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# (Un)-damning Subplots: The Principate of Domitian Between Literary Sources and Fresh Material Evidence

TOMMASSO SPINELLI AND GIAN LUCA GREGORI

Moving beyond the methodological issues of a literary-based reassessment of the reign of the last Flavian emperor, this article re-reads the principate of Domitian in light of fresh epigraphic and numismatic evidence that has only been discovered or fully understood in recent years. This exploration documents the progressive ingraining into second-century literature of an unfavorable vulgate on Domitian's architectural, moral, and religious policies, the positive impact of which is, however, documented by material sources. In addition to contributing to the ongoing reevaluation of Domitian, this article displays the benefits of a cross-fertilizing and interdiscursive reading of literary and material sources.

## Introduction

The negative portrait of Domitian, long established both by senatorial and Christian traditions, has undergone a vigorous reconsideration over the last century.<sup>1</sup> While modern scholarship has increasingly questioned the historical reliability of the post-Domitianic writings of Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, methodological doubts have also been expressed about the plausibility of un-damning the last Flavian emperor via critical reappraisals of literary and anecdotal evidence.<sup>2</sup> Adopting a more holistic approach, the following analysis suggests that a new opportunity to reassess Domitian's principate can be provided by an interdiscursive reading of the ancient literary sources in the light of fresh pieces of material evidence, up to now excluded or only marginally considered by (for example) McCrum's and Jones's monographs on the Flavian emperors.<sup>3</sup>

1. We have used the critical editions of the relevant Latin texts by Clausen (1992), Courtney (1990), Fisher (1911), Kaster (2016), Lindsay (1902), and Mynors (1964). All translations are our own. Initial reconsiderations of Domitian can be found in Gsell (1894) and Syme (1930). An overview is found in Galimberti (2016) 92–108 and Pasqualini (2009) 19–31.

2. See Hurllet (2016) 22 and our discussion below.

3. McCrum, Woodhead (1961); Jones (1992). See also Flower (2006) 234–60, who focuses on the material evidence of Domitian's *damnatio memoriae*.

The critical debate on Domitianic Rome seems to be far from reaching its conclusion. This is hardly surprising if we consider the conspicuous number and the inherently heterogeneous nature of our ancient sources. A chronological and political split problematically divides the generally positive views of Domitian's principate proposed by the contemporary writings of Statius, Martial, Frontinus, and Quintilian from the anti-Domitianic tendencies of Pliny's *Epistles* and *Panegyric*, Suetonius's *Vitae*, and Tacitus's *Agricola* and *Historiae*, all written after Domitian's assassination in 96 C.E.<sup>4</sup> Although a past generation of scholars tended to echo the hostile view of Domitian unanimously propounded by ancient historiographic accounts, more recent attempts to rehabilitate Domitian have conversely questioned the historical reliability of these *post eventum* accounts that share a tendency to systematically darken the principate of Domitian via rhetorical clichés in order to celebrate the advent of the new golden age of Nerva and Trajan, as Pliny overtly suggests: *primum erga optimum imperatorem piorum ciuium officium est, insequi dissimiles. Neque enim satis amarit bonos principes, qui malos satis non oderit* ("the first duty of good citizens towards a perfect emperor is to attack those who are not like him. Indeed no one can love good emperors who does not hate the bad ones enough," *Pan.* 53.2–3).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, modern scholarship has increasingly reflected also on the limits of such revisionist readings. According to Wiseman and Saller, in particular, the use of literary tropes and rhetorical exaggerations is a basic component of some literary genres, which does not automatically imply that ancient sources are historically unreliable, nor should it automatically contribute to a more positive reassessment of Domitian's reign.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Hurllet has contended that anti-Domitianic sources "should not be dismissed on the doubtful grounds that they were under the influence of a hypothetical early Antonine propaganda," while warning against the temptation of reading together very different works such as Pliny's *Panegyricus*, Tacitus's *Historiae*, and Suetonius's *Vitae*.<sup>7</sup>

4. Such a division is seen also in the work of Martial, whose life, just like that of Frontinus, spans this dividing line. On Martial see Hurllet (2016) 20 and Fitzgerald (2018) 108–25. On Martial and Frontinus, see König (2018) 233–59. In addition, modern scholarship has increasingly explored the subversive nature of this apparently "court literature." See McGuire (1997) and Hurllet (2016) 19. See also Ahl (1986) 2811–34 and Dominik (1994) 139 on the idea that these texts perform a "safe criticism" of the emperor using myth as a veil. A detailed discussion of Martial's poetry on Domitian is offered by Hulls in this volume.

5. Cf. Gibbon (2000) 63 and Cary (1962) 609. On the politics of the ancient literary sources see Sullivan (1976); Ramage (1989) 640–707; Adams (2005); Roche (2011); Gibson and Morello (2012).

6. Wiseman (1996) and Saller (2000).

7. Wiseman (1996) and Saller (2000).

Moving beyond the political interpretation of single literary sources, the following analysis aims to explore the formative stages of anti-Domitianic storytelling in light of material evidence that has been found or better understood only recently. Over the last decades, indeed, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence for the Flavian period has become strikingly richer, in both volume and understanding.<sup>8</sup> Although this material documentation is inevitably fragmentary and often linked to an official context, in what follows we suggest that it can shed new light not only on Domitian's principate but also on the narrative strategies deployed by later Nervan and Trajanic authors to characterize it as a "reign of terror." Thus, by focusing especially on the Suetonian *Vitae*, the first part of this contribution will explore the progressive ingraining into ancient historiographic accounts of an unfavorable vulgate on Domitian's reign, whose key themes seem to find little confirmation in extant material evidence. In the second section, two of the most famous personal accusations made about Domitian, namely the use of the titles *Dominus* and *Deus* and his incestuous relationship with his niece Julia, will be reconsidered in light of epigraphic evidence that has gone thus far largely unexplored. Overall, this contribution will suggest that a more holistic exploration of the ways the ancient sources interacted among themselves and with their material context can help not only to overcome the methodological obstacles of the scholarly reassessment of Domitian's principate but also to reconsider more cautiously the literary nature and the historical reliability of our sources.

### 1. Suetonius's *Domitian*: Re-reading the Literary Vulgate in Light of Material Culture

Composed circa thirty years after the emperor's death, the Suetonian *Life of Domitian* has emerged as "one of the most influential and important ancient sources" for our understanding of Flavian Rome.<sup>9</sup> Due to the fragmentary status of both Tacitus's *Historiae* and Dio's *Roman History*, Suetonius's biography represents the fullest, extant account of Domitian's principate and the only continuous narrative on the Flavian dynasty.<sup>10</sup> This text has long been consid-

8. Hurlet (2016) 22.

9. Quotation from Adams (2005) 1. The Suetonian *Life of Domitian* — which has many points of contact with the writings of Pliny and Tacitus — informs not only early Christian authors such as Tertullian, Eusebius, and Orosius, but also the image of the emperor that we find in Dante (*Pg.* 22, 83) and Petrarch (*TF* 1.122).

