

GOD ON EARTH: EMPEROR DOMITIAN



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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 & Claire Stocks

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Domitian's Reshaping of Rome

Eric M. Moormann

When Vespasian became emperor, he was far from Rome and needed to gain support in the capital of his Empire. Rome had become the unavoidable holy see of power from the time of Augustus onwards, when it was stylized as a metropolis and main centre of the world. Thanks to his huge building projects, the town had changed into a conglomerate of shining public buildings amidst the traditionally shabby and poor living quarters of the increased masses. Repeated fires devastated these slum areas, whereas the constructions of marble and brick were relatively well protected, although they remained susceptible to fire. After the great fire in 64, Nero dictated rules to improve the building standard of house blocks and built public baths for the people in order to contribute notably to the public interest of the town. At the same time, he appropriated large properties on and around the Palatine to create the Golden House, a private landscape garden with pavilions and works of art. With this intervention he transgressed in terms of what people saw as appropriate behaviour, for he displayed – at least in the eyes of the elite – an extreme penchant for *luxuria* (luxury).¹

Vespasian and Titus saw the relevance of creating monuments to enhance their modest family prestige and profited from the bad name Nero had acquired.² In the centre of the Golden House's area, they erected a huge amphitheatre, a commodity hitherto known from temporary wooden installations only, and usually constructed at a city's edges, in order to avoid large crowds in the urban centre. The two Emperors also rebuilt (or continued the construction of) the large temple devoted to *divus* Claudius on the southern limit of Nero's former properties, the Caelius. The Templum Pacis was a kind of forum similar to the Forum Augustum, with a shrine dedicated to the goddess of Peace (Pax) at the eastern side. Pax recorded Vespasian's victories over the Germans in the Low Countries and – more lavishly – the Jews in Judea. Works of art from both Nero's Golden House and the conquered areas made the garden resemble a showcase of imperial power. For Pliny, the complex was one of “the most beautiful works ever seen in the world.”³

A new great fire in 80 rudely interrupted their projects, especially in the down town area of the Campus Martius. As in previous instances, works included large-scale restorations of damaged buildings as well as entirely new structures. Due to Titus'

1 Moormann 2003, Edelmann-Singer 2014, Welch 2018. See Domenico Palombi in this volume.

2 Fundamental Darwall-Smith 1996 and Pierre Gros in Coarelli 2009a, 98-109.

3 Plin. *HN* 36.101. See Meneghini/Rea 2014, 242-341, Tucci 2017, Varner 2017, 252-255, Moormann in press.

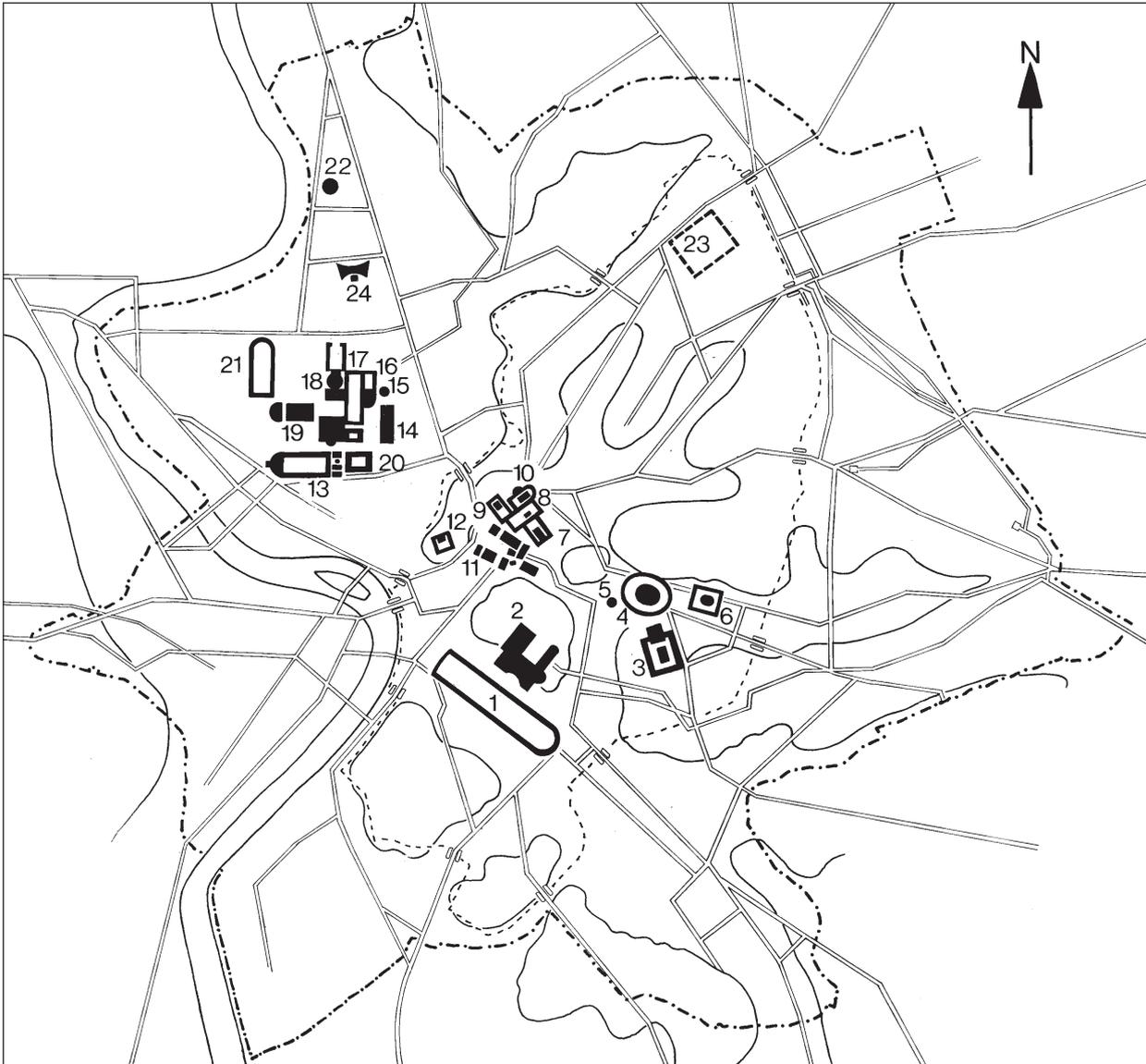


Fig. 1. Map of Rome with interventions undertaken under Domitian (drawing R. Reijnen; after Moormann 2018, fig. 3).

premature death in September 81, Domitian could shape the town into a real Domitianopolis without trespassing the ambitions of his father and brother (fig. 1).⁴

First, he amplified the Colosseum, and added the four training facilities, the *ludi*. He reconstructed at its western side an Augustan fountain, the Meta Sudans. With this intervention he anchored his work⁵ in that of the first Emperor, and annulled the last traces of Nero's Golden House which had covered a couple of venerated Augustan

monuments like the Meta and the Curiae Veteres in this area, both reconstructed under the Flavians.⁶ The area was further filled with various triumphal and memorial arches, seen as a specific form of self-representation Domitian displayed.⁷ The recently excavated and thoroughly studied remains of an arch in the Circus Maximus date to 81 and might still belong to Titus' reign, whereas the well-known arch on the Sacra Via was built by Domitian. The Circus Maximus Arch stood in the vicinity of Titus' birth place

4 On Domitian's rebuilding of Rome, see, among others, Frederick 2003 and, most recently, Moormann 2018.

5 For the concept of 'anchoring innovation' as a leading issue of our work, see the Introduction. Frederick 2003 connects Domitian with Augustus.

6 On the first Meta and the various phases of the Curiae Veteres, see Panella 1996, 70-91, Panella et al. 2019, Coarelli 2020, 234-236. See also Moormann 2018, 165-166, fig. 3.

7 Suet. *Dom.* 13.2 and Dio Cass. 68.1.



Fig. 2. Relief from the Tomb of the Haterii depicting monuments built under Domitian. Vatican Museums, Museo Gregoriano Profano ex Lateranense, inv. 9997 (courtesy Governatorato SCV – Direzione dei Musei, all rights reserved).



Fig. 3. View of the eastern side, including the podium of the shrine dedicated to Pax. Rome, Templum Pacis (photo Lidy Peters).

prope Septizodium.⁸ The crude relief from Quintus Haterius Tychicus' tomb shows some of these arches as well as the Colosseum (fig. 2). Haterius belonged to the *redemptores*, the contractors of complexes erected under Domitian and eternized some of them in a neutral way, not specifically alluding at Domitian.⁹

Domitian turned the Templum Pacis (fig. 3) into a public facility by adding a public library and an administration building in which a predecessor of the

marble city plan of the Severi, the Forma Urbis Romae, may have had a place of pride.¹⁰

Domitian created one more forum, the Forum Transitorium, dominated by a temple dedicated to his patroness Minerva. By means of this 'transition market', Forum Romanum and Subura were connected in a monumental way. Again, this was a clear proof of paying attention to public works, since the transit disclosed a densely inhabited area towards the commercial, administrative, and religious centres in and around the forums. There might have come a third, much more monumental forum at the west side of the Forum

8 Suet. *Titus* 1. Cf. *Arco* 2017, 171.

9 See most recently Steinby 2018 and Paolo Liverani in this volume. On the Arch of Titus in the Circus Maximus, see *Arco* 2017 and Claudio Parisi Presicce in this volume.

10 Tucci 2017, 126-173.

Augustum, some elements of which are recognizable in the Forum of Trajan.¹¹ The Emperor may have envisaged to connect the forums through this piazza with the hill where he was born, the Quirinal.

Concerning Domitian's interventions on the Forum Romanum I only mention the three-partite aula at the foot of the Palatine which was connected with the palace by a monumental ramp. Its function would have been that of an entrance with reception hall for the citizens who could greet the Emperor here.¹² Part of this complex was probably, again, dedicated to Minerva.¹³

The Palatine, the emblem of Neronian luxury, was neglected by Vespasian and Titus. In contrast, Domitian was keen to revive the tradition of imperial residences: in great splendour, he constructed a new version of the houses of Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero by covering the remains of their dwellings with a multiple complex known as the *Domus Flavia* and *Domus Augustana*, allegedly the private and public sections respectively that met the wishes of the emperor in all senses.¹⁴ It displayed Domitian's desire for luxury by applying peculiar architectural techniques and shapes and embellishment that incorporated works of art, marble ornaments and precious floor and wall coverings in *opus sectile*. By designating a large part as a public residence, with the aforementioned public entrance on the Forum Romanum, audience halls and rooms for festivities, receptions, and banquets, Domitian avoided association with Nero's selfish building projects, and implied that his building projects were for the people of Rome, although, in practice, the majority of citizens would never have contact with these new areas.

On the Quirinal, Domitian erected an ambitious complex in memory of his father and brother, the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, allegedly at the spot of his birth, *ad malum punicum*.¹⁵ This *altum Flaviae decus gentis* ('high grace of the Flavian family'), as Martial (9.1.8) called the complex in 93-94, however, has left no visible traces. Due to the dearth of concrete

remains, the exact location and reconstruction of this mausoleum cum temple have been problematic, but investigations under the Planetario, an octagonal hall within the Baths of Diocletian, and in its surroundings have yielded proof of its position. Filippo Coarelli has proposed a square podium topped by a round Pantheon-like temple; within the podium it would contain the tomb of the *divi* Vespasian and Titus and Julia Titi, venerated here maybe in combination with other members of the family.¹⁶ The shape of the mausoleum's nucleus would have copied that of Augustus and the Pantheon-like part reflected the Augustan Pantheon restored by Domitian. However, most scholars argue for a rectangular complex surrounded by a portico measuring up to 123 x 83 m.¹⁷ If, one more time, we may believe Coarelli, next to the monument stood the obelisk which now graces Bernini's Four Rivers Fountain in Piazza Navona and which was brought there from the Circus of Maxentius.¹⁸ Whilst the monument surely enhanced Domitian's prestige, the emperor seems to have been keen to have shifted direct focus away from himself, onto the memory of his predecessors, again avoiding the worst of Nero's self-promotion works. This anchoring to the past was also achieved by establishing an ideological link with Augustus' Pantheon and Mausoleum where, before the construction of the *Templum*, Vespasian had been buried by Titus.

Simultaneously, Domitian linked the *Templum* both topographically and functionally with the Temple of Quirinus. This shrine was dedicated to the mythical founder of Rome, Romulus, who as Quirinus had become the name-giver of the hill. It had Republican origins, but the monumental distyle temple was erected by Caesar and reconstructed by Augustus.¹⁹ Coarelli observed a connection with the Flavii in the etymology of the name Quirinus, which, according to ancient sources, derived from the Sabine word for a lance, *cures*. This origin could have been connected with the region of Vespasian's

11 Pierre Gros in Coarelli 2009a, 107-108, Moormann 2018, 167. See Claudio Parisi Presicce in this volume.

12 Sommainsi 2019, 230-240, esp. 239: "cerniera tra Foro Romano e Palatino unificante gli spazi della *civitas* e quelli del *princeps*." For further interventions on the Forum Romanum, see Moormann 2018, 168-169, Coarelli 2020, 151-160 (*Equus Domitiani*, see also J. Fejfer in this volume), 243-247 (Temple of Vespasian).

13 Sommainsi 2019, 239: the area was known as *ad Mineruam*. Cf. J. Aronen, *LTUR* III (1996) 249-250.

14 See the contributions in this volume by Aurora Raimondi Cominesi & Claire Stocks and Natascha Sojc.

15 Suet. *Dom.* 1.1. cf. Martial, *Ep.* 9.20.2: "the ground knew about the infant-master." See Coarelli 2009b, 93-94, Eugenio La Rocca in Coarelli 2009a, 224-233, Coarelli 2014, 194-207, Moormann 2018, 169-170, Kaderka 2018, 186, 196-208. On the houses of the Flavii, see Coarelli 2014, 271-274.

16 And Domitian himself, despite his *damnatio memoriae* (Suet. *Dom.* 17.3). See Coarelli 2014, 200-204, fig. 52.

17 Most recently Borg 2019, 244-251. Häuber 2021. I follow this view, which is supported by Borg's well-founded critique (Borg 2019, 249).

18 Jean-Claude Grenier in Coarelli 2009a, 234-238, Coarelli 2014, 205-207. I have doubts concerning this pedigree and prefer the traditional attribution to the *Iseum Campense* (Moormann 2018, 171-172, note 65). See Häuber 2017, 158-164, Versluys/Bülou-Clausen/Capriotti Vittozzi 2018, 32-33 (Katja Lembke: *Iseum*), 188 (Stefan Pfeiffer: *Iseum*), Nagel 2019, 1073-1077.

19 Coarelli 2014, 83-112, esp. 96-97, figs. 21-25. A description of its outlay is implicitly given by Vitruvius in his section on types of temples, i.e. dipteral temples (3.2.7). For the Hartwig reliefs, see Rita Paris in Coarelli 2009a, 460-468, Coarelli 2014, 98-106, Kaderka 2018, 186-196.



Fig. 4. Archaeological area of Largo Argentina with four Republican temples and the Porticus Minucia Frumentaria, all restored under Domitian. Rome, Largo Argentina (photo Lidy Peters).

provenance.²⁰ If this etymology really played such an important role, it would constitute one more case of anchoring through this ‘visualisation’ of the Flavians’ roots in both the Sabine area and on the Quirinal. The presence of the Romulus-Quirinus myth in the temple’s pediment as visible on the Flavian Hartwig relief might substantiate the importance of this connection.²¹

The Capitol Hill saw various paramount interventions during Domitian’s reign. The most important shrine of Rome, the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, had been rebuilt by his father after a devastating fire in December 69 during the fights between the Vitellian and Vespasian factions, but the 80 fire made a new reconstruction necessary. Domitian rendered the building very luxurious, with gilded bronze rooftiles, Pentelic marble columns, and a chryselephantine cult statue by Apollonios. Plutarch tells that the Greek poet Epicharmus compared Domitian to the gold-greedy Midas.²²

Despite a lightning strike in 96, this temple would remain more or less intact for the next two centuries.²³

The Capitol got two more Domitianic shrines, first, a small temple dedicated to Jupiter Custos, then a larger one for Jupiter Conservator.²⁴ They were connected with the personal biography: the young prince escaped, if we may believe Suetonius and Tacitus, from here in the guise of an Isis follower during the turmoil of the December 69 conflict.²⁵ Like Minerva, Jupiter became Domitian’s personal patron rather than the Isis whose followers gave him undercover.²⁶ The emperor had himself depicted on a relief adorning the altar as well as a statuette in the hand of the cult statue. It is unclear whether there was an old shrine dedicated to Isis relevant in this respect. I tend to follow Coarelli rather than Miguel John Versluys in virtue of the strong evidence adduced by the Roman scholar for

20 Coarelli 2014, 83, 97. Among the sources quoted is Ovid. *Fasti* 2.477-478, a text well-known in the Flavian era (sources in Coarelli 2014, 83 note 4).

21 See for a lengthy discussion of the connection between the Templum, Quirinus and the Flavian origins Leithoff 2014, 179-197. Kaderka 2018, 206-208 also stresses the Flavian veneration of Romulus and Remus. For one fragment, see Conlin, fig. 7.

22 Plut. *Publ.* 15.5. Translation from Frederick 2003, 200. For a full quotation, see Nathalie de Haan in this volume.

23 See S. De Angeli, *LTUR* III (1996) 151-152, Frederick 2003, 199-200.

24 Tac. *Hist.* 3.74.2. On these temples, C. Reusser, *LTUR* III (1996) 131-132, Arata 1997, 146-154 (he also suggests the presence of a mithraeum).

25 Suet. *Dom.* 1.2, Tac. *Hist.* 3.74.1. On the conflict Arata 1997, 149-151, Coarelli 2018, 69. The story has also been seen as fictitious and as a trope known from other persons as well: Gasparini/Veymiers 2018, 12, 89-90 note 82 [Giulia Sfameni Gasparro], 291-292 [Ludovine Beaudrin], 557-558 [Emmanuelle Rosso], Nagel 2019, 1048-1049, 1054-1055.

26 Emmanuelle Rosso in Gasparini/Veymiers 2018, 558. See now Coarelli 2018, 61-70.



Fig. 5. Façade which corresponds with the outline of the Odeum of Domitian. Rome, Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne (photo Lidy Peters).

its existence.²⁷ It should be searched for under the church of S. Maria in Aracoeli and possessed at least one obelisk, the ‘Obelisk Mattei’, erected by Domitian.²⁸ A first-century wall with semi-circular protrusions has been connected with this shrine.²⁹

In the densely crowded Campus Martius,³⁰ massive restorations dating back to Domitian are visible on Largo Argentina, where the four temples of the republican era and the surrounding piazza and porticoes were repaired after the fire and a new travertine pavement was installed. The complex was of enormous importance, for it included the Porticus Minucia frumentaria, the accommodation for the *frumenta* and oil distribution of the greater part of the lower classes. The Emperor could demonstrate his concern to maintain these accommodations despite the recent disaster and the death of his brother, who had been much-loved by the people. At the same time he copied works of Augustus who had ‘travertinized’ the temples and the piazza’s pavement and perhaps incremented the distribution accommodations.

The Campus offered further possibilities to execute building projects, despite the presence of venerable complexes like the Augustan Pantheon and the Baths of Agrippa and Nero. A large space of 220 by 70 m was destined for the *Iseum Campense*, the temple for Isis and Sarapis, located at the east side of the Saeptra.³¹ The complex emanated the Flavian connection with the Land of the Nile and had a sensible relation with the grain distribution in the nearby Porticus Minucia frumentaria. It must have been a fairy-tale-like setting, with palms, obelisks, and Egyptian and egyptianizing statuary along the Euripus, which, at its turn, reflected one of the Nile arms in the Delta. Water constituted a paramount component as expressed by the Euripus and other fountains. The Iseum clearly mirrors the Campus Martius with its perennial Tiber flooding and sacral spaces dedicated to water gods like those on Largo Argentina. Domitian fostered a special relationship with the land of the Nile, as did his father who grasped power in that country. Domitian was honoured as a pharaoh and stylised in that dignity in the shape of

27 See Coarelli 2018, 62-69. For the topography of this area Tucci 2006. The monograph announced by Tucci on this topic (p. 63, note 4) has not yet come out.

28 For this obelisk, nowadays in the Villa Mattei on the Caelius, see Coarelli 2018, 69, with bibliography.

29 Tucci 2006, 64-66, fig. 2. Cf. Arata 1997, Pier Luigi Tucci in Coarelli 2009, 218-221, Nagel 2019, 1049-1050.

30 See Moormann 2018, 170-173 for an overview, with bibliography.

31 Numbers given by Filippo Coarelli, *LTUR* III (1996), 108. See Versluys/Bülou Clausen/Capriotti Vittozzi 2018, Nagel 2019, 1056-1081, see in this book Miguel John Versluys.

portraits (Versluys, fig. 4).³² Contemporary Isea are known as well from other towns in Italy and farther away.³³

An impressive undertaking was the stadium constructed around 90, probably on top of Augustus' and Nero's stadiums, but much larger (275 x 106 m).³⁴ Its Greek architectural format tied in with its function to host Greek-style sport manifestations.³⁵ Next to it, the similarly Greek-styled Odeum, a roofed theatre, accommodated recitals, both of poetry and music. Its outlines can still be recognized in the façade of Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne (fig. 5).³⁶ With the propagation of Greek festivals, Domitian followed Nero, but also Augustus: both had embraced aspects from the classical Greek culture and visualized them in their versions of Rome (see note 35).

All these constructions show how Domitian meticulously anchored his projects in the building programmes of Augustus and Nero. Regardless of how he was perceived after his assassination, he assiduously sought to avoid being labelled a tyrant like Nero³⁷ by stressing the importance of public building as had been done by his father and brother in the previous decades.

32 See most recently Emmanuelle Rosso in Gasparini/Veymiers 2018, 560-561, figs. 18.14-15, Irene Bragantini in Versluys/Bülow Clausen/Capriotti Vittozzi 2018, 249-250, fig. 1 (portraits at Benevento, here Versluys, fig. 4, and in Palazzo Altemps), Nagel 2019, 1056 (as sign of "Herrscherlegitimation").

33 The rebuilt Iseum of Pompeii (Nagel 2019, 1125-1151) dates to the last years before the eruption of Vesuvius and that in Beneventum is from Domitian's era (see Irene Bragantini in Versluys/Bülow Clausen/Capriotti Vittozzi 2018, 243-259, Nagel 2019, 1163-1168).

34 Maria Letizia Caldelli in Bernard 2014, 44-45, Pierre Gros, *ibidem* 87-88, Jean-François Bernard/Paola Ciancio Rossetto, *ibidem*, 138-139. For measurements and further data see *ibidem*, 140-142.

35 For the stadium and its 'successive' stages of Piazza Navona, see Bernard 2014. On spectacles, see in this volume contributions by Daniëlle Sloopjes and Onno van Nijf, Robin van Vliet & Caroline van Toor.

36 Djamilia Fellague in Bernard 2014, 117-134.

37 Eric Varner (2017, 237) typifies this relation with Nero as "a careful recalibration of the Neronian visual program." See on their relationship Heerink/Meijer in press.

