

## Cassius Dio and the Principate

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# Between Civilitas and Tyranny: Cassius Dio's Biographical Narrative of the Flavian Dynasty

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**Abstract** In Cassius Dio's account of imperial Rome, the Flavian Dynasty represents all the strengths and weaknesses of monarchical rule. The strength is represented with Vespasian, his display of modesty and understanding of the need to cooperate and share power with the senatorial elite. The weakness is described through the nepotism, betrayal, and uncontrolled ambition for glory and prestige that helped Domitian to power and forced the return of tyrannical rule upon the Romans. In this chapter, I shall discuss the way in which the Flavian narrative serves as a microcosm in the *Roman History* to demonstrate the reason for which dynastic succession was incapable of providing the stability needed for monarchical rule to reach its full constitutional and political potential.

**Keywords** Cassius Dio. The Flavian dynasty. Dynastic succession. Principate. Vespasian. Titus. Domitian.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Dio's Books on Flavian Rome. – 3 The Ideal Monarchy. – 4 Vespasian the New Augustus. – 5 Titus: Between *Civilitas* and Tyranny. – 6 Domitian: Tyranny Returns. – 7 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

As Vespasian rode into Rome in the fall of 69 to receive the Senate's approval as the next *princeps*, he, or rather his officers, had not only brought a year of political chaos, unrest, and civil war to conclusion; his accession to the throne with his two grown sons Titus and Domitian also replaced the Julio-Claudians with his own dynasty.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the civil war, Rome was soon filled with hope of a new beginning; and Vespasian – an experienced member of the Senate and a proven commander – soon took a number of steps to present himself as a more modest and respectful 'first among equals' than his predecessors who acknowledged the wisdom of the Senate and held the well-being of the commonwealth close at heart.<sup>2</sup> The contemporary historiographical sources that have come down to us present the founder of the Flavian dynasty as a self-restrained man who lived a humble life, but also as one who divided the Romans. Suetonius describes Vespasian's modest background and his tolerant and merciful nature; Tacitus underlines that even if there were reasons to criticise the fiscal policies of the new emperor or his choice of associates, Vespasian was nevertheless the only *princeps* to have improved after his accession, and his victory in the civil war was the best outcome for Rome.<sup>3</sup>

As a man from a modest Italian background who worked his way up the Roman *cursus honorum*, Vespasian did not follow his accession with wide-ranging constitutional changes similar to those ushered in by the wars between Pompey and Caesar or the wars that followed the latter's murder, even if measures were taken in the *lex de impero Vespasiani* to formalise his powers.<sup>4</sup> Upon coming into power, Vespasian signalled a break from the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the depraved, luxurious, and wasteful form of despotic culture they represented, where young men such as Gaius and Nero – unprepared for and largely indifferent to the task ahead of them – ruled through the terror of unpredictability, or when older men such as Tiberius and Claudius developed an uneasy relationship with the senators, whom they began to prosecute for treason at a later point in their reigns.

In his Imperial narrative, Cassius Dio describes the accession of Vespasian as an intermezzo in an otherwise steep political decline starting with the death of Augustus and as a short step in the right di-

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the life of and career of Vespasian see Griffin 2000, 1-11; Mellor 2003, 69-74.

<sup>2</sup> Mellor 2003, 80-4.

<sup>3</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 1.1, 12; Tac. *Hist.* 2.84, 1.50, 2.97. See also Griffin 2000, 3-4; Mellor 2003, 80. Reitz 2010, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mellor 2003, 80-1. Mantovani 2009, 125-7.

rection that would show later emperors a better path forward. In that sense, Dio's narrative of Vespasian is both a return to what he saw as values introduced in the age of Augustus and a tale of an enlightened form of civilised monarchy brought to Rome by Vespasian.<sup>5</sup> Judging from what remains of Dio's coverage of the Flavian dynasty, the reign of the three Flavians proved to be a rather mixed experience. With the death of Titus – who started out on a positive note – Domitian acceded to the throne in 81 and initiated what Dio describes as fifteen years of tyrannical rule. Once again the Romans were exposed to the arbitrary will of a single ruler, which in their view equalled tyrannical rule, and the reign of an envious and immodest young monarch who, in order to compensate for his lack of experience and insecurity, humiliated and marginalized the senators into passive spectators.<sup>6</sup> Rome had once again come under the sway of an intolerable despot. The Senate was no longer consulted with the intention of hearing their honest opinion, and no longer in a position in which they were free to offer their best advice. Instead, they were humiliated publicly and prosecuted in disputable *maiestas* trials. But with the death of Domitian and the succession of Nerva, an aged senator with considerable political experience, the monarchical form of rule finally reached its best years: the ill and highly exposed *princeps* went outside his family to adopt Trajan as his heir and successor and lay the ground for Rome's golden age.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Dio's Books on Flavian Rome

To use the words of Charles Murison, the books on the Flavian reign hardly exist; they are merely a narrative now assembled from Byzantine epitomes, excerpts, and scattered fragments.<sup>8</sup> Even if we see the outline of a historical account that goes beyond the year 70, where Tacitus' *Histories* breaks off and Josephus finishes his Jewish War – which is valuable in itself – it is not the traces of Dio's *historical narrative* as such that are the most interesting consideration. More rewarding from an analytical point of view are the historian's asides on the nature of monarchy and how to organise it in its ideal form, of which we can still see glimpses in the epitomes written in 11th–12th-century Byzantium by Xiphilinus and Zonaras. Yet it is just as difficult to recover Dio's theorization of the ideal monar-

<sup>5</sup> Cass. Dio 65.10.5; Madsen 2016, 149–50.