10. The section on Domitian in Tacitus's *Historiae* has gone lost. Dio's Books 56–58 on the Flavians can be read through the Byzantine abridgments of Xiphilinus. On Dio on Domitian, see further Hulls in this volume.

ered more trustworthy than the filo-senatorial writings of Pliny (*Ep.* 4.11; *Pan.* passim) and Tacitus (*Agr.* 1–3; 39–42; 43–46), who overtly vilify Domitian to minimize their connections with him and to apply protreptic pressure on Nerva and Trajan.<sup>11</sup> The scholarly reassessment of Domitian, however, has increasingly highlighted that the Suetonian biography also deploys subtle manipulations to cast indirectly Domitian as a bloodthirsty tyrant.<sup>12</sup> Above all, a comparison with the other *Vitae* has revealed that Suetonius often describes Domitian via literary clichés that found their origin in Aristotle’s description of a tyrant (*Pol.* 5.1311a 2–6, 1313b–1314a) and that are applied also to other notorious emperors such as Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Suetonius’s account of Domitian’s reign, composed under the emperor Hadrian, is predominantly formed around three intertwined themes, namely the emperor’s enmity with his brother Titus, his inconsiderate financial policies, and his cruelty.<sup>14</sup> In the following analysis, I will suggest that, far from being just generic literary tropes, these themes further develop the anti-Domitianic *topoi* already hinted at, although more indirectly, in the writings of Pliny and Tacitus. Artfully reorganized by Suetonius in coherent and morally inflected narratives, these accusations seem to establish narrative patterns that become canonical in the literary tradition. A confrontation with fresh archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphic evidence will reveal the delicate omissions and manipulations through which these influential narratives came to cast Domitian as a new “Nero” in Suetonius’s hands (through contrast with the positive model of Titus) while giving an apparently rational explanation for Domitian’s behavior in order to make his cruelty more credible.

*Exhaustus operum ac munerum inpensis:*

Domitian’s Building Program

One of the most prominent themes featured in all surviving “anti-Domitianic” sources is that of Domitian’s inconsiderate financial and building policies. Already in his *Panegyric*, Pliny effectively describes Domitian as the “robber and the executioner” (*spoliator et carnifex*, *Pan.* 90) of his subjects after having remembered how he replenished the imperial fiscus, drained by his immoderate expenditures (*Pan.* 20), with property confiscated from honest citizens via

11. See Gibson and Morello (2012) 74.

12. An overview in Adams (2005); of course, Suetonius has an agenda that goes well beyond Domitian. See the following discussion, as well as Power and Gibson (2014).

13. Bradley (1991) 3728–29; Jones (1996) XV.

14. Cf. Suet. *Dom.* 3.2. For an overview, see Adams (2005).

the charge of *laesa maiestas* (*Pan.* 42.1). Similarly, the theme of Domitian's *avaritia* appears in Tacitus's description of Agricola's assassination (*Agr.* 43) before becoming canonical in the later writings of Cassius Dio (67.14.1–3; 67.12.1–2; 67.4.6) and Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.17). These descriptions are certainly reminiscent of the rhetorical cliché of the rapacity of the tyrant that is attested in ancient literature from Aristotle (*Pol.* 1313b) and Plutarch (*Publ.* 15.5) to Cicero (*Ver.* 2.1.82) and Sallust (*Cat.* 13). However, this theme seems to assume a particular function in the Suetonian biography, where the generic hints of previous writers are reorganized into a coherent narrative that serves to justify Domitian's transition from simulated honesty to open cruelty.

For the first nine chapters, Suetonius focuses on Domitian's ability to dissimulate his *cupiditas* and *avaritia* (*uix suspicione ullam . . . dedit, Dom.* 9).<sup>15</sup> Thus, as often happens in the first chapters of Suetonian biographies, the emperor is initially presented as an honest man (*Dom.* 8), who rebuilds the monuments destroyed by the fire of 80 C.E. (*Dom.* 5) and who refuses the inheritances left to him (*Dom.* 9). From chapter 10, however, his real nature emerges, and Domitian turns to cruelty and avidity (*ad saeuitiam . . . ad cupiditatem, Dom.* 10). The fact that at this pivotal turning point Suetonius links avarice and cruelty is not casual. In chapter 12, we are told that the emperor's building program and military expenditure drained the imperial finances, resulting in Domitian's rapacious fiscal policies and cruel prosecutions (*exhaustus operum ac munerum inpensis stipendioque . . . nihil pensi habuit quin praedaretur omni modo, "bankrupted by the costs of the buildings and the shows and by the salary increases . . . he had no scruples about looting by all possible means," Dom.* 12).<sup>16</sup> In this way, Suetonius's narrative not only makes Domitian's cruelty rationally plausible, as motivated by economic need, but it also retroactively darkens the emperor's building program, which was introduced as ultimately motivated by the emperor's desire to rename after him the monuments of his predecessors (*omnia sub titulo tantum suo ac sine ulla pristini auctoris memoria, Dom.* 5). While some modern historians have already questioned the veracity of this account, epigraphic evidence provides additional insights into the real figure of

15. The emphasis on Domitian's *dissimulatio* served as a justification for the many senators who started or advanced their careers during the reign of Domitian and who, in the new age of Nerva and Trajan, presented themselves as honest people deceived by the emperor's initial ability at dissimulating his cruelty.

16. It is worth noting here Suetonius's use of technical terms such as *munus* and *inpensa*. The first term refers to the costs of the spectacles in the amphitheater, while the second is often used in inscriptions for the costs of public buildings.

Suetonius's manipulations that, drawing on traits already hinted at by Pliny and Tacitus, became canonical in subsequent tradition.<sup>17</sup>

New studies carried out around the bimillenary of the Flavians have revealed the importance of an inscription (*CIL* VI 40456) that had been long dismissed for its heavily fragmentary condition.<sup>18</sup> The inscription (dated c. 83–92 C.E.) was found in the zone of Largo Argentina—close to the district of Campus Martius—and is broken into three pieces:

[Imp(erator) Caesa]r Diui [Vespasia]ni f(ilius) D[omitianus Augustus] /  
[pont(ifex) max(imus), tr(ibunus) pot(estate)-----, -----], / [pater pa]triae  
+[- ca. 8 -]o i[ncendi]o (?) / [a]mpli[auit pecun]ia [sua?]. (*CIL* VI 40456)

The emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus son of the divine Vespasian *pontifex maximus*, in the year of his (X) *tribunicia potestas* . . . father of the fatherland . . . by the fire . . . enlarged using his own patrimony.

The text commemorates some of the reconstructions made by Domitian after the fire of 80 C.E., precisely of the kind recorded by Suetonius. However, the inscription suggests a different scenario for Domitian's building program. First of all, Domitian has not replaced the name of the ancient builder by adding his own name on the original dedication of the monument, as, for instance, happened with Septimius Severus's renovation of the Pantheon. Rather, this new inscription, which was probably added to the monument after the fact, states that Domitian only enlarged the existing monuments affected by the fire. This finds confirmation also in other inscriptions (*AE* 1995, 1444; *CIL* III 1381c) that use the verb *refecit* to describe Domitian's interventions throughout the empire. Secondly, the textual integration commonly accepted for this celebratory inscription records that the emperor paid for the reconstruction of the temple and the porticus *pecunia sua*.<sup>19</sup> That an emperor was using his personal wealth to refurbish public buildings is worth noting, for it is attested only ten times in

17. Scholars have pointed out that Domitian did not sell confiscated properties and that Nerva inherited a good financial situation that allowed him to continue Domitian's building projects, pay a *congiarium* to the soldiers, and reduce the Judaic taxation. Cf. Plin. *Pan.* 41.2; 50.3–6; Syme (1930) 67; Butcher and Ponting (2015) 409–33. On the continuation of Domitian's policies under Nerva, see Grainger (2003) and Elkins (2017).

