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VESPASIAN AND METTIUS POMPUSIANUS

By David Woods

Summary: Several ancient sources agree that the emperor Vespasian did not punish a certain Mettius Pompusianus when he learned that he had received an imperial horoscope, but appointed him as consul. It is argued here that Vespasian intended his appointment of Pompusianus as consul as the fulfilment of this horoscope which was vaguer in its original language than the surviving sources suggest. This saved him from having to punish Pompusianus.

In a section of his biography of the emperor Vespasian describing how that emperor did not harbour grudges against his enemies or those who had insulted him, but was even inclined to be generous in his treatment of them, Suetonius first describes how Vespasian arranged an excellent marriage for the daughter of his former rival Vitellius, and even provided a dowry for her, then how he confined himself to dismissing a former court official of Nero in the same way that that man had once dismissed him, and, finally, how he rewarded a certain Mettius Pompusianus with the consulship despite the fact that he had been warned that he was a potential conspirator against him for the throne.[1] His description of Vespasian's treatment of Pompusianus runs as follows (*Vesp*. 14):

> Nam ut suspicione aliqua vel metu ad perniciem cuiusquam compelleretur tantum afuit ut monentibus amicis cavendum esse Mettium Pompusianum, quod volgo crederetur genesim habere imperatoriam,

1 Nothing more is known for certain about the earlier career or wider family of this man (*PIR*^{2} M 570), although he may have been one of the Mettii from Arles who fell into disfavour under Domitian (*PIR*^{2} M 565-72). See Jones 2000: 86.

David Woods: 'Vespasian and Mettius Pompusianus' *C&M* 71 (2022) 129-138.

> insuper consulem fecerit, spondens quandoque beneficii memorem futurum.[2]
>
> For he was so far from being impelled by any suspicion or fear towards the ruin of anyone that when friends warned him to beware of Mettius Pompusianus, since it was commonly believed that he had an imperial horoscope, he even made him consul, promising that he would at some time be mindful of the favour.

Suetonius' basic account of this incident is supported by two other sources also. Cassius Dio includes a description of it when he describes how the emperor Domitian exiled Pompusianus to Corsica before eventually executing him because he believed that he was aspiring to the throne.[3] His account runs as follows (Dio 67.12.3):

> ἐν δὲ τοῖς τότε τελευτήσασι πολλοῖς οὖσι καὶ Μέττιος Πομπουσιανὸς ἐγένετο, ὃν ὁ μὲν Οὐεσπασιανὸς μαθὼν ἐκ φήμης τινὸς ὅτι μοναρχήσει οὐδὲν κακὸν εἰργάσατο, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐτίμα, λέγων ὅτι "πάντως μου μνημονεύσει καὶ πάντως με ἀντιτιμήσει."[4]
>
> Among the many who perished at this time was Mettius Pompusianus, whom Vespasian had failed to harm after learning from some report that he would one day be sovereign, but on the contrary had shown him honour, declaring: "He will surely remember me and will surely honour me in return."

Finally, the anonymous author of the late-sixth-century *Epitome de Caesaribus* also describes this incident during his brief account of the reign of Vespasian, as follows (*Epit. de Caes.* 9.14):

2 Ed. Kaster 2016: 383. The translation is mine.
3 On the circumstances surrounding his execution, see Arnaud 1983; Geus 2020.
4 Ed. and trans. Cary 1925: 344-45.

> Hic monentibus amicis, ut caveret a Mettio Pomposiano, de quo sermo percrebuerat regnaturum fore, consulem fecit, alludens tali cavillo: "Quandoque memor erit tanti beneficii".[5]
>
> When his friends warned him to beware of Mettius Pomposianus, about whom the rumour had spread that he would rule, he made him a consul, joking in the following way: "When will there ever be a memory of so great a gift?"

