

Domitian (81-96 AD): The Last of the Flavians

Domitian was never expected to become emperor. While Titus had long been groomed to succeed his father Vespasian and given great responsibilities, Vespasian's younger son, Domitian, was largely overlooked. Titus had gained great experience fighting the Jewish Revolt and governing under his father, while Domitian was left by himself in his early years and given few responsibilities later on since everyone assumed that it would be Titus who succeeded Vespasian. However, Titus died after little more than two years of rule and had no sons, meaning that the empire fell into the hands of the long-ignored Domitian. Unlike his brother's short and happy rule, Domitian's reign would be long and troubled.

Despite the popularity of Vespasian and Titus, Domitian sought to outdo his father and older brother. Domitian modeled himself as the new Caesar Augustus, and tried to emulate that first emperor. He instituted new laws legislating Roman morality, and was notably pious toward the gods. Domitian also ensured the bureaucracy ran smoothly, though sometimes this seemed like a policy of meddling micromanagement. Though Domitian did not benefit from the training that Titus had, he was mostly successful and continued many of his brother's policies. Whereas most emperors debased the currency, Domitian added to its value by increasing its silver content, and used strict but efficient taxation to keep the state well financed. Domitian also continued the building projects of Vespasian and Titus, largely rebuilding the city of Rome, which had been damaged by the civil war of his father and a great fire in the reign of his brother. He built or repaired over fifty public buildings, including an arch celebrating his brother's conquest of Jerusalem.

Domitian trusted important government posts to talented men of the equestrian order instead of well-born members of the Senate. In addition, while Domitian's father and brother had shown some respect to the Senate and presented the pretense that it still had power, Domitian made it clear that he was in charge and the Senate would do as he commanded. Whereas Titus had stopped treason trials against senators and stopped paying informers to spy on his political opponents, Domitian brought back these activities. He had a number of senators executed, sometimes on trumped-up charges because they were rich and he wanted to confiscate their money for the treasury. This led to a strong hatred of Domitian among the senatorial class. Since it was the members of the senatorial class who wrote the histories of Rome, the image that comes down to us from antiquity is that while Vespasian and Titus were good emperors, Domitian was cruel, depraved, and possibly insane.

In reality, Domitian was a ruthless but effective ruler. It is hard to know what he was really like since the historical sources were so hostile to him, but his reign seems to have been generally prosperous. The most truthful complaint against Domitian seems to have been that he was vainglorious and dedicated to creating a cult of personality around himself. He encouraged emperor worship (one historian from the senate claims that he referred to himself as "Lord and God"), and built a vast palace for himself on the Palatine Hill. He also celebrated several triumphs, taking credit for the accomplishments of his generals and soldiers. His armies did win many victories, but there was a notable exception. The Dacians, a people living north of the Danube, crossed the river and raided Roman territory. They destroyed a Roman legion, and though Domitian marched against them, he had to let them



escape in order to deal with problems elsewhere in the empire. This was seen as a blow to Roman prestige, and it would fall on Domitian's successors to finally defeat the Dacians.

As he grew older it seems Domitian's bad qualities grew more extreme, as he became paranoid and increased executions. After 15 years of rule, Domitian was assassinated by members of his palace staff, who probably acted out of fear that he would soon put them to death. Domitian had no sons, and so the Flavian dynasty ended with him. When the senate learned of his death, they were overjoyed, and passed a *damnatio memoriae* on him, meaning that all his images and monuments were destroyed and his name was removed from every inscription. It was a harsh punishment from a senate angered by Domitian's treatment of them. To avoid a civil war, the senate immediately nominated a new emperor; they picked Nerva, a member of the senate and a safe choice since he was a little-known but well-liked older man. The Flavian Dynasty was over, and its last member, Domitian, would be remembered, whether deserving or not, as its worst emperor, a cruel and insane tyrant.

Lesson Summary:

- Domitian was never expected to become emperor, and only became so because his brother Titus died young and without an heir.
- Though Domitian did not benefit from the training that Titus had, he proved a ruthless but effective leader intent on emulating Augustus.
- Domitian weakened the power of the senate and had several senators executed, which resulted in the senate preserving a memory of Domitian as a tyrant and bad emperor.
- Domitian was killed and had no children, ending the Flavian.