18. See Coarelli (2009). The inscription has been studied by Ceci (2009) 456–57 and is discussed also by Panciera (2006) 453–68.

19. Fundamental is the study of Panciera (2006), who accepts Alföldy's textual integration of this epigraph. Coarelli (2009) suggests a slightly different text that expands Domitian's intervention from the temple to the entire area, moving the date forward to the 92 C.E.

the entire history of the city of Rome, starting with Claudius.<sup>20</sup> In particular, while Titus and Vespasian occasionally used their money to rebuild aqueducts and roads (*CIL* VI 931, 1257, 1258), several inscriptions record that Domitian started to use his own personal funds to rebuild public monuments and temples (*CIL* III 13691, 14203).<sup>21</sup> This group of inscriptions, then, sheds an interesting light on the narrative strategy used in the *Vitae* to darken the image of Domitian. Suetonius builds a narrative in which Domitian's inconsiderate projects are moved by the desire for monuments to be named in his honor and trigger the emperor's avarice and cruelty. This serves to accentuate the contrast with his brother Titus, who is described as a generous emperor who used his patrimony to rebuild the monuments destroyed by the fire (Suet. *Tit.* 8).<sup>22</sup> Although fragmentary, however, the epigraphic evidence seems, against the version of the literary sources, to suggest that Domitian simply continued the necessary reconstruction of the districts affected by the fire and even generously extended the use of his personal patrimony for the reconstruction of temples and monuments: a fact that Suetonius' vulgate (followed by Dio) omits.<sup>23</sup>

### Domitian's Enmity with Titus

A second theme prominently featured in the literary sources is the enmity between Domitian and Titus. The suspicion that Domitian is conspiring against his brother is mentioned already in the *Historiae* by Tacitus (4.86), who alludes to his exclusion from power (4.51). Pliny takes this enmity for granted in his letters (*Titum timuit ut Domitiani amicus*, "as a friend of Domitian he feared Titus," *Ep.* 4.9.2). It is only in the Suetonian biography, however, that these elements are developed into a much more complex narrative that spans chapters 2 and 13 of Domitian's *Vita*.<sup>24</sup> Just as for the building program, this narrative is organized as a crescendo in cruelty: at the beginning, Suetonius parallels Tacitus's account by describing Domitian as jealous of the glory of his brother

20. For an overview of the topic see Panciera (2006) 461–68. A precedent seems to be Augustus's building of the Via Flaminia (*CIL* XI 365; *Res Gest.* 20). Only twenty-three provincial inscriptions record the formula *pecunia sua* (or a similar one) throughout Roman history.

21. The only exception seems to be Vespasian's refurbishing of the *aedes Victoriae* in the Sabine territory (*CIL* XIV 3485).

22. The same narrative pattern is later followed by Dio, who, according to Xiphilinus's epitome, establishes a similar link between Domitian's building projects and the murders of wealthy citizens under dubious charges (67.14.1–3; 67.12.1–2) as well as reviving the narrative opposition between Domitian's *avaritia* and the generosity of the frugal Titus (66.24.3–4; 67.19.3a).

23. Domitian's building projects were continued by Nerva and Trajan. See Grainger (2003) 55–56.

24. See Duff (1964) 526 and Adams (2005) 5.



who is favored by Vespasian (*ut fratri se et opibus et dignatione adaequaret*, “to match his brother’s power and fame,” *Dom.* 2), even once conspiring against Titus (*neque cessavit ex eo insidias struere fratri clam palamque*, “from that moment he did not cease plotting against his brother, either secretly or openly,” *Dom.* 2). Thus, at the end of the chapter we are told that, once elevated to be emperor, Domitian allowed only a formal deification of Titus, while in fact, he took every opportunity to denigrate his memory with discourses and edicts (*nullo praeterquam consecrationis honore dignatus, saepe etiam carpsit obliquis orationibus et edictis*, *Dom.* 2).

Although the private relationship between Titus and Domitian is impossible to verify, epigraphic and numismatic evidence offer a lens to check some of the information provided by Suetonius. Suetonius records that Domitian obtained only one ordinary consulate (in 73 C.E.) thanks to the kindness of his brother, Titus, who withdrew in his favor (*Dom.* 2). This information, apparently marginal, is crucial. Indeed, it gives a rational motivation to Domitian’s jealousy by confirming his exclusion from power while also developing the theme of Titus’s love for Domitian that Suetonius introduced in chapter 9 of the *Life* of Titus in order to portray Domitian’s jealousy for his brother more negatively (*Tit.* 9). At first glance, Suetonius seems right here because 73 C.E. is the first year in which Domitian’s consulship lasts an entire year. However, if we look at the broader picture of the *fasti consulares*, as it emerges from the epigraphic record, we realize that Titus did not quit for Domitian. In fact, consideration of an inscription (*CIL* V 7239) from the year 73, which is not included in Degrassi’s edition of the *Fasti*, confirms the natural continuation of a well-established strategy of government for that year:<sup>25</sup>

In order to give consular status to members of their entourage, the Flavians took the consulship in turn on a two-year basis (being alternatively consuls or designated consuls for the following year) while often remaining in their position only for a few months. Thus, in 71 Vespasian and Nerva left the consulship to Domitian and Cascus, while in 72 Titus was consul with Vespasian, and in 73 (according to this pattern) the consulship was given to Domitian and Mesalinus, only to come back to Titus in the year 74. What Suetonius portrays as an exceptional event and as a proof of Titus’s love for the ungrateful Domitian, then, seems part of a government strategy that suggests a unity among the members of the imperial family in their power management. However, following the Suetonian manipulation, subsequent historiographers not only continue but even expand the theme of the enmity between the brothers, culminating in

25. Cf. Degrassi (1954) 20–29.

YEAR	CONSULS	EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE
70	Vespasian + Titus Mucianus + Cerialis	<i>CIL</i> XVI 10, 11
71	Vespasian + Nerva Domitian + Cascus	<i>CIL</i> XVI 12, 13 <i>CIL</i> XVI 14–17
72	Vespasian + Titus Mucianus + Sabinus	<i>CIL</i> VI 2053
73	Domitian + Messalinus	<i>CIL</i> V 7239
74	Vespasian + Titus Aelianus + Domitian Cerialis + Marcellus	<i>CIL</i> I 774 <i>CIL</i> IV 5526 <i>CIL</i> XVI 20

the dramatic passage by Cassius Dio in which the dying Titus, put in a basket of snow by Domitian who wants to hasten his death, regrets having loved too much his ungrateful brother (66.26.1–4).

Even subtler is what Suetonius says about the tokenistic divine honors bestowed on Titus. This information seems plausible because we do know of other cases of deifications that remained almost purely formal. In the specific case of Domitian, this detail creates a parallel with Nero, who is described by Suetonius as neglecting and even abolishing the divine honors of his predecessor Claudius (*Claud.* 45). Such a link further develops the idea that we find already attested in Pliny’s *Panegyric*, where the formal and self-serving nature of Domitian’s deification of Titus is overtly compared with Nero’s deification of Claudius but contrasted to Trajan’s honest deification of Nerva (*Pan.* 11). Once again, then, Suetonius expands common anti-Domitianic themes into a much more complex narrative that—via thematic allusions and comparisons—indirectly portrays Domitian as a new Nero against the positive model of Titus.<sup>26</sup> In addition, in this case also the Suetonian account establishes a narrative pattern later followed by Cassius Dio, who paraphrases the Suetonian passage: αὐτός τε γὰρ καὶ φιλεῖν τὸν ἀδελφὸν καὶ πενθεῖν προσεποιεῖτο, καὶ τοὺς τε ἐπαίνους τοὺς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ μετὰ δακρῶν ἔλεξε καὶ ἐς τοὺς ἥρωας αὐτὸν σπουδῇ ἐσέγραψε, πάντα τὰ ἐναντιώτατα ὧν ἐβούλετο (“Domitian pretended to love his brother and mourned him and uttered his eulogy in tears and wanted him divinised, pretending precisely the opposite of what he really desired,” 67.2.6).