<sup>6</sup> Cass. Dio 66.26; on the terrified passivity of the Senate see also Tac. *Agr.* 43–46; Suet. *Dom.* 10; Pliny *Pan.* 48, 66. See also Woodman 2014, 304–8, 308–9; Madsen 2014, 26–7.

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of Rome's supposed golden age see Noe in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Murison 1999, 1–3.

chy from the evidence of the epitomes as it is to use them to reconstruct the historical chronology; the same methodological problems apply in both cases. The reconstruction of Dio's approach to monarchical rule under the Flavians relies on the unsettling premise that the epitomes are reasonably faithful to Dio's text or to the points the historian sets out in the original. Just as Dio's historical narrative is complicated by the considerable later abridgements of the original text – for example, Xiphilinus' deletion of phrases or entire episodes, and Zonaras' tendency to paraphrase – so too is the attempt to identify Dio's thought on monarchical rule under the Flavians challenged by Xiphilinus' criteria for selection or deletion. As pointed out by Murison, Xiphilinus shortened Dio's original text by cutting out sentences and passages that he found irrelevant for his readers and his own interests, but he left Dio's own words to stand for themselves.<sup>9</sup> This may well be true in most cases, but as demonstrated by Christopher Mallan, there are sufficient examples to demonstrate that Xiphilinus adapted the historian's (original) reasoning to align more fully with his own (new) historical analysis.<sup>10</sup> Some of these examples are directly relevant in the attempt to reconstruct Dio's thought on ideal rule. In Xiphilinus' epitome of Dio's Republican books, the Byzantine scholar either cut out the speeches altogether, mentioned them only briefly (as in the case of the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue, a centrepiece of the historian's political and constitutional framework), or offered an abbreviated version of them. That Xiphilinus could remove or paraphrase so important a dialogue poses a methodological problem for the reconstruction of Dio's political philosophy: to rely on the epitome alone is insufficient, since it is in the speeches that Dio conveys his own opinion on political and constitutional matters.<sup>11</sup>

Another problem pointed out by Mallan is the way in which Xiphilinus transforms the *Roman History* to give the reader what was in his view a better explanation of Caesar's death. Whereas Dio understands the political crises in the Late Republic and the murder of Caesar as the result of a structural crisis – as laid out in the opening of book 44, where monarchical rule is offered as the only solution to the deep lack of modesty among Rome's political actors (44.1-3) – Xiphi-

<sup>9</sup> Murison 1999, 2-3; Berbessou-Broustet 2016, 82-3.

<sup>10</sup> See Mallan 2013, 611-12 and 617-18 for discussion of the wide scale of Xiphilinus' deletion of Dio's original from his epitome, including perhaps up to three-quarters of Dio's Imperial narrative and even more in the Republican books.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the debate between Gabinius, Catulus, and Pompey see Coudry 2016; Burden-Strevens 2016, 193-5; Burden-Strevens, 2020, 14-21. For a reading of Dio's speeches as literary rather than historical debates see Fomin 2016, 237. On how the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue offers the reader an insight to Dio's own political views see also Adler 2012, 483. Burden-Strevens 2021; Pistellato forthcoming b.

linus is more interested in the importance of human character. Compared to the opening of Dio's book 44, Xiphilinus' focus on the importance of human character provides a considerably different text. The epitome struck out the entire constitutional discussion, a key passage for the understanding of Dio's political thought; it introduced instead a passage dismissing Dio's analysis, which had linked Caesar's assassination to the dysfunction of the political system and the disharmony emerging from ambition and greed for glory. Instead, the Byzantine scholar offers Plutarch's reading that Caesar was murdered because of Brutus's natural urge for freedom.<sup>12</sup>

We perceive, then, that Xiphilinus frequently modified the original text of Dio in his *Epitome*. However, the narrative Xiphilinus provides of the reign of the Flavians nevertheless appears to retain both the wording of Dio's original as well as the historian's original assessment of the Flavians and their rule. It is precisely here, in Xiphilinus' focus on the character of the actors, that we may deduce how our historian described and assessed the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian respectively: their conduct as emperors and their relationship with members of Rome's political elite.

### 3 The Ideal Monarchy

Dio's account of the Flavians is especially interesting in that it offers a case study of the difference between legitimate monarchical rule on the one hand, and the despotic suppression of free citizens by a tyrant on the other. As we shall see in the following, the historian uses the Flavian dynasty to demonstrate the challenges monarchical rule in the form of the Roman Principate faced as it progressed, and particularly when it depended on dynastic succession. In Dio's description of the Flavian dynasty we can detect a circular life span: a beginning, a period of growth, and then a decline that echoes the cycle of other forms of constitution, already familiar in Greek political thought. By showing how Vespasian's promising accession and constructive cooperation with the Senate was replaced by what he describes as the tyrannical reign of Domitian, Dio offers a microcosm within his Imperial narrative which, judging again from what little remains of the original text, allows the historian to demonstrate the inherent fallibility of dynastic succession and the threat it posed to legitimate sole rule.

