CHAPTER 1

Sources and Evidence

Frédéric Hurlet

Introduction

As one of the “human sciences,” history entails both a method and an object of study. Any study or assessment of the Flavian Age and its emperors must begin with the question of the sources upon which our knowledge of this period rests, and a vetting of those sources according to category. This is an essential prerequisite for all historical research; a synoptic examination of sources also offers a unique occasion to circumscribe the field of investigation by identifying which questions it is possible to answer and, no less importantly, those that are less fruitfully raised because of want of adequate evidence.

The sources used by ancient historians are not immediately intelligible to the general reader today because of their highly technical nature: this begins with, but is by no means limited to, the fact that the languages involved are, principally, Latin and Greek. A conventional division is made between written sources and material sources. The former fall into three main categories: literary, epigraphic, and numismatic; the latter include iconographic and archaeological evidence. Space limitations necessitate a narrowing of focus: this chapter will revolve around the question of imperial power as it is illuminated by written sources. The principal aim will be to highlight the contributions of the most important written documents to our knowledge of the Flavian principate, as well as critical debates they have given rise to, and the challenges that they continue to present. Material sources will be discussed more briefly, with an eye to what they bring to our knowledge of imperial power and its representation.

1 Literary sources

The essential list of literary sources on the Flavian period has not changed recently or even in the last century. The same “classical” authors still provide the point of departure for any research about the Flavians: above all, the Histories of Tacitus and Suetonius’
biographies, with much to be gleaned as well from the Epigrams of Martial and other poetry. But if the sources themselves have not changed of late, critical approaches to them have. Recent studies of Flavian authors have demonstrated that the understanding of literary sources is conditioned by a number of factors that must be taken into account. The first of these is the literary genre to which each work belongs: one should not, for example, treat the testimony of a poem in the same way as that of a biographical or historical account. There were precise generic rules that an author was more or less obliged to follow, and these had an important influence on the essence and tone of a particular treatment of the emperor or members of his family and inner circle. That it was dangerous openly to criticize the reigning princeps was as true for poets as it was for other writers – and here it should not be forgotten that Domitian was known for his passion for poetic composition. Generic convention might further limit the scope for a poet, especially one writing on mythological themes, to address contemporary issues and concerns. But it is also true that there were oblique and figurative modes of expression that allowed for critique of the powerful in encrypted form. It should, moreover, not be forgotten that some expressions of apparently servile praise and adulation of an emperor, such as that found in the Panegyric of Trajan by Pliny the Younger, could serve as a way of delineating the qualities of an ideal ruler, thereby applying protreptic pressure for conformity to those standards.

The second factor to consider in assessing the contribution of literary sources to our knowledge of the Flavian period is the date of their composition. In this regard, an important break occurs in 96 CE, the year of Domitian’s assassination and the advent of a new imperial dynasty. This chronological dividing-line does not merely indicate whether or not a given author was a contemporary witness to the events of the Flavian dynasty. From a political point of view, it marks the beginning of a systematic tendency of authors – including some who had previously expressed positive views – to blacken the principate of Domitian. This denigration served to emphasize by contrast the merits of the new ruling dynasty, and of Nerva and Trajan in particular, presented as the guarantors of a new golden age. Here the crucial question is whether we should follow the prevailing historiographical trend and be wary of these judgments post eventum or, rather, afford them a measure of credibility. What is at stake in this debate is nothing less than the merits of attempts to rehabilitate the last Flavian emperor, which began more than a century ago with the work of Stéphane Gsell (1894) and have proliferated in the scholarship of recent decades (Jones 1992; Southern 1997).

The third and final factor to be taken into account in assessing a literary source is what we know of a given author’s life: surviving biographical information often supplies clues as to how writers viewed their world, as well as their relationship to imperial power. Such assessment of the circumstances and conditions of production of particular works allows us better to “decode” the historical testimony they provide. That, broadly speaking, the Greek and Latin sources for the period constitute a literature written by aristocrats for aristocrats is crucial. What follows is a brief overview organized by date of composition and the literary genre.¹

Much like the Augustan Age before it, the Flavian Age sees a rich profusion of Latin poetry. This was evidently encouraged by the new regime – in no small part through Domitian’s creation of new artistic competitions: the quinquennial Capitolia at Rome and the annual festival in honor of Minerva, celebrated at his Alban villa under the name
Relations between the princeps, especially Domitian, and poets were often marked by mutual interest and a form of reciprocity: the emperor needed poets to broadcast a positive image of his reign, while poets looked to imperial patronage to enhance their social position (for such bestowal of dignity and popularity, see Le Doze 2009). Praise of the princeps and his family in poetry of the Flavian period should not, however, be regarded as naive panegyric. On the question of imperial representation, poetic production has given rise to widely contrasting assessments. It has been regarded both as a court literature in which one cannot expect even the slightest criticism of those in power, and as a subversive literature that expresses criticism in encrypted form. Such monolithic views are to be rejected in favor of more nuanced conceptions permitting us to see even encomiastic poetry as the product of a complex dialogue that casts the poet neither as a mere instrument of “propaganda” nor as an opponent of the imperial regime. The prevailing view today is that encomiastic literature, far from being purely servile, constructs a portrait of imperial power fashioned as an ideal against which the princeps might measure his own conduct and towards which, where failing, might strive (Rosati 2011). It thus becomes a form of communication whereby the laudans – the poet – could transmit an indirect message to the laudatus – the princeps – concerning his conception of imperial power and the manner it was to be exercised. The result is that the poetry of Flavian period tells us a good deal not only about the excesses of Domitian – here we might think of Statius’ description of the colossal statue of Domitian placed in the Forum (Silv. 1.1) – but also about the idealizing notions of the nature and exercise of imperial power that circulated in Flavian Rome.

Epic poetry was very much in vogue during the Flavian period, as the surviving work of Valerius Flaccus, Statius, and Silius Italicus amply attests. These writers well represent the prevailing literary tastes of the age, and Domitian’s reign in particular, through their reworking of mythological and historical subject matter. The subject matter notwithstanding, their poetry is anything but detached from its contemporary context and, without being overtly subversive, it seems to include criticism of the manner in which power was exercised by the last of the Flavian emperors.

The Argonautica of Valerius Flaccus has reached us in incomplete form – it breaks off midway through the eighth book – probably due to the poet’s untimely death around 90 CE. This epic provides a novel retelling of the well-known myth of Jason and the Argonauts, updated in no small part by recasting the traditional Greek tale along Roman lines. Valerius begins with a flattering invocation of Vespasian, but the subsequent narrative strikes a more ambivalent note. In the recurring exploration of relations between tyrannical rulers and oppressed aristocrats, including elements such as aristocratic suicides in response to imperial death sentences, we can see reflections of contemporary political realities. Without question the aristocratic Roman reader would have noticed the similarities to the political configurations of the principate (Zissos 2009). Statius (more fully Publius Papinius Statius) is another important poet datable to the principate of Domitian. Hailing from Naples, he was born sometime in the 40s and lived at least until in the mid-90s. The author of two extant epics, a Thbaid and an unfinished Achilleid, Statius is perhaps best known for his collection of shorter occasional poems, the Silvae, many of which extol the last Flavian princeps. In the five books of the Silvae we find many of the central themes of Domitianic policy and ideology: the celebration of
victory over the Germans (Silv. 3.3.164–71); construction of public buildings (4.2.60, 4.3.9–10, 5.1.239–41); and the divine character of the monarchy, affirmed through the assimilation of the princeps to a terrestrial Jupiter – most strikingly through the identification of the palace on the Palatine built by Rabirius as the residence of the king of the gods (4.2.18–31; see also 1.6.27, 3.4). The last Flavian epic poet active whose work has come down to us is Silius Italicus (more fully Tiberius Catius Asconius Silius Italicus). Born during the principate of Tiberius, his life extends at least until the beginning of the principate of Trajan, at which point he disappears from the historical record. A senator, his career reached its culmination under Vespasian with his appointment to the proconsulship of Asia, an office at the pinnacle of the senatorial cursus honorum. Silius’ son was himself consul in 94, which enables us to situate him in the imperial court or in a milieu not far removed from it. Written under Domitian, Silius’ Punica is the longest surviving Latin epic (17 books running to approximately 15,000 verses). It takes as its theme an historical subject, the Second Punic War, a choice that reaches back to two of the earliest Roman epicists, Naevius and Ennius. While this topic offers limited scope for reflection on contemporary political matters, the Punica addresses pertinent general themes such as Roman virtues, along with Rome’s greatness and its perceived moral decline after the victory over Hannibal (see CHAPTER 22, EPIC POETRY, section 5). The only passage that deals explicitly with contemporary politics is a prophecy ex eventu put in the mouth of Jupiter that looks forward to the advent of the Flavian dynasty, anticipating its military success and insisting on its divine origins (Pun. 3.594–629).

The case of the epigrammist Martial is complex. A native of Bilbilis in Spain, he has the peculiarity of having begun his literary career under Titus, having been active principally under Domitian and having retired under Trajan, at which point he returned to his native land. Martial produced an abundant oeuvre that provides, through its sketches of everyday life, valuable information about Rome in the late first century CE, while offering a vision of the Flavian establishment that is often close to the official image. Such similarities do not mean he wrote at the express request of the Flavians, but rather that his work often echoes the principal themes of imperial ideology established by Domitian, though it does so in a poetic language that reflects both Martial’s own artistic qualities and the genre to which his poetry belongs. In the De Spectaculis, a collection of 33 poems published in 80 CE, he celebrates the inaugural games of the Flavian Amphitheater dedicated by the emperor Titus. This collection offers valuable testimony for the central role played by public spectacle at Rome as a venue for communication between the emperor, the Roman aristocracy and the people. Martial is best known for his Epigrams, short poems that frequently refer to Domitian, and do so in regard to three aspects, characteristic of that emperor’s exercise of power and self-representation: affirmation of the dynastic principle and concomitant hope of a continuing hereditary succession (6.3, 9.1), frequent mentions of Minerva (a favorite deity of that emperor), and flattering references to military campaigns conducted by the last Flavian (especially in books 7–9 on the successful wars waged in 92/93 against the Sarmatians in Pannonia and the Swabians). The first of these has elements of continuity with Flavian predecessors, Vespasian in particular; the latter two are rather more particular to Domitian’s reign.

Prose literature is represented in the Flavian period by several well-known figures. We begin with Pliny the Elder, author of the Natural History, a monumental encyclopedia running to 37 books. A member of the equestrian order, Pliny is the perfect example of
a man devoted to the Roman empire and its emperor. He followed an equestrian career path that saw him hold several procuratorships and led to the prefecture of the fleet at Misenum, in the Bay of Naples, where he died in 79, attempting to satisfy his scientific curiosity by observing the eruption of Vesuvius at close range. His *Natural History* is a kind of “inventory” of the empire and a monument to the glory of Rome – and not merely because of the wealth of information compiled and offered to the reader (Naas 2002). The production of this encyclopedia is driven by a thirst for knowledge deriving from the needs of an empire whose inventory-taking, initiated with Augustus and perceptible in the work of Strabo, was vigorously resumed once Vespasian had restored peace and order. In this respect it is unsurprising that Pliny, in the preface, chose to dedicate his *Natural History* to the emperor’s “co-regent” and designated successor, Titus, considered both as the first reader and the present and future bearer of a power without which the composition of such an opus could never be achieved or even conceived. More than merely encyclopedic, Pliny’s literary project is driven by moral and ideological impulses that place it in the context of the Flavian restoration following the instability of the late 60s. His method is likewise in accordance with contemporary practice, which favored reliance on earlier literary authorities over the empirical observation of nature. It is for this reason that Pliny provides in the opening book a list of the many sources he consulted, ordered in his own way, a novelty that contributes to the innovative and paradigmatic character of the *Natural History* (see CHAPTER 29, RECEPTION OF FLAVIAN LITERATURE, section 2.1).

Worthy of passing mention is Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus), who was appointed by Vespasian to the new chair of rhetoric in Rome, and who later enjoyed close relations with Domitian. His *Institutio Oratoria*, a teaching manual running to 12 books, offers fulsome testimony for the central position of rhetoric and the teaching thereof in Flavian Rome as it systematically constructs and elaborates upon the Catonian ideal of the *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (“the good man skilled in speaking,” *Inst*. 12.1.1).

Rather more interesting and unusual is the case of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian who fought against Rome prior to joining the Flavians and becoming, as his name suggests, both a Roman citizen and a close associate of the new dynasty. Josephus straddles two cultures, Jewish and Greek, in a world under Roman dominion. His literary oeuvre, written in Greek, illuminates the history of his own people along with the unfolding of the recent Jewish revolt and the closely associated sequence of events that led to the emergence of the Flavian dynasty. Leaving aside the *Against Apion*, a forensic plea *pro domo* delivered in 93–94, Josephus composed in Domitian’s reign a compendious work entitled *The Jewish Antiquities* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*) which extends to 20 books and reaches back to the remote past of the Jewish people. Its subject matter notwithstanding, this account is inflected by the Roman context of its composition. In addition, the importance that Josephus attaches to broader institutional issues leads him to discuss Roman matters: to take just one example, he provides the most detailed information we have for the circumstances of the accession of the emperor Claudius (*AJ* 19.236–66). A concern with recent history is reflected in Josephus’ other major work, the *Jewish War* (*Bellum Judaicum*), describing the conflict of 66–73 CE, which pitted his homeland against his adopted country. The Flavian dynasty is at the heart of this account, and it is not surprising that it is presented in a positive light. The proximity of Josephus to the new regime makes him a valuable witness, capable of understanding the Flavian
political program, and of transmitting elements of its “official” version. It is through his
detailed account of the joint triumph of Vespasian and Titus over Judea (BJ 7.123–57),
held in June 71, that Josephus makes clear the extent to which this event was perceived
by contemporaries as a political and dynastic turning point. This magnificent triumph
marked the first occasion upon which all three members of the new imperial family were
reunited in Rome (Domitian also participated in the procession, but riding on horseback
rather than in a chariot). It amounted to a public celebration of the end of wars and the
official birth of a new dynasty heralding an era of renewed stability.

Mention must also be made of certain authors writing in the early second century CE,
that is, shortly after the assassination of Domitian. Well-known literary figures such as
Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Martial (in his post-Flavian guise) and Juvenal
have in their different ways transmitted a decidedly negative image of the last Flavian
emperor. Through contrast, whether explicit or implied, with the early Antonine emper-
or, they give expression to the idea that contemporary Rome – and its senatorial class in
particular – was experiencing a new golden age after the excesses of Domitian’s princ-
pate (Ramage 1989). Various modern attempts to rehabilitate Domitian have led to criti-
cal assessments of the testimony of these authors as offering the perspective of an
aristocracy – senatorial and equestrian – that was mistreated in the later years of Domitian’s
reign. While it is true that these authors either downplay or ignore – whether knowingly
or unknowingly does not matter – Domitian’s military and administrative achievements,
their testimony should not be dismissed on the doubtful grounds that they were under
the influence of a hypothetical early Antonine “propaganda.” If the repeated condemna-
tions of Domitian in Pliny the Younger’s Panegyric offered a ready and effective means
of praising Trajan within the framework of an enthusiastic eulogy of the new princeps, it
should not be assumed that the same strategy automatically suited other authors of the
early Antonine period – particularly as they were composing in different genres. Indeed,
it would be profoundly misguided to put on the same footing as Pliny’s Panegyric such
diverse works as Martial’s Epigrams, Juvenal’s Satires, the historical works of Tacitus,
and the biographies of Suetonius.

The last-mentioned author, born sometime around the 70s CE, probably at Hippo in
North Africa, constitutes, from a historiographical perspective, our most important
source for the Flavian period. Suetonius consolidated the three Flavian emperors into a
single chapter, the eighth, whereas an individual chapter had been dedicated to each of
the Julio-Claudians, from Caesar to Nero. The three Flavian biographies, indeed, offer
the only continuous narrative of the dynasty that has come down to us – aside from
summaries belonging to much later periods, which are themselves partly dependent
upon his account. Suetonius does not provide an account in strict chronological order,
preferring to proceed “by categories” (per species), as he sketches out the contours of
“good” and “bad” emperors. He famously supplies a wealth of suggestive information
on the Flavians – for example on the obscure and modest origins of this gens (Vesp. 1.1),
on the omens foretelling their rise to power (well discussed in Vigourt 2001), and on the
circumstances of birth and death of the three emperors. Suetonius’ individual portraits
of the Flavian emperors are morally inflected according to aristocratic notions of imperial
power and offer striking contrasts. Titus, “the darling and delight of the human race”
(Tit. 1), is afforded the most favorable biography of all the Lives, being praised in particu-
lar for his generous spirit. Vespasian is also very positively treated, his only shortcoming
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being avarice (Vesp. 16.1 sola est, in qua merito culpetur, pecuniae cupiditas), and even that is nuanced (16.6). Domitian, though, is depicted as a full-blown tyrant: cruel, greedy, and bloodthirsty. Beyond these portraits, it is worth observing that the Flavian chapter records the greatest number of witticisms uttered by its protagonists (for the possible existence of a collection accessed by Suetonius, see Gascou 1984, 319). These offer useful insights into the minds and characters – rather caustic in the case of Vespasian – of the three emperors. It is well known that Suetonius had access to various sources by virtue of the offices he held in the imperial bureaucracy under Hadrian (as part of an eminent equestrian career): he was successively secretary of studies (a studiis), of libraries (a bibliothecis) and of imperial correspondence (ab epistulis).

Our knowledge of the Flavian period also owes much to the writing of Tacitus, and his Histories in particular. This work has not survived the vicissitudes of transmission intact: only the first four books and part of the fifth are now extant. It has become commonplace of modern historians to lament the loss of the rest of the work, but what we have still provides the most detailed account of the pivotal years 69–70 to have reached us. In addition to the Histories, Tacitus’ Agricola, a short treatise devoted to the life of the author’s titular stepfather, usefully traces out the career of a prominent and capable senator whose most significant offices were held under the Flavians. In it the emperors Domitian and Trajan are pointedly contrasted, the latter being praised for having restored the senatorial libertas that had been suppressed by the former – including restrictions on freedom of expression and publication (Agr. 2–3, cf. also 44.6). Tacitus’ primary purpose, of course, is to transmit to posterity the deeds and character of a senator who was close to him personally as well as being a relative by marriage. This task is more difficult, the author laments at the opening of his work, in an age that no longer recognized the merits of individual aristocrats as readily as before (Agr. 1.1 and 1.4; cf. also 46.4). But the Agricola is also a document about the administration of the Roman empire under the Flavians, dealing with both Roman military expansion in Britain and the duties of the provincial governor in his dealings with subject peoples. In this respect Tacitus emerges as a historian of imperialism who has perceived only too clearly uncomfortable truths associated with the necessity of provincial integration and consequently developed an ecumenical vision not without criticism of Roman abuses, including a famous speech put in the mouth of the British chieftain Calgacus (Agr. 30–2; for Tacitus on Roman imperialism, see Questa 1998).

The final author to be taken into account is the poet Juvenal, who wrote a series of 16 satires in the early second century. Of the author’s own life we have little secure information; in the Satires he decries the perceived faults of his time and is thereby led to make reference to the Flavian period during which he lived. For the most part, the Flavian emperors do not appear as central figures; but one poem, Satire 4, takes Flavian power and its operation as a principal thematic concern. Juvenal’s purpose is ironic: he describes the conduct of an imperial council (consilium principis) convened to decide how to cook a gigantic turbot, which, on account of its prodigious size, was presented to Domitian at his Alban villa. It is of course the contrast between the solemnity of the gathering and the triviality of its agenda that generates the humor of the piece. Domitian is the target of the bulk of the poet’s disparagement and sarcasm. He is depicted as a tyrannical (Sat. 4.86) and vicious (4.85, 150–2) ruler who lives in luxury (4.38, 137), encourages the practice of informers (4.47–52), and pushes his advisers to praise him
rather than express independent opinions (4.67–9, 116–29). This portrait corresponds to the negative characterization of the Domitianic principate that figures more briefly in other satires (2.29–81, 6.82–113, 7.80–92), where the emphasis is on the lack of libertas under the last of the Flavians. Such disparagement of the recent past should not, however, lead us to regard it as written in the service of Trajan. The very nature of Juvenal’s work prohibits such a conclusion; it should instead be observed that the intrigue revolving around the fate of the unfortunate turbot uses established commonplaces about Domitian in order to enhance the satirical effect. This is a sign that the last Flavian had (already) been extracted from objective historical discourse to become the prototype of the “bald Nero” (calvo Neroni, Sat. 4.38), and thereby round out the already crowded gallery of “mad” emperors.

From authors writing after the Antonine period, we have accounts that are less valuable for being both more remote in time from the Flavian Age and less detailed in their treatment. Cassius Dio might have been a partial exception: he discussed the Flavian dynasty in Books 67 and 68 of his Roman History, but this part of the Greek historian’s magnum opus has been lost, and we must settle for anthologies and abstracts from the Byzantine period (Constantinian excerpta from the tenth century, some entries in the Suda, and, most importantly, the abridgments of Xiphilin and Zonaras). Mention should also be made of abridgers from late antiquity such Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, though such treatments offer no new data; they merely reiterate an established historiographical tradition, drawing on Suetonius in particular for portraits that set the virtues of the first two Flavian principates against the many excesses of the third.

2 Epigraphic evidence

In contrast to their literary counterparts, epigraphic sources for the Flavian period have significantly increased in number over the last century. Hundreds of newly discovered Greek and Latin inscriptions from the Roman world are published every year – the reader is referred to L’Année Épigraphique, which offers a systematic annual inventory – many of which are dated to the Flavian period. The steady influx of fresh evidence, arising in large part from archaeological projects, has revised our knowledge and understanding of the Flavian period in a variety of areas. The Augustan “revolution” had given rise to an increase in the production of Latin inscriptions throughout the Roman empire, especially in Italy and in the western part of the Mediterranean. This new “epigraphic culture” was consolidated under the Flavians, and even strengthened in regions such as the Iberian Peninsula, in connection with patterns of municipalization.

Our understanding of local governance has been significantly enhanced by the ever-expanding body of epigraphic evidence. To take just one example, the discovery in the 1980s in Andalusia (southern Spain) of the Lex Irnitana, that is, a law passed in the Roman town of Irni, has provided historians with a wealth of new data that will be discussed at the end of this section. With respect to imperial power, the situation has proven to be somewhat more static. Recent decades have seen no dramatic advances in epigraphic documentation on the fundamental question of the evolution of imperial power in the post-Augustan principate; there has been no discovery comparable to the Tiberian senatus consultum regarding Germanicus, unearthed principally in Andalusia over
the past three decades. For the Flavian Age, the point of departure remains a law concerning Vespasian’s investiture, widely referred to as the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani*, and usually dated to late 69 or early 70. Known and discussed since the Middle Ages, the content of this law continues to pose problems and give rise to heated critical debate. The *Lex* is a document unique in its kind, since we know of no other law of imperial investiture (the full text and translation are provided in APPENDIX 4). It survives in the form of a bronze tablet, now housed in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. This tablet, it should be noted, is the final, and lone extant, member of a series: there were originally one or more preceding tablets that are now lost. The *Lex* is divided into eight clauses that define the authority of Vespasian in the following areas: rights in affairs of war and peace, including that of concluding treaties without prior authorization (I); powers of the emperor in relation to the senate (II and III); the right of *commendatio* to all elected offices (IV); the right to extend the *pomerium* (V); power commonly referred to as “discretionary” but probably limited to particular spheres, to take measures deemed appropriate to promote the welfare of the state in sacred and secular matters, as well as in public and private law (VI); exemption from certain laws and plebiscites (VII); retroactive ratification of all acts of the emperor prior to the vote of investiture (VIII). The law concludes with a *sanctio* (sanction) that declares its superior authority to that of any other laws with which it might be in conflict.

Though the document defines itself as a *lex*, and the concluding *sanctio* is characteristic of comitial legislation, the clauses themselves are formulated in the manner characteristic of *senatus consultum* (in particular, the use of the subordinating conjunction *uti* followed by the present subjunctive to introduce the various clauses); this suggests that the *comitia* ratified the senate’s resolution in a perfunctory manner that was typical of the early imperial period (see Brunt 1977, 95–6). We find a similar pattern in a law passed in 19 CE by the Roman people on funeral honors to be granted to Germanicus, part of which is preserved in the *Tabulae Hebana* and *Siarensis*.

Though clearly offering fundamental testimony on the nature, legal basis, and evolution of imperial power, the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani* nevertheless poses rather more questions than it provides clear and consensual answers. The issues it raises are of such daunting complexity that its authenticity was often called into doubt between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Ferrary 2009). Such doubts have since been banished, but modern scholarship remains some distance from resolving the various problems, both general and on the level of detail, arising from an analysis of the *Lex*. There are three principal issues that have been and continue to be the object of intense critical debate. The first is the history of the transmission of the *Lex*. The famous bronze tablet may have been discovered as early as the eleventh century, and certainly no later than the end of thirteenth. Its political use by Cola di Rienzo in the middle of the fourteenth century and its “fortune” from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries are topics very much in vogue in recent scholarship. A striking piece of evidence, which has generated ongoing critical debate, is provided by an anonymous chronicler – identified by Billanovich with Bartolomeo di Iacovo da Valmontone, an acquaintance of Petrarch. The chronicler describes the scene of presentation of the law to the people in the Roman Basilica of St John of Lateran by Cola di Rienzo in 1346 and reproduces the content of the clauses of the law as it was presented by the latter. It has long been wondered whether Cola had knowledge of an additional bronze tablet, and if so, whether the anonymous chronicler’s
report could be used to restore clauses not attested on the single bronze tablet that has come down to us. In recent scholarship the affirmative view of Sordi (1971) has been endorsed by Purpura (1999), but a more skeptical stance is taken by Collins (1998) and Ferrary (2001, 151). A reference made by the anonymous chronicler to the right to re-channel the course of rivers is crucial in this regard, as it prompts us to ask whether such jurisdiction would have fallen within the framework of enumerated imperial powers, as well as whether it would have been appropriate to the context of Vespasian’s principate (only critics responding in the affirmative, like Bruun 2009, will be receptive to the possibility that Cola had knowledge of parts of the Lex now missing).

Unanimity has also proved elusive with regard to the second issue, namely, the precise stage of investiture at which the powers specified by the Lex were conferred on Vespasian. Did the Lex confer en bloc all imperial powers (tribunician power, imperium and supplementary powers), one of the two main powers (tribunician power or imperium) along with a series of supplementary powers, or just a series of supplementary powers? Its content makes clear that supplementary powers were granted to Vespasian that were additional to the prerogatives defined by imperium and tribunicius power, but the loss of at least one preceding tablet does not allow us to impose one solution rather than another (cf. the attempted synthesis of Ferrary 2001, 150–4).

The third and final issue concerns whether the Lex was an established measure, that is, a form of legislation passed on which the powers specified by the Lex were conferred on Vespasian, or whether it was, to the contrary, promulgated for the first time for Vespasian, as an expedient to compensate for the lack of auctoritas intrinsic to a figure of comparatively modest origins inaugurating a new dynasty. The first alternative has held the status of communis opinio since the foundational study of Brunt (1977); more recently, though, the scholarly trend has been to qualify or challenge this assumption. The theory of the essential novelty of the Lex de imperio Vespasiani depends on the assumption that this law is specifically related to the context of 69, that it constitutes an unprecedented attempt to provide a legal basis for imperial authority. In other words, it will have recognized ex lege Vespasian’s right to do what his predecessors had done by virtue of their auctoritas. But this is to reach beyond the limits of what the balance of evidence permits us to conclude. It is certainly in itself conceivable that the disappearance of the Julio-Claudian dynasty led the incipient regime to propagate one or more majestic laws of investiture, and that it is the very novelty of this expedient that accounts, in part, for the preservation of the Lex de imperio Vespasiani. But it would be ill advised to ignore the evidence of sources indicating that all imperial power was formally conferred by law, and that, moreover, the circumstances of his accession had encouraged Caligula to have his imperial powers vested through legislation. Suetonius’ well-known references to the obscurity of the gens Flavia (Vesp. 1.1) and Vespasian’s initial lack of maestas and auctoritas (Vesp. 7.2) do not suffice to counteract the weight of evidence for the existence of prior laws conferring some or all of the imperial powers, or, indeed, the testimony of Tacitus that following the death of Vitellius Vespasian received “all the powers usually granted to principes” (cuncta principibns solita, Hist. 4.3.3). In the light of such compelling indications it seems incumbent upon proponents of uniqueness to demonstrate the unlikelihood of such a law of investiture prior to the Lex de imperio Vespasiani – and that demonstration has yet to be made. Finally, it is worth noting a feature of the Lex that points to its traditional character, namely, the mention in five clauses of Augustus,
Tiberius, and Claudius as precedents, underscoring that most of the powers granted to Vespasian had been exercised in the past by “good” emperors, whose memory had not been not condemned. As for the clauses in which no reference is made to Julio-Claudian antecedents (III, IV, VIII), the absence of a cited precedent is explained by technical considerations and does not signify Flavian innovation (Hurlet 1993; Mantovani 2005 and 2009).

Another pertinent Flavian epigraphic source consists of a series of fragments belonging to the so-called Acts of the Arval Brothers (Acta Arvalia), a record of religious services rendered by members of this priestly college (Scheid 1998). Beyond its obvious value for religious historians, this document refers to various ceremonies commemorating particular acts of investiture of imperial powers (Scheid 1992). The surviving fragments all have to do with the accession of Domitian in 81. The Acta report that sacrifices were offered on September 14, September 30 and October 1 in conjunction with three successive steps: Domitian’s acclamation as Imperator by the senate following his selection as emperor by the soldiery (the Praetorian Guard in this case); the granting of tribunician power by the comitia; the pronouncement of vows for his well-being. This shows that under the Flavians, imperial investiture continued to be a complex process stretching over several weeks and involving various actors (the soldiery, the senate, the comitia), as well as acts of different kinds (acclamation, promulgation of senatus consulta and laws, public vows).

The contribution of Flavian inscriptions is by no means limited to the juridical sphere and strictly institutional matters. They also provide valuable indications as to how the regime wished to represent itself and how it was perceived outside Rome. Dedications to Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, found throughout the Roman empire, are far too numerous to be enumerated here, but two general features are worth identifying: a strong dynastic emphasis, and the recurring characterization of Vespasian as a restorer (often through the use of the verbs restituere and reificere or the nouns conservator and restitutor). The latter places the rise of the Flavian dynasty in the formal context of a restoration, as was the case when the Principate was founded by Augustus, and points to an imperative, strongly felt in the early years of Vespasian’s reign, to represent the inevitable changes arising from the foundation of the new dynasty within an overarching framework of continuity. The fact that Vespasian undertook the rebuilding and dedication of the Capitol, which was damaged by fire in 69, is thus significant from both a religious and political point of view.

Not to be overlooked are inscriptions marking the pomerium, for which there was Claudian precedent. These date to the early months of 75 and indicate the extension of this sacred boundary in connection with the censorship of Vespasian and Titus, held in 73/74. There are four extant cippi (boundary stones) along with four restored under Hadrian but reflecting the Flavian layout. Their content indicates that, as earlier with Claudius, the reason for this prolatio pomerii is the expansion of the empire (occupying the right bank of the Rhine?). It is likely that the new area incorporated by the Flavian extension was a small portion of the space beyond the Tiber, modern Trastevere (Coarelli 2009).

Inscriptions offer precious testimony for the practices and procedures involved in the administration of the empire in the later first century CE. Indeed, they constitute the only manner of source that preserves the content of the three types of imperial ordinances (edicts, rescripts and mandates) for this time, as the legal compilations of later periods do not reach back beyond the principate of Hadrian. One of the best examples is a letter
from Vespasian addressed to the local authorities of Sabora, a city in the province of Hispania Baetica (identified with modern Cañete la Real). The Saborensians had evidently sought permission from the emperor to build a new city, with like privileges to the old, in a better location:

The Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, holding tribunician power for the ninth time, hailed Imperator eighteen times, Consul for the eighth time, Father of the Fatherland, greets the quattuorviri and decurions of Sabora. Since you have indicated that the smallness of your community results from the constricting effect its physical situation, I authorize you to build a city on the plain, bearing my name, as you desire. I guarantee the revenues (vectigalia) that you say you received from the divine Augustus; should you wish additional revenues you must contact the proconsul: I cannot make a decision on such a matter without an indication from him. I received your ordinance on 25 July (77); I dispatched ambassadors on the 29th of the same month. Farewell. The duumvirs C. Cornelius Severus and M. Septimius Severus had this letter engraved in bronze at public expense.12

Vespasian’s immense power is expressed through his name and titles, and his power to create from afar a new city bearing his gentile name (Flavia).13 For their part, the Saborensian authorities had the imperial letter engraved, thereby monumentalizing the emperor’s generosity in the form of a public record.

Another inscription from the province of Hispania Baetica preserves the only extant rescript from the emperor Titus. It reproduces a letter dated September 7, 79 in which Titus settles a dispute between the municipium of Munigua (modern Mulva, 30 km northeast of Seville) and Servilius Pollio, a “tax farmer” (that is, a collector of local revenues or vectigalia).14 When the city refused to pay him what it owed, Pollio appealed to the proconsul, who ruled in his favor. The magistrates and decurions of Munigua thereupon sent an embassy to the emperor to appeal the proconsul’s decision. Though such recourse to the higher authority of the princeps was standard legal procedure, Titus rejects this one as unjustified and so, in addition to dismissing the appeal, he admonishes the Muniguenses, pointing out that they should be subject to a fine for an unjustified appeal. With a customary flourish of indulgentia, however, he not only forgoes applying such a penalty, but also grants the municipium a remittance of 50 000 sestertii. This generosity prompts the local authorities to have the letter engraved and put on display in the city.

This pair of imperial letters from Baetica are, technically speaking, rescripts – that is to say, imperial responses to appeals or petitions made by cities. As such, they illuminate an important aspect of the operation of the imperial administration, which spent an enormous amount of time responding to such requests (on the petition-response model, developed by Millar and still heuristically useful, see most recently Eich 2012). But the imperial administration also had the ability to send instructions to provincial authorities by means of mandata, a category of imperial ordinance that survives in much smaller numbers than rescripts. Here again inscriptions play a crucial role in preservation. A case in point is the engraved copy of a mandatum from Hama (Syria). The text, translated into Greek, features instructions sent by Domitian to his procurator Athenodorus Claudius, aimed at regulating the use of the vehiculatio (the imperial mail service) so as to prevent abuses by the imperial administration.15

Epigraphy is often the only source we have for precise and detailed information on the management and public life of cities, those fundamental cells of the Roman empire, for
the Flavian period. From this perspective, the Iberian Peninsula constitutes a privileged object of study, as it was a particular focus of all three emperors. The most significant Flavian measure, as well as the best documented, was Vespasian’s bestowal of *ius Latii* (the Latin right) to all of Hispania during his joint censorship of 73/74 (Plin. *NH* 3.30). This was a blanket grant of the Latin right to all Spanish cities, with the most favored among them being granted the still higher status of Latin *municipium*. These changes in status explain the comparative large number of bronze inscriptions dating to the Flavian period that document “municipal laws.” Such inscriptions were evidently meant to document the institutional procedures to be followed by the community in question in the wake of the grant of *ius Latii*, and thus attest to the transformational impact of Vespasian’s measure.

For a long time critical attention was largely focused on the fragments of two inscriptions from, respectively, the Latin municipalities of Malaga and Salpensa, dating to the reign of Domitian. The remains of the two inscriptions were discovered together (a curiosity given that the towns were at some distance from one another) in a brick pit near Malaga in 1861. The longstanding evidentiary importance of these fragmentary *leges* was eclipsed and subsumed by the dramatic discovery in 1981 of the *Lex Irnitana*, also dating to the reign of Domitian, and now housed in the National Museum of Archeology in Seville. This inscription is a charter for a *municipium* in Hispania Baetica, presumed to have been called Irni. The *Lex Irnitana* is the only such law to survive in substantial sections: it essentially reduplicates the contents of the *Malacitana* and *Salpensana*, and contains much more besides. Of the original 10 bronze tablets, six, each with three columns, are almost completely extant (*AE* 1986 333; the edition of Lamberti 1993 merits consultation). This exceptional document attests to the high degree of precision required by its legislator. It defines in a very detailed manner such technical matters as the procedure for the election of city magistrates and the method for selecting ambassadors. The similarity between these municipal laws and the fragmentary legislation recently discovered by Duratón in Hispania Citerior would seem to indicate that these Flavian-era regulations were not confined to the province of Baetica alone within the Iberian Peninsula.

3 Numismatic evidence

Numismatic evidence is hybrid in nature inasmuch as coins almost invariably unite an image and a caption or legend. The visual and the textual thus work in combination to convey the desired “message.” One of the main achievements of research on the Flavian age over the last two decades has been more fully to take into account the testimony of coinage and to integrate it into the broader political history of the Flavian dynasty. Coins offer indications both of the image of itself that the Flavian dynasty strove to project and the image of the dynasty as constructed by the various communities of the empire. This dichotomy arises from a division in the authority for minting coins in the Roman empire. In addition to the imperial coinage, issued at Rome or in the provinces by official mints, local and regional authorities were granted limited rights to issue coins (often, but not always, restricted to coins of lower value and baser metals). In the latter case, the coinage was both functionally and symbolically integrated into the Roman system, but the stamps
were designed and approved by the local or regional authority in question. The study of this material has been greatly facilitated by the recent publication of two important reference works covering imperial issues for the Flavian period: the second edition of volume 2 of *Roman Imperial Coinage* (edited by Carradice and Buttrey, replacing the first edition of 1926, and cited as *RIC*²), and the second volume of *Roman Provincial Coinage* (edited by Burnett, Amandry, and Carradice, and cited as *RPC*). For chronological reasons, our examination begins with provincial coinage. The Flavian imperial image was actually born in the East because of the circumstances of Vespasian’s accession – including his proclamation as *imperator* in the legionary camp of Nicopolis near Alexandria.

It was not the imperial mints, at Rome or elsewhere, which struck the first coins bearing the image of the new *princeps*, but rather the most important local mints of the East, those of Antioch and Alexandria. Antioch was a logical choice as both the capital of the province of Syria and Vespasian’s residence in 69: from that year onwards aurei, *denarii* and *tetradrachmas* were struck there (Tac. *Hist.* 2.82; cf. *RPC* 1901–75). Alexandria was an equally suitable location: the second city of the empire, it was here that Vespasian was first declared emperor, made his initial decisions, and stayed regularly throughout the first year of his reign (for the Alexandrian coinage under Vespasian, struck from July to August 69, see *RPC* 2401–61). In fashioning the image of the new *princeps*, the coinage from both mints feature elements that will recur in the imperial coinage: the new dynasty’s restorative political program, signaled in part through legends invoking *Libertas Augusta* (*RPC* 1901), on which more below; the characteristic emphasis on the dynastic nature of Vespasian’s rule, expressed through the early appearance of the portrait of Titus and, to a lesser extent, that of Domitian; allusions in various forms to Flavian military victory – for example with the figure of an eagle and a palm on the reverse of *tetradrachmas* from Antioch (*PRC* 1936–9 and 1945–6); on the coins of Alexandria are found images of Nike (*RPC* 2402, 2406, 2412, 2417) as well as the restoration of peace resulting from Flavian victory (*RPC* 2401, 2411 and 2422).

The imperial mint at Rome struck its first Flavian coins in 70 – whether before or after the return (*adventus*) of Vespasian in October of that year is unclear. In any event, the Flavian coinage issued from this and other imperial mints can be characterized as conservative in both inspiration and execution. Modeled on the coinage of Augustus, though without mechanical imitation, it is organized around three main themes present in Augustan coinage and adumbrated as well in the coinage of Antioch and Alexandria: the celebration of the “restoration of the *Res Publica*” (*Res Publica restituta*), the dynastic character of the new regime, and the exaltation of imperial victory (see Rosso 2009). These themes were not represented on imperial coins all at once; there was rather an evolution over time.

The theme of the Flavians’ restoration of the Roman state featured prominently on coinage from 70–71. This was a way officially to present the Roman empire’s first change of dynasty as a political act necessary to restore stability in the political and military spheres after the disastrous events of Nero’s reign and the crisis of 68–69. The image of Vespasian as restorer rather than innovator quickly developed as a central element of numismatic representation. The appeal to Augustan precedent is logical in that a century earlier the founder of the Principate had likewise found it necessary to legitimize power
Sources and Evidence

arising from a civil war. Indeed, the analogous circumstances explain why the designers of the Flavian monetary program drew so much inspiration from the Augustan coinage. At the same time, though, they avoided outright mimicry, individuating their treatment through the appropriate inflection of inherited themes. This is evident in the legend of a coin issued in 71 affirming the restoration of libertas publica, a cardinal imperial value that harks back to Augustus (cf. Res Gestae 1.1) and was invoked by Claudius and Galba in order to denounce by contrast the excesses of, respectively, Caligula and Nero, both of whom were, like Antony, assimilated to the type of the tyrant. A pertinent numismatic precedent in this respect is a cistophorus (a silver coin bearing the image of a sacred basket carried in the rites of the god Dionysus/Bacchus) issued from the mint of Ephesus in 28 BCE designating Octavian/Augustus libertatis p(opuli) R(omani) vindex (“avenger of the freedom of the Roman people”), a reference to the official “restoration” of the Res Publica by Octavian after defeating Antony and returning to Rome in 29 BCE (Hurlet and Mineo 2009). In adapting the formulation, Vespasian preferred to be styled as “defender of public liberty” on a coin whose legend suggests that this title was awarded to him by the Senate and the People of Rome (SPQR adsertori libertatis publicae, RIC² Vesp. 35, 121–4, 207–10, 252; cf. also RIC² Vesp. 63, 82, 87, 137, 141, 173–4, 237, 272, 309–10, 377, 1339, 1345–7, 1384 for reference to libertas publica; RIC² Vesp. 52 and 88–9 for references to libertas restituta). The subtle difference in expression is noteworthy, indicating a desire to project a less vengeful imperial image and to reinforce the legitimacy and perceived legality of the new regime, as seeking first and foremost to “defend” the Roman people (Rosso 2009, 218–20). Besides traditional references to various protective deities of imperial power – for example Roma (the personified goddess of Rome), Fides (Loyalty), Aequitas (Justice), or Fortuna Redux (personified Fortune presiding over the emperor’s return to Rome) – we find particularly interesting coin issues, struck from 71 onwards, which make reference on the obverse to Concordia (the goddess of Concord). Among the various formulae for invoking this personified deity (who often received particular attention in Roman public discourse after civil strife), we find the legends Concordia Augusti (Concord of Augustus) and Concordia senatui (either broadly denoting “concord with the senate,” or expressing an implied injunction through the idea that Concord is urging the senate to crown Vespasian) on a sesterce representing Vespasian in military dress holding Victory and crowned by a personification of the genius of the senate holding a laurel branch. Whatever the nuances of signification in this last coin, the broader message is unmistakable: Vespasian expresses a desire to govern in harmony and in close collaboration with the senate.

Coinage also bears witness to the early desire of the new dynasty to ensure its own continuity, an almost obsessive preoccupation to which Suetonius attests in recalling that Vespasian had no compunction about declaring to the senate that “his sons would succeed him or else nobody would” (Vesp. 25.1; see also Cass. Dio 65.12 and Eutrop. 7.20.3). Coinage, indeed, is invaluable for providing a virtually continuous testimony on dynastic politics throughout the Flavian period, making it possible clearly to discern significant developments between 70 and 96. The joint image, on the reverse of a coin dated to 71, of Titus and Domitian, who stand facing each other in military attire, each holding a spear and wearing a belt, presents the two brothers in an equal and undifferentiated manner, the only perceptible difference being their respective titles on
the legend (RIC² Vesp. 152–4 and 1132–3); we find a number of variations on this association between the two brothers during Vespasian’s principate. With Vespasian’s image on the obverse, these coins provide a visual expression of a unified dynasty, the father being framed and supported by his two vigorous and capable sons. Early on, though, perhaps from the joint triumph of Vespasian and Titus in June 71, this egalitarian scheme gave way to a more clearly hierarchical one that assigned second place to Titus as the elder son and diminished the prominence and visibility of Domitian as the younger. This development resulted in the formal delineation of distinct iconographic types for each of the two brothers, with an enhanced representation of Titus as sole designated successor. Once again, a resort to Augustan precedent is evident, both in the choice of currency types (which follow those of the Augustan mint) and through the existence in the reigns of Titus and Domitian of so-called “restitution” strikes, which resumed without alteration coin reverses with a dynastic tone from the Julio-Claudian period (for example, coins representing Agrippa, Drusus the Younger or Germanicus; for these strikes, see RIC² Tit. 399–497 and RIC² Dom. 822–30). Following the death of Titus in 81, Domitian continued the policy of monetary representation of dynastic themes, now showing members of his own dynasty. One of the novelties of the coinage from his reign is the appearance on reverses of various members of the imperial family who were posthumously deified: his brother Titus of course (RIC² Dom. 126–31); his son, who died at a very young age before 83 (RIC² Dom. 132–6, where the deceased son is associated with his mother Domitia, honored on the right as Divi Caesaris mater; see also RIC² Dom. 152–5); his niece Julia, daughter of Titus, represented primarily from 90 (RIC² Dom. 147 [during her lifetime], 683–4, 717–18, 760, 848–9); Flavia Domitilla, described on the coinage as Diva Domitilla (RIC² Dom. 146, 157), though whether this is the emperor’s mother or sister is uncertain. Worth noting here is the high visibility of female members of the imperial family under Domitian. This is an appropriate dynastic strategy, which was reinforced by the presence on the imperial coinage of the emperor’s wife, Domitia, throughout his reign (RIC² Dom. 148–9, 678–82, 845–7).

The last major theme to appear on Flavian coinage is the celebration of war and victory, which remained prominent for the duration of the dynasty. Here once again a crucial precedent was provided by Augustus, who had found in the Battle of Actium a victory that contributed both materially and symbolically to the creation of a new regime and the return to peacetime. Very soon after his acclamation in Alexandria, Vespasian reprieved a number of Augustan coin types, some of which may go back to a pre-Actium phase: first of all, images of Mars and Neptune, deities directly associated with the naval victory of Octavian/Augustus’ then Victoria (personified Victory) herself, a deity represented in five different guises through the reworking of five Augustan numismatic types. The victory of Vespasian and Titus over the Jews and the triumph of 71 that celebrated it provided the Flavians with an equivalent to the Battle of Actium, which could be exploited in various ways. A very common numismatic image is that of a shackled Jewish captive with various explanatory captions: Iudaea, Iudaea capta, Iudaea devicta (Judea, Judea captured, Judea defeated). An alternative image was that of Vespasian and Titus in military attire with a foot placed on the globe – thereby reinforcing the pretense of the Jewish rebellion as an external war. Later on, the military successes of Domitian in Germany in the 80s gave rise to a very similar coinage, in which the figure
of a captive German replaced that of the Jewish captive (*RIC*² *Dom.* 274, 351, 397, 463, 525, 632 with the legend *Germania capta*).

### 4 Iconographic and archeological evidence

Though not dramatically enhanced in recent years, the iconographic and archaeological evidence for the Flavian Age is now more systematically exploited by scholars than previously. The fuller critical engagement with this material has made possible a more comprehensive analysis of the Flavian dynasty. I will limit myself to general remarks, as the subject is too vast to be discussed in detail here; the reader will find more detailed discussions in some of the subsequent chapters of this volume.

For the city of Rome itself, the past two decades have seen the appearance of a body of archeological research that emphasizes the political dimension of urban restructuring that took place during the Flavian period. It now appears that a major thrust of the building program undertaken by Vespasian and Titus was to give back to the Roman people the enjoyment of objects – for example, works of art such as paintings and statues – and spaces that were confiscated by Nero and integrated into his *Domus Aurea* (Golden House, a vast and lavish landscaped villa constructed at the heart of Rome after the fire of 64). It is in this sense that Pierre Gros was able to speak of “demagogic” urban planning under the first two Flavian emperors (Gros and Torelli 1988, 184–6; see Gros 1996, 328). Among the most dramatic construction projects of this kind are the Flavian Amphitheater and the Baths of Titus. Under Domitian, the main achievements were a proliferation of honorary arches (cf. Suet. *Dom.* 13.2) and the erection on the Palatine of the *Domus Flavia*, a large residence that had the appearance of a true imperial palace (Royo 1999).

For Italy and the provinces, Pompeii is an emblematic locus, affording a unique glimpse into the daily life of a city in the Flavian period. Pompeii’s “encasement” after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 has meant that here, more than anywhere, one can discern the concrete forms taken by public activities in the political and religious spheres (Van Andringa 2009).

It would be impossible within the framework of this survey to discuss in any detail the various discoveries that have been made in the municipal domain. But it should be mentioned in passing that archaeological excavations in the region of San Lorenzo in central Italy have located the village of Falacrinae, identified by Suetonius (*Vesp.* 2.1) as the birthplace of Vespasian, and even uncovered a villa that may have been his natal home (Coarelli, Kay, and Patterson 2008).

With respect to iconography, some recent research has focused on problems of typology. It has been noted, for example, that each of the emperors and other members of the imperial family was assigned a specific capillary arrangement, which might occasionally be changed according to circumstances, and which was broadcast throughout the empire. Suffice it to observe here that the decision to build one or more statues in honor of the emperor or his family was made by different people, depending in no small part on whether the place of erection was Rome or another city. In the former case, the image was more or less controlled by the imperial establishment; in the latter, the initiative usually originated with local agents, often members of the elite, who not only financed the imperial image, but also determined the location and manner of its representation.
Conclusion

Necessarily incomplete, this panoramic survey of the sources used to reconstruct the history of Rome and its empire in the Flavian Age has attempted to introduce a series of themes, many of which will be developed in the subsequent chapters of this volume, from the standpoint of the available evidence. It has proven useful to distinguish between an official discourse, broadcast by the Flavian regime on its own initiative, and the reception of that discourse by the governed and administered – whether senators, the Romans of Rome, Italians or provincials.

The image of themselves that the Flavians wished to project, which might be termed their self-representation, can be examined and studied from a range of sources including epigraphic, numismatic, archaeological, and iconographic. The so-called Lex de imperio Vespasiani, the markers of the pomerium, imperial letters, coins produced in the imperial mints, the new palace built on the Palatine – all this and more besides outlines the contours of an image that Rome’s second imperial dynasty sought to shape and control. From an examination of such evidence it emerges that the official Flavian discourse was essentially conservative in character: this was certainly the case under Vespasian and Titus, but it also was also true under Domitian if we accept the analysis of Gering (2012). The primary and preeminent model was Augustus, supplemented by the intermediate figure of Claudius as circumstances required. This conservatism does not, of course, mean that significant change was altogether absent; there is no doubt, for example, that the frequent assimilation of Domitian to Jupiter manifests a certain sacralization of imperial power. But we should not exaggerate the degree of innovation introduced by the Flavians in this respect. Reference to the past was virtually constant, and the broad conservatism of the Flavian approach is symptomatic of a world dominated by the phenomenon of mimesis: change of any kind almost inevitably assumed the guise of restoration.

The other significant element of the self-image that the Flavian regime wished to project was its generosity towards the people of Rome and towards provincials. The emperor considered himself, wished to be considered, and was considered a benefactor – in this case the preeminent and unrivaled benefactor of the Roman world. It is this idea that Suetonius underscores when he reports Titus lamenting that he had “lost a day” upon realizing in the evening that he “had not made anyone happy” (Tit. 8).

The official discourse is one thing; how it was received, adapted or transformed is another. This is a complex matter, not least because each recipient or addressee constructs his or her own image based on criteria that often elude us (social status, place of residence, proximity to imperial power or lack thereof, literary genre, and so on). With respect to literature, one principle is now widely accepted: we cannot reduce any author of the Flavian age to a mere agent of imperial propaganda. Indeed, the modern concept of “propaganda” is itself problematic when applied without qualification to the ancient world (Weber and Zimmermann 2003). One consequence is that writers who praise the dynasty, especially poets under Domitian, should not be considered mere mouthpieces of the regime. Their writings are better seen as protoptic communications that encouraged certain patterns of imperial behavior. The same holds for the authors of the early second century, many of whom project a very negative image of Domitian and his reign. The writings of Suetonius, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Juvenal are as much founts of information on Domitian as they are reactions to a form of government that contrasted
with the exercise of power and imperial ideology under Nerva and Trajan. Italian and provincial communities should likewise be included among those who adapted the official discourse according to their own interests. The common language of ruler and ruled is one of the most striking features of the communication between the imperial center and the periphery. In official correspondence, on monuments erected by cities, and in the inscriptions that were associated with those monuments, the Flavian emperor saw himself and was seen as benevolent, righteous and devout (Hurlet 2010). Provincial iconographic sources representing the Flavians in one manner or another provide particularly enlightening testimony about the process of reciprocity involved in the fashioning of such representations. In this case the typologies to be adopted were imposed by the regime, while the decision to raise a statue or relief representing one or more members of the Flavian dynasty was normally left to the discretion of the governed.

Rather than the shaping of public opinion, it is better to think of dialogue or negotiation when considering the relationship between the Flavian dynasty and those – whether, cities, groups or individuals – who have left written or iconographic testimony. One of the major conclusions to be drawn from the various sources from the provinces is that it was a distinct Flavian achievement to have extended and deepened Rome’s relationships with provincials, and thus to have contributed to the enduring political and cultural configuration of the Roman empire.

NOTES

1 Cf. the recent Quellenlage, both succinct and well informed, in Gering (2012, 10–27).
2 Valerius’ death is reported by Quintilian at Inst. 10.1.90 (written around 92–93 CE) as having occurred “recently” (nuper), though the precise implication of this elastic adverb remains debated, and consequently the date of composition for the Argonautica remains a vexed issue. I follow, for example, Hershkowitz (1998, 246) in concluding that Valerius Flaccus was still alive and writing during Domitian’s reign. Various arguments from internal evidence have been made for a Domitianic dating, starting with Syme (1929, 133–4). A useful overview of the debate is found in Stover (2012, 6–26), though Stover’s attempt to limit the period of composition to the reign of Vespasian does not convince.
3 Minerva: 1.39.3; 1.76.5; 1.102.2, 4.23.7, 5.5.1, 5.40.1, 6.64.16, 7.1.1, 7.32.3, 10.20.14, 14.179.1–2; military campaigns: 7.1–2, 7.5–8, 7.30, 7.80, 8.2, 8.4, 8.8, 8.11, 8.15, 8.21, 8.26, 8.30, 8.50, 8.55, 8.78, 8.80, 9.31; cf. Henriksen (2002).
4 That, at least, was his original motivation for sailing into danger; but in the course of making ready for the scientific excursion, Pliny learned of people imperiled by Vesuvius’ eruption and so set out to save them – though carefully recording his observations on the volcano as he proceeded. A detailed account of Pliny’s death in the course of this scientific inquiry turned rescue mission is provided by his nephew, Pliny the Younger, at Epist. 6.16.
5 Though Pliny clearly valued empirical observation, as his reaction to the eruption of Vesuvius shows: magnum propiusque noscendum ut eruditissimo viro visum (“being a most learned man, he realized this was an important phenomenon, and one that needed to be examined at closer quarters,” Plin. Epist. 6.16.7).
6 Here we are reminded of the ubiquity of rhetoric in Rome, which pervaded virtually all literary genres, and helped to make speeches, both as delivered and as reconstructed by ancient historians, a permanent feature of Roman “political culture.”
7 CIL 6.930 and 31207 = ILS 244 = FIRA 1.15 = MW 1 = Crawford (1996, 39).
This is the position adopted by most contributors – including Lucrezi, Venturini, Pani, and Lanza – to Capogrossi Colognesi and Tassi Scandone 2009, a volume devoted to the *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani*, and whose appearance was timed to commemorate the bimillenary of the birth of Vespasian.

For example, *CIL* 6.932 = *ILS* 246; *IGRRP* 4.211 = *MW* 136; Khanoussi and Maurin no. 3; cf. also the Greek inscription engraved on a fortress in Iberia in the Caucasus Ibérie, *IGRRP* 3.133 = *ILS* 8795 = *MW* 237. The strong dynastic emphasis is also evident in the existence of statutory groups featuring Vespasian as father with his two sons or sometimes just one of them, usually Titus, or associating the princesses of the dynasty (Herculaneum group; Pinara group, dated 82–91, *IGRRP* 3.573).

*CIL* 6.931; *CIL* 6.31208 = 933; *CIL* 6.934 = *ILS* 252; *CIL* 6.31538a; *CIL* 6.31538b = *ILS* 248; *CIL* 6.31538c; *CIL* 6.40854. Restored *cippi*: *CIL* 6. 1233 = 31539a; 1233b = 31539c; 31539b; 40855.

On a more concrete level, McCayden (1921, 47) points to various signs of encroachments upon senatorial authority in this letter. So, for example, as Hispania Baetica was a senatorial province, the proper authority to make the final decision on an expansion of revenue would be the senate, not the princeps.


*IGLSyr* 5.998 = *SEG* 17.755 et *SEG* 19.880 = *MW* 466 = Oliver 1989 no. 40.

*Concordia Augusti*: *RIC* Vesp. 8–9, 155, 228, 262–7, 291–8, 357, 391, 434, 442, 480–81, 485, 493–4, 567–8, 579, 613, 623, 1348–9, 1380, 1394, 1400, 1409, 1415–16, 1428, 1438, 1446, 1453, 1456, 1460, 1464, 1468–9; *Concordia senatui*: *RIC* Vesp. 67.

*RIC* Vesp. 5–6, 13, 15–16, 37, 54–6, 64, 66, 1122–6, 1301–02, 1318, 1320–21, 1344, 1362–4, 1376–8, 1387, 1401–05, 1410–11, 1417–20, 1424, 1429–30


REFERENCES


References:


FURTHER READING

In the case of so wide-ranging a survey, recommendations for further reading must be limited to a few useful studies addressing specific topics. On the postmortem literary response to Domitian’s principate, Ramage (1989) makes many important observations of broad import through his study of the case of Juvenal. For the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani*, the studies of Brunt (1977) and Hurlet (1993) remain particularly valuable. On the complex question of how the imperial center communicated with the periphery in the early imperial period, Eich (2012) provides a helpful overview of the state of scholarship while adding incisive observations of his own.