However, if we look at the material evidence of Claudius’s and Titus’s deifications, they are very different. Although Suetonius’s verbs *destituo* and *aboleo* are too strong, Nero can effectively be said to have granted a tokenistic deification to his predecessor. For instance, we know that the temple of Diuus Claudius was

26. Cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 25.

only completed by Vespasian, because Nero left it unfinished after the fire of 64. In addition, if we exclude the acts of the *Fratres Aruales*, in Rome there are no inscriptions datable to the Neronian age with mention of the Diius Claudius.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, Domitian's memorialization of Titus is well attested. Archaeologists have highlighted how a series of monuments were erected by the Flavians to celebrate the imperial family within a process of sacralization of the imperial institution. Among them, Diius Titus was commemorated in the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, in the *Arcus Divi Titi*, in the *Templum Vespasiani* and *Titi*, and in an *aedes* of the *Porticus Diuorum*.<sup>28</sup> Differently from that of Claudius, in addition, the cult of Diius Titus is well attested not only in many provincial epigraphs but also in Rome, as we can see from inscriptions such as *CIL VI 945* (= *CIL VI 31211*) that is a dedication to Titus by the Senate of Rome, and *CIL VI 40455* (81 C.E., Rome).<sup>29</sup> A final element is provided by the Domitianic coinage which displays the portrait of Diius Titus featured in four different coin-types including both *sestertii* (*RIC 2, Domitian*, 129; 126; 131) and *aureii* (*RIC 2, Domitian*, 147) all minted in Rome between 81 and 83 C.E. While we cannot reconstruct the personal relationship between Titus and Domitian then, the material evidence clearly suggests that, at least at an official level, Domitian collaborated with Titus in power management and encouraged his cult in ways that cannot be compared, as Suetonius and Pliny maliciously do, with Nero's deification of Claudius.

### Domitian's *saevitia*

If we look at the broader architecture of the Suetonian work, the narratives discussed so far seem to be functional to the representation of Domitian's principate as a "reign of terror," arguably the most important theme of Domitian's biography.<sup>30</sup> Although in the *Vitae* we do not find emotional statements comparable to Pliny's description of Domitian as a "fearful monster" (*Pan.* 48.1), the theme of Domitian's paranoid *saevitia* pervades the text. As early as chapter

27. The Arvalian acts record that sacrifices were made for Claudius although by the collegium of the *Fratres Aruales*. Cf. *CIL VI 2040* = 32353; *CIL VI 2041*; *CIL VI 2042* = 32354. Provincial inscriptions for the Diius Claudius are *AE 1951*, 39; *AE 1996*, 668; *CIL III 1947* = 8566 = D 219; *CIL VI 1257*; *CIL VI 1258*; *CIL XII 641*; *IAM-02-02*, 370a; *IK-17-01*, 3003. See also the coin-types *RIC 1 Nero*, 7 and *RIC 1 Nero*, 5.

28. See Anderson (1983) 95–97; Packer (2003) 174; Tuck (2016) 118–22.

29. *CIL VI 945*: *Senatus / Populusque Romanus / Divo Tito Divi Vespasiani filio) / Vespasiano Augusto*; *CIL VI 40455*: *[D]ivo T[ito Vespasiano] / [Augusto] / Divi Vesp[asiani filio]*. For provincial inscriptions honoring Diius Titus, see *AE 1990*, 1031; *CIL II 1050*; *CIL II-7*, 979; *CIL III 12680* = 13818; *IGLS VI 2762* = *AE 1939*, 56.

30. On Domitian's "reign of terror," see Botha (1989) 45–59; Southern (1997) 119–25; Adams (2010).

3, the emperor who kills flies, sadistically with a stylus, is presented as *metu saeuus* (“cruel because of fear”). In chapter 10, Domitian is described as turning to open savagery (*ad saeuitiam desciiuit*). From here onwards, the account of the emperor’s political actions is a crescendo of physical and psychological violence. Chapter 10 provides us with a long list of famous people killed by Domitian for *laesa maiestas*. Chapter 11 shows how “Domitian’s cruelty was not only big but also subtle” (*erat autem non solum magnae sed etiam callidae inopinataeque saeuitiae*) via a list of other political murders. In chapter 12, this cruelty extends to the common citizens of the empire, who are victims of the emperor’s *immodicus* and *minime ciuilis animi*. In chapter 14, we are told that “because of these facts, [the emperor] became an object of terror and hate for everyone before being finally killed by a conspiracy” (*per haec terribilis cunctis et inuisus, tandem oppressus est conspiratione*). This description of Domitian’s principate as a reign of terror is completed in chapter 23, where Suetonius overtly refers the lines used to comment on the death of the much-loved Titus:

Quod ut palam factum est, non secus atque in domestico luctu maerentibus publice cunctis, senatus prius quam edicto conuocaretur ad curiam concurrir, obseratisque adhuc foribus, deinde apertis, tantas mortuo gratias egit laudesque congessit, quantas ne uiuo quidem umquam atque praesenti. (Suet. *Tit.* 11)

When the news spread, all citizens publicly grieved as if for a family member. The Senators rushed into the curia, without waiting to be summoned by an edict and, having opened the doors that were still closed, gave thanks to the deceased emperor and praised him as they had never done before in his presence.

Occisum eum populus indifferenter, miles grauissime tulit . . . Contra senatus adeo laetatus est, ut replete certatim curia non temperaret, quin mortuum contumeliosissimo atque acerbissimo adclamationum genere laceraret. (Suet. *Dom.* 23)

The news of his death was taken with indifference by the people, but with indignation by the army . . . The Senate, instead, showed the greatest joy: they rushed into the curia and could not resist insulting the deceased emperor with the most offensive and violent invectives.

In this case too, Suetonius’s account seems complementary to both Tacitus’s description of the *saeua tempora* of Domitian age (*Agr.* 1) in which all the best citizens died because of the emperor’s cruelty (*Agr.* 3.2) and to the emphatic description made by Pliny, in which the *damnatio memoriae* is presented not

as an act of the Senate but rather as the natural expression of the people's anger against Domitian:

Iuuabat illidere solo superbissimos uultus, instare ferro, saeuire securibus, ut si singulos ictus sanguis dolorque sequeretur. Nemo tam temperans gaudii seraeque laetitiae, quin instar ultionis uideretur, cernere laceros artus, truncata membra . . . (Plin. *Pan.* 52.4–5)

It was a pleasure to smash those superb faces to the ground, to break down the iron, to rage with the axe, as if blood and pain had come at every stroke. There was nobody so moderate in his joy or so reluctant to rejoice, that it did not feel like vengeance to see the torn joints, the limbs cut off.

This information is unquestionably followed by both Cassius Dio (68.1.1), who remarks on the violent nature of the *damnatio memoriae* following Domitian's death, and Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.17), who emphasizes the link between Domitian's *saeuitia* and his Neronian end.

