

Domitian: An Innovative Emperor?

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God on Earth: Emperor Domitian, National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden, Netherlands, 17 December 2021–22 May 2022, curated by Aurora Raimondi Cominesi, Claire Stocks, Nathalie de Haan, and Eric M. Moormann.

God on Earth: Emperor Domitian. The Re-invention of Rome at the End of the 1st Century AD, edited by Aurora Raimondi Cominesi, Nathalie de Haan, Eric M. Moormann, and Claire Stocks (Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities 24). Leiden: Sidestone Press. Pp. 223. €35. ISBN 978-90-8890-954-2 (paper).

God op Aarde: Keizer Domitianus, by Nathalie de Haan and Eric M. Moormann. Leiden: Sidestone Press. Pp. 144. €19.95. ISBN 978-94-6426-072-4 (paper).

Wreed en Pervers: De Romeinse bronnen over Keizer Domitianus, translated and annotated by Olivier Hekster and Vincent Hunink. Leiden: Sidestone Press. Pp. 58. €9.95. ISBN 978-94-626-065-6 (paper).

The Flavian emperor Domitian (r. 81–96 CE) wanted to be addressed as “dominus et deus” after he became emperor, if we believe Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Their accounts set the tone for the long-standing perception of Domitian as an arrogant and “bad” ruler. However, as revisionist histories are in vogue, one might ask whether this is an accurate assessment of Domitian and whether the architectural remnants and artifacts of his era tell a different story. The exhibition at the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden, *God on Earth: Emperor Domitian*, presented an overview of Domitian’s life in objects to demonstrate the significance and impact of his reign.¹ The exhibition reflects the larger trend of museum displays that center on a single Roman emperor or dynasty, such as those on Vespasian (2009, Rome, Colosseum, Curia [Forum Romanum], Cryptoporticus of Nero [Palatine Hill]), Nero (2011, Rome, Forum Romanum, Colosseum and Palatine Hill; 2021, London, British Museum), and Augustus (2014, Rome, Scuderie del Quirinale museum).² The 2021 exhibition on Nero is particularly noteworthy, as it sought to rehabilitate Nero, steering away from the traditional “bad emperor” narrative that has long been attached to him.³ The Leiden exhibition similarly challenged the viewer to rethink the assessment of Domitian in ancient sources and focused on how he legitimized and shaped his rule, which,

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¹ All of the objects mentioned in this review are in accord with the AIA Policy on the Presentation and Publication of Undocumented Antiquities. Supplementary figures are available online at <https://doi.org/10.1086/723402>.

² Raimondi Cominesi et al. 2021, 13–14.

³ Oppen 2021.

despite being branded as one of the “bad” emperors, lasted for an impressive 15 years. While a wall panel text at the show’s conclusion explicitly stated that the exhibition did not aim to recast Domitian as a “good” ruler but rather invited the viewer to consider all aspects of his image and reputation, at the same time the exhibition seemed to rehabilitate Domitian, presenting him as an important emperor in his own right and in a more positive light.

Central to the exhibition was the concept of “anchoring innovation” that was used to understand how Domitian solidified his rule, connecting the new to the old, innovation to tradition.⁴ This idea is the focal point of a major research project, *Anchoring Innovation* (2017–2027), funded by the Dutch Research Council, in which a number of classical philologists, ancient historians, and archaeologists of Dutch universities collaborate.⁵ The project investigates moments of political transition and regime change in the classical world, moments that seem particularly conducive to the introduction of new ideas.⁶ These innovations are especially well received if they can be cognitively linked to familiar ideas in an already established world view. Rather than associating themselves with Nero (the last Julio-Claudian emperor), the Flavian dynasty forged a connection to Augustus, the most popular ruler before him. Although the Flavian emperors were neither the first, nor the last, to make use of this strategy, the exhibition aimed to demonstrate that Domitian’s actions are a good example of this phenomenon of “anchoring innovation.” However, the exhibition was unconvincing in making clear why the emperor Domitian is a good or unique case study for examining this notion of anchoring innovation, as the idea can be easily applied to other Roman rulers.

The exhibition was coproduced with the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali (Rome) and the Museo dei Fori Imperiali, Mercati di Traiano. Later in 2022, the exhibition traveled to the Musei Capitolini, Villa Caffarelli in Rome. There, it featured fewer objects and focused on Domitian’s building activities in Rome. A separate catalogue will be published. For the Leiden exhibition, an impressive 275 objects were loaned from more than 20 museums. Nearly all dating

to the second half of the first century CE, these artifacts were united in this exhibition for the first time, visually recreating the Flavian (especially Domitianic) world in all its facets and from all corners of the empire. Because it is impossible to cover every aspect of the exhibition, I discuss certain displays that elucidate the themes, especially that of anchoring innovation, and the most important objects on display.