Dio's overall approach to Roman politics is negative. Rooted in Thucydides' *Realpolitik* and his focus on human arrogance, Dio's account offers a gloomy narrative of man's predisposition to choose

<sup>12</sup> Mallan 2013, 624-5. Berbessou-Broustet 2016, 89-90.

himself and his associates over the good of the commonwealth.<sup>13</sup> To handle this notorious lack of self-restraint and limit the competition for power and prestige, communities (in the historian's view) would have to be organised as monarchies, where one man held the power to enact new laws and to choose the magistrates and commanders he believed most fit for their administrative and military tasks. In Dio's eyes, even a rather ordinary sole ruler was therefore to be preferred over many men of the same quality simply because sole rule, where the monarch selected magistrates and commanders, would limit the competition that in turn would lead to political violence and in the end to civil war (44.2.1-2.) But what also clearly emerges from Dio's Imperial narrative is that to attain the ideal monarchical rule, the Romans would have to strive to prevent it from declining into tyranny, the perversion of legitimate monarchical rule or kingship.<sup>14</sup> Once again the danger lay in the lack of moderation (τὸ σῶφρον), which would come into play if the monarch failed to uphold the balance between being first and respecting his former peers, or if members of the political establishment lost interest in politics now that the competition for power and prestige was no longer free.

Dio elaborated his belief in the ideal form of monarchical rule in book 52 of his *Roman History*, staged as a dialogue between Agrippa and Maecenas on whether Augustus was to choose a republican form of government or monarchical rule as part of his settlement.<sup>15</sup> If we accept the consensus among scholars that what Maecenas and Agrippa offer are reflections of Dio's constitutional thinking, he therefore argues in favour of a form of monarchical rule, where the monarch should be handed what was essentially undisputed powers. He would be the one responsible for enacting new laws. He should introduce the laws in consultation with the best men, the senators, without any interference from the people, but the responsibility was his alone. It would be his responsibility to select senior magistrates and commanders – again without any meddling on the part of the Senate or the candidates themselves, as that would only encourage the same unfruitful competition that previously stood in the way of mod-

<sup>13</sup> See Thucydides on greed (3.81) and on envy (3.84). On Dio's inspiration from Thucydides see Millar 1964, 6; Rich 1990, 11; Rees 2011, 79-80.

<sup>14</sup> See Polyb. 6.4 for the oft-cited view that the lifespan of any given constitutional form may be seen as circular, with a beginning, a period of growth, and a decline; on the pervasion of constitutional forms see also Arist. *Pol.* 3.7.

<sup>15</sup> For studies on Dio's Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue, see Hammond 1932, 101-2 for a reading of the dialogue as a reflection of Dio's view of the evolution of the Principate; see also Aalders 1986, 296-9; Reinhold 1988, 165, 170; Fomin 2016, 217-20; Adler 2012, 512; Burden-Strevens 2021. For the suggestion that Dio was not as in favour of monarchy as is generally suggested, see Manuwald 1979, 8-26.

esty and harmony.<sup>16</sup> These absolute powers were to be balanced by the monarch's show of respect both for the Senate but also for some of Rome's other institutions, particularly the courts, and a profound sense of modesty in the display of power and status.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the competent monarch should avoid divine honours, which Dio describes as an empty political gesture (52.35.5). To avoid conflicts of interest and to ensure free trials, it was important that the monarch hand any cases of treason over to a court of senators so that he did not convict any of his own alleged enemies (52.32.1-2).<sup>18</sup>

In his coverage of the reign of Augustus, Dio depicts an emperor who overall follows Maecenas's advice. Augustus determination to keep the senators involved in the administration of public affairs is underlined by a series of initiatives that were to encourage or force the senators, who were gradually losing interest in the decision-making process, to reassume political responsibility as Imperial advisors. To increase the attendance at Senate meetings, Augustus is said to have announced dates of meetings well in advance on days where no other business took place that would require the attention of the senators. Fines for not attending were put in place, a quorum of how many senators had to attend to meetings was introduced in order for the decisions to stand, and the opportunity to preview new laws before the meetings was made available so that members could prepare themselves for the discussion and offer their most qualified advice (54.18.3; 55.3.1-6; 55.4.1-2).<sup>19</sup> It is here, in the inclusion of the Senate as an advisory board, that Dio sees the difference between legitimate monarchical rule and tyranny. The rule of the monarch had to be absolute; Dio does not suggest any form of check and balance between the emperor and the Senate in the Agrippa-Maecenas dialogue, nor in his coverage of Augustus' reign. What Dio suggests as his ideal is not a mixed constitution but rather absolute monarchy, where legitimacy lay in the acceptance of the need for one-man rule and a quite undefinable show of modesty on the part of emperor both in terms of the display of his status and in his recognition that decisions should be made in consultation with men of experience.<sup>20</sup>

**16** For Maecenas' advice regarding how Augustus was to select commanders and senior magistrates himself, see Cass. Dio 52.14.3, 52.15.2; On senior magistrates see 52.20.2-3. For the monarch's responsibility to all appropriate laws in consultation with the Senate and entirely without a popular vote see 52.15.1.

**17** See Cass. Dio 52.20.5 for the Senate's obligation to remain in charge of the legal process.

**18** Ando 2016, 569-71.

**19** See Dio's description of how Augustus' manipulated the Senate into offering him *imperium* and full control over Rome's legions (53.11).

