

The *Sacramentum* and the Inauguration of the Flavian Challenge (Tacitus *Histories* 2.73-81)

According to Tacitus (*Hist.* 2.73-81), Vespasian's bid for the throne officially began in July 69 CE, when the legions of the Eastern provinces, one by one, proclaimed him emperor and swore him their allegiance. Though scholars have noted many complexities of this sprawling account (Nicols 1978; Ash 2007), sufficient attention has not been paid to the vital role which the oath ritual itself, the *sacramentum* (*OLD* s.v. 2a), plays in the Flavian rise to power. In this paper, I argue that Tacitus uses the oath scenes before (2.73-4) and during (2.75-81) Vespasian's imperial proclamation to distinguish the upstart Flavians from the current Vitellian regime: whereas Vitellius and his subjects fail to grasp the ritual's proper procedure or significance, the Flavians—particularly Mucianus, Vespasian's closest ally—understand that the administration of an oath at the right time and in the right way is essential to establishing lasting loyalty among the soldiers. Oaths, therefore, reinforce the dichotomy between Flavian savvy and Vitellian befuddlement evidenced throughout *Histories* 2 and 3 (Damon 2006). Furthermore, I argue that Mucianus' control of the oath-taking process diminishes the role of the soldiers in Vespasian's ascent. Tacitus thereby subverts, as he does elsewhere in book 2 (Briessmann 1955; Levick 1999; Ash 1999 and 2007), the pro-Flavian version of events, in which a powerful soldiery forces its will on a passive Vespasian. This particular dimension of Tacitean opposition to Flavian propaganda has not previously been explored.

Immediately before Vespasian's rise to power (2.75-81), a critical failure among the Vitellians to understand an oath casts the subsequent Flavian successes into sharp relief. Tacitus achieves this effect by telling two "versions" of the same *sacramentum* back-to-back. When Vespasian leads his legions in the obligatory oath of allegiance to the new emperor (*praeuntem* 2.74), his soldiers' decision to remain silent breaks established ritual practice (Plb. 6.21.2).

Vitellius' scouts ought to have perceived the soldiers' defiance, yet, in a bland report to Vitellius, represent the oath as a success (2.73). Tacitus' point, I argue, is that Vespasian has no access to the Roman world of the oath-based loyalties which will form the basis of Flavian power to come. Indeed, Vitellius' otherness is confirmed when he reacts to the scouts' report with barbarian wantonness and cruelty.

In Tacitus' telling of events, the Flavian regime is founded upon the timely oath administration of the legate Mucianus. When the legions proclaim Vespasian emperor, the unsophisticated Vespasian effectively does nothing. Mucianus, on the other hand, swoops in immediately and "compels the soldiers to take an oath of allegiance" (*militem in verba Vespasiani adegit* 2.80.2). The verb *adigo* (*OLD* s.v. 9) emphasizes Mucianus' active role as the oath's administrator. Mucianus' initial efforts create a domino effect, when other legions throughout the East swear *sacramenta* of their own accord. I argue that a Vitellian scene in book 3 explains why Mucianus is so effective. When Caecina, Vitellius' trusted legate, attempts to transfer his and his army's allegiance to Vespasian (3.13), he only leads his *officers* in an oath (*in verba Vespasiani adegit*, 3.13.1), while totally ignoring the common soldiers. Caecina pays for his poor decisions when the common soldiers, ignored and disrespected, throw him in chains. Thus, Tacitus suggests that Mucianus' inclusiveness was critical to his success.

The *sacramentum* lends a unique specificity to Tacitus' acclamation narrative. Of the surviving accounts of Vespasian's rise to power (Dio Cassius, Josephus, Suetonius), only the *Histories* distinguishes between the imperial proclamation of the soldiers (*salutavere imperatorem* 2.80.1) and the subsequent *sacramenta* orchestrated by Mucianus. Whereas the *salutatio* is a spontaneous—albeit anticipated—expression of grass-roots support, the *sacramentum* is the swift response of Mucianus to secure a formal relationship between emperor

and soldier. Thus, Tacitus confines the soldiers' spontaneity—an inheritance from the pro-Flavian propaganda preserved most clearly by Josephus (*BJ* 4.585-604)—within his own broader framework of Flavian control and planning. The point Tacitus makes is not that the soldiers are feckless or weak, but rather that Mucianus and the Flavians are considerably more manipulative and opportunistic than the sanctioned version of history would care to admit. In Tacitus' narrative, the Flavians alone are capable of using oaths to dictate loyalties and steer events in their favor.

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