

## Galba and Pasiphaë: nobility in the first century CE

The end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty offered an opportunity for Romans to reassess their notions of leadership, authority, and nobility. At the beginning of the *Life of Galba*, Suetonius tells us that Nero had been replaced by a man with an exceptionally noble and powerful family background: as emperor, he displayed a family tree in his atrium which traced his ancestry back to Jupiter on his father's side and to Pasiphaë on his mother's (Suet. *Galba* 2; cf. Sil. Ital. 8. 468-71). Some modern scholars have found it curious that Galba boasted of his descent from Pasiphaë – the woman who conceived of a passion for and seduced a bull, producing the Minotaur (Charlesworth 1937; Baldwin 1983); but others have observed that this claim is in keeping with a tradition of aristocratic self-fashioning that flourished in the Republic (Kragelund 1998; Charlesworth 1937; Flory 1989). However, this explanation seems to oversimplify the complicated message behind Galba's family tree, and to miss the significance of Pasiphaë's identification as his maternal ancestor. The reference to Galba's family tree shows that he cultivated a persona as a traditional Republican nobleman, invoking a discourse of aristocracy and lineage that had flourished over a century earlier; however, Suetonius' focus on Pasiphaë as Galba's ultimate maternal ancestor indicates that Galba's pretensions had been undermined by an audience that was no longer willing to accept the definitions of status in which this discourse was rooted.

The description of Galba's family tree shows that Galba was engaging in a form of self-promotion that arose from the late Republican agonistic discourse of nobility, in which members of the senatorial and social elite had asserted their status by publicizing the antiquity and importance of their families through genealogies featuring both historical and mythic figures (Crawford 1974, Wiseman 1974). This discourse lies behind Julius Caesar's claims of descent from Venus and Anchises, and perhaps Galba's intention was to demonstrate his suitability as a successor to the Julio-Claudians. But Armstrong (2007) has found that Roman sources considered Pasiphaë a representative of transgressive female sexuality and the troubling power of the wild over the civilized, whose actions were disturbing and unnatural even in a mythical system that featured many acts of bestiality. Wiseman (1974) suggested that the Mummii (Galba's maternal family) boasted of their descent from Pasiphaë through Glaucus, one of her children with Minos; it is very likely that this is the case, which suggests that Galba's family tree did not just show a relationship with the sexually-troubling Pasiphaë, but from her union with Minos, and therefore descent from his father Jupiter.

That Suetonius identifies Galba's maternal ancestor as Pasiphaë rather than Minos or Jupiter indicates that Galba's attempts at aristocratic self-promotion had backfired. He had made these traditional Republican claims in order to present himself as eligible for imperial power as a representative of the Republican aristocracy. But, as Syme (1939) showed, many of the Republican families who had participated in this discourse had disappeared by the reign of Nero, and Galba was therefore appealing to an audience that had developed other notions of nobility, status and power. The Roman public was ready to question Galba's claim to divine ancestry and focused on his relationship with Pasiphaë in order to undermine his aristocratic pretensions; moreover, in reducing his lineage to descent from Pasiphaë, Galba's Roman audience was scrutinizing the traditions of status and authority that underpinned Galba's claims. To Galba, Pasiphaë and her

connections represented the power of his lineage and therefore of himself; to his audience, she represented an opportunity to challenge and question old definitions of aristocracy and power.

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