**20** On the mixed constitution see Carsana 1990, 59-60; Carsana 2016, 557-8. See also Bono in this volume.

Vespasian was a man of considerable political and military experience who had worked his way up the career ladder in Roman politics. As someone who had served in all the junior and senior magistracies and as a commander in the Eastern provinces and in Britannia under Claudius, Vespasian had the right experience and balanced confidence to offer Rome a new beginning. When we consider Dio's narrative – not just the Imperial books, but the totality – the Flavian Dynasty appears as a break, in which the political and cultural decline of Augustus' Julio-Claudian successors was (temporarily) intermitted. Vespasian and his way of managing his undisputed powers is seen by Dio as a step in the right direction, but not as the solution. As powers passed first to Titus and later to Domitian (whom Dio, like most other ancient commentators, describes as a tyrant), the decline continued into a new reign of terror.

It is often argued that Dio's thoughts on Rome's constitution and monarchical rule in the age of Augustus should be read more as reflections of the historian's contemporary experience with the Severan dynasty than an attempt to describe real historical circumstances in the first century BCE.<sup>21</sup> Other scholars have seen Dio's preference for monarchical rule as a symptom of his own preference for safety, stability, and privileged senatorial status over real political influence.<sup>22</sup> Dio was, just like historians in general, influenced by his own time and by what he experienced personally from his acquaintance with Roman politics and the imperial administration; he surely feared civil war and political prosecutions. Yet, as I argue in the following, Dio wanted more than well-defined social status, personal safety and show of respect on the part of the emperor. Instead, he argues in favour of a form of monarchy according to which the Senate has real influence on the decision-making process – not directly as the right to enact laws or choose magistrates, but indirectly: first, through offering their honest advice in a respectful discussion between emperor and Senate of what would be the best way forward; and secondly, through a form of succession which selects the new emperor from the pool of qualified, proven and virtuous senators with the right set of political, military, and personal skills to rule in a fair and beneficial way.

The form of sole rule Dio envisaged is a kind of representative monarchy: the emperor, being a former senator himself, represents the Senate and holds the interests of the commonwealth as his priority. In the way in which he lays out his thoughts on ideal rule, Dio follows

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**21** Bleicken 1962, 448; Reinhold 1988, 165-8. Reinhold, Swan 1990, 169-70; *contra* Rich 1989, 98-100; 1990, 14-15. See Kemezis (2014, 90-4) for Dio's use of the Republican and Augustan books as response to the Severan dynasty and their official narrative.

**22** Millar 1964, 74-7; On *libertas* in the age of the Principate see Wirszubski 1950, 169-71. See Pettit 1997, 35-41 on how laws can ensure freedom; see also Kapust 2004, 294-98; Strunk 2017, 23-37. On Republican ideals of *libertas* see also Arena 2012, 45-8.



Tacitus' reasoning in the *Agricola*: Rome's elite, men like Agricola, had to come to terms with the reality of the Principate and accept that serving diligently as governor may be prizable in itself and a resolution of one's purpose as an aristocrat, particularly under bad emperors.<sup>23</sup> But in laying out his own guidelines for avoiding the accession of incompetent emperors, Dio goes a step further than Tacitus. One explanation for his development of this political program is that he, unlike Tacitus, lived to see the potential in adoptive succession and the return of chaos when first Marcus Aurelius and later Severus passed the throne to their sons.

#### 4 Vespasian the New Augustus

Dio aligns Augustus with the ideals of monarchical rule established above, and they form a benchmark against which he measures Vespasian and his sons. In what is left of the book dedicated to Vespasian's rule, the first of the Flavian emperors represents a return to the political stability that the historian ascribes to Augustus' settlement in the 20s BCE.<sup>24</sup> In Dio's coverage, Vespasian was the first *princeps* since Augustus to have chosen a form of government in which the senators were offered a role in the decision-making process; like Augustus, he allowed senators to speak freely in order to use their advice to make the best decisions.<sup>25</sup> Judging from Xiphilinus' epitome, Dio stages the first of the Flavians as a political game-changer who reversed years of decline by adopting some of the same values for which Augustus is acknowledged. Accepting the methodological challenges of the different forms in which the books of Augustus and Vespasian respectively have come down to us, there are several parallels between Dio's presentation of Augustus' dealings with the Senate and Xiphilinus' epitomes of the reign of Vespasian. Both emperors secured supreme rule after winning civil wars; both took it upon themselves to change the dominant political culture when they, again in Dio's view, replaced previous oligarchic or despotic regimes with beneficent and enlightened one-man rule. Furthermore, both Augustus and Vespasian came into power with alternative backgrounds to those of their predecessors: Augustus as a young man with no senatorial background, and Vespasian as an average member of the Julio-Claudian Senate from a modest Italian background.

<sup>23</sup> See Tacitus on the way in which Agricola's diligent administration of Britannia allowed him to fulfill his purpose in life as a servant to the state (Tac. *Agr.* 42.4); see Woodman 2014, 302-3; see also Atkins 2018, 82-3.

<sup>24</sup> On the division of Dio's books in the Flavian dynasty see Murison 1999, 3-5.

<sup>25</sup> For ancient and modern comparison of Vespasian to Augustus see Griffin 2000, 1, 11.