However, an overview of the epigraphic evidence seems to suggest, at least at a formal level, a different perception of the emperor by his subjects. Firstly, at least four epigraphs were dedicated respectively by the population of Rome, Misenum and Puteoli to the emperor between the years 95 and 96, just a few months before his murder. Both the inscriptions found in Puteoli express the gratitude of the town to Domitian, the reason for one of which (*AE* 1941, 73) seems to be the recent construction of the *via Domitiana* that is recorded by Cassius Dio (67.14.1) and celebrated by Statius in the *Silvae* (4.3). On the other (*CIL* X 1631; Puteoli, Jan–Sept. 95), the name of Domitian has not been erased after the *damnatio memoriae*:

[[Imp(eratori) Caesari]] / [[Divi Vespasiani f(ilio)]] / [[Domitiano Aug(usto)]] / [[German(ico) pont(ifici) max(imo)]], / [[trib(unicia) potest(ate) XV, imp(eratori) XXII]], / [[co(n)s(uli) XVII, cens(ori) perpet(uo), p(atri) p(atriciae)]] / [[colonia Flauia Aug(usta)]] / [[Puteolana ----]] / [[indulgentia maximi]] / [[diuinique principis]] / [[urbi eius admota]]. (*AE* 1941, 73= *AE* 2001, +842; Puteoli, 95/96)

To the emperor Cesar Domitian Augustus Germanic, son of the divine Vespasian, *Pontifex Maximus*, in the year of his XV *tribunicia potestas*, consul for seventeen times, *imperator* for twenty-two times, father of the fatherland and *censor perpetuus*, the colony Flavia Augusta of Puteoli, made closer to Rome thanks to the benevolence of the supreme and divine emperor.

To the same period belongs an inscription recently studied by Camodeca, from which we know that the Augustales of Misenum paid with their own money for

two twin inscriptions celebrating Domitian (*AE* 2000, 345a–b), while another celebratory inscription for Domitian was paid *publica pecunia* in Rome in the year 95 (*CIL* VI 40458).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, despite Flower’s recent assertion that “within the city of Rome Domitian’s name . . . [had] virtually disappeared,” when we compare the rate of erasure from inscriptions of Domitian’s name with that of other damned emperors, such as Geta, we realize that Domitian’s name was erased in only 24 percent of examples found in Rome and in 37 percent of the inscriptions in the provinces, while that of Geta was erased from 68 percent of cases in Rome and in 80 percent of the provincial inscriptions.<sup>32</sup> Finally, we must consider the exceptional case of an inscription (*CIL* VI 2725 = *ILS* 2034) composed for a soldier in Rome in the year 99—a good three years after the declaration of the *damnatio memoriae*—in which the emperor Domitian is remembered with all his honorific titles. Of course, because of its predominantly official nature, this epigraphic evidence cannot be used as a benchmark to assess the people’s real affection for Domitian. Nevertheless, it shows that Domitian enjoyed at least a formal consensus until the last months of his reign and—at least before his sudden *damnatio memoriae*—he is not perceived or declared a *hostis publicus* like Nero, as Suetonius, Pliny, and Cassius Dio indirectly suggest.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, despite their fragmentary and formal nature, fresh pieces of epigraphic and numismatic evidence offer the possibility of reconstructing more positively some aspects of Domitian’s reign, from the emperor’s munificence and building programs, to its perception by the population, and to the Flavian family-based strategies of power management. More importantly, the confrontation between material and literary sources sheds a new light on the subtle omissions, the literary clichés and the narrative strategies deployed by Suetonius to accentuate Domitian’s contrast to Titus and, on the contrary, his similarity with the tyrannical model of Nero, which later writers such as Cassius Dio and Eusebius unquestionably follow.

### Domitian Incestuous *Dominus et Deus*?

Domitian’s rebuilding of Rome was not only physical and administrative but also a moral one. Following the policies of *imitatio Augusti* already adopted

31. See Camodeca (2011).

32. Cf. Flower (2006) 241. In Rome the name of Domitian is erased only in 7 inscriptions out of 29; in the provinces only 48 out of 127 are erased. The name of Geta is surely erased in 28 inscriptions out of 41, but possibly even more since in 8 cases it is reintegrated but the fracture of the epigraph in that point might suggest that the name was deleted. In provincial inscriptions Geta’s name is deleted in 290 inscriptions out of 359. On the citizenry’s appreciation of Domitian in general, see Pleket (1961) 296–315 and Christ (1962) 187–213.

33. See Giardina (2011) 210–25 and Panetta (2011) 26–35.

by Titus and Vespasian, Domitian began a wide program of *correctio morum* during the first years of his reign (Suet. *Dom.* 8).<sup>34</sup> These moral reforms ranged from the banning of slaves' castration and the censorship of lascivious shows to the tightening of religious and moral rules that became particularly visible in the reintroduction of the Republican *lex Scantinia* and of the Augustan *lex Iulia* respectively on *stuprum* and on adultery.<sup>35</sup> Although the ancient sources could not blame the promotion of traditional values per se, the second-century historians all seem to contrast the emperor's formal attempts of moral reformation to his lascivious and impious tendencies in ways that cast him as a sexual hypocrite and a stock tyrant.<sup>36</sup> When read in light of epigraphic evidence, however, the two most important accusations made about Domitian by the ancient historians—namely the use of the title *Dominus et Deus* and an adulterous familial life—seem to find little evidence and to be predominantly based on distorting narrative patterns aimed at emphasizing Domitian's similarity with the notorious tyrants of the Julio-Claudian era: Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero.

### *Dominus et Deus*

In the first half of Suetonius' biography, Domitian is described encouraging justice, fighting immorality, and defending the cult of gods (*ne qua religio deum impune contaminaretur*, *Dom.* 8). According to a narrative pattern that we have already seen informing the *Vitae*, however, in chapter 13 the emperor's *pietas* is revealed to be illusory by his impious desire to be addressed as “master and god”:

Adclamari etiam in amphitheatro epuli die libenter audiit: ‘Domino et Dominae feliciter! . . . cum procuratorum suorum nomine formalem dictaret epistulam, sic coepit: ‘Dominus et deus noster hoc fieri iubet’. (Suet. *Dom.* 13.1–2)

He also welcomed with pleasure, on a day of public banquet in the amphitheater, this exclamation: “joy be to the master and the mistress” . . . dictating an official letter on behalf of his agents, he began in this way: “Our master and god orders this be done.”

Scholars have long debated on the credibility of this information, which seems confirmed by several of Martial's *Epigrams* (9.66.3; 5.8.1; 7.34.8; 8.2.6; 10.72.3), and later also by Cassius Dio (67.13.3–4) and by Dio Chrysostom (45.1), while

34. On the Flavian *imitatio Augusti*, see Tuck (2016) 109.

35. Cf. Suet. *Dom.* 8; 7, 1; Cass. Dio 67.2.3; Mart. 2.60, 4.2, 9.5; Stat. *Silv.* 3.4.74–77, 4.3.13–15. See Johnson (1997) 24–27.

