The historical Domitian - illustrating some problems of historiography

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ABSTRACT
The "quest for the historical Domitian" provides a good example of the problems a historian has to grapple with, especially when the sources are very limited and biased and a strong tradition to prejudge the issues exists. This paper discusses some relevant theoretical aspects of historical research, the major sources for knowledge of Domitian, and develops a context within which one can understand the opposition and persecution encountered under Domitian. It adds up to a preliminary study: prolegomena to a more complete historical reconstruction - illustrating the need of such an attempt as part of all historiography.

1 INTRODUCTION
Imperator Caesar divi Vespasiani filius Domitianus Augustus was killed at the age of forty-four by people quite close to him. This was apparently the result of a serious conflict. The controversy surrounding emperor Domitian did not end with his death. There are widely divergent opinions about him: from psychotic, cruel tyrant (Bengtson 1979:182) to able, just administrator (Pleket 1961), "a moderately decent man" (Waters 1964:69).

Part of the problem is created by the partisan literary tradition about Domitian. Further problems - which are decisive in historical activity - are the researcher's prejudices and assumptions. Parallel problems exist in the historical study of early Christianity.

How does a historian (with the famous Tacitean principle of tradere sine ira et studio as a guideline) go about constructing a presentation of historical events? My paper grapples with this problem as its primary objective.

I start off with a short discussion of what historical research comprises. Thereafter the more important sources of knowledge about Domitian are discussed and attention is given to the specific perspectives on Domitian. Some evidence exists outside the literary traditions and its importance is pointed out. A successful framework for the interpretation of the data regarding Domitian must explain the opposition to and persecutions under Domitian; an attempt is made to do so. The idea is to move beyond an event-oriented narrative account to a problem-oriented, analytic approach, reflecting current trends in historiography (Iggers 1983:279).
2 HISTORY AND PERSPECTIVE

The development towards an analytic discussion of historical problems is due (in part) to the realisation that the data the historian uses cannot be called facts as such. The data only become part of a "factual" description when they combine with a perspective. "The historical data that we find in our sources become historical facts only after they are placed in patterns of relationships; these patterns are objectively verifiable, but they become visible only when we see them in the light of perspectives that usually incorporate not only the present state of our knowledge but also our epistemological predilections" (Mommsen 1978:22; cf Smith 1982: xi). Mommsen also refers to "the constitutive elements underlying the theorems and exegetical schemes we employ - usually without having explicitly articulated them - to organize our knowledge of the past and give meaning to it" (1978:23).

Domitian undoubtedly has a very negative description in the literary traditions. One has to consider only Pliny's reference to the "immanisima belua" (Pan 48) and that of Christian tradition to a "second Nero" (Tert Apol 5.4; Eus HE 3.27). Today, however, we no longer share the same presuppositions, which obviously imply different value judgements. To use the literary traditions for historical reconstruction one should consider the very specific perspective of each and every text. This becomes possible when the researcher consciously adopts a different starting point and perspective. A discussion of presuppositions becomes imperative.

It all boils down to the correct use of one's sources. What is required is a mastery of not only the primary material but also of the history of its interpretation. I specifically want to emphasise the need to move away from a "canon mentality", an "it-is-written approach". What is needed is an open and candidly critical and suspicious reading of our sources. One's "epistemological predilections" and "underlying constitutive elements" make all the difference in this regard. For example, one should guard against lapsing into unspoken convictions in which the early Christians always seem the heroes, or the Roman emperors pleasure-seeking tyrants.

The challenge is to see people behind the texts - ordinary human beings with aspirations, ideals, prejudices, self-interests and quite a bit of irrationality (cf MacMullen 1980:12-16; Baldwin 1980:ix, 68). The dualism of the good-guy-versus-the-bad may be a pleasing plot structure but it is unhistorical.

Of course we do not have enough information to pierce the opacity of the past. The data simply say too little (McDermott & Orentzei 1979a:3). Rather, they say almost anything. The well-known hermeneutical circle is the answer. But then one's argument must be truly spiral: an imaginative reconstruction, which integrates, explains, describes and illustrates all the data as well as one's premises and perspectives.