Just as Dio's Octavian fought to free the Romans from war and slavery of factions, Vespasian's alleged prudence and tolerance stood in antithesis to the prodigal life of the craven and incompetent Gaius and Nero. Both Augustus and Vespasian had a solid grip on power but were, again in Dio's version, keen to involve the senators, whose advice they both valued. Both Augustus and Vespasian took firm control over the state at a moment when the constitutional cycle was at a historical nadir: Augustus after the collapse of the Republic and the most destructive civil war in the history of Rome, and Vespasian at a moment in imperial history when Nero's lack of commitment and unlimited cruelty led a degenerated monarchy towards the first civil war since the 30s BCE. In Dio's opinion, Nero was the worst of the depraved Julio-Claudian emperors because he did not care at all about the empire; instead, he left its administration in the hands of advisors and freedmen. But when he finally got involved, he followed the worst example of them all:<sup>26</sup>

Cass. Dio 61.5.1 παραγγέλματα αὐτῶν συγγέας καὶ καταπατήσας πρὸς τὸν Γάιον ἔτεινε. ὡς δ' ἄπαξ ζηλώσαι αὐτὸν ἐπεθύμησε, καὶ ὑπερεβάλετο, νομίζων τῆς αὐτοκρατορικῆς καὶ τοῦτ' ἰσχύος ἔργον εἶναι, τὸ μηδὲ ἐν τοῖς κακίστοις μηδενὸς ὑστερίζειν.

[Nero] lost all shame, dashed to the ground and trampled underfoot all their precepts, and began to follow in the footsteps of Gaius. And when he had once concerned a desire to emulate him, he quite surpassed him; for he held it to be one of the obligations of the imperial power not to fall behind anybody else even in the basest deeds.<sup>27</sup>

With the accession of Vespasian, Rome appears to return to the political practice that Augustus introduced as part of his settlement in the 20s. The senators – free from fear – are now encouraged to assume roles as the emperor's trusted advisors, whose criticism and counsel the new *princeps* values:

Cass. Dio 65.10.5 καὶ τοῖς πάνυ φίλοις καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἕω ἐν τῇ εὐνῇ κείμενος συνεγίνετο, καὶ ἕτεροι ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτὸν ἠσπάζοντο. αἱ τε θύραι τῶν βασιλείων ἠνεωργήθησαν διὰ πάσης τῆς ἡμέρας ἦσαν, καὶ φρουρὸς οὐδεὶς ἐν αὐταῖς ἐγκαθειστήκει. ἔς τε τὸ συνέδριον διὰ παντὸς ἐφοῖτα, καὶ περὶ πάντων αὐτοῖς ἐπεκοίνου, κὰν τῇ ἀγορᾷ πολλάκις ἐδίκαζεν.

<sup>26</sup> Pistellato forthcoming a.

<sup>27</sup> All translations are taken from Cary 1914-1927.

With his intimate friends he would hold converse even before dawn while lying in bed; and others would greet him on the streets. The doors of the palace stood open all day long and no guard was stationed at them. He regularly attended the meetings of the Senate, whose members he consulted on all matters, and he frequently dispensed justice in the Forum.

There is a sharp contrast here between the description of Vespasian's respectful rapport with the senators and the arrogant and disrespectful disposition of the Julio-Claudian emperors toward the Senate, which they then either despise or humiliate in an attempt to strengthen their own position. The difference between Vespasian and his Julio-Claudian predecessors is further underlined by the following paragraph in the epitome, in which Vespasian is praised for the humility of his sons: out of respect for the senators, they read his messages out loud to the Senate when the emperor himself was unable to attend. This mutual respect is further underlined in the account of how Vespasian invited both senators and others to dine as his guests (65.10.6).

These references to Vespasian's uncomplicated and modest nature – his approachability of access, his respect for the opinions of the Senate, and his eagerness to resolve disputes without trials and prosecutions – are other elements in Dio's portrait of Vespasian as a competent emperor who serves as an antithesis to the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>28</sup> With his modest nature, Vespasian fits Dio's definition of the ideal emperor. He was unpretentious, humble, and (importantly) an experienced senator who knew the value of including the political elite in his decisions. The remark on his performance at Senate meetings carries a lot of weight: it testifies both to his predecessor's absence and also to Vespasian's willingness to listen to the thoughts and concerns of his peers. This was precisely what Dio claims Augustus did by welcoming the senators to speak freely and by arranging matters so as to encourage the senators to take a real interest in the decision-making process, fulfilling their intended and historic role as an advisory council to the magistrates.

The execution of Helvidius Priscus that Vespasian orders is touched upon briefly in the epitome. What Suetonius describes as a complicated and damaging conflict for Vespasian is in 65.12, covered merely as a justified reaction to unreasonable opposition on the

<sup>28</sup> For Dio's description of Vespasian's affable nature see 65.11.1-3. For comparison to the Julio-Claudian emperors see 57.1.1-6 or comments on Tiberius' dishonest and manipulative nature, see 59.10.7 and 59.22.3-4. for Gaius' lavish. See also Pistellato in this volume. For Claudius' dependence on his freedmen, see Cass. Dio 60.2.4.

part of the rebellious Priscus.<sup>29</sup> Therefore in the version of Dio's text that we have from Xiphilinus, Priscus is said to have used his right to speak freely as a means to stir up the masses with the aim to overthrow; he was therefore responsible for his own end.

