

Johanna LEITHOFF, *Macht der Vergangenheit. Zur Erringung, Verstetigung und Ausgestaltung des Principats unter Vespasian, Titus und Domitian*, Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014 (Schriften zur politischen Kommunikation 19), 266 pp., illustrations, ISBN 978-3-8471-0289-2, €45.00.

The Flavian period (69–96) is very much in vogue. Hardly a year passes without two or three books being devoted to the subject, if not in their entirety, then at least covering selected periods or issues. Here, one should mention – without going back too far – such publications as the work edited by N. KRAMER and Chr. REITZ (*Tradition und Erneuerung. Mediale Strategien in der Zeit der Flavier*, 2010), J. GERING’s *Domitian, dominus et deus? Herrschafts- und Machtstrukturen im Römischen Reich zur Zeit des letzten Flaviers* (2012), *Ne quid popularitatis augendae prae-termittet. Studien zur Herrschaftsdarstellung der flavischen Kaiser* by Chr. RUFFI (2012), *Domiziano. Fine di una dinastia* by U. MORELLI (2014), *Nero und Domitian: Mediale Diskurse der Herrscherrepräsentation im Vergleich* by S. BÖNISCH-MEYER et al. (2014), J.O. LEY’s *Domitian. Auffassung und Ausübung der Herrscherrolle des letzten Flaviers* (2016) or the collective study of the period edited by A. ZISSOS (*A Companion to the Flavian Age of Imperial Rome*, 2016), not to mention dozens of papers. What most of these publications share is a departure from a “straightforward” narrative written from the standpoint of “event-based” history in a linear arrangement or relying on a biographical approach. Instead, preference is given to inquiry into the rule of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian in terms of particular issues. Predominant aspects include structures of power, as well as the ideology and (self)presentation of individual emperors. After all, it is aptly noted that the lowly lineage of the new dynasty, unrelated to any of the old aristocratic families, left an evident mark on the “publicity” undertakings of the Flavians. Such efforts were intended to forge a desired image in the eyes of the Roman population and lend legitimacy to their being in power.

The book discussed here follows that path, but in a fairly original fashion. Namely, the author is interested in the extent to which “experience of the past”, relating to state and society, but also directly to the new dynasty, affected the manner in which they exercised power and influenced the (systemic) shape of the principate in the Flavian era. In other words, this is about how “the Flavii took advantage of references to the past in their political dimension” (p. 77). This, however, is only the first step. “In essence, the monograph seeks to determine the degree to which discernible instances of drawing upon the past did successfully reach the contemporaries, or find out how much they correspond with our own point of view or how they become mutually interlaced [in our present-day consciousness]” (p. 14). At the same time, the author notes that in a society afflicted by the disaster of civil war, “looking to the past may have had constitutive significance”, especially as in the universe of Roman notions vital importance was attached to a singularly construed *memoria*, dominated by illustrious examples (*exempla*) of great ancestors (*maiores*). In this context, “the definition of the past reflects the expectations of the present times. This inescapably invites the question how [...] the ‘new’ principes – Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian – tried to live up to the resulting Roman sensibility and Roman patterns of thought and action, while simultaneously exploiting that trait [i.e. the particular understanding of *memoria*] for their own ends” (pp. 10 f.). Admittedly, prior to becoming emperor Vespasian had been a senator, but he had originated from the milieu of municipal elites, so there were no *imagines maiorum* he could boast. “For the first time in around hundred years the leadership of the state (*res publica*) was assumed by an individual from outside the family circles of the Iulii and the Claudii” (p. 9). Naturally, one is thus inclined to ask how Vespasian continued the legacy of his predecessors, the political system he came into, i.e. the empire (principate), and thus to what extent he relied on earlier solutions. Johanna LEITHOFF (= L.) is aware that in undertaking such studies she does not enter virgin territory; the author underlines that the attitude of the Flavii to the events of the past, sometimes the fairly remote past, has been addressed by numerous researchers, but it has never been their principal concern. It tended to

be examined alongside a range of other issues or in the context of such issues. This is the reason why the book is worthy of attention.

The work is divided into three chapters. Let us note, however, that the reader may “lose their bearings”, since the author provided all units of the book with consecutive Roman numerals, from I to VII. This means that the chapters the author refers to as chapters one, two, and three (cf. p. 15) are in fact numbered II, III, IV, because the introduction (“Einleitung”) is marked as I. Consequently, the conclusion is assigned number V, the list of illustrations number VI, and the indexes – VII. The widespread practice is to not number the parts which do not constitute the thematic core of the book, which makes the situation perfectly clear.

Successive chapters explore themes indicated in the subtitle, respectively the attainment (*Erringung*), consolidation (*Verstetigung*) and shaping (*Ausgestaltung*) of the principate under Flavian rule. It is therefore no surprise that the first (= II) chapter is entitled “The Contest for the Principate and the Significance of the Jewish War” (pp. 17–75). It has been divided thematically into two parts: the civil war (= II.1), focusing on the individual adversaries involved, and the Jewish war (= II.2), viewed in the light of its importance in image-building and the legitimisation of the new dynasty, Vespasian and Titus in particular.

With respect to the civil war, the main focus is on the conflict with Vitellius, since he was Vespasian’s primary rival. The author emphasises that the victor’s treatment of the defeated and above all deceased emperor was exceedingly restrained in its measures. No *damnatio memoriae* was promulgated, there was no retaliatory action against members of Vitellius’ family; Vespasian went as far as taking care that his daughter was married (Suet. *Vesp.* 14; cf. p. 40). Anti-Vitellian action was not directly concerned with the person of the former opponent, but it sought to “undermine the potential of the late princeps as a symbol and source of legitimacy (of power)”. Given the underlying concept of the work, it is important that Vespasian drew conclusions from Vitellius’ approach to Galba and Otho. The figure of Vitellius is also associated with the question of the fire on the Capitoline Hill which raged on December 19th, 69. The somewhat later tradition (Flavius Josephus, Pliny the Elder) was unequivocal in placing blame for the burning of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus on Vitellius, yet it seems that the matter was not as evident as these authors asserted. Consequently, the destruction of the Capitol and its subsequent rebuilding played a crucial role in forging the image of the new dynasty virtually from the first day of their assumption of power (cf. pp. 41–43).

As regards the Jewish war (pp. 55–75), its impact on the image of the members of the dynasty is beyond any doubt. The author focuses on analysing edifices erected to commemorate the victory, which simultaneously served to demonstrate the *virtus imperatoria* of Vespasian and Titus, and indirectly of Domitian as well. L. also disputes the thesis claiming that the Jewish war theme was uniformly present in the case of each of the Flavian emperors. The difference is conspicuous, the author observes, when one compares the first two rulers with Domitian, even though the latter did not neglect to exploit its chief purpose, which was to provide a foundation for the dynasty’s legitimacy (cf. pp. 67–75). Among other things, the book discusses the Colosseum (pp. 58 f.), the best known of Flavian constructions, Templum Pacis (pp. 57 f., cf. also 197–205), which performed the function of a singular museum glorifying the dynasty (this was where the spoils from the Temple of Jerusalem were deposited), as well as triumphal and commemorative arches (pp. 59–61). The author emphasises that all these structures owe their creation to the victory in the Jewish war, celebrated with a magnificent triumph in 71. The only exception is the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which burned down in 69: its construction started before the fall of Jerusalem. Still, it should be remembered that the later notorious Jewish tax (*fiscus Iudaicus*) was instituted for the sake of that very temple. Thus, the triumph over Judaea became associated with the Capitoline Hill, twice at that: after another fire which destroyed the temple in the year 80, its reconstruction was largely financed from the Jewish tax (p. 65).

Energetic construction undertakings which aimed to demonstrate the merits of the dynasty were accompanied by coinage series with the legend IVDAEA and IVDAEA CAPTA, as well as

issue of coins OB CIVES SERVATOS which alluded to the civil war. L. aptly concludes (p. 62) that the simultaneous release of those coin series into circulation deftly interwove the glory of victory over the Jews with an implicit message about the appeasement of the much less glorious internal conflict. “The closest analogy to the adopted strategy [of self-presentation] may be found in the actions of Augustus when he intensively publicised his defeat of Cleopatra, in order to obscure the memory of earlier civil wars he had waged. The similarity is palpable in the coinages AEGYPTO and IVDAEA CAPTA as well as in the closure of the Temple of Janus on Vespasian’s orders. In his case, the concurrence of rise to power thanks to civil war and to victory over an external foe seems to be [...] a condensed iteration of the Augustan model” (p. 64).

Given the above, the reign of the third Flavian emperor represents an interesting case. It is widely known that he put great effort into building his image, underscoring his own achievements, including *virtus militaris / imperatoria*. However, he remained true to the principal image-shaping communication of the dynasty, i.e. the victory over the Jews (cf. p. 75). The construction and the arrangement of Titus’ arch demonstrates that quite distinctly: the figure of Domitian is also represented on the relief showing the triumphal procession. Here, the author advances an interesting thesis (p. 68), observing that the Templum Gentis Flaviae, a mausoleum of the Flavian house erected towards the end of his reign in a deliberate act contributing to the “overall image” (*Gesamtbild*) of the dynasty, contained a reference to the victory in the Jewish war in the palm motif found on its reliefs: the palm symbolised Judaea. It is worth noting that the concept of the Templum Gentis Flaviae (p. 68, cf. pp. 187–197), where the remains of the Flavii were laid to rest, clearly corresponded with Augustus’ idea (Mausoleum Augusti), even if it “competed” in a way with its prototype.

Chapter two (= III), devoted to the consolidation of the new order in the context of the ideal of republican freedoms (*libera res publica*, pp. 77–132), is concerned first and foremost with the relations between Vespasian and the senatorial aristocracy. “Ensuring himself its approval was the most important task of the new emperor”. This was due to the fact that the character of rapport between the princeps and the Senate determined the nature of principate as a political and legal system (p. 77). Paradoxically, it involved the experiences of the past because it was the senators, especially philosophers originating from senatorial circles, who were the mainstay of the republican idea, hence by default the Senate should have been in opposition to imperial authority. The author quoted the well-known example of Helvidius Priscus, a philosopher and the only senator whom Vespasian condemned to death (III.2, pp. 90–113). Following source accounts, Helvidius is contrasted with Eprius Marcellus, a delator from the Neronian times, with whom he fiercely contended in the Senate. Helvidius clashed with the latter trying to demonstrate the Senate’s significance as a bulwark of *libertas*, and at the same time remind Vespasian that good advisors make good rulers (p. 101). The ideal of *res publica* was the background to all this. According to L., Helvidius’ conflict with Vespasian should be perceived as a dispute concerning “appropriate balance between the Senate and the princeps, while its relevance (at the time) resulted from the circumstances in which Vespasian ascended to power” (p. 122). In Domitian’s era, discussed chiefly based on the example of Helvidius the Younger (III.3, pp. 113–123), who was sentenced to death (in 93) along with six other people, the situation was altogether different. However, the dissension was not related to the manner of coming to power. The son of Helvidius Priscus and others faced charges in a *de maiestate* trial which had not taken place under Vespasian, even less under Titus. The author shows that in the assessment of the contemporaries, their death was due to the emperor’s wantonness. It is therefore no surprise that the victims – both the exiled and the murdered ones – became a key to the evaluations of the ruler and accepted as a token of the decline of *libertas senatus*” (p. 122). The final subchapter (III.4, pp. 123–132) addresses that very *libertas*. L. remarks that in 69/70 the situation resembled the circumstances after the assassination of Caligula in the year 41: it seemed that the Senate was regaining the “freedom” it enjoyed in Republican times, and that it would henceforth be able to take sovereign decisions (p. 127). There is no doubt either that officially the Flavii drew upon that ideology. “It was in that period that the

Genius of the Roman People (*Genius Populi Romani*) was coupled with the Genius of the Senate (*Genius Senatus*)” (p. 128). The latter was usually found in various representations jointly with the Genius of the Roman People. “The watershed year of 68/69 marked the beginning of the later universally adopted convention of representing both Geniuses alongside one another. The Genius of the Senate became a complement to the Genius of the Roman People but it never reached that degree of distinctiveness and religious veneration. Perceived in conjunction, both lent substance to the formula *Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*” (p. 131). The author believes that it was the Flavian era which witnessed the emergence of “a notion of ideal past, when the senate, thoroughly capable and free to shape public opinion, tended to and fostered the good of the community, of the ‘Roman Republic’” (p. 132). Consequently, in spite of occasional friction, the Flavian period saw a fundamental change take place in the relationships between the emperor and the Senate. “In the context of the *Genius Populi Romani*, the debate on the role of the Senate [in the state] became more concrete under Flavians, which enabled the princeps to take steps towards internal integration. This tendency persisted long after Domitian’s death” (p. 132).

The most extensive part of the book, chapter three (= IV, pp. 133–219), plays a special role in its structure. It is concerned with the principate of the Flavii acquiring a particular “nature”, which arises from their approach towards the past, understood as a legacy after the reign of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (“formation of the Flavian principate in the light of legacy left by the Julio-Claudian dynasty”). The chapter comprises three subchapters, which discuss the attitude of the new rulers to Nero (IV.1, pp. 134–146), Claudius (IV.2, pp. 147–175) and Augustus (IV.3, pp. 176–214). As regards Nero, L. highlights the fact that Vespasian and his sons distanced themselves from the figure and the reign of the said princeps. Nero is a *malus princeps*, a tyrant whose action brought detriment to the people. In order to build the Domus Aurea, which was to serve the emperor exclusively, Nero confiscated the houses of the poor (*miseri*). Vespasian and Titus, by founding the amphitheatre (Colosseum), the baths of Titus and the temple of Claudius, showed their concern for the people of Rome. Works of art gathered in the Golden House were supposed to indulge the tastes of Nero and his closest circles, while those deposited in *Templum Pacis*, including the treasures from Jerusalem, were made accessible in an act of Vespasian’s *liberalitas* to the broad masses of the *populus Romanus* (cf. pp. 135–137). “Distancing himself from Nero was a conscious decision on Vespasian’s part, intended to have a wide public appeal. It found its fullest manifestation in surrendering the Golden House (Domus Aurea) in favour of a radical rearrangement of the space it occupied. The essentially negative image of Nero conveyed by ancient authors shows how effective that severance with the person of the last princeps from the Julio-Claudian dynasty really was” (p. 143, cf. p. 146).

This is accompanied with consistent efforts to restore emperor Claudius to the collective consciousness as a good ruler. Vespasian’s first step in that respect was the decision to finalise the construction of the temple of Claudius, a project abandoned by Nero and even partially dismantled on his orders (pp. 149–152). “Completion of the *Templum Divi Claudii* by Vespasian offered a splendid opportunity [...] to draw upon the most respected – after Augustus – princeps of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, while at the same time demonstrating his own *pietas* [towards a *princeps bonus*]. In paying homage to *Divus Claudius*, Vespasian set a direction which would later be followed by Titus and especially Domitian, in that they deified numerous deceased members of the (imperial) family” (p. 151). Claudius became a paragon to be emulated in other respects as well. One of the foremost of these is the extension of the *pomerium*, the boundaries of the City, and then the exercise of censorship (pp. 152–169). L. draws attention to the fact that the reign of Claudius saw a concurrence of three elements: censorship of the ruler, extension of the *pomerium* of the City, and finally the celebration of *ludi saeculares*. Later, this would be repeated only under the Flavians (censorship and extension of the boundaries during Vespasian’s reign and *ludi saeculares* under Domitian). However, if Vespasian and Titus, partly due to the fact that the latter grew up with Britannicus, Claudius’ son, explicitly drew on the legacy of that emperor, Domitian gave priority to the Augustan model.

Still, these are merely preferences or a different placement of emphasis. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Augustus was present all the time in the image-building projects of the new dynasty. This issue is addressed in the last subchapter (pp. 176–213: “the long shadow of Augustus”).

This notion is well established in historiography. The author does not find it at all surprising, since “for us Augustus is the beginning and simultaneously the central figure of the principate, an individual who by and large defines our understanding of the term ‘empire’. It is hardly astonishing that all subsequent principes are measured with the same [Augustus’] yardstick [...]. Nor can there be any doubt that in evaluations of the reign of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, the times of Augustus are adopted as the model paradigm, while Flavian principate tends to be described as ‘Augustan’” (p. 176). L. obviously aims to confront that thesis with the findings of her studies. Once again, the author returns to the humble origins of the Flavii (pp. 177–179). It is underscored that unlike Galba and Vitellius (p. 178), Vespasian did not try to deny his lineage and never strove to create a fake genealogy which would have gone back to the mythical times. Paradoxically he “used the appeal [...] of the modest descent, putting emphasis on his merits and achievements. Domitian did the opposite, openly favouring genealogical elevation of the *gens Flavia*, which manifested itself not only in his accepting Sabine origin of the house [cf. pp. 179–187, 196], but also in numerous acts of deification of various members of the family, Vespasian and Titus in particular” (p. 187). Therefore, the author asserts, the notion of Sabine roots of the family dovetails perfectly with the idea of the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, which in itself was anchored in Augustus’ conception.

The erection of the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* (pp. 187–197) was a “response to the Augustan times” (s. 187). Despite what the name (*templum*) may have suggested, it was not a temple in the strict sense, but a mausoleum, a site of interment of all the deified members of the *gens Flavia* (Vespasian, transferred from the Mausoleum of Augustus, Julia Titi, the infant son of Domitian). In its essence, the edifice drew directly on the Mausoleum of Augustus on the Campus Martius, where the remains of the members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty had been deposited. The other structure which provided inspiration and reference was the Temple of Divine Augustus (*Templum Divi Augusti*), built on the Palatine hill, where Augustus had once lived. The *Templum Gentis Flaviae* was created on the Quirinal, where Domitian had been born (p. 195). This was no coincidence – the allusion to the first princeps is all too evident. The Quirinal Hill offered another advantage: it was associated with the cult of Quirinus and the Sabines, among whom one sought the roots of the Flavii. To L., the temple built there was in a way an allusion to the *Templum Divi Vespasiani* which stood on the Forum Romanum at the foot of the Capitol, precisely opposite the *Templum Divi Iulii* (pp. 194 f.).

The author analyses successive edifices linked to the Flavian emperors in a similar vein, attempting to demonstrate their ideological connection with the Augustan era. The *Templum Pacis*, built by Vespasian on the north-eastern side of the Forum Romanum, was to evoke connotations with the Augustan Ara Pacis and imply a strict causal relationship with the closure of the Temple of Janus, since Augustus was the only one to have done so before Vespasian (cf. p. 203). The Forum Transitorium, started by Domitian and completed by Nerva, is also argued to have been a direct reference to Augustus. L. considers it an allusion to Augustus’ *Porticus ad Nationes*, while the entire artistic arrangement of the Forum was, according to the author, profoundly rooted in the tradition of the founder of the principate (pp. 209 f.). “The example of the Forum Transitorium may serve to determine two role models upon which Domitian drew: Vespasian, which was well within continuing the family tradition, and Augustus, the most outstanding among the principes of the Julio-Claudian dynasty” (pp. 213 f.). The Forum Transitorium represented a linking element between the Forum of Augustus and *Templum Pacis*.

The book is extraordinary: it shows, in a manner which may at times arouse controversy, the vibrant potential of memory (*memoria*) of the past as it was consistently harnessed to build the Flavian principate, and simultaneously to forge the dynastic identity of victors in the civil war. The author brilliantly interprets a variety of sources, compels the reader to reconsider many of

the established and widely-entertained notions, and provokes reflection. Regardless of whether we concur with the assertion that the “definition of the past reflects the expectations of the present-day”, we will certainly accept the view that “the Flavian period was a final stage of a longer transformation process, which strengthened the conviction that the new system is stable and would last” (p. 219), while not precluding the necessity of adjusting it so as to meet the demands of the times. One could hazard the opinion that in the very extensive body of publications devoted to the Flavian era, the book by Johanna LEITHOFF has already deservedly achieved a prominent place, and I find it quite likely that it will inspire further studies pursuing their inquiry in like spirit.

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