The decision by Vespasian to ignore the potential threat to his rule posed by Pompusianus is unusual, but by no means unique. For example, when the emperor Tiberius learned that the young Galba was thought to be destined to become emperor, but only as an old man, he left him unharmed on the basis that his continued life and freedom was no threat to him, or so the story goes.[6] Furthermore, Lucius Vitellius, consul in AD 34, 43, and 47, allegedly did all he could to prevent his son, the future emperor Aulus Vitellius, from being appointed as a provincial governor in an effort to frustrate the fulfilment of a horoscope that had apparently foretold his accession to the throne.[7] If there is any truth to this claim, then such behaviour could only have drawn attention to the existence of this horoscope. Indeed, one must also question whether family gossip about such a shocking horoscope would not have spread news about it beyond the immediate family circle long before the child had reached adulthood. Nevertheless, Aulus Vitellius lived safely through the reigns of five different emperors before his own rise to power. The peculiar point here is not that Vespasian allowed Pompusianus to continue living unharmed despite the potential threat that he seemed to pose, but that

5 Ed. Pichlmayr and Gruendel 1966: 143. On the date of this text, see now Stover 2021.

6 Suet. *Galba* 4.1; Tac. *Ann.* 6.20; Jos. *AJ* 18.216; Dio 57.191.1. Tiberius named both Caligula, his grandson by adoption, and Tiberius Gemellus, his natural grandson, as his heirs, with the eventual result that the elder, Caligula, dispossessed, and then executed his younger rival. His depiction as one unconcerned at the harm that Galba might inflict upon one of his successors is entirely consistent with the general lack of concern that he is supposed to have shown for his heirs.

7 Suet. *Vit.* 3.2.

he also honoured him with the consulship, even if only the suffect consulship rather than the ordinary consulship.[8] At face value, this action seems completely counterintuitive in that the greater the honour that was accorded to Pompusianus, the more distinguished he seemed, and the more acceptable as a potential imperial candidate he became. In fact, it represents the very opposite of the action that Lucius Vitellius allegedly undertook in order to prevent his son from attaining the imperial power promised by his horoscope. So why did Vespasian treat Pompusianus in such a generous manner?

Vespasian's own words as he bestowed the consulship upon Pompusianus should help answer this question, but there are three problems with them. The first is that the three sources for this event do not entirely agree concerning the details of what he said. For example, it is Suetonius alone who preserves the part about how Vespasian expected to be honoured in some way for what he had done for Pompusianus. Neither of the other two sources includes this element in its description of his words, although one could perhaps argue that it is implicit in the very idea that Pompusianus would one day look back upon and remember what Vespasian has done for him as claimed in Cassius Dio's description of Vespasian's words. The second is that the tone of Vespasian's alleged statement is not clear, whether he was being entirely serious or mocking and ironic. Certainly, the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* understood that he was joking as he spoke, but there is no evidence that either Suetonius or Cassius Dio understood his tone in the same way. Finally, the third problem is that the significance of Vespasian's words remains ambiguous, even when the three sources do appear to be in general agreement. For example, all three sources agree that Vespasian's words refer to the future memory of the benefit that he has conferred upon Pompusianus. However, while Suetonius and Cassius Dio agree that Vespasian refers to Pompusianus' own future memory of this benefit, the version of his words preserved by the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* seems to refer to some general, popular memory of this event instead.

8 There is no other evidence for his consulship so that it can only be vaguely dated to the period c.70-75. For the consulships of the Flavian period, both ordinary and suffect, see Gallivan 1981.

It has sometimes been suggested that Vespasian did not execute Pompusianus because he was confident that the horoscope seeming to promise him the throne was wrong since it contradicted his own horoscope, and those of his family, and other signs that his sons would succeed him and enjoy reasonably lengthy reigns.[9] Hence Mooney claims that 'Vespasian, relying on his own horoscope and those of his family, was confident that his sons would succeed him', Cramer claims that 'one cannot but assume that Vespasian's serenity was based on his firm conviction (obtained from the advice of men like Balbillus, Ptolemy Seleucus, or other court-astrologers) that the astrological predictions, which Mettius Pompusianus had received, were wrong', Jones claims that 'Vespasian preferred to accept the prediction that his sons would succeed him', Pagán claims that 'Vespasian is willing to overlook the horoscope as meaningless', while Wardle claims similarly that 'his faith in the reliability of his own horoscope probably explains why he did not eliminate Mettius Pompusianus'.[10] However, the best way to prove that Pompusianus' horoscope was wrong would have been to order his trial and execution. More importantly, even if Vespasian was absolutely confident that Pompusianus' horoscope was wrong and that he would never rise to the throne, this still does not explain why he honoured him by appointing him as consul.