GOD ON EARTH: EMPEROR DOMITIAN

The overall atmosphere created in the nine exhibition rooms was rather dark and suspenseful. After entering the introductory gallery (Room 0), the exhibition started in Room 1, where visitors almost immediately encountered a portrait bust and dagger evoking Domitian’s violent death, making for an eerie, striking start (fig. 1).⁷ The Roman dagger, found in the Netherlands,⁸ was added to the display of Domitian’s bust to create this dramatic effect. In subsequent rooms, many walls were covered with colorful reconstructions of Rome’s cityscape, creating a wonderful backdrop for the display of many of the objects. Other walls had black and white graphics on Roman themes, such as a charioteer, or details of Roman frescoes or objects, thereby linking the focus and objects of each room.

ROOM 2: CHILDHOOD

The exhibition then shifted settings to the Flavian family home in Pomegranate Street on Rome’s Quirinal Hill. By combining floor mosaics, sculptures, and smaller objects, the domestic setting of Domitian’s childhood was recreated. A computer animation of the *domus*, based on Pompeian models, completed this picture.⁹ Objects related to childhood, including a *bullā*, a wooden toy sword, and knucklebones, were displayed. The inclusion of such artifacts humanized Domitian. A rare papyrus from Philadelphia, dated to 11 July 72 CE, contained a birth announcement, showing how such news was disseminated in Domitian’s time.¹⁰ Portraits of other Flavian family members and coins of the protagonists of the Year of the Four

⁴ On the concept of anchoring innovation applied in the exhibition, see Lardinois and Sluiter 2021, 9–10.

⁵ *Anchoring Innovation*, <https://anchoringinnovation.nl/>.

⁶ Raimondi Cominesi et al. 2021.

⁷ Naples, National Archaeological Museum 6061.

⁸ Leiden, National Museum of Archaeology E 1931/2.21.

⁹ The archaeological interpretation and reconstruction were created by Learning Sites, Inc., Donald H. Sanders, in collaboration with Diane Favro and Matthew Nicholls.

¹⁰ Leiden, Leiden Papyrological Institute P. Warren 2.



FIG. 1. Bust of Emperor Domitian, with Roman dagger added, in the opening gallery of *God on Earth: Emperor Domitian* (© Mike Bink).

Emperors alluded to the political and military turmoil in the late 60s, during Domitian's childhood. Artifacts from Cremona, near the site of a battle between Vitellius and Vespasian in 69 CE, were included to underscore the political instability of the era.

ROOM 3: GROWING UP IN HIS BROTHER'S SHADOW

The following room chronicled Domitian's upbringing and problematic relationship with his older brother, Titus. Quotations from ancient sources on the walls connected the displayed objects to stories about his schooling and upbringing. The brothers were engaged in an intense rivalry, because Vespasian favored Titus, especially after his victory in Judaea, whereas Domitian had to make do with several less important magistracies. A first-century CE marble sculpture depicting two boys fighting over a game of knucklebones

embodied the brothers' competitive and combative relationship (online fig. 1).¹¹ The sculpture, by seemingly humanizing Titus and Domitian, allowed the viewer to empathize with them. But the eye-catcher of this room was the larger than life marble cow, a Flavian copy of a fifth-century BCE bronze original by the famous sculptor Myron.¹² It was displayed in the temple of Apollo that Augustus built on the Palatine Hill, and Augustus had the cow depicted on some of his coins. Later Vespasian moved it to the Templum Pacis. Vespasian, imitating Augustus—or, as the organizers see it, anchoring his reign to that of Augustus—depicted that same cow on his own coinage. Examples of both coins (*aurei*) are shown at the exhibition. Yet the placement of the cow in this room, where the topic was Titus and Domitian's relationship, seemed slightly out of place.

ROOM 4: EMPEROR

Room 4 focused on Domitian as emperor, casting him as an innovative builder who transformed Rome, and examining his role in the northwest provinces. One of the well-known reliefs from the Tomb of the Haterii, which depicts monumental Roman architecture, conveyed the scope of Domitian's endeavors (online fig. 2).¹³ In 80 CE, a major fire destroyed large parts of Rome, especially the Campus Martius, and Domitian redeveloped significant parts of the city. He built a stadium for Greek athletics, which today lies under the Piazza Navona in the Campus Martius. Domitian's love for public entertainment endeared him to the masses. In a nice allusion to the reception of Flavian projects, the exhibit includes paintings and objects, such as decorative boxes from the 19th century, that depict the Colosseum and Flavian buildings in the Forum Romanum.¹⁴ These convey Domitian's important role in reshaping Rome's physical form.

