

## At Dinner with Domitian: A Case Study on an Emperor's Relationship to Food

The study of elite diet and dining is a notorious aspect of Roman history often marred by moralistic condemnations of extravagance. Legends of dormice dipped in honey and flamingo brains tend to dominate the discussion. In spite of the trend in social history to minimize the focus on upper-class foodways as mere rhetoric, there is still work to be done on the elite diet. The emperors, specifically of the first century CE, merit discussion and analysis of their historical relationship to food beyond traditional assumptions and shallow descriptions.

Roman authors' discourse on imperial foodways is certainly problematic. Diet and dining habits are used as tools with which some writers cast their opinions on the moral quality of the Caesars. Other writers employ mentions of food rhetorically in Roman panegyric and satire. It is, thus, difficult to assess the imperial diet free from the influence of virtue-laden critique or conscious flattery. That is not to say it is impossible; with critical assessment and the compliment of archaeological evidence, much can be examined, questioned, and learned.

Domitian offers an excellent case study, as the historical and archeological record surrounding his reign provides much fruitful ground for the study of imperial diet and dining. Unlike other first century emperors whose gastronomic lives were recorded primarily by Suetonius, a variety of writers penned accounts of Domitian's culinary character. Suetonius' *Vita Domitiani* is in fact rather wanting in culinary asides as compared to the earlier biographies. Statius and Martial provide eulogizing accounts of Domitian's famous palace and dining room atop the Palatine as well as narratives of banquets, both fictional and historical. Statius and Suetonius make noteworthy mention of policy changes enacted by Domitian pertaining to *sportulae* (Slater 2000). Adding to this diversity, Juvenal satirizes the emperor's taste for the

extravagant while critiquing his novel focus on court culture. Dio Cassius' account of a mock funerary banquet highlights Domitian's penchant for eccentric and deviant dining behaviors.

These sources are indeed complicated. However, archaeology affords the opportunity to compare and augment the characterization of Domitian and his relationship to food. The *triclinium* of the *Domus Flavia* on the Palatine hill in Rome is steeped with information on imperial dining. Its massive scale and precariously placed apse are highly commented upon both by ancient writers and modern scholars (Frederick 2003; MacDonald 1965). The physical features of the *triclinium* generally support the reputation of the building promoted in literary accounts (Gibson, DeLaine, and Claridge 1994). Its grand size and ornate decoration featuring exotic marbles conveyed the message of dominance and power intended by Domitian and his architect, Rabirius (Bek 1983).

Our understanding of emperors' relationship to food can be expanded through case studies like that of Domitian. Compared to his fellow Caesars, the evidence from his reign is unique in the large and varied amount of extant material relating to his culinary life. Through examination of literary accounts and archaeological remains a more nuanced, complete picture forms of emperors' diet and dining habits.

#### Bibliography

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