One possibility is that his appointment of Pompusianus to the consulship was part of some larger joke at his expense intended to mock his alleged horoscope and any imperial aspirations that he might have had as a result of it. After all, Vespasian only appointed him to the suffect consulship rather than the ordinary consulship, and it is not clear for how long he appointed him. He might have appointed him for only a week or even a day. Such an interpretation would be consistent with the characterization by the author of the *Epitome de Caesaribus* of Vespasian's words as he made the appointment as a joke. Certainly, some modern commentators have found this approach attractive. For example,

9 For his confidence in the imperial horoscopes and a dream promising that he and his two sons would reign as long as the period of the reigns of Claudius and Nero taken together, see Suet. *Vesp*. 25.

10 Mooney 1930: 435; Cramer 1954: 138; Jones 2000: 87-88; Pagán 2012: 108; Wardle 2012: 198.

Mooney claims that 'Vespasian is rightly said to be speaking with scoffing irony', while Levick describes Pompusianus as 'a subject of mirth'.[11] Furthermore, Vespasian was known for his sense of humour and his habit of settling matters with a joke.[12] However, it is doubtful whether any emperor could ever have really regarded a horoscope appearing to promise imperial rule to a Roman senator as a laughing matter, even an emperor with as well-developed a sense of humour as Vespasian. In his case, for example, almost all of the alleged examples of his humour consist of brief witticisms about relatively unimportant matters, the correct pronunciation of certain Latin words, the strange physical appearance of an individual, or minor examples of financial corruption.[13] There is no other indication that he found charges of treason a laughing matter.

Another possibility is that his decision to honour Pompusianus with the consulship was an act of bravado intended to prove to any who had heard about his alleged imperial horoscope that he had no faith at all in it and was so far from fearing for either himself or his family because of it that he would even honour Pompusianus in this way. Yet such behaviour would be inconsistent with the character of Vespasian who was naturally cautious and little inclined to indulge in flamboyant gestures or public display.[14]

A third possibility is that he honoured Pompusianus with the consulship in order to place him under obligation to him and to better cement his loyalty.[15] Yet all the most successful assassins or rebels had enjoyed trust and preferment before they had eventually turned on their benefactors. Indeed, one could say that it was the nature of the political game at this period that one could not conduct a successful rebellion or assassination unless one had first enjoyed the trust and preferment of him against whom one was acting. Most recently, for example, the fact that Nero had appointed Galba as governor of Hispania Tarraconensis in AD

11 Mooney 1930: 435; Levick 2017: 102.

12 Suet. *Vesp.* 22-23; Dio 66.11.1-3.

13 One noteworthy exception is his joke at his own expense when, as he lay dying, he declared that he thought that he was becoming a God (Suet. *Vesp.* 23.4), but this was clearly a unique situation.

14 Morgan 2006: 182, characterizes him as 'notoriously cautious and canny'.

15 So Saller 1982: 70 suggests based on Suetonius' description of Vespasian's words to Pompusianus as he appointed him consul.

60 did not prevent Galba from rebelling against him in AD 68. It is unlikely, therefore, that Vespasian could really have believed that his appointment of Pompusianus as consul would guarantee his loyalty in the future.

