

Vespasian the Surgeon of Serapis: Artemidorus and Divine Support of the Flavian Cause in Tacitus' *Histories*

I argue that the miraculous healings at Alexandria in book four of Tacitus' *Histories* portray Vespasian as the healer of Rome's governmental and military weakness represented by a man with a blind eye and a man with a withered hand. This complements Tacitus' narrative of restoring the Capitolium, the caput or place of the eye and governance of Rome, and his narrative of Flavian military success, the restoration of Rome's might which had been withered by turning on itself.

However, there is a dark side to being a healer connected with Serapis. According to Artemidorus' dream manual, a dream in which one is healed by Serapis portends death because Serapis is a chthonic god (5.92-94). Tacitus was aware of Serapis as both a healer and a chthonic god connected to Jupiter Dis (*Hist.* 4.83-84). Though Artemidorus post-dates Tacitus by a century, he reflects traditional dream knowledge which would have been available to the Roman historian. Artemidorus himself uses principles of augury, astronomy, haruspicy and other divinatory arts in his dream interpretations (Harris-McCoy 2012 33). So we should be open to the possibility of principles from one branch of divination being applicable to another, in this case dream interpretation applied to a healing which itself is a sign with political implications. Tacitus does not favor dream interpretation as a form of prophecy except in ritual contexts (Davies 2004 168). However, the incubatory Serapeium is a ritual context. Moreover, Tacitus does display expert knowledge of the interpretation of other portents (Davies 2004 150-165). I maintain that an interpretation of Vespasian's miracles as signs of a chthonic "healing" a death and resurrection of Rome itself, fit both knowledge likely available to Tacitus and the structure of his narrative.

Previous studies have pointed out that Vespasian is the first Roman emperor reported as a healer, that this was the only time Vespasian is alleged to have healed, the probably incubatory dreams of the men seeking the healing, the possibility of Tiberius Julius Alexander engineering the whole episode, have compared earlier Greek and later Roman healing rulers, commented on the overall success of Vespasian's effort to heal the state, the blurring of Vespasian's human and divine status, and his identification with Serapis (Weber 2000 384)(Nock 1957 118-119)(Edwards 2012 256)(Haynes 2022 234), but none have drawn out the connection with Serapis' sinister implications in dream divination and what this means for the healings as a sign for the Roman state.

An individual who is "healed" by a god of death can be whole in the underworld, but the Roman state cannot die in the same way. Vespasian and his faction act as divine surgeons of Rome, the violent painful grinding of a hand underfoot, "pede ac vestigio calcaretur" signifies the violent defeat of Vitellian forces and the burning of Cremona, while the blinding, perhaps polluting act of spitting in the eye, with the oris excremento balances the destruction of the capitolium's temples (Hist 4.81). Yet Vespasian rebuilds Roman might and Roman temples.

This exploration of Serapic Dream imagery and the narrative of Vespasian add to our overall picture of Tacitus' divinatory knowledge, pessimism and presentation of the gods. In *Hist 1.3* Tacitus famously declares that the gods do not care for the *securitas* of Rome, only for *ultio*. I concur with scholars who see some exaggeration in this *sententia* and some optimism in Tacitus' admonitory histories (Davies 2004 146-7; Woodman 1988 164-167). I conclude that for the gods as Tacitus presents them, *ultio* is very real and painful but is ultimately an act of healing surgery on a greater than human scale.

## Works Cited

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