DOMITIAN, THE SENATE AND THE PROVINCES

BY

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The portrait which has been drawn both by ancient and modern authors of the Emperor Domitian is certainly not a flattering one. We are asked to believe that Domitian was a detestable autocrat, ready to eliminate all those who were not prepared to bear his tyranny. In his barbaric fight against what Pliny and Tacitus would have called most respectable senators, e.g. Helvidius Priscus, Rusticus Arulenus, Herennius Senecio and Jun. Mauricus 1), he availed himself of the help of such despicable characters as Regulus, Fabricius Veiento, Catullus Messalinus and Mettius Carus 2), all notorious delatores. Not content with their lives he also confiscated their possessions and banished their relatives (Fannia, Arria, Gratilla 3). Those who might seem to win too much favour with the population were either killed or compelled to retire from public life (Agricola 4). It was complete chaos everywhere. The army was a band of undisciplined soldiers; the senate had degenerated into a group of trembling and speechless slaves 5), who regarding Domitian as a source of imminent danger, could not say what they wanted to say. Domitian moreover had brought the state to the brink of bankruptcy by his financial extravagances 6). He had increased the pay of the legionaries with one third, spoiled Rome's citizens by prodigious festivals and shows, while his building program did the rest 7). In short, his reign was one of devastating terror and extra-

1) Cf. Pliny Ep. I. 5. 2, 3, 5, 10; 3. II. 3; 5. I. 8; 7. 19. 4-6; 9. 13. 2; Tac. Agricola 2. 1, 44. 5, 45. 1.
3) Pliny Ep. III. 11. 3.
4) Tacitus Agricola 42.
6) Cf. the debate between R. Syme (JRS 20 (1930), 55 ff.) and C. H. V. Sutherland (JRS 25 (1935), 150 ff.); see also A. Garzetti, Nerva (1950), 60 ff.
7) Suetonius Dom. 4. 5.
vagance. The purpose of this paper is to test the historical value of this picture. From the outset it must be stated that it cannot be our aim to whitewash Domitian and to blacken the senate. In doing so we would rightly meet with the same criticism which can be levelled against the defenders of the opposite view, i.e. one of onesidedness. There seems, however, to be room for a more balanced treatment of this Emperor, one in which more attention will be devoted to epigraphic evidence which had not yet come to light at the time Gsell wrote Domitian's biography 1).

The senatorial tradition (Pliny and Tacitus) is unanimous in ascribing all the attacks on the Senate by Domitian to the latter's inborn saevitia and rapacitas. He was, to quote Pliny, just a latro, in ingenti invidia destitutus 2: his inborn perversity of character is the ultimate source of all misery and tyranny 3). Now apart from the fact that this theory hardly takes into account a psychological development during Domitian's reign, which extended over 16 years, it simply does not suit the facts. First it is a well-known fact that it was after Antonius Saturninus' defection in Upper Germany that Domitian became saevus 4); the belief, then, that Domitian saw fit during ten odd years to behave like a relatively moderate man and then suddenly turned wild and over-suspicious, is not

1) St. Gsell, Essai sur le règne de l'Empereur Domitien (1894). On the subject under discussion in this paper there is not much to be found in B. W. Henderson's otherwise useful Five Roman Emperors (1927); the same applies to the chapters on Domitian in CAH XI and to E. T. Salmon's treatment of this emperor in A History of the Roman World from 30 B.C. to A.D. 138 8 (1950), 225 ff.; some fine remarks in D. Magie, Roman Rule in Asia Minor (1950), 576-582. I have not been able to consult Arias, Domiziano (Catania 1945) and Gianelli, Domiziano (Roma 1941).

2) For saevus and rapax see Suetonius Dom. 3, 10; Pliny Ep. I. 12. 8 (latro); IV. 11. 5 (invidia).

3) K. von Fritz has recently emphasized the fact that esp. Tacitus pays almost undue attention to the personal factors in history (CP 52 (1957), 73 ff., esp. 94 f.); see also JRS 36 (1946), 168 ff., where a quotation from D. M. Pippidi's Autour de Tibère (1944) is given: "moraliste par le plus profond de son être".

4) Cf. Suetonius Dom. 6, 10; for Saturninus' revolt see F. Grosso, Aspetti della politica orientale di Domiziano, Epigraphica 17 (1955), 33 ff., esp. 59-60; this revolt coincided with the appearance of a false Nero in the East supported by and cooperating with the Parthians. This coincidence explains to a certain extent Domitian's severe punishment of the conspirators in the West and his increasing suspicion.