36. Cf. Suet. *Dom.* 8. See Griffin (2000) 19–21; Charles and Anagnostou-Laoutides (2010).



being contradicted by Statius (*Silv.* 1.6.83–84).<sup>37</sup> Besides being consistent with the broader process of sacralization of imperial power by the Flavian dynasty, a similar claim would find precedent with Caligula (*Aur. Vitt. de Caes.* 3.13; *Epit. de Caes.* 3.8) who, just like Domitian, appropriated the apparently Jovian title *Optimus*.<sup>38</sup> And yet, in the case of Caligula too, the detail is reported only by later literary sources and one might wonder if in both cases this information is aimed at stressing the tyrannical and Hellenizing tendencies of these two damned *principes* who both associated themselves with Jupiter.<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, an important contribution can come from the material sources. Both Suetonius and Cassius Dio record that Domitian ordered to be addressed formally as *Dominus* and *Deus* also in written documents, suggesting a formal introduction of such appellatives in the imperial *tituli: unde institutum posthac, ut ne scripto quidem ac sermone cuiusquam appellaretur aliter* (“from then on it was established that, in both speeches and written documents, everyone should not call him differently [than *Dominus et Deus*],” Suet. *Dom.* 13, 2); ἤδη γὰρ καὶ θεὸς ἡξίου νομίζεσθαι, καὶ δεσπότης καλούμενος καὶ θεὸς ὑπερηγάλλετο. ταῦτα οὐ μόνον ἐλέγετο ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐγράφετο (“he wanted to be regarded as a god and took pride in being called ‘master’ and ‘god.’ Such titles were used not just in speeches but also in written documents,” Dio 57.5.7). As Miriam Griffin has noted, the use of the terms *Dominus* and *Deus* was not novel in itself; what was scandalous was their use in official documents or as an official title deployed in the vocative form to address Domitian himself, as the ancient sources suggest.<sup>40</sup> Martial refers to Domitian with the term *deus* in two *epigrams* (7.5.1–3; 8.82.3), but this is not in fact unusual considering the Augustan poets had already done so with Augustus.<sup>41</sup> However, despite the conspicuous number of extant Domitianic

37. Cf. also Tac. *Ann.* 2.87; Dio 57.8.1; *Aur. Vic. de Caes.* 11.2, *Epit. de Caes.* 11.6; Eutr. 7.23; Oros. 7.10. For a discussion of this theme in the literary sources see Southern (1997) 36, 45–46; *CAH* 80–81; Jones (1992) 108–9; Gering (2012).

38. *Optimus*, however, was sporadically used also by Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. See Gregori and Bianchini (2017). On Domitian’s use of divine attributes, see Scott (1936) 133–40.

39. While *Optimus* is occasionally found in epigraphs from the reign of Tiberius onwards, the title *Deus* is never used in imperial inscriptions of the first and second century. Cf. Gregori (2014).

40. Griffin (2000) 81.

41. On the Augustan poets, see Gering (2012) 136–37 and Bianchini and Gregori (2018) 197–200. On the use of these terms by Martial, see Henriksén (2012) 280–81. Scott (1936) 102–12 suggests that Domitian used such titles only in the last years of his reign, while Griffin (2000) 80–83 endorses the idea that Domitian encouraged their use. The epigraphic evidence discussed below seems to confirm Jones’s argument (1992) 109, recently followed by Rebeggiani (2018) 9, that Domitian never formally used these titles, although the terms *dominus* and *deus* were occasionally used to refer to him.



inscriptions, there is no evidence of the use of the title *Dominus et Deus* in Latin inscriptions of either public or private nature, nor in Domitianic coinage.<sup>42</sup> In addition, there are no literary or material sources that record an institution of priests centered on worship of the living emperor; although often neglected by modern scholarship, this detail is very important, as such colleges were created for the living Tiberius and Nero.<sup>43</sup> We have material evidence instead of the titles ΘΕΟΣ or ΚΥΡΙΟΣ appearing in Greek inscriptions; these were not used as a single formula, but were commonly used also for other emperors, such as Vespasian and Titus, according to a well-established Hellenistic tradition.<sup>44</sup>

More problematic is the use of the Latin title *Dominus*. While an inscription records the use of this title as generally related to the *numina* of the Flavian emperors, it appears to be applied explicitly to Domitian only in two inscriptions.<sup>45</sup> In both cases, these texts are of private nature and composed for slaves or freedmen related to the imperial family. The first case is an inscription in which a certain Olympus, who died prematurely when he was only four years old, is defined as *uerna* (“servant”) of the emperor:

Olympus domin(i) / Domitiani / Aug(usti) ser(vus) / vern(a) Rom(ae) /  
natus vixit / an(nos) IIII, m(enses) IV, d(ies) XXI; / fec(it) Olympus pat(er)  
infeli/cissimus. (CIL VI 23454)

Olympus, servant and slave of the master Domitian Augustus, born in Rome lived for four years, four months and twenty-one days; Olympus, most sorrowful of fathers, erected this.

Only the long text of a second epigraph (CIL X 444) appears differently, offered for the emperor (*pro salute*) to the god Silvanus in *Lucania* by L. Domitius Phaon, who addresses Domitian as *Optimus Princeps et Dominus*.<sup>46</sup> In this case, the inscription was offered by a freedman of Domitia Lepida (Nero’s aunt) who, after the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty probably continued his work under

42. Gering (2012) 130–39. The epithet *diuinus*, different from *Deus* and *Diuus*, was already used for Claudius during his lifetime (CFA 22, Rome; CIL X 1558, Puteoli) and for Domitian (CIL X 1632; AE 1941, 73) in epigraphs from Puteoli; the term seems to refer to the emperor’s divine lineage: cf. *OLD diuinus* 4b “proceeding from or inspired by a god.”

43. On Tiberius, see CIL II 49 (Pax Iulia); IX 652 (Venusia); IRT 596 (Leptis Magna); AE 2014, 1190 (Philippi). On Nero, see CIL IV 7996 (Pompei); AE 1923, 40 (Dyrrachium).

44. *IvEph* 746, 749, 750, 751; see also *DE* II 1953.

45. CIL VI 10251a: *T. Flavius Aug. lib. Trophimus, constitutor collegi numinis dominorum quod est sub templo Diui Claudi* (“Titus Flavius Trophimus, imperial freedman, founder of the collegium of the divinities of the masters that is in the temple of the divine Claudius”).

46. Cf. Mannino (2009).

the Flavians. In both cases, the use of the title “master” would seem to refer more to the servile condition of the two dedicatees rather than to the divine nature or stature of Domitian. Furthermore, we must consider that only fifteen years after Domitian’s assassination, Pliny repeatedly calls Trajan “master,” anticipating the formal introduction of this term among the imperial titles under the Severan dynasty.<sup>47</sup> While the literary sources seem to stress the emperor’s desire to be addressed as “master and god” as an exceptional signal of his impious nature in opposition with his formal *pietas*, then, such information does not find enough evidence in epigraphic texts. These only occasionally record the use of the title “master,” apparently in accordance with a trend that begins well before Domitian and that is increasingly attested under the following emperors.<sup>48</sup>

### Domitian’s *lasciua*: Domitia Longina and Julia Augusta

The second accusation famously made about Domitian concerns his *libido* and *lasciua*. In this case, the contrast between the emperor’s moral agenda and his personal life is articulated by two interconnected incidents: his incestual relationship with Titus’s daughter Julia and his problematic relationship with his legitimate wife, Domitia Longina. As in the case of the title *Dominus et Deus*, Suetonius frames these accusations in a complex narrative: while in *Dom.* 8.3 the biographer records a series of positive measures aimed at combatting immorality and adultery, as early as chapter 1 readers have already been alerted to the *lasciua* of the emperor, said to have seduced many married women and to have consorted with men (*Dom.* 1). In chapter 22, the emperor reveals his real nature and his *libido nimia* by engaging in an adulterous relationship with his niece Julia:

non multo post alii collocatam corruptit ultro et quidem uiuo etiam tum Tito; mox patre et uiro orbatam ardentissime palamque dilexit ut etiam causa mortis extiterit coactae conceptum a se abigere. (Suet. *Dom.* 22)

When she [Julia] was married to another, he did not hesitate to seduce her, and this happened while Titus was still alive; later, when she had lost her father and her husband, he felt such a violent passion for her that caused her death, forcing her to abort, after having made her pregnant.

