



DOMITIAN

81–96

DOMITIAN (Titus Flavius Domitianus) (81–96), the second son of VESPASIAN and Flavia Domitilla, was born in 51. At the time of his father's uprising in the east against VITELLIUS in the summer of 69 he was at Rome, and remained there unharmed until 18 December. Then he took refuge in the Capitol with his uncle Flavius Sabinus, the city prefect; but when the Capitol was overrun by supporters of Vitellius, Domitian, unlike Sabinus, escaped (later, he was to arrange for this adventure to be recorded by artists and poets). After the death of Vitellius he was acclaimed as Caesar by the recently arrived troops of Primus, who, marching from Pannonia, had won the second Battle of Bedriacum on Vespasian's behalf; and when Vespasian's representative Mucianus reached the city shortly afterwards to represent his father, it was Domitian's name that headed the first official dispatches and edicts of the new regime from Rome.

But friction between the two men soon arose. Mucianus jealously rejected Domitian's request that Primus should receive a staff appointment. And with the co-operation of Cerealis, who was conducting the campaign against Civilis' German and Gallic rebels, Mucianus also ensured that Domitian's desire to take over the suppression of the revolt – in the hope of rivalling the exploits of his elder brother TITUS – was frustrated. During the rest of Vespasian's reign Domitian received a share of outward privileges, including consulships, the title of Prince of Youth (*Princeps Iuventutis*) and ample attention on the coinage; for since Titus had no son it was understood that brother would eventually succeed to brother. Yet their father never gave Domitian any position of authority, and never allowed him to pursue any military glory. The young prince pretended that he did not mind, and took refuge in poetry and the arts, but he was seething with embittered grievances and frustrated ambitions.

Nor did matters improve when Titus came to the throne. True, he allotted Domitian additional honours, increased his publicity on the coinage still further, and reiterated that he was his partner and prospective heir. However, the official powers which would have given substance to such a partnership were not conferred. Domitian even believed that Vespasian had intended him to reign jointly with his brother, but that the latter had used his expert handwriting skills to remove this provision from their father's will (see TITUS).

When Titus died – probably not by any act of his brother's – Domitian duly ensured his deification, for, whatever their personal relations had been, it was still necessary to exalt the Flavian house. But the new emperor was determined to remedy the glaring inequality between the military achievements of his elders and his own total lack of such qualifications. His wife Domitia Longina was now elevated to the rank of Augusta, and in keeping with this marriage to the daughter of the great general Corbulo, Domitian's overriding aim was to be a triumphant conqueror. In 83 he therefore completed his father's occupation of the Agri Decumates between the upper Rhine and the upper Danube, suppressing the Chatti, annexing Mount Taunus, and extending the frontier to the rivers Lahn and Main. These campaigns, displaying an ingenious combination of forward offensive actions and defensive fortress construction, enabled him to assume the title of Germanicus – no longer as nominee of the German legions (the sinister significance with which VITELLIUS had endowed the term), but as conqueror of the Germans (the old meaning). Thenceforward he habitually wore the costume of a victorious general, even at meetings of the senate. Shortly after this campaign he also substantially raised the pay of all ranks of the army – not as outrageous a step as his critics later suggested, since inflation had reduced the purchasing power of the currency, but a clear sign, all the same, of the army's central role.

Meanwhile Cnaeus Julius Agricola, governor of Britain, who had already been engaged in military operations in Wales and southern Scotland during the previous reign, launched three further successive advances into Caledonia, winning a battle at Mons Graupius, which is perhaps Bennachie in Aberdeenshire. In about 85 he was recalled to Rome, much to the fury of his passionately partisan son-in-law Tacitus, who came to detest the emperor, perhaps because he was conscience-stricken over the high offices he had accepted from him. But Mons Graupius was evidently not the decisive triumph the historian proclaimed it to be, for no territorial annexation had been achieved.

Domitian's next and most ambitious target was Dacia, which had now, after a century of weakness, risen again as a formidable power under its king Decebalus, who in 85 crossed the Danube and slew Oppius Sabinus, the governor of Moesia. Summoning reinforcements Domitian himself marched to the theatre of war, but returned to Rome the following year. Meanwhile, his

armies had suffered another defeat in which this time it was Cornelius Fuscus, the praetorian prefect, who lost his life. Roman superiority, however, was duly reasserted in 88 by a victory by Tettius Julianus at Tapae, not far from the Dacian capital of Sarmizegethusa. After holding the Secular Games at Rome, Domitian staged a Triumph for this success.

