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# Domitian and the Capitolia

Onno van Nijf, Robin van Vliet & Caroline van Toor<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

A striking grave monument on the Via Salaria in Rome (fig. 1) stood testimony to one of the most remarkable initiatives of Domitian: the institution in 86 of the *Capitolia*, a Greek-style contest with athletic, musical, equestrian and literary competitions.<sup>2</sup> The monument shows a young boy dressed in Roman toga, holding a scroll. On the same monument Greek and Latin texts were inscribed.<sup>3</sup> His name was Quintus Sulpicius Maximus. He participated at the tender age of 11 with a Greek composition in the third edition of the contest; he did not win, but he received an honourable mention.<sup>4</sup> The *Capitolia* were not a children's game, however. Famous poets like Statius and Florus competed, but failed to win (causing the latter to leave Rome in disappointment). The effort may have been too much for Sulpicius as well, as he died from exhaustion after "having spent his mornings and nights on his meditations on the Muses," thus spoiling the hopes of his freedmen parents.<sup>5</sup> Sulpicius' monument gives a good impression of the remarkable mixture of Greek and Roman ingredients that constituted the *Capitolia*.

## Greek and Roman Elements in the Capitolia

The *Capitolia* were a clever piece of bricolage mixing Greek and Roman elements.<sup>6</sup> Intended for an empire-wide audience, they referred simultaneously to the Olympic traditions and to the traditional significance of Jupiter and the Capitolium for the preservation of imperial Rome – and the Flavian dynasty.<sup>7</sup> The festival was dedicated to Jupiter Capitolinus, the Roman counterpart of Olympian Zeus, with whom Domitian

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- 1 The authors wish to thank Ruurd Nauta, Jitse Daniels and the members of the Groningen Ancient History group for their help and discussion. The research was carried out in the double framework of the Oikos Anchoring Innovation Initiative and the NWO funded project 'Connecting the Greeks': [www.connectingthegreeks.com](http://www.connectingthegreeks.com).
  - 2 Suet. *Dom.* 4.4, Robert/Lianou/König 2010. The most comprehensive discussion in: Caldelli 1993 and Rieger 1999, 171-203.
  - 3 Greek and Latin: IGUR 3, 1336, ILS 5177 has only the Latin text.
  - 4 Garulli 2018, Nocita 2000, see SEG 50, 1060, Döpp 1996.
  - 5 Ούτε γὰρ ἡοῦς, οὐκ ὀρφνης μουσέων ἐκτός ἔθηκα φρένα (IGUR 3, 1336, C 3-4).
  - 6 Heinemann 2014 offers a good discussion of the balancing of Greek and Roman ingredients.
  - 7 Hardie 2003, 130.



Fig. 1. Funerary monument of Quintus Sulpicius Maximus. Rome, Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini, inv. MC 1102/S (courtesy Rome, Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali; photo Zeno Colantoni).

was frequently compared.<sup>8</sup> The festival opened with a procession of the delegations from the festival sites on the Campus Martius to the newly restored temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, where joint sacrifices may have taken place for the Capitoline triad and the Emperor. The Emperor's appearance was a carefully stage-managed mix of Greek and Roman elements. He presided over the games seconded by the priest of Jupiter, the Flamen Dialis, and by the collegium of the Sodales Flaviales Titiales, the priests responsible for the cult of the Flavians, who bore Domitian's own image in

8 This suggested that the supreme rule of Jupiter over the cosmos was mirrored in Domitian's rule over the oikoumene. Sulpicius' Greek poem shows that at least some Romans picked up the reference. Nauta 2002, 328-335.

their crowns. Like the Emperor, they were all dressed as Greek agonothetes (festival presidents).<sup>9</sup>