This room also included a number of objects related to Domitian's military activities at the northern edges of the empire. During his reign, the provinces of Germania Inferior and Superior were established,

¹¹ London, British Museum 1805.0703.7. Online figures available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/723402>.

¹² Rome, Capitoline Museums, Palazzo dei Conservatori S921.

¹³ Vatican City, Vatican Museums, Museo Gregoriano Profano ex Lateranense 9997.

¹⁴ E.g., a decorated metal box, Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities Z 2019/21.1.

and the northern border was fixed at the Rhine River. Several coins depicting Domitian as the conqueror of Germania were displayed alongside Augustan coins. Both the Augustan and Domitianic coins bear the caption *Germania capta* and deploy similar iconography with a trophy and captive figures. By displaying these coins together, the curators presented this as another example of anchoring innovation, where Domitian portrayed himself as a good emperor in emulation of Augustus. The room also contained objects from Roman Britain. In the 70s CE, the Romans moved into northern England and Scotland, and a number of forts were built along the so-called Stanegate Road. The best known of them, Vindolanda (built in 85 CE), is famous for the excellent preservation of many wooden and leather objects from daily life, due to the anaerobic conditions of the soil. Several of these evocative finds, including some of the famous leather shoes and writing tablets, were displayed, making Roman daily life tangible for the visitor. While these objects brought the period further to life, the link with Domitian was somewhat lost.

A section of Room 4 was dedicated to Flavian women. The marble female portraits that feature the intricate and famous female hairstyle distinctive to the Flavians were joined by larger-than-life-size photographs of others projected on the wall. Together they made for an impressive display (fig. 2). Here, two women important in Domitian's life, his wife Domitia Longina and his niece Julia Titi, took center stage. In a rather stereotypical and traditional display, the room also included Flavian female finery, such as jewelry and mirrors. In a nod to modernity, the imperial women were presented as role models and fashion "influencers" for their contemporaries.¹⁵

ROOMS 5 AND 6: WRITING FOR THE EMPEROR AND THE LAVISH LIFESTYLE OF AN EMPEROR

The next two rooms presented various aspects of Domitian's reign. In Room 5, a short movie narrated by Mustafa Marghadi, a well-known Dutch journalist in Rome, took the viewer through Rome on a tour of Flavian monuments, guided by descriptions from the Roman poets Statius and Martial. It gave a good sense of the enduring prominence of these monuments in the modern city.

Room 6 turned to Domitian's construction of palatial residences: the Domus Flavia on the Palatine Hill in Rome and a villa near modern Castel Gandolfo where he could enjoy his luxurious lifestyle more privately. His taste for luxury was illustrated by a number of objects, such as an elaborate silver dining set, a 19th-century copy of the so-called Hildesheim treasure (the original is in the Altes Museum in Berlin).¹⁶ The display of these objects in front of walls decorated with reconstructed imperial architecture brought to life the emperor's taste for extravagance (online fig. 3).

ROOMS 7 AND 8: GOD ON EARTH AND DEAD AND FORGOTTEN?

The exhibition took on a more macabre tone in Room 7. Here objects such as tombstones and black ceramics narrated the story of Domitian's infamous black dinner (Dio Cass. 67.9; fig. 3). One night, the emperor invited several senators and equestrians to dinner and terrified them when he instructed them to sit down in a completely black room next to tombstones with their respective names. After that awkward supper, the guests returned home, convinced of their imminent death. Their fear only increased when the tombstones were later delivered to their houses. Although Domitian had enjoyed scaring his guests, he did not kill them. This trick conveyed the emperor's wicked sense of humor and highlighted Domitian's problematic relationship with the Senate (represented in the exhibit by a bronze statue of two senators in toga) whom he sought to intimidate.¹⁷ Here the question was raised whether this was an innovative way to govern or rather the strategy of a malicious—and possibly deranged—emperor.

In this room, the theme of anchoring innovation re-emerged in the realm of religion. Roman rulers often employed religion to legitimize their position and to make or break connections with earlier traditions. Domitian's patron goddess was Minerva, but he took a strong interest in new cults, especially from Egypt,

¹⁶ Replicas in the Leiden museum, based on originals in the Altes Museum in Berlin: drinking bowls RMO HmZ2 (based on Berlin Misc. 3779, 9), HmZ3 (based on Berlin Misc. 3779, 5 or 6), HmZ4 (based on Berlin Misc. 3779, 12), HmZ5 (Berlin Misc. 3779, 10); serving bowls RMO HmZ10 (Berlin Misc. 3779, 37) and HmZ20 (Berlin Misc. 3779, 48–50); salt shaker RMO HmZ16 (Berlin Misc. 3779, 19); salver for 12 eggs RMO HmZ15 (Berlin Misc. 3779, 68); jug RMO HmZ1.

¹⁷ Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Villa Museum 85.AB.109.