The subjective and hypothetical nature of all historiography becomes quite obvious. It is not false, however. History is relative and as such valid
Historical activity becomes rather difficult when done in such a manner, but a lot more worthwhile. The humanising importance of history becomes clear: the ideal of objectivity moves beyond a striving for absolute truth and becomes a struggle against intolerance and reluctance to understand. Non licet is admitted much more readily - a confession appropriate to the greater part of the past.

3 SOURCES
The major literary sources are Tacitus, Pliny (Minor), Suetonius and Cassius Dio. All four were part of the Roman aristocracy and their writings reflect the senatorial point of view. The fact that Domitian is thought to have been a bad emperor simply means that he was an emperor the senate did not like - and then, only members of the senate whose opinions have been preserved.

3.1 Tacitus wrote in his Agricola that his story tells of enslavement and recent liberation. His generation had seen the utmost servitus, but, under Nerva, freedom of speech was restored (Agr 3). The same theme underlies his Historiae and Annales. All his works pose the question: What do good men do living under a tyranny?

It is very possible that Nerva was involved in the conspiracy against Domitian (see Cass Dio 67.15.5-6, where εὐγενέστατος καὶ ἐπιευκέστατος should be read as "acceptable to the majority in the Senate - especially the pro-Domitian group" (cf Jones 1979:49; Garzetti 1974:296-297). Whatever the case, it is obvious that the one who got the best out of the conspiracy would have allowed others to publicly criticise Domitian. Freedom of speech is all a matter of perspective: "libertas was only conceded on the assumption that the subjects would voluntarily use their freedom to speak in favour of the emperor" (Wallace-Hadrill 1982:39). The temptation is implicitly to identify Tacitus with one’s own political ideals; to modernise him by making him a representative of a modern conception of democracy.

Tacitus survived the tyrant. Not only survived, but prospered, as he himself admits (Hist 1.1). A very uncomfortable and embarrassing situation arose afterwards: how to explain loyal service and the attendant promotions. This in part explains Tacitus' hostility.

"All Tacitus' writings are marked by a deep, though purely intellectual, distaste for the principate and a romantic admiration for the republic" (Seager 1972:256). The republic was freedom, the empire as good as slavery (An 1.1, 1.7, 1.46, 6.48). Libertas, however, meant something very specific to Tacitus, namely libertas senatus. To turn against the interests of the ruling class is licentia and illegal. There is a significant report (An 1.75) about Tiberius who attended meetings of the senate to keep the administration of law free from the influential pressure and solicitations of the powerful. According to Tacitus this promoted justice, but destroyed libertas.
The terrible Domitian not only fought corruption, but tried to model himself according to Tiberius' example (Suet Dom 8.20). He was an autocrat with little time for the democratic pretensions of Roman politics so important to some circles in the senate. It all adds up: "Domitian... is the victim of Tacitus' most carefully contrived vilifications... being depicted as a second Tiberius.... Denunciation of him was part of the creation of a good image for his successor Nerva" (Baldwin 1980:24,58). The rehabilitation of the characterisation of Tiberius by Tacitus is now an accepted and well-argued approach (Baldwin 1980:12-13,67; Garzetti 1974:19-79,563-572; Seager 1972; Martin 1981:104-141).

Although he is defending himself, and unabashedly protecting his and his friends' interests, Tacitus' works have practical value. He had "the courage to describe the gulf between public profession and private motive" (Martin 1981:243). He profoundly remarks, that the wealth the principat brought to the influential people destroyed their aspirations to freedom (An 1.2). Tacitus is at his best when he describes how friendship and loyalty dissipate before power. He also remarks that one should deride the stupidity of people who believe that a display of power makes it possible to control the thoughts of others (An 4.35). He already knew the Actonian principle that "absolute power corrupts absolutely" (An 6.48: Arrantius on Tiberius' degeneration). This is a problem that is structurally part of the principat - also in Domitian's case. On the other hand the very power of the emperor gave others the opportunity to shirk responsibility. "Put crudely, Tacitus and company were on to a good thing. Wealth, position, cultivated ease, all were attainable. And if things went wrong, the emperor would be the public scapegoat" (Baldwin 1980:88; cf De Ste Croix 1981:380).