Dio considered the reign of Domitian to be a catastrophe and a setback from the harmonious and cooperative government of emperor and Senate. Vespasian had already offered an alternative form of government that later emperors could allow themselves to be inspired by (although Domitian chose not to). As we shall see in the following, not only Augustus but also Vespasian is used as a role model for the emperors in the second century when monarchical rule was at its most stable. In that sense, Dio presents the reign of the adoptive emperors as a representative monarchy whose origins lay in the programme first of Augustus and then of Vespasian; the latter serves to bridge the depraved Julio-Claudians and the emperors from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius. Dio is well aware that Hadrian's claim to the throne after Trajan was far from justified and he knew only too well that Marcus Aurelius, another of his heroes, left the throne to his only son after the true nature of Commodus was known (73[72].1.1-2).

On the other hand, it is with the combination of an experienced and virtuous emperor on the one hand (possessing political and military skills honed through membership of the Senate), and a responsible elite on the other hand, that monarchical rule reaches its full potential. That understanding was being developed already in the reign of Augustus, who struggled to convince the remnants of the Republican senators to accept their new role as advisors. These were concerns Augustus had to attend to several times during his reign and something the senators did not fully realise until they reflected upon Augustus' achievements after his death (56.43-44). From what we may judge from the epitomes, it was Vespasian who inspired men like Nerva, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius with the model of his treatment of the Senate. With the accession of Titus, monarchical rule and the Flavian dynasty *per se* were already descending into a new period of tyrannical rule. This may not have been felt as a sudden change or crisis at first, but rather as a miniating presence beneath the surface of a seemingly competent and experienced leader with strong military credentials.

<sup>29</sup> Suet. *Vesp.* 15.

## 5 Titus: Between *Civilitas* and Tyranny

Dio's account of Titus' years in power may at first appear positive. Like his father, Titus had already proven his ability as a capable military commander who ended the Jewish revolt. In Rome, after his accession, Titus chose, just as Vespasian had done before him, a mild strategy towards the Senate; we hear that he also refrained from killing any senators, even those accused of conspiracy (66.18-19.). What may seem a quality, as it surely was in the case of Vespasian, is reversed and used as an example of how dysfunctional dynastic succession is when nepotism prevents the emperor (in this case Titus) from making the right decision. Titus did indeed keep his promise not to kill any senators; but in so doing he failed to protect himself against the conspiracies of Domitian, who should have been removed for plotting against him. In Xiphilinus' and Dio's versions, it was Domitian himself who eventually killed Titus; other writers believed he died a natural death, but Titus would not allow his brother to be removed in any case (66.26.2).

A further example of Dio's questioning (and perhaps coded critique) of Titus can be found in his speculation over the possible reasons for his good reputation. Dio questions whether Titus would have turned to the worse had he ruled longer, just as Augustus changed for the better over his many years in power (66.18.3-4):<sup>30</sup>

Cass. Dio 66.18.3-4 ἤδη δὲ καὶ ὅτι ἐπὶ βραχύτατον, ὥς γε ἐς ἡγεμονίαν εἰπεῖν, ἐπεβίω, ὥστε μηδ' ἄμαρτίαν τινὰ αὐτῷ ἐγγενέσθαι. δύο τε γὰρ ἔτη μετὰ τοῦτο καὶ μῆνας δύο ἡμέρας τε εἴκοσιν ἔζησεν ἐπ' ἑννέα καὶ τριάκοντα ἔτεσι καὶ μηνὶ πέντε καὶ ἡμέραις πέντε καὶ εἴκοσι. καὶ αὐτὸν ἐξ ἴσου κατὰ τοῦτο τῆ τοῦ Αὐγούστου πολυετία ἄγουσι, λέγοντες ὅτι οὔτ' ἂν ἐκεῖνος ἐφιλήθη ποτὲ εἰ ἐλάττω χρόνον ἐζήκει, οὔτ' ἂν οὗτος εἰ πλείονα.

Again, his satisfactory record may also have been due to the fact that he survived his accession but a very short time (short, that is, for a ruler), for he was thus given no opportunity for wrongdoing. For he lived after this only two years, two months and twenty days – in addition to the thirty-nine years, five months and twenty-five days he had already lived at that time. In this respect, indeed, he is regarded as having equalled the long reign of Augustus, since it is maintained that Augustus would never have been loved had he lived a shorter time, nor Titus had he lived longer.

<sup>30</sup> Murison 1999, 179-80. On *civilitas* in Dio and his Greek translation for this term (δημοκρατικώτατος), see Wallace-Hadril 1982, 44; Bono 2018, 94-7. See also Bono in this volume. On how Dio was skeptical about the elite's ability to share power see Noe this volume.

This may seem a bit of a stretch, but what comes into play here is Dio's scepticism towards dynastic rule, which – surely encouraged by his own experience of the Severans – he viewed as incompatible with a more representative and stable form of government.<sup>31</sup> If Dio allowed Titus to be a successful emperor, he would also have to admit that dynastic succession could work if the successor, such as Titus, had the necessary skills and the right attitude to rule in a responsible, modest, and inclusive manner. The idea of a qualified son would probably not have been entirely inconceivable to Dio; but history had proven that the random male relative was usually not able to maintain a civilized relationship with the Senate and usually not particularly interested in exposing himself to the illusion of inclusive government with the senators in the role of his honest and diligent advisors. So, in order to make the case as clearly as possible, Dio highlights – as Suetonius did in his biography of Domitian – the way in which Domitian introduced tyrannical rule after having killed his brother, and he blames Titus for allowing it to happen.<sup>32</sup>