It could not however be followed up and converted into something permanent. For in 89, the very year of his Triumph, a threatening military revolt broke out among the Roman troops in Upper Germany under the commander of the legions, Lucius Antonius Saturninus. Saturninus' homosexuality was said to have been the reason for his revolt, since Domitian showed a puritanical disapproval of such tastes. But Saturninus was surely in alliance with other disaffected senators, who disliked and feared the emperor's autocratic behaviour. By seizing the savings banks of the two legions at Moguntiacum, Saturninus induced their men to acclaim him as emperor, and his German auxiliaries joined the rebellion as well. But the commander in Lower Germany, Lappius Maximus, loyally resisted the usurpation, and, in a battle near Castellum, Saturninus was killed. Domitian himself, who had marched with lightning rapidity from Rome, arrived on the scene soon afterwards, and the seditious officers were mercilessly punished (although Lappius Maximus, in the hope of limiting the massacre, destroyed Saturninus' files). Only twenty-four days after the revolt had broken out, priests at Rome were already celebrating its collapse.

Next, Domitian, after overhauling the entire military organization of Germany, became preoccupied with the Danube front, where serious trouble was brewing among the German tribes of the Marcomanni and Quadi and the Sarmatian Jazyges. In order to free his hands to deal with them, he felt he first had to renounce his chance of following up the Roman victory over Decebalus; and when the king made an offer of peace Domitian accepted his proposals. Then he felt free to turn against the Jazyges, and duly defeated them, though not with sufficient completeness, he felt, to justify the celebration of a Triumph. His difficulties in the Danube area had given a foretaste of the crises on this frontier which Germans would precipitate in the following century.

Domitian spent a lot of time with the soldiers, and they liked him. To control their centurions, however, he instituted a new kind of army personnel bureau in which full records relating to every centurion were kept up to date; this enabled him to make personal decisions on all their appointments, promotions and transfers after considering all the evidence. This was only part of much firm and meticulous administrative activity directed by his lucid brain. Even Suetonius, who depicts Domitian as a monster, had to conclude that 'he took such care to exercise restraint over the city officials and provincial governors that at no time were these more honest or just'. As the greatest of all later historians of Rome, Theodor Mommsen, observed, he was one of the best administrators who ever governed the Empire.

However, his régime was characterized by a rigidly austere and somewhat terrifying legal correctness. In 83 Domitian sentenced three Vestal Virgins, convicted of immoral behaviour, to the traditional capital penalty, and seven years later the chief of the same order, Cornelia, condemned to death for a similar offence, was walled up alive in an underground cell while her lovers were beaten to death with rods. These alarming punishments conflicted with the strong aversion to bloodshed which Domitian claimed to feel. But they went together with a strong reverence for the antique Roman religion, which caused him to celebrate ancient rituals with ceremonious pomp. He showed a profound and almost obsessive veneration for the Italian goddess Minerva, worshipped in his family's Sabine Hills. It was she, depicted in no less than four separate guises, who formed the main theme of Domitian's coinage, and whose temple was to be the centrepiece of the new imperial Forum he began to build, the Forum Transitorium (later known as the Forum of Nerva).

For Domitian, in the autocratic tradition, proved to be not only an emperor who staged exceptionally costly public shows (defrayed by severe taxation), but also a builder on a grandiose scale. He completed the restoration of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol, from whose ruins he had escaped in the civil war. He also built a stadium capable of holding thirty thousand spectators; they crowded in to watch the Capitoline Games which, despite his Roman traditionalism, he inaugurated in the Greek, Olympic tradition, comprising contests in literature, music, athletics and horse-racing. Domitian also ordered the construction of a new and more imposing residence for himself on the Palatine Hill, to express his exalted conception of the imperial role. In addition, he built a magnificent villa outside the city looking down on the waters of Lake Albano; in its grounds were a theatre and an amphitheatre, to which large audiences were invited. Yet another work completed during his reign was the Arch of Titus at the head of Rome's Via Sacra, notable for its simple dignified architectural lines and for its relief sculpture illustrating the Triumph of Domitian's father and brother after the capture of Jerusalem. The Jewish spoils shown on the relief include the table for the shew-bread, the seven-branched candlestick or Menorah and the trumpets for summoning the people.