Finally, there is a fourth possibility that seems to have passed unnoticed heretofore, that the wording of Pompusianus' horoscope was not as precise in its promise of imperial power to him as the surviving sources suggest, so that Vespasian appointed him as consul in order to make it seem that the horoscope had foretold this rather than his accession as emperor. Two points need to be borne in mind here. The first is that the description of Pompusianus' horoscope by authors who wrote after the reign of Domitian has probably been heavily influenced by the fact that Domitian did execute him for aspiring to the throne in the end. Furthermore, even if Pompusianus did continue to hope that his horoscope pointed to his accession as emperor, despite the fact that Vespasian had done his best to fulfil it by other means, and the allegation that, by the time of his execution, he used to carry about a map of the world with him and a collection of speeches of kings and generals from the work of Livy, does seem to point in this direction, this does not mean that this was the only or most obvious interpretation of that element of his horoscope.[16]

The second point is that Romans had long been accustomed to try to manipulate the interpretation of various omens or predictions of the future so that their fulfilment proved far less problematic than it might otherwise have been. For example, just before the battle of Thapsus in Africa in 46 BC, Julius Caesar placed an obscure man called Scipio Sallustio at the front of his troops as if he was their commander because there was an ancient oracle that the family of the Scipios would always conquer in Africa and he wanted to attract the victory from the other side, led by Metellus Scipio, to his own side.[17] Similarly, Suetonius records a tradition that when the empress Messalina went through some

16 There is a contradiction between Suetonius (*Dom.* 10.3), who claims that Pompusianus carried a map on the world on parchment about with him and Dio (67.12.4), who claims that he had a map of the world painted on the walls of his bedroom, but this does not matter here.

17 Plut. *Caes.* 52.2-3.

form of marriage ceremony with her lover Gaius Silius in AD 48, the emperor Claudius himself signed the contract for the dowry because he believed that the marriage was no more than a device intended to divert the danger promised by some omens from himself onto Silius instead.[18] He also records that the astrologer Balbillus advised the emperor Nero that some kings believed that, when the death of a great man was portended by a comet, he could divert the death from himself by killing someone else important instead and that Nero found the perfect pretext for such killings when he discovered two conspiracies against him shortly after the appearance of a comet, probably that of AD 64.[19]

It is my argument, therefore, that Nero appointed Pompusianus as suffect consul in the hope that this would fulfil the promise of supreme office apparently made to him by his horoscope. This was in Vespasian's own interest, and that of his family, in that he hoped by this action to forestall whatever sequence of events might raise Pompusianus to the throne instead, a sequence which had, by its very nature to include either his own deposition, and probable death, or that of one of his sons. However, the fulfilment, or apparent fulfilment, of the horoscope in this way was in Pompusianus' own interest also in that it would help free him from suspicion by any of Vespasian's successors that he was plotting for the throne. Hence when Vespasian promised Pompusianus that he would one day be mindful of the favour that he had done him, the favour to which he referred was not so much his appointment of him as consul, but the manner in which this appointment freed him from potential suspicion by future emperors. A more prudent man than Pompusianus was would have seized upon this unexpected opportunity with gladness and have studiously avoided any subsequent behaviour that could possibly have suggested that he harboured even the slightest hope still of rising to the throne. He certainly would not have carried a map of the world and a collection of regal speeches from the work of Livy around with him in the manner of Pompusianus.

In conclusion, it is arguable that Vespasian's appointment of Pompusianus as a suffect consul was a humane and inventive solution to the problem of what to do in the case of someone who had allegedly received

18 Suet. *Claud*. 29.3.

19 Suet. *Nero* 36.1. For the identification of the comet concerned, see Rogers 1953: 242.

an imperial horoscope. It was entirely in keeping with both his general aversion to executions and his general respect for astrology as a means of divination. He managed to avoid executing, or otherwise punishing, Pompusianus, without seeming to be weak or indecisive, while also preserving his general reputation for restraint and his good relationship with the senate. Unfortunately, however, his son Domitian did not share his humane outlook, and the short successive reigns of both Vespasian and Titus may have encouraged Pompusianus himself, and others also, to wonder whether Vespasian's effort to make his horoscope refer to the consulship rather than to imperial rule had not failed. The result was fatal for Pompusianus, and may have contributed to the loss of the memory of what Vespasian had been trying to achieve by his appointment of him as consul.

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