## 6 Domitian: Tyranny Returns

The reign of Domitian represents a new low point in Dio's history of Imperial Rome. Compared to Vespasian and Titus, Domitian stands out as the despot who ruled alone, leaving the senators behind humiliated and terrorised. In Dio's surviving text for the reign of Domitian, the last of the Flavian emperors comes out as hateful, irrational, and sadistic, having no intention to cooperate with the Senate. He ruled through fear as exemplified by the dinner party that Dio, as the only source for the event, describes in detail: the theme was silence, death, and darkness, and the emperor alone spoke of death and slaughter (67.2.1-7; 67.9.1-6).<sup>33</sup> Dio further relates that Domitian did not follow his brother's policy of not killing any senators but instead murdered or banished several good men in the course of his reign (67.3.3<sup>1</sup>-67.3.4<sup>2</sup>). Domitian's vanity is underlined by examples of his penchant for self-proclaimed extraordinary honors such as the titles of 'master' and 'god'; this again stands in sharp contrast to the conduct of both Vespasian and Augustus, who, again according to Dio, were hesitant to accept any divine honors.<sup>34</sup> Domitian's inability to defend the empire

<sup>31</sup> On the Severan disappointment and the failure of the Severan dynasty see Madsen 2016, 154-8. See also Rantala 2016, 161-5.

<sup>32</sup> Suet. *Tit.* 9., *Dom.* 2.

<sup>33</sup> For a thorough analysis of Dio's use of the dinner to underline Domitian's sadistic tendencies when he terrorises the Roman elite, see Schulz 2016, 286-92; 2019, 26-8.

<sup>34</sup> On Augustus' reluctance to accept the personal cult see Cass. Dio 51.20.6-8.

is illustrated in the account of his failure to pacify the Quadi, Marcomanni, and the Dacians. As commander, Domitian is said to have been a disaster. He accuses others for his own failures but shares none of the successes, even those for which he was not responsible in the first place (67.6.4). Furthermore, as emphasised by Verena Schulz, the triumphs Domitian celebrated are disputable and were said to have been undeserved: the emperor took no hostages and weakly allowed himself to be deceived even by inferior enemies (67.7.2-4).<sup>35</sup>

It has been demonstrated that Domitian was not as incompetent as our sources make him out to be.<sup>36</sup> But what matters here is not whether Dio overstates Domitian's tyrannical tendencies or his alleged lack of leadership. Young Domitian, unlike Nero, showed a real interest in government. Yet, he would have been difficult to stomach for an elite now accustomed to being acknowledged as an esteemed social group that had recently enjoyed respect as the emperor's valued advisors. It is therefore to be expected that Domitian's more obvious autocratic rule provoked a reaction from the empire's intellectuals, who, as demonstrated by Schulz, offered an alternative to the official panegyric version represented by the writings of Martial and Statius.<sup>37</sup> On that note, we see fear and revulsion represented in the writing of Tacitus and Pliny, who both did well under Domitian and obviously needed to explain their own behaviour and the circumstances they were in at the time.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, criticism of Domitian and the type of emperor he represented goes beyond any personal need to distance oneself from a fallen, unpopular regime. Like Dio Chrysostom, both Tacitus and Pliny offer opinions on how to organize monarchical rule in so different a way that the emperor may rest his powers on the empire's political elite; this testifies to how the elite's experience of Domitian, and of the Flavians more broadly, did generate a theoretical debate among the empire's political commentators.<sup>39</sup>

In this context, it is worth noting that Dio holds the Senate to be largely blameless for the development of autocratic rule. Instead, it is the emperor's sole responsibility to include the Senate in the decision-making, something that in Dio's view rests with the undisputed right to enact new laws. Because there are no checks and balances between the emperor and the Senate, the senators cannot force

<sup>35</sup> Schulz 2016, 280-2.

<sup>36</sup> See Jones 1992, 192 for discussion of the reception of Domitian's reign: Jones argues that his monarchy was not, in fact, so different from that of other emperors and that his persecutions of senators had led to an unbalanced view of his relationship with the aristocracy in general.

<sup>37</sup> Schulz 2016, 279-80, 284, 286-92.

<sup>38</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 1.1.; Plin. *Pan.* Ash 2009, 86. Woodman 2009, 38-41.

<sup>39</sup> Dio Chrys. *Or.* 3.43-46; Pliny *Pan.* 66.2-4. Tac. *Agr.* 42.3-4. Atkins 2018, 82.

their advice upon the emperor. Such a political philosophy differs from Tacitus' criticism of the Senate's failure in refusing to share power shortly after Tiberius' accession, and from Pliny's claim that Trajan ordered the senators to be free and take a responsibility for the good of the commonwealth.<sup>40</sup>

Dio pays essentially no attention to the plots against the emperor; this again exemplifies that it was never his intention to offer a balanced account of Domitian's years in power, nor to explain why Domitian turned out in way he did or behaved in the manner he chose to. Instead, as Schulz points out, Dio's ambition was to sketch out and criticise the type of emperor Domitian represented and, secondly, to attack the emperors of his own time.<sup>41</sup> Dio no doubt drew up archetypes of good and bad emperors in order to comment on contemporary politics: he used his portrait of Domitian, Nero, and others to guide his readers toward what he believed was the best form of monarchical rule. Yet in addition, there are elements in Dio's writing to suggest that his coverage of the Flavian dynasty goes a step further than providing archetypes or models for emulation and blame. He uses his account of the three Flavians to demonstrate the instability of dynastic succession in general, when power passes to unqualified, cruel, or indifferent random male heirs. This is precisely the cycle that was broken, in Dio's eyes, when Nerva adopted Trajan and chose competence and talent over family and ethnicity.