In Judaea itself, Domitian intensified a policy, initiated by Vespasian, of tracking down and eliminating Jews who claimed descent from the royal house of David. In about 95 Gamaliel II, leader of their principal community (now situated at Jamnia), found it necessary, with three other Pharisee leaders, to make a hurried visit to Rome, probably to ward off further repressive action against their compatriots. Meanwhile the Jews at Rome were running into serious trouble. In particular, the *Fiscus Judaicus*, the tax levied on all Jews by Vespasian, was being collected with the utmost rigour; furthermore, many people who had adopted Jewish practices found themselves condemned for 'godlessness' or 'atheism', which meant that they had refused to sacrifice to the

divinity of the emperor.

Such punitive practices came clearly to the public eye because their victims included two of the best-known personages in Roman society. They were Flavius Clemens, consul in this very year (95), and his wife Flavia Domitilla the younger – the emperor's cousin and niece respectively. Clemens and Domitilla were probably sympathizers with Judaism rather than Jews in the full sense of the word. Nevertheless, Clemens was executed and Domitilla banished. It may well be that they owed their downfall not so much to their religious beliefs as to their possession of sons, whom the emperor, suspicious of would-be heirs, wished to remove from the scene: the young men were probably killed.

These savage eliminations were not isolated occurrences but climactic displays of Domitian's progressive and finally almost complete alienation from the ruling class of Rome. As he showed its members all too clearly, AUGUSTUS' polite insistence that the senate was the emperor's partner in a restored Republic only incurred his contempt. Domitian preferred to emphasize that he was an absolute monarch – a conviction which his unprecedented title of 85, Perpetual Censor, served to underline. Aware of the senators' hostile reaction – sometimes framed in the terms of free-thinking philosophy – he viewed its members with rising, unremitting suspicion. This process of estrangement gained impetus after the abortive rebellion of Saturninus. All the unpleasantnesses of treason trials were brought back with harrowing stringency, amid a proliferation of imperial spies and informers. Suetonius estimated the casualties among ex-consuls alone at no less than twelve. Alleged conspiracies came thick and fast; and some of them were no doubt genuine enough, since, as Domitian himself perceptively observed, it was an emperor's unhappy fate that nobody would believe stories about plots against his life until they had successfully taken place.

In this atmosphere the prospect of Domitian's own assassination became more and more imminent. He weakened his position further by dismissing his joint praetorian prefects and bringing charges against them; but the men who took their place, Petronius Secundus and Norbanus, not unnaturally felt nervous, especially when they heard that complaints against them were being made to the emperor. So they decided, out of self-protection, to put him out of the way; and various leading men in the provinces and the German commands were also probably involved in the plot. At the capital the conspirators included Domitian's court chamberlain and one of his state secretaries. Prominent in the project too was his wife Domitia Longina, daughter of Nero's leading general Corbulo, who had been divorced by Domitian but subsequently reinstated, though the coinage previously issued in her name was not revived. A certain Stephanus, an ex-slave of Clemens' banished widow, was mobilized to do the deed, with the help of an accomplice, and after a violent hand-to-hand struggle he succeeded in killing him, though he lost his own life

in the process.

Domitian, we are told by Suetonius, was greatly addicted to sexual activity, which he described as bed-wrestling. Although he had been in love with his wife Domitia Longina, he later seduced Flavia Julia, the daughter of his brother Titus, but allegedly caused her death by compelling her to have an abortion. This attachment to Julia may have been one of the reasons why Domitia eventually decided he must die. Suetonius describes him as a large, ruddy man but weak-eyed, spindle-legged, hammer-toed and sensitive about his baldness. Although he remained interested in Greek and Latin culture alike, his initial devotion to poetry (if it was not, as Tacitus suggested, a pose) apparently did not prove lasting. He was cold and cruel: there was a story that he liked catching flies and stabbing them with the point of a pen. He took pleasure in gladiatorial fights between women and dwarfs, Dio Cassius adds, and enjoyed asking senators to dinner-parties at which all the equipment and services were black and funereal, with conversation to match, so that guests were paralysed with fright.

The younger Pliny shows him eating heavily and alone before midday and then sitting down, satiated, to watch his dinner-guests eat, as the dishes were slammed down casually in front of them. Pliny also adds that his nerves were so bad that he could not bear to be rowed on Lake Albano near his country palace because he found the noise of the oars an intolerable irritation; so he had to sit in a separate boat towed by the vessel in which the oarsmen were rowing. He also became a very frightened man, since, despite his popularity with the soldiers, it had already become clear some time before his death that the price of his determination to become an absolute ruler was the increased danger to his life. For the immediate future the more discreet methods of asserting power, formulated by his father Vespasian, promised more success.