona, and Primus took Rome on 21 December 69; Vitellius had been brutally killed the day before.

The senate passed a law conferring the powers of emperor on Vespasian. It is disputed whether such a law was normal, or whether it was passed now for the first time; the text still exists. Vespasian finally arrived in Rome in the late summer of 70, having left his elder son Titus in charge in Judaea; Jerusalem was taken in August 70 and its population enslaved.

Vespasian's major objectives during his ten-year reign were to restore Rome's finances after Nero's reign (Rome had suffered a major fire in 64, and had been damaged in the struggle against Vitellius); to restore discipline in the army after the civil wars; and to ensure that Titus should succeed him. In all three he was successful.

The immunity from taxation that Nero had given to the Greeks was revoked, and the Colosseum (or 'Flavian Amphitheatre', to be more correct) was begun on the site of the lake of Nero's 'Golden House' - thus giving this part of Rome back to the people.

In Britain, Roman forces conquered northern England and advanced into Wales and Scotland. Vespasian's relations with the senate were on the whole excellent, thanks to his bluff and unassuming character and his parading of his humble origin. Tacitus observes that he was the first man to improve after becoming emperor.

Vespasian died in 79, remarking, 'I think I am becoming a god!' He was succeeded by Titus, who arranged his deification. He was the first emperor to be succeeded by his son, and the first since Augustus to die a natural death (assuming that Tiberius was murdered). The dynasty that he founded, however, would be short-lived, coming to an end with the assassination of his younger son, Domitian, in 96.