The typical Greek-style characteristics of the programme stand out. The contest followed the traditional threefold model of the Greek games, with musical, equestrian and gymnastic events, in the traditional age-categories of the *paides* (boys), *ageneioi* (youths), and *andres* (men).<sup>10</sup> They were held every four years, probably between late April/early May and June.<sup>11</sup> Like the *Sebasta* they were inserted in the Greek festival circuit. However, Roman elements were also in view. The horse races were held in the Circus Maximus, itself a particularly Roman setting very different from the Greek hippodrome. Moreover, the races followed a Roman model,<sup>12</sup> with the charioteers recruited from the factions of the Whites, the Reds, the Greens and the Blues.<sup>13</sup> The most strikingly Roman element were the Latin literary contests, perhaps specifically designed to attract participants from the Western provinces.<sup>14</sup> Contests in Latin oratory – mentioned by Suetonius – do not seem to have survived Domitian's reign, but poetry competitions lasted until the fourth century. An innovation was the inclusion of races for unmarried girls, that may have been inspired by the example of the *Sebasta* of Neapolis, but no names of victors have survived.<sup>15</sup> The prize for all these contests, as with the other Greek contests, was a crown, which in Rome was made of oak leaves. The oak was of course associated with Jupiter, but it would have brought up associations with the traditional *Corona Civica* that was traditionally awarded to benefactors of the Roman people.

Moreover, the festival had a distinct impact on the urban landscape requiring the construction of Greek building types that had not existed in Rome. Central on the Campus Martius, Domitian ordered the construction of a huge roofed odeum that seated between 5000 and 10,000

9 Suet. *Dom.* 4.4: *Certamini praesedit crepidatus purpureaque amictus toga Graecanica, capite gestans coronam auream cum effigie Iouis ac Iunonis Minervaeque, adsidentibus Diali sacerdote et collegio Flauialium pari habitu, nisi quod illorum coronis inerat et ipsius imago.* "He presided over the contests wearing boots and dressed according to Greek fashion in a purple toga, and on his head, he wore a golden crown with an image of Jupiter and Minerva. By his side were seated the priest of Jupiter and the college of the Flavian priests, similarly dressed."

10 Caldelli 1993, 32-34.

11 Caldelli 1993, 57-59.

12 Rieger 1999, 183-188.

13 Rieger 1999, 185-186, with reference to inscriptions listing Capitolia victors also known from the Green and the Blue stables: CIL VI, 10058, 100800.

14 Hardie 2003, 129. See below, for an overview of the origins of the known participants.

15 Suet. *Dom.* 4: *Certabant ... in stadio uero cursu etiam virgines.* "In the stadium ... even unmarried girls competed in the footrace." For the *Sebasta*: SEG 14, 602 (Seia Spes); a race for *parthenoi* at the *Sebasta* of Neapolis: SEG 64, 860. Female athletes in the Isthmia, Nemea and Corinth: *Corinth* VIII, 3, 153, FD 3.1, 534.

spectators for the musical and literary competitions. A stadium – whose contours are still visible in the Piazza Navona – was built for the athletic events.<sup>16</sup> In the fourth century these were still reckoned among the main “perennial adornments of the city” (*haec decora urbis aeterna*).<sup>17</sup> They served a Greek style festival, but stylistically they had more in common with Roman spectacle buildings like the Colosseum than with their counterparts in Greece.<sup>18</sup>

### Greek Contests in Rome

Domitian was not the first Roman emperor to set up Greek-style games, nor would he be the last. Augustus had celebrated his victory over Mark Antony by founding a new city Nikopolis (Victory city) and raising the local Actian games to panhellenic status.<sup>19</sup> In this respect he stood in a long tradition: since the second century BC Greek cities had been organising Greek contests for individual Roman generals, or for the new goddess Thea Rhomē (Roma) whose cult followed closely on the stages of progressing Roman rule.<sup>20</sup> There had been some Greek style games in Italy – mostly organised by victorious Roman generals, but these remained incidental.<sup>21</sup> Augustus was the first to organise Greek style games on a regular basis on Italian soil. In 2 he instituted the Augustan Games (the *Sebasta*) in Neapolis (Naples), as a counterpart to the ‘Romaia Sebasta’ that had been set up for him by the province of Asia in Pergamon.<sup>22</sup> They were to have equal status to the Olympic games, as we learn from an inscription set up at Olympia that records the programme, but they were anchored in a long local tradition, as Neapolis was part of Greek-influenced southern Italy.<sup>23</sup> The games were a great success, and were repeated every four years until the fourth century. Of Augustus’ immediate successors, Nero was the first to set up a Greek style contest in Rome itself, the *Neroneia*, which he founded after his return from a successful (in his own eyes at least) agonistic tour through Greece.<sup>24</sup> No victors are known, however, and the games were abolished after Nero’s death.