The Suetonian *Vita* seems to develop a link already established in Pliny’s *Epistoles* (4.11.6), in which the cruel execution of the supposedly adulterous Vestal

47. *CIL* VI 40414; cf. *CIL* VI 40415. On the Severian, see *DE* II 1953–1955. On Pliny’s abundant use of the term *Dominus* to refer to Trajan (c. 80 occurrences), see Gering (2012) 136. Statius calls Domitian *Dominus* thirteen times. See Leberl (2004) 195.

48. Cf. Rebggiani (2018) 9n25.

Cornelia is overtly contrasted with the unpunished adultery of the emperor.<sup>49</sup> The theme of Domitian's *laschiua* is reported also by the *Panegyric* (52), by Juvenal (*Sat.* 2.29–33) and by Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.2.1; 68.1).<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, both Suetonius and Cassius Dio (67.15.2–5) enrich this story by framing it with Domitian's morally dubious relationship with his wife Domitia Longina. In Suetonius, the emperor's marriage to Domitia is presented as one of the cases of Domitian's wife-stealing (*Dom.* 1), while readers have been aware since the end of Titus's biography that Domitia was suspected by some to have a secret relationship with Domitian's brother (*quidam opinantur consuetudinem recordatum, quam cum fratris uxore habuerit*, Suet. *Tit.* 10).<sup>51</sup> In both Suetonius (*Dom.* 3.1) and Cassius Dio (67.3.1), Domitian's interest in his niece follows Domitia's affair with the actor Paris and the subsequent divorce of the emperor from his wife (Suet. *Dom.* 3.1; 13.1; Cass. Dio 67.3.2). Domitian's marriage is presented in both narratives as irreparably compromised, with the emperor continuing his relationship with Julia even after the apparent reconciliation with his wife (Suet. *Dom.* 22; Cass. Dio 67.3.2) and Domitia participating actively in the murder of Domitian (Suet. *Dom.* 14; Cass. Dio. 67.15).

Although it is attested in all the most notable literary sources, this account needs to be scrutinized, since the accusation of sexual license is a well-established rhetorical *topos* in the *vituperatio* of tyrants, from Herodotus (3.80.4–5) and Plato (494e) to Livy (1.58.2–5) and is found in the Republican era in Cicero (*Cael.* 32; *Pis.* 28). In addition, the same narrative is employed by Suetonius for Caligula and Nero, who, despite their apparent promotion of traditional Roman morality (Suet. *Calig.* 16.1; *Ner.* 16.2), are both accused of having seduced married women (Suet. *Calig.* 25.1–2; 36.2; *Ner.* 35.1).<sup>52</sup> Making Domitian's case more problematic, however, is the fact that in reapplying this standard accusation to the last Flavian emperor the literary sources skillfully engage with the important role publicly given to Julia in the imperial court according to Flavian familial policy.<sup>53</sup> Suetonius records that she was educated by Domitian's nurse (*Dom.* 17), and after her death she was deified like her father, becoming *Dia Julia*. Her political role is also suggested by the appearance of her name in

49. On Pliny's treatment of this affair, see Vinson (1989) 433–36.

50. On Julia's abortion see also Juv. *Sat.* 2.29.

51. Domitian married Domitia Longina in 70, when Julia was only a ten-year-old girl: Raepsaet-Charlier (1987) 323–34; Kienast, Eck, and Heil (2017) 107–8, 112. As the daughter of Domitius Corbulo and a descendant of Augustus, Domitia ensured links of *amicitia* for the Flavians with important senatorial families: Raepsaet-Charlier (1987) 287–88; Chausson (2003); Morelli (2014) 27–45; Fraser (2015).

52. See also Suet. *Aug.* 62.2.

53. Gering (2012) 57–62, 100–117; Morelli (2014) 19–21.

inscriptions composed during the reign of Titus as well as in many Domitianic inscriptions, in which she is mentioned as *filia Divi Titi*, after the name of the emperor's wife Domitia Augusta.<sup>54</sup> This is further confirmed by an inscription dedicated to Julia Augusta by two Alpine populations (the Trumpulini and Benacenses) which, unlike their neighbors the Camunni, had not yet received Roman citizenship by the time of the Flavian dynasty (*CIL* V 4313 = *Inscr. It.* 10.5.90).<sup>55</sup> Unless it was originally accompanied by other inscriptions for the other members of the imperial family, it is likely that this inscription was aimed at obtaining Julia's political support, in line with a practice already well attested to during Augustus's reign (Suet. *Aug.* 40).

Of course, it is impossible to reconstruct precisely the private relationships of Domitian with his wife and Julia. However, a more attentive consideration of extant material evidence suggests that the accounts in the literary sources are highly unlikely. Let us start from the major event that is Domitian's incest with Julia. Firstly, the literary sources are biased in magnifying the incestuous nature of this relationship. According to Roman law, *incestum* concerned relationships between close blood relatives, such as those mentioned by Suetonius of Augustus with his daughter Julia (*Cal.* 23.1), of Caligula with his sister Drusilla (*Cal.* 24.36), and of Nero with his mother Agrippina (*Ner.* 28.2).<sup>56</sup> Taking advantage of the important role assumed by Julia in the Flavian court, the literary sources build their *vituperatio* of Domitian around her, but during the time of Domitian the relationship between uncle and *fratris filiam* was not considered an incestuous one: in fact, Diuus Claudius had legally married his niece Agrippina.<sup>57</sup>

More importantly, different pieces of epigraphic evidence suggest a chronology that raises serious doubts concerning the historical credibility of the events as they were presented by second-century writers. In particular, all our sources suggest that Julia died during an abortion after having become pregnant with Domitian's child (Plin. *Pan.* 52.3, *Ep.* 4.11.6; Juv. 2.29–33; Suet. *Dom.* 22). Material evidence allows us to establish the year of her death: the acts of the *Fratres Aruales* record that in 87 Julia was still alive, as sacrifices *pro salute* were made for her (*CIL* VI 2065). The acts of the years 88/89 are unfortunately fragmentary, but the acts of 90 (*CIL* VI 2067) clearly show that Julia had died

54. *CEA* 48–49; *AE* 1979, 176; 2005, 440; 2010, 286; *CIL* V 4313; VI 941, 2059 = 32363, 2060 = 32364; IX 2588; *CIL* X 1632 (Puteoli): *Domitianus, Domitia Augusta, Julia Augusta and domus diuina*. See also *AE* 2010, 286 in which Julia is mentioned as Vespasian's niece.