Cass. Dio 68.41-2 Οὕτω μὲν ὁ Τραϊανὸς Καῖσαρ καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο αὐτοκράτωρ ἐγένετο, καίτοι συγγενῶν τοῦ Νέρουα ὄντων τινῶν. ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ τῆς τῶν κοινῶν σωτηρίας ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν συγγένειαν προετίμησεν, οὐδ' αὖ ὅτι Ἰβηρ ὁ Τραϊανὸς ἀλλ' οὐκ Ἴταλὸς οὐδ' Ἰταλιώτης ἦν, ἥτιόν τι παρὰ τοῦτο αὐτὸν ἐποιήσατο, ἐπειδὴ μηδεὶς πρόσθεν ἀλλοεθνῆς τὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων κράτος ἐσχίκει· τὴν γὰρ ἀρετὴν ἀλλ' οὐ τὴν πατρίδα τινὸς ἐξετάζειν δεῖν ᾔετο.

Thus Trajan became Caesar and later emperor, although there were relatives of Nerva living. But Nerva did not esteem family relationship above the safety of the State, nor was he less inclined to adopt Trajan because the latter was a Spaniard instead of an Italian or Italiot, inasmuch as no foreigner had previously held the Roman sovereignty; for he believed in looking at a man's ability rather than at his nationality.

<sup>40</sup> See Seager 1972, 129-31; Levick 1999, 75-7.

<sup>41</sup> For the deconstruction of Domitian and the official version of his reign and how this historiography serves as criticism of emperor's in Dio's own lifetime see Schulz 2016, 276-9, 292; Schulz 2019, 264-5.



Dio knew old Nerva had few other choices than to ally himself with Trajan, one of the strongest generals at the time. But again, what matters to Dio is to demonstrate that adopting the next emperor in line from the pool of experienced and virtuous senators could provide the missing piece that would ensure continuous political stability for the Principate.<sup>42</sup>

To prove his point, Dio provides a series of examples from the reign of Nerva and the adoptive emperors, in which the civil *principes* rule in harmony with Rome's political elite. Nerva melted the statues of Domitian, promised that he would not kill any of the senators, and did nothing without first consulting the foremost men (Cass. Dio 68.1). Trajan promised not to kill or exile any good men, and instead honoured those who did well and paid no attention to rumours and slander that under other emperors would have led to prosecution (68.5.2). And Hadrian – despite his questionable claim to the throne – is described as a competent emperor who managed to discipline the army (69.2.5; 69.9.4), and who made arrangements to ensure that the tradition of adoption continued not only after his death but also after the death of his successor Antoninus Pius (69.20-21).<sup>43</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

The accession of Vespasian was a step in the right direction and the experienced senator managed to introduce a mode of government that survived Domitian. In Dio's view, he set new standards for the relationship between the emperor and the Empire's political elite which grew to their full development in the second century, Dio's golden age. Vespasian was, to Dio, an example of an ideal emperor who thanks to his senatorial experience brought monarchy back on the tracks that Augustus had laid out as part of his settlement. Now, the Flavian dynasty did not bring any long-term solution to the ever-present risk that the Principate might become tyrannical. The explanation Dio offers is that dynastic rule from the outset was dysfunctional and tyrannical: it was bound to favour family relations over quality. Similar examples in Dio's narrative can be found in the accounts of the Severan dynasty – where Septimius Severus fails to remove Caracalla when he realised the true nature of his son – or in the description of Augustus' rationale for choosing Tiberius, whose misrule Augustus

<sup>42</sup> See Frascchetti 2008, 48 and Madsen 2016, 153 for discussion of Dio's idealising attitude toward adoptive succession.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed discussion of Hadrian's adoption speech of the next emperor in line, see Davenport, Mallan 2014, 643-4, 657-8.

hoped would later cast a more favourable light on his own Principate.<sup>44</sup>

It may well have been Dio's ambition to tell the story of the Flavian emperors as accurately as he could; nevertheless, his aims for accuracy are complicated by his choice of a wider narrative in which Vespasian was the example of the ideal emperor, Titus was a naïve and inattentive emperor whose love for his brother threw the empire back into chaos and tyranny, and Domitian was a tyrant who had no intention to include the Senate in his government. While Dio's portrayal of Domitian fits the trend among other ancient writers, the account of Titus is far more peculiar and an example of the historian's deliberate shaping of his project – not only to create a certain historical narrative, but also to deliver a proactive vision of why dynastic succession was unlikely to produce the stable and civilised form of monarchical rule Rome needed (and particularly in the turbulence of the third century). In this way he questioned family succession at a time when the Severan dynasty was the new leading family in Roman politics. Dio was not prepared to accept that dynastic rule would ever work. Accordingly, he could not acknowledge Titus' qualities as emperor and was therefore compelled to find reasons to undermine the impression of a reasonably well-equipped monarch: had he only had more time, he might have been just as disappointing as so many others.

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**44** On Caracalla's attempt on Severus' life see 77[76].14.3-4. For Dio's remark on how Augustus chose Tiberius so that he would shine even more and how the old emperor knew about the character of his adoptive son, see 56.45.1-3.

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