The new Flavian dynasty invested heavily in properly Roman types of spectacle and entertainments to boost its popularity, but the adoption of Greek style contests had to

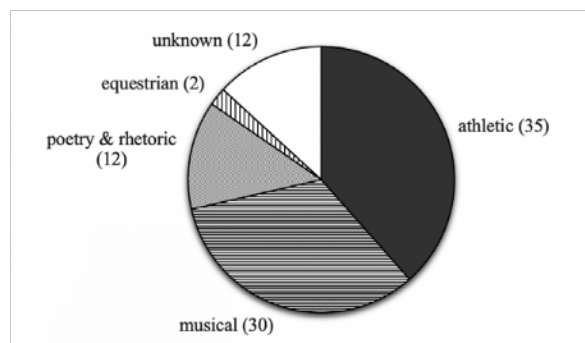


Fig. 2. Recorded victories in the Capitolia (chart by authors).<sup>\*</sup> <sup>\*</sup>Cf. Caldelli 1993, 121-163. This chart is based on the data we have collected for [www.connectedcontests.org](http://www.connectedcontests.org). This project aims to collect prosopographical data on all Greek athletes and performers.

be handled with care.<sup>25</sup> Domitian was careful not to repeat Nero’s mistakes: the festival was not named after himself, he did not participate himself, nor did he force Roman nobles to compete.

We can only surmise why Domitian set up the Capitoline games. Personal tastes may have played a part. Growing up under Nero he shared the contemporary fashion for Greek style performances among the young men of the Roman elite.<sup>26</sup> Such personal interests were also pursued in his villa in the Alban hills where he organised literary contests in honour of Minerva that were not continued after his death.<sup>27</sup> But it is also likely that he sought to emulate Augustus, which is supported by his strong personal involvement in the *Sebasta* of Neapolis. We know now that he served as *agonothete*, competed in chariot races and oratory (with an *encomium* on *Divus Titus*), and was himself the object of *encomiastic* poetry competitions.<sup>28</sup> It has also been suggested that he meant the games as a gesture towards his Greek subjects – Nero’s antics had certainly hit a chord in Greece.<sup>29</sup> Whatever his intentions, the long-lasting effect of the new foundation was to offer entertainment to the Roman people and to link the city of Rome firmly to the Greek festival network that was flourishing in the eastern provinces. In fact, his reorganisation of the festival calendar and the urban landscape would have established Rome as a Greek city, the proper capital of a Greco-Roman Empire.<sup>30</sup>

16 Suet. *Dom.* 5.

17 Amm. Marc 16.10.4. Rieger 1999, 192-194.

18 Heinemann 2014. See also Daniëlle Slootjes in this volume.

19 Zachos, 2008, Pavlogiannis/Albanidis/Dimitriou 2009.

20 Greek Games in honour of Roman generals: Thériault 2012. For the Romaia contests see Van Nijf/Van Dijk 2020.

21 Lee 2014, Mann 2014.

22 Robert/Lianou/König 2010, 123, cf. IGR 4, 454

23 IvO 56. For the *Sebasta* see now Miranda de Martino 2014 with references to earlier literature. Cf. SEG 64, 859-62.

24 Suet., *Nero* 12,3. On Nero’s tour: see Alcock 1994.

25 For Roman attitudes to Greek athletics, see: Mann 2014, Lee 2014.

26 It is possible that he was partly inspired by the *Neroneia*, although a Neronian inspiration is very unlikely in other aspects of his reign, Nauta 2010.

27 Nauta 2002, 329. See on this villa, Aurora Raimondi Cominesi & Claire Stocks and Claudia Valeri in this volume.

28 Miranda De Martino 2014.

29 Hardie 2003, 127.

30 For the expression: Veyne 2005.

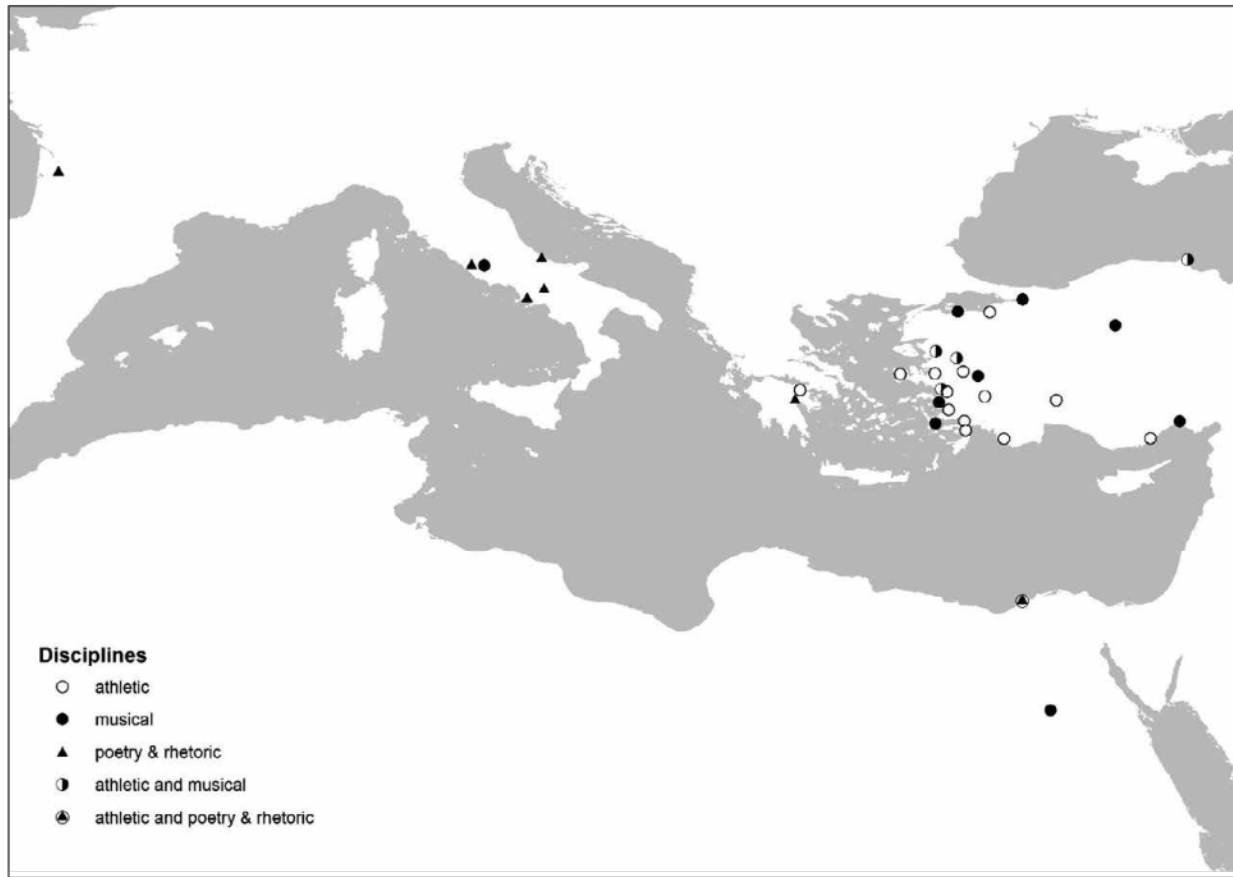


Fig. 3. Map recording the origins of the known participants in the Capitolia.

If Domitian wanted to turn Rome into a centre of empire-wide agonistic activity he certainly succeeded. When in the second century a successful athlete wanted to present the global reach of his athletic career he stated that he had been “successful in contests from the Capitolia in Rome to those in Syria.”<sup>31</sup> He was not the only one: an overview of the known victors shows that they came from all regions of the Roman Empire. Most of these were renowned athletes and musicians from the Greek provinces. The first known victor – at the Capitolia of 86 – was the runner Titus Flavius Metrobios of Iasos in Western Asia Minor, a *periodonikes*; *i.e.* he had been victorious at all the great Greek contests.<sup>32</sup> He may have owed his Roman citizenship to his victory at the Capitolia.<sup>33</sup> Later editions continued to attract the greatest champions: from the second century we learn that M. Aurelius Damostratos Damas from Sardeis,

31 IGR 4,1636.

32 I.Iasos 107, 108. His fatherland honoured him also with an inscription: SEG 48, 1333, cf. I. Iasos 109.

33 Two other victors shared the privilege: T. Flavius Artemidorus and T. Flavius Hermogenes. See [www.connectedcontests.org](http://www.connectedcontests.org).

one of the greatest athletes of the era, and perhaps of all times won twice, in 174 and 178, as did father and son M. Aurelius Demetrios and M. Aurelius Demetrios Asklepiades (probably in the 180’s) from Hermoupolis in Egypt.<sup>34</sup> All were high-ranking members of the Empire-wide athletic association. The participants in the equestrian and literary competitions came predominantly from Italy and the western provinces.

The Capitolia were star-studded events that attracted not only participants, but also sports fans from all over the Empire, such as Q. Iulius Miletos, “who had left his hometown of Tripolis in Lydia to watch the contest that was presided over by the Emperor Severus.”<sup>35</sup> As this was written on his epitaph in Rome, it seems that his trip cost him his life.

Not everybody may have been equally positive about this flourishing of Greek agonistics on Roman soil – and

34 Damas: Sardis 7.1, 79; for a full dossier see: Strasser 2003. Aurelius Demetrios (IGUR II, 239) Asklepiades (IGUR II, 242), with a discussion by Strasser 2004.

35 IGUR IV, 1567, with Strasser 2001.



Fig. 4. The location of Capitolia and Isocapitolia (map authors).

critics arose especially after Domitian's death.<sup>36</sup> In one of his letters, Pliny approvingly quotes the comments of an old curmudgeon, Junius Mauricus, who upon hearing that Greek-style contests had been abolished in Vienne (Gaul) wished that they could also be abolished in Rome itself.<sup>37</sup> Such criticism does not seem to have had an effect on the Capitolia, however, nor on the popularity of Greek athletics in Rome. The Capitolia not only continued, but were actively supported by later emperors, as were other athletic contests. Hadrian rearranged the 4-year Greek festival calendar, and confirmed a fixed position of the Capitolia between the Hadrianeia of Athens and the Sebasta of Neapolis.<sup>38</sup> His main concern appears to

have been the opportunities the festivals offered for the propagation of imperial rule. Antoninus Pius praised the African city of Barca-Ptolemais for sending a delegation to the Capitolia to join in the sacrifices that were held for the Emperor.<sup>39</sup> Marcus Aurelius and his successors used the contest as a public stage to offer Roman citizenship to successful athletes,<sup>40</sup> which shows another way in which Greek cultural events could be used to push a Roman political agenda. We know that Severus organised a successful edition, which was celebrated by his coinage.<sup>41</sup> The Capitolia continued to be celebrated through the third and fourth centuries, and seem to have maintained their relatively high status. An edict of the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian limits the entitlement to freedom from liturgies to athletes who had obtained at least three crowns, among which at

36 For Roman views on Greek athletics: Mammel 2014.

37 Plin. *Ep.* 4.22.

38 SEG 56,1354, 63-65: ὁ δ' ἐν Τάραντι ἀγών μετὰ Ἀδριάνεια ἀγέ-|σ<θ>ω τοῦ Ἰανουαρίου μηνός, ἀπὸ δὲ Καπετωλείων, ὡς μέχρι νῦν ἐπετελέσθη, ἀγομένων ἐν Νεαπόλει ἀγώνων· εἶτα Ἄκτια ἀρχόμενα μὲν τῇ πρό θ' καλ(ανδῶν)| Ὀκτων(βρίων), συντελούμενα δὲ ἐν τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέραις. "The contests in Tarentum must be held after the Hadrianeia in the month January; The contests in Neapolis must be held after the Capitolia, as they have been until now. Then the Actia must start before the Kalends of October, and conclude within 40 days."

39 SEG 28, 1566.

40 They were building on a precedent set by Domitian: Strasser 2004, and note 34 above.

41 RIC 260 = BMCRE 216, 319, Damsky 1990, with Strasser 2001, 131-135.

least one crown in Rome or Old Greece.<sup>42</sup> But the Roman events continued too: the last known victor was a Latin poet: Attius Tiro Delphidius, who was successful in the Capitolia of 338 or 342.<sup>43</sup>

### **Anchoring and the Capitolia**

The Capitolian games were not only themselves anchored in Greek and Roman traditions, but they also provided an anchoring place for innovations elsewhere. Caldelli suggests that their foundation promoted a taste for Greek style agonistics even in the western provinces including Gallia Narbonensis, as most known athletes from that region postdate the institution of the Capitolia.<sup>44</sup> More secure signs of anchoring strategies are found in the eastern provinces, where several cities organised their own versions of the Capitoline games. No Capitolia were founded on proper Greek soil, but we find Capitolia and Isocapitolia (i.e. festivals that claimed the same kind of rewards for their victors) in cities like Aphrodisias<sup>45</sup> and Antiocheia on the Maeander (Caria),<sup>46</sup> Perge (Pamphylia),<sup>47</sup> Olbasa (Pisidia),<sup>48</sup> Heliopolis<sup>49</sup> and Laodicea<sup>50</sup> (Syria) and Oxyrhynchus,<sup>51</sup> Antinoopolis,<sup>52</sup> and Hermoupolis<sup>53</sup> (Egypt), as well as an unknown city in Bithynia (fig. 4).<sup>54</sup> Not all these cities had a long Greek pedigree, but they may have wanted to use the festival culture to underline their claim to a Greek identity, while also signalling their allegiance to Rome. The Capitolia offered them a very Roman way to express their Greek identity and vice versa.

Domitian's Capitolia were a remarkable event. They succeeded where Nero had failed, in staging in the heart of Rome Greek style contests that reached out to an Empire-wide audience. Thus, Rome became a true 'assembly place for all the world'.<sup>55</sup> After Domitian's death and despite the *damnatio memoriae*, they were continued by Trajan and his successors for centuries and they may well have been Domitian's most successful innovation and longest lasting achievement.

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42 C. Just 10.54.1: *coronis non minus tribus certaminis sacri, in quibus uel semel Romae seu antique Graeciae* (no less than three crowns in a sacred contest, among which at least one in Rome or Ancient Greece).

43 Caldelli 1993, 112 and no. 64, Rieger 1999, 201.

44 Caldelli 1997.

45 Roueché/de Chaisemartin 1993, 179-182 nos. 56-57.

46 Nollé 2009, 43-44, n. 231.

47 I. Perge 334, 336.

48 *IGR* 3, 411-4 +1493 with *SEG* 48, 1534.

49 Caldelli 1993, 117, Aliquot 2019.

50 Ziegler 1985, 147-151.

51 P. Harr I, 97, P. Oslo 3, 85 = P. Agon 89, P. Oxy 3135, 3116, 4080.

52 P. Agon 10 = P. Oxy, 3116.

53 SB 28, 16959, I. Side 130.

54 Moretti 1953, 87.

55 Cens. 18.5: *in illo orbis terrarum conciliabulo*.