55. Gregori and Filippini (2012).

56. On the Roman legislation on *incestum*, see Guarino (1943).

57. Cf. Suet. *Claud.* 26.3; Dio Cass. 60.31.6; Tac. *Ann.* 12.5–7. See Guarino (1943) 223.

at the beginning of January of that year. Her name is not mentioned among the members of the imperial family for whom the Arvalians offered sacrifices, nor is her name mentioned as *Diua Julia*. Similarly, in Statius's *Silvae* 1.1 (composed after Domitian's victory over the Dacians in 89) Julia is not yet mentioned in the pantheon of the deified members of the Flavian family, but on the coinage of the year 90/91 Julia appears deified as *Diua Julia* (*BMC* 2.402–3). This suggests that Julia died in 89 and was deified at the beginning of 90.<sup>58</sup> Such a chronology, however, makes it difficult to believe the literary accounts of her death, as material evidence shows that Domitian spent most of the year 89 far from Rome, returning only around November; consequently, he would not have been able to impregnate Julia and then force her to an abortion some months later. More specifically, the acts of the *Fratres Aruales* of the year 89 (*CIL* VI 2066) record that Domitian was already in Germany fighting against Saturninus by the beginning of January, and in February the Arvalians were still praying for the safe return of the emperor (*pro salute et reditu*). As Jones has pointed out, these trips in which the emperor was accompanied by part of his entourage were quite long, and it is likely that Domitian left the *urbs* before the end of 88.<sup>59</sup> The tombstone of Tiberius Claudius Aug. lib. Zosimus (*AE* 1976, 00504 = *AE* 1989, 00564), official taster of Domitian and his companion abroad, proves that the emperor was in Mainz in 89. From Mainz, Domitian moved to the Danube and made peace with the Dacian Decebalus before attacking the Suebian Marcomanni and Quadi, who were hostile to Rome. According to Jones's reconstruction for the year 89, "Domitian was the first emperor since Tiberius to spend long periods of time outside Rome," and only "by November 89 Domitian was back in Rome celebrating his triumph over the Chatti and the Dacians (*Dom.* 6.1)."<sup>60</sup> This timeframe, which is corroborated by many pieces of material and textual evidence as discussed by Jones, makes it difficult to believe that Domitian had the time to impregnate Julia and cause her death by abortion in 89, as he was physically absent from Rome until the final months of that year.

Material evidence also helps us to reconsider the broader narrative in which this story is framed in literary sources. As we have noted, according to Suetonius and Cassius Dio, this affair happened in the context of Domitian's poor relationship with his unfaithful wife Domitia, whom he divorced and who took part in the conspiracy against him. Firstly, a quick survey of extant numismatic

58. See Vinson (1989) 436 and Bowman, Garnsey, and Rathbone (2000) 57n261.

59. Jones (1992) 26.

60. For a detailed reconstruction of Domitian's movements and a survey of the many sources, see Jones (1992) 148–52.

and epigraphic documentation suggests that, despite Domitia having failed to provide an heir to Domitian, there was actually no divorce at all, as her name constantly appears on coins and in official inscriptions.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the hostility between Domitia and Julia is not confirmed by public inscriptions in which they often appeared together, nor by inscriptions of a more private nature. For example, in the Noricus region a centurion commissioned a dedicatory epigraph for both Diua Julia and Domitia Augusta, suggesting that no hostility between the two *Augustae* was perceived by the populace.<sup>62</sup> Finally, another piece of material evidence, more private and informal in nature, suggests that the relationship between Domitia and Domitian was not as bad as presented in the literary sources. Domitian's wife survived him by almost thirty years, and she continued to own factories of roof-tiles.<sup>63</sup> These tiles, abundant in Rome, are marked with a seal in which Domitia Longina is mentioned as "the wife of Domitian" (*Domitia Domitiani [uxor]*).<sup>64</sup> This fact was certainly not encouraged by the political atmosphere in the aftermath of Domitian's assassination, in which many people tried to distance themselves from their past links with the Flavian court. In addition, as Flower has shown, this practice was not usual at all in Rome—widows did not refer to their deceased husbands in inscriptions.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, this anomalous decision to sustain the memory of Domitian in a hostile political climate, particularly unusual considering his formal *damnatio memoriae*, is at odds with the way literary sources describe Domitia's relationship with her husband.

## Conclusions

Overall, this brief reevaluation of Domitian's principate has tried to explore the narrative strategies deployed by ancient literary sources (especially Suetonius) to darken the image of the last Flavian emperor in light of fresh material evidence that has only been discovered or fully understood in recent years. While over the

61. The only exception being the year 83, in which Domitia does not appear on coins: cf. *BM-CRE II* 297–313. Unfortunately, the Arvalian acts of that year have not survived, but such a short gap seems insufficient to have been a divorce. See Vinson (1989); Southern (1997) 41–4; Morelli (2010) and (2014) 22–27, 55–67.

62. Cf. *CIL* III 13524 = *ILS* 8906. Fraser (2015) 231–38 suggests that the hostility between the two women and the accusations of incest and adultery are just "malicious rumours."

63. On the sort of Domitia Longina after Domitian's death, see Fraser (2015).

64. One of these seals of the *Figlinae Sulpicianae* is particularly important, as it records the consular year 123, which assures us that the tiles with the mention of Domitian were produced after the emperor's death. See Fraser (2015) 238–44.

65. Flower (2006) 253.

last century scholars have increasingly contended that the literary representation of Domitian was artificially constructed and is historically inaccurate, a survey of the extant material sources (although often affected by their fragmentary or official nature) provides an essential contribution to reconstruct actively some aspects of Domitian's principate that ancient writers omit or misrepresent. Specifically, the consideration of the fragmentary epigraphic evidence that relates to three major themes around which Suetonius builds his tyrannical portrait of Domitian (namely his enmity with Titus, his immoderate building and financial policies, and his cruelty) points to their function as literary *topoi*. These, already hinted at by Tacitus and Pliny, are reworked by Suetonius in order to emphasize the similarity between Domitian and the other damned emperors and his deviation from the positive model of Titus. Similarly, the exploration of how posthumous literary records obliquely criticize Domitian's moral reforms suggests that the two most famous accusations of the emperor, such as his impious desire to be addressed as god during his lifetime and his incestuous relationship with Julia, do not find enough material evidence to be regarded historically. They can be better understood as literary developments of anti-Domitianic themes, the designs of which were to present the emperor as a tyrannical and lascivious follower of Nero and Caligula (cf. *Juv. Sat.* 4.38: *calvus Nero*).<sup>66</sup> Moving past the methodological issues of a literary-based reassessment of Domitian, this analysis has further displayed the benefits deriving from a cross-fertilizing and interdiscursive reading of literary and material sources.<sup>67</sup>

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### *Abbreviations*

*CAH*: Bowman, A. K., Garnsey, P., and Rathbone, D., eds. 2000. *The Cambridge Ancient History. Vol. XI: The High Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*CFA*: Scheid, J. 1998. *Commentarii Fratrum Arvalium qui supersunt. Les copies épigraphiques des protocoles annuels de la confrérie Arvale (21 av.-304 ap. J.C.)*. Rome: École Française de Rome.

*CIL*: 1862 -. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

*DE*: De Ruggiero, E., ed. 1895. *Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romane. Vol. I*. Rome: Istituto Italiano di Storia Antica.

66. Cf. Charles *et al.* (2002).

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- IGLS VI*: Jalabert, L. et al. (1967). *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*. Paris: P. Geuthner.
- IK-17*: Meriç R. et al., eds. 1981–84. *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien. Die Inschriften von Ephesos*. Bonn: Verlag Dr. Rudolf Habelt.
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- RIC 2*: Carradice, I. A., Buttrey, T. V., eds. 2007. *Roman Imperial Coinage. Vol. II, Part I. AD 69–96: Vespasian to Domitian*. 2nd ed. London: Spink.
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