¹⁵ On this idea, see Fejfer 2008.



FIG. 2. View of Room 4, Flavian women (© Mike Bink).

which could be seen as innovative. On the Campus Martius, he built a temple to Isis and Osiris. A fresco from the temple of Isis at Pompeii depicting Io arriving in Egypt¹⁸ and the bust of Domitian as a pharaoh from the sanctuary of Isis in Benevento (online fig. 4),¹⁹ commissioned by the emperor in 88–89 CE, highlighted his embrace of foreign cults.

Later in his life, Domitian became increasingly isolated from Rome's elite. According to Suetonius (*Dom.* 13) and Cassius Dio (67.4), the excessively proud emperor now wished to be addressed as “dominus et deus” (master and god). There is some evidence, in the form of a surviving statue of his *genius*,²⁰ that Domitian's *genius* was worshiped, but no official inscriptions or coins confirm the stories by Suetonius and Cassius Dio. These three aspects tied together well and painted a telling picture of how the ancient sources described this final phase of Domitian's life.

On 18 September 96 CE, Domitian was murdered in a palace coup, as is detailed in Room 8. Despite his popularity with the army and the people of Rome,

the Senate disliked him and ordered a *damnatio memoriae*.²¹ In this last room of the exhibition, various examples of this destructive practice were shown, including an adjusted inscription from Egypt²² and a reworked portrait of Domitian transformed into his successor Nerva.²³ Perhaps most interesting was a bronze *modius*, a standard measure for grain found in the Roman fort at Carvoran in Britain,²⁴ from which Domitian's name in the inscription had been removed. The object, however, continued to be used for centuries, long after the memories of this emperor had faded.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND PUBLICATIONS

Digital technologies were skillfully used throughout the exhibition; clips of various scholars participating in the Anchoring Innovation project explained how Domitian connected innovative elements in his reign with pre-existing traditions. These recordings were a valuable addition to the displays. In Room 5, there was an informative video about Domitian's Rome through

¹⁸ Naples, National Archaeological Museum 8920.

¹⁹ Benevento, Museum of Sannio 1903.

²⁰ Rome, Capitoline Museum S1130.

²¹ Vout 2021.

²² London, British Museum 1894.1105.1.

²³ Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Villa Museum 83.AA.43.

²⁴ Chollerford, Hexham, Chesters Roman Fort and Museum – Hadrian's Wall CH1823.



FIG. 3. View of Room 8, objects from Domitian's black dinner (© Mike Bink).

the lens of his contemporaries, and a number of animated computer reconstructions of Flavian architecture projected on the walls complemented the objects. A computer game, developed for younger visitors (14 and up),²⁵ was downloadable from the app store and could be played at home or in the exhibition itself. In the game, a player chose an avatar to travel through Rome on the last day of Domitian's life to solve the murder mystery: who killed the emperor? It engaged younger visitors with the history and archaeology of Flavian Rome in a playful way.

A number of publications accompanied the exhibition, aimed at both scholars and the general public. A collection of short academic papers entitled *God on Earth* discusses several instances of material culture in Rome and the empire during Domitian's reign; it seems to primarily serve an academic audience. An exhibition catalogue (in Dutch, *God op Aarde*) was produced for the general public and includes images of many of the objects and reconstructions on display in the exhibition. A booklet (also in Dutch, *Wreed en Pervers*) published translations of relevant fragments of

Suetonius and Cassius Dio related to Domitian. The translations are extensively annotated and critically juxtaposed, and some of the fragments were translated into Dutch for the first time.

CONCLUSIONS

Translating a major academic research project into an exhibition for a wider audience is a worthwhile endeavor, but the challenges of such an undertaking are considerable. The selection and arrangement of the objects in impressive displays conveyed the importance and richness of the Flavian architecture, art, and material culture. Although the life and rule of Domitian can justifiably be assessed by the concept of anchoring innovation, this assessment was made in only a few of the many rooms. In addition, one was left wondering why this particular emperor (rather than other rulers) was deemed fit for this assessment. For example, Roman emperors before and after the Flavians looked to Augustus as a model, and new cults were regularly integrated into the Roman world. While the exhibition claimed that rehabilitation of Domitian was not the aim of the exhibition, the presentation of this impressive collection of artifacts largely enhances Domitian's reputation. However, the inclusion of the black dinner

²⁵ Developed by Entertainment Game Apps, Ltd.

(even as humor) undercuts a total rehabilitation. The great achievement of the exhibition lay in the quality and scope of the objects on display; the Flavian era emerged as equally artistically rich as that of the Julio-Claudians and the subsequent adoptive emperors. The immense wealth and grandeur of the Flavians emperors, as well as the beautiful details of Roman daily life, stay with the viewer.

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