3.2 From his letters one gets an impression of Pliny as an honourable and dedicated person, kind-hearted and on good terms with all people. He probably was such a person, but one should recognise the ambitious and vigorous personality behind his self-projection. He started off as eques and ended an impressive career as imperial governor of Pontus and Bithynia. He won the favour of Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. Although he (grudgingly) admits his advancement under Domitian he emphasises that when this, the most treacherous (insidiosissimo), emperor started to reveal his hate for honourable men his career was halted (Pan 95). Fortunately for him Domitian only revealed his true colours late in Pliny's career; Pliny held the very important post of praefectus aerari militaris in AD 95-96.

A very interesting fact is that Pliny was a common factor among all of Domitian's disloyal opponents. Pliny and Tacitus hunted together, and Pliny was very impressed with Tacitus' Historiae (Ep 1.6; 7.33). Pliny and Suetonius were friends, and Pliny was Suetonius' patron (Ep 1.18,24; 3.8; 5.10; 9.34). Then there were Pliny's seven friends who were involved in a plot against Domitian (following Rogers 1960). Is it possible that Pliny was
involved in the final conspiracy against Domitian? There was his friendship and loyalty towards Nerva (Ep 7.33, 4.22) and the informer who wrote (?) to Domitian (Ep 7.27), but it is impossible to be certain.

His letters clearly affirm the remark by Suetonius that Domitian "so carefully supervised the city magistrates and provincial governors that the general standard of honesty and justice rose to an unprecedented high level - notice how many of them have been charged with corruption since his time" (Dom 8.2). Both Nerva and Trajan continued the acta, decisions and policies of Domitian (cf Waters 1969), with Pliny even approving! (Ep 10.58, 60, 65, 66).

On 1 September 100 Pliny and Cornutus Tertullus became consuls. Pliny delivered an actio gratianum in the senate in honour of Trajan. Later a revised and amplified version was published, which became known as the Panegyricus. The theme is the contrast between the evil Domitian and the virtuous Trajan. Its view of Domitian is distorted, and consistent with what Pliny says in the Letters, though charged with even stronger emotional feeling - he will concede nothing to what Mommsen called the 'sombre but intelligent despotism' of Domitian' (Radice 1968:167).

Reading the Panegyricus more closely one realises that it is a statement of reconciliation between senate and emperor, after the conflict with Domitian that would not come to rest under Nerva. Behind the title optimus princeps (Pan 95.4) there actually lies a manual for the emperor: the senate's idea of a good leader (Pan 4.1-2). "This is skilful propaganda, a subtle blend of fact and 'wishful thinking', a tactful way of telling Trajan what his grateful subjects would have him be" (Radice 1968:168). It, therefore, tells us very little about Domitian - or for that matter about any event in the past (cf McDermott & Orentzel 1979b:9).

3.3 Suetonius gives a more interesting and definitely more balanced picture of Domitian, especially in comparison to Pliny and Tacitus.

His vita Domitiani should be read in the context of his other vitae. One quickly realises that Domitian is one of the "in-between" emperors: Augustus, Titus and Vespasian are the most virtuous, while Caligula, Galba and Vitellius turn out to be the worst. Julius, Tiberius, Nero and Domitian (also Claudius and Otho) are either a mixture of good and bad or start off virtuous and then degenerate. "But it is clear that he did not regard Domitian as a second Nero or a replica of Caligula. The last of the Flavians is not called monstrum or belua by Suetonius" (Baldwin 1983:304).

Suetonius, although part of the equestrian order, identifies completely with the aristocratic ideology. In no way does he let through that Domitian might have enjoyed considerable support. His respect for traditional social values determines his ideal emperor and his ideal that everyone should have the same respect influences his perspective. Bad emperors are bad for all and good ones are loved by all. "The ideal emperor for Suetonius then, is by no means one who offers a challenge to the high standing of the senate or to the
traditional social structure of the republic. Far from being the enemy of the senate, he must be the friend of all ranks, omnes ordines" (Wallace-Hadrill 1983:117). No one should be favoured or injured above his dignity. For Suetonius libertas is subordinate to dignitas.

