

BOOK REVIEW

Domiziano: Fine di un a Dinastia. By ULISSE MORELLI. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014. Pp. 348. Paper, \$100.00. ISBN 978-3-447-10189-9.

The title under review makes a significant and substantial contribution to the study of Rome's second Imperial dynasty by offering a fine-grained description and analysis of the succession from Domitian to Nerva to Trajan (rather, from Domitian to Trajan *via* Nerva). The author uses literary, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence for a variety of chronological, prosopographical, and biographical studies in order to reconstruct the historical narrative of this tumultuous era of dynastic transition. The book consists of three parts which together recount the fall of Domitian and the concomitant rise of Nerva and Trajan.

In his "Introduzione" (11–15), Morelli begins with a brief look at the assassination of Domitian and at his subsequent *damnatio memoriae*: he points out that, while civil war followed the deaths of both Nero and Commodus, Rome managed to avoid a similar fate after the death of Domitian. At its core, the remainder of the work attempts to explain how and why this is so by tracking the delicate balance between continuity and change in the political establishment, especially through the reconstruction of various political networks.

"Parte I – Il regno di Domiziano" (17–165) divides the reign of Domitian into three roughly comparable periods—81–85, 86–90, and 90–96—and then treats "La congiura" (137–165). Morelli laments the relative lack of sophistication in modern interpretations of the end of the Flavian dynasty and calls for greater attention to the question of dynastic succession. He reviews the critical moments from throughout the reign when this issue came to the fore, beginning with the elevation of Domitian's wife Domitia Longina to Augusta and that of their (deceased) son to Divus Caesar, followed soon thereafter by Domitia's fall from grace and Domitian's affair with Julia Flavia (at least according to the traditional account), and continuing with a roll call of the many dynastic plots and conspiracies which ensued, including those hatched by L. Antonius Saturninus and the so-called "philosophical opposition" (Stoic, in particular).

In the course of this historical reconstruction (speculative, by and large, as the author himself admits), Morelli explores Domitian's fraught relationships with both the Senate and the military in order to trace the formation of the *partes Flavianae*, whose roots were planted deep in the turmoil surrounding the fall of Nero: the vast networks of Cn. Domitius Corbulo and Vistilia, the parents of Domitia Longina, well illustrate just how entrenched the "new" dynasty was in the establishment. Ultimately, of course, Domitian did fall victim to a palace conspiracy, and Morelli attributes his demise to his decision to execute his cousin T. Flavius Clemens, calling it "il suo suicidio politico" (140, see also 132). While it remains unclear what role the restored Domitia Longina and the Praetorian Guard played (or not) in the assassination plot, the author emphasizes the logic behind the selection of M. Cocceius Nerva as Domitian's successor and contemplates the potential involvement of Ti. Catus Caesius Fronto (relative of Silius Italicus) in the scheme.

"Parte II – I comandi provinciali" (167–239) consists of two chapters, the first an overview of the Rhine-Danube frontier and the fascinating case-study of Cn. Pompeius Longinus (see 187 for "un identikit"), and the second a more in-depth examination of the governors of the Moesias, the Germanias, and other strategically important provinces during the transition from Domitian to Nerva to Trajan. Through an elegant allusion to Trajan, Morelli frames this section of the book with the thought-provoking question, "Ma chi era veramente questo oscuro governatore della Pannonia, nelle cui mani per qualche tempo si ritrovarono i destini dell'Impero?" ("But then, who really was this obscure governor of Pannonia, in whose hands were placed the fate of the Empire for some time?" 176), and finds his answer in the careers of other aspirants to the throne: "D'altro canto, i potenziali rivali del nuovo *princeps* avevano una caratteristica comune: erano d'estrazione equestre, *omine novi* [sic] che difficilmente avrebbero potuto aspirare all'*imperium*" ("On the other hand, the potential rivals of the new *princeps* had one characteristic in common: they were of the equestrian order, *homines novi* who could hardly aspire to *imperium*", 239).

"Parte III – L'interregno di Nerva" (241–320) likewise consists of two chapters, the first a succinct account of Nerva's dealings with the Senate and the associated rise of what the author dubs the "*partes Traiani*" (on the model of the *partes Flavianae*), and the second a more in-depth analysis of the adoption of Trajan by Nerva. In the chapter on the adoption, Morelli articulates "alcuni [i.e., six] particolari decisamente importanti nello studio degli avvenimenti del biennio 96–98" which he feels have been "sottovalutati" by previous scholars and which he feels

may necessitate “una rilettura degli avvenimenti, almeno parzialmente differente” (287–288). The author subscribes to the idea that M. Cornelius Nigrinus Curvatus Maternus played a pivotal role, highlights the significance of Trajan’s appointment by Nerva as governor of Germania Superior, and stresses the importance of the conspiracy hatched by C. Calpurnius Piso Crassus Frugi Licinianus. Ultimately, Morelli proposes that the adoption of Trajan by Nerva merely provided cover for what, in fact, was an outright usurpation of the throne by Trajan (via Casperius Aelianus and the Praetorian Guard).

In the short “Conclusioni”, Morelli simply recapitulates the argument, ending with an apposite quote from the first page of Syme’s *Tacitus*, “The principate arose from usurpation”; Tacitus himself could have been cited to support the other half of the argument: *evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri* (*Historiae* 1.4.2), especially among the legions stationed along the *limes Germanicus*. The book looks back to Nero as much as it looks ahead to Trajan, and, in doing so, it provides an illuminating and stimulating (if not always convincing) conjectural reconstruction of a critical period in Roman history. As evidenced by the ample bibliography (323–341), the author demonstrates a deep and thorough engagement with the scholarship. *Domiziano: Fine di una dinastia* joins the ranks of other excellent monographs on the fall of the Flavians and will be required reading for scholars in history and related fields.

JOHN JACOBS

Montclair Kimberley Academy, jjacobs@mka.org