Tacitus and Pliny were senators and the senate was the centre of the universe to them. The same applies to Suetonius: the importance of the senate is all-pervading in his work. The virtues and vices of an emperor are determined by the conflict of interests between the ruler and his rich and powerful subjects. This turns out to be a golden thread to follow in understanding their convictions.

Several aspects of the vita Domitiani remain vague, for example: how long was his "good" period? (Dom 8-10). Both Caligula and Nero degenerated, according to Suetonius - which raises suspicion, as Domitian's personalia reminds one of Caligula and Nero. Like Julius and Caligula, he was sensitive about his baldness, and the description of his funeral resembles Nero's. All together, it is too much to be mere coincidence - and clearly illustrates the hazards of historical activity.

3.4 Cassius Dio wrote his Roman History during the twenties of the third century. The greater part of his work - specifically the history of the principat - survived only in epitomised form, namely the abbreviations of Xiphilinus (11th century) and Zonaras (12th century).

To Cassius the good emperor should be δημοτικός. To him this is what the Romans understand as civilis (57.8.3; 67.9.1; 66.11.1; 74.3.4; 74.5.1): "refusal of honours and flattery, respect to the senate, accessibility and affability, the exchange of courtesies with the aristocracy, the good-natured handling of the plebs in the theatre and at the games and so on" (Wallace-Hadrill 1982:44). Democracy is important, but to his mind it has little to do with individual responsibility. It is simply the external formal functioning of the state, that is, public peace and order (cf Millar 1964:74ff). Peace and order is of course that which benefits the ruler class.

Cassius' history on the Flavii has a serious flaw: it tends to reflect Septimius Severus and his two sons Caracalla and Geta - with Domitian as Caracalla in disguise. It is quite understandable to find one's own experiences reflected in history, but history is never as simple as that.

3.5 By the time of Cassius Dio, Domitian (like Nero) had become the model for hostile propaganda: the ready example of bad politics. This trend was also apparent in the efforts of the church historians of the third and fourth centuries to gain a good audience among their emperors and the ruling classes.

Christian tradition has tended to perpetuate the prejudices Roman (senatorial) historians revealed (Bleicken 1978:160-1), the logical corollary of
the developing "imperial theology" (Breisach 1983:313) from the end of the third century.

The whole point of the discussion up to now has been to show that Domitian was judged according to rather specific value systems - which we no longer share. Historians should never fall prey to their sources' propaganda, at least not without carefully arguing its validity and assumptions. It would be more than mere presumption (and silly, anyway) to maintain implicitly the values of classical Rome's aristocracy.

3.6 An interesting piece of evidence is Oracula Sibillina 12, which provides a positive picture of Domitian, and originated independently from senatorial historiography. This Jewish book "provides a rare witness to the popular perception of Roman emperors in the eastern provinces" (Collins 1983:443; Pleket 1961:303). It was written around A D 230 and the traditionally "bad" emperors (Caligula and Nero) are described negatively, but Domitian is described in glowing terms (SibOr 12:124-142). Apparently there existed a tradition among the average provincials that Domitian was a benefactor of the provinces.

3.7 Epigraphy and numismatics are very important sources of information, but highly complex and difficult to utilise (Millar 1983; Crawford 1983). Both are obviously specialist terrains, but can only be ignored to the historian's detriment. Fortunately, a valuable collection has been made of relevant inscriptions and numismatic evidence covering the Flavian era, by McCrum & Woodhead (1961). Several aspects of Domitian's life and reign can be (and have been) illuminated from these sources.

A single example of this is Domitian's letter (actually it is more of a decree: ἔξ ἐντολήν) to procurator Claudius Athenodorus of Syria in which he addresses the problem of the misuse officials made of the right to forced rentals (McCrum & Woodhead no 466). Domitian instructs the procurator to see to it that no one makes requisitions unless the emperor has authorised it. It is ὁδικότατον that the influence or rank of persons should occasion these requisitions (lines 17-20). The impression one gets of Domitian is that of a concerned administrator aiming at balance.

Obviously the projected image is slanted - it is, after all, part of official rhetoric - but it is very possible to see, as his motive for consolidating control, an attempt to curb corruption, "for it is just to help the exhausted provinces". He also admits that taxes are too high (lines 24-25, with Garnsey & Saller 1982:12; but cf Levick 1982).

That Domitian probably was an excellent administrator is generally admitted, even by researchers who are not positive about him (Charlesworth 1936; Magie 1950:576-82; Garzetti 1974; Bengtson 1979). The evidence is cogently argued by Pleket (1961) and Jones (1979). It is interesting to note that several of the "bad" emperors actually were quite industrious, very
involved in the complex details of government (Millar 1967; Baldwin 1980:74).

I think it has become clear that a critical reassessment of traditional views on the data provided by the literary evidence, combined with other evidence from inscriptions and coins, allows for a radical reconsideration of the popular image of Domitian.

4 TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK: A DISCUSSION OF THE OPPOSITION AND PERSECUTION

One can describe Roman politics as the interplay of five groups: the armies, the plebeians, the senate, the provinces and the "intellectuals" (poets/writers and philosophers). Each group had its own powerbase and its own basic interests. An emperor's loyalty could not possibly include each one. Domitian failed with the senate and the intellectuals. His advancement of the other groups led to a backlash from them.

4.1 Domitian's relationship with the senate was a lot more complex than the sources suggest. Of approximately nine hundred senators who served under him only three left an indication of their assessment of him, which can hardly be taken as representative. The hostility that Pliny and Tacitus reported cannot be generalised. Frontinus, the third senator, portrays Domitian as quite an able strategist and military general (Strategemata 1.1.8; 1.3.10; 2.3.23; 2.11.7; 4.3.14), in contrast to Tacitus' version of Domitian's German campaign that "seems to spring from ignorance coupled with malevolence" (Wellesley 1969: 269; Weynand 1909:2542).

The senate was never a uniform body, and Domitian surely enjoyed some support. There is evidence leading to a convincing argument that Domitian strived for good relations with the senate (Jones 1973; 1979). He probably erroneously believed that he succeeded in achieving this.

The conflict had its origin in Domitian's effort to revise the role traditionally allocated to the senate. He did not necessarily affect its dignity (Suet Dom 8.3) but rather its real power. Efficient government was not the primary concern of the senate, and Domitian had a policy of "relying on efficiency rather than on the traditional hierarchical distinctions that were of paramount importance to senators" (Jones 1979:28). I am condensing a rather complicated argument into a single statement by suggesting that Domitian's reputation as a tyrant was formed in an important way by his refusal to allow senatorial governors to abuse their provinces. It was probably not his reign of terror but the alarm caused by his policies that fuelled the reaction against him.

One should also realise that the "official" view of Domitian was established by the senate's failure to deify him. Deification was usually encouraged by a successor. Domitian was not considered meritorious (Brunt 1979: 168-169; De Ste Croix 1981:395; Jones 1979: 5). In fact, "had he been more cir-
cumspect regarding his personal security and also managed to provide himself with an adult male heir, one suspects that the literary tradition would have been no less unsatisfactory, erring on the side of generosity” (Jones 1979:87).

4.2 The philosophically inspired opposition to the *principat*, which was a characteristic of the Flavian era (MacMullen 1966:46; cf Forte 1972:257ff), was dominated by Stoicism. It was their personal arrogance and insistence on the privileges of the senate and on restrictions on imperial power that drew the emperor’s wrath and caused their subsequent banishment (Suet Dom 10.3). But once again it is more complex. Not all "intellectuals" ended up in conflict with Domitian (Suet Dom 4.2, 20); for example, it is doubtful that Quintilian was hypocritical in his praise of Domitian (*Orat 4.Pr.2-3; 10.1.91-92), as this would explain the change of attitude of Pliny and Juvenal towards Quintilian. It is also quite possible that the *Institutio Oratoria* was published after Domitian's death (McDermott & Orentzel 1979a). Josephus had a thriving career under Domitian (*Vit 76*). It is also significant that Martial could praise Peatus Thrasea (*Mart 1.8; 1.13; 4.54*) - a staunch opponent of Domitian - and prosper.

4.3 Turning to Domitian's persecutions it is amazing how few hard facts are available. There are lots of vague accusations such as those of Eusebius, who claims that Domitian "killed a significant number of distinguished men at Rome without any reasonable trial, and punished innumerable notable men" (*HE 3.17*).

The different reports are very difficult to integrate. According to Cassius Dio, Domitian was already killing senators in 83, but he contradicts himself (cf 67.3.2-4 with 67.4.5 and 67.9.6). Tacitus has the *saevitia principis* enduring the full fifteen years (*Agr 3.2*). Suetonius does not say when Domitian changed for the worse, but creates the impression that his reign can be divided in roughly equal periods (*Dom 3, 10.1*).

Most of the ascertainable persecutions were probably reactions to conspiracy and treason (*Tac Agr 2.44.45; Plin Ep 1.5; 3.11; 5.1; 7.19; 9.13; Suet Dom 10; Cass Dio 67.13*), which make the emperor's reactions very understandable: he was really endangered. He himself remarked, "emperors are in a wretched position, since no one will be convinced that there are plots against them until they have actually been assassinated" (Suet Dom 21).

4.4 Domitian probably never had anything to do with Christians. Hegesippus, in writing about 150, claims that some peasant farmers in Palestine, family of Jesus, were brought before Domitian (*Eus HE 3.201-6*). The parallel of this story with Matthew 2, and its patent confusion with regard to officialdom and Domitian's itineraries, make it most likely to have been a legendary fabrication. However, the story shows Domitian putting an end to the persecu-
tions, contradicting the major tradition, invented by Melito, that only bad emperors - hence Nero and Domitian - persecuted the church (Eus HE 4.26.9; Tert Apol 5). This theory is part of the Apologists' attempts to persuade their emperors to be "good" and curb the persecutions the Christians endured.

Eusebius' identification of Flavia DomitiUa as a Christian (HE 3.18.4) probably is "an inaccurate attempt to absorb an item from pagan historiography into the tradition of martyrdom" (Millar 1977:554; Smallwood 1956). His admiration for martyrdom is well known.

4.5 A lot is sometimes made of Domitian's so-called "megalomania" citing his alleged claims to divinisation and the "dominus ac deus" title.

Rulers in classical times - especially the emperors - had to develop a fine sense of balance in their conduct between civilitas and superbia, between the conduct of a citizen among citizens and that of a superhuman being, endowed with awesome authority. Religion and the gods played an important part in the legitimising of authority and the sanctioning of power. Domitian in this regard is therefore no different from any other emperor or ruler of the ancient world. On the other hand: "Aspiration to divinity was a standard element in the rhetorical image of the tyrant" (Fears 1977:223).

Domitian was probably one of the few serious religious emperors (Suet Dom 4; cf Scott 1936:90; Fears 1977:190-199; McDermott & Orentzel 1979b:18; Morawiecki 1977). It appears that he believed himself elected by Jupiter and Minerva, receiving their care and chosen to care for things on earth, to exercise authority in various ways for the good of mankind.

The dominus ac deus title as evidence of Domitian's claim of divinity is highly problematic (Scott 1936:102-112; Grenzheuser 1964:129-144; Bengtson 1979:185-187; De Ste Croix 1981:397). Suetonius said that Domitian started a letter with these words, and that it became a regular form of address (Dom 13.2). But further evidence is scanty, and does not suggest that its use was in any way typical of either Domitian or the people close to him. The title was used by people trying to impress Domitian and gain his favour, for example Martial, whose writings, incidentally, are excellent witness to considerable freedom of speech under Domitian (Szelest 1974; cf also Cass Dio 67.13.3-4). Statius' reports on Domitian's reticence in accepting extreme honours (Silvae 1.6.81-84) probably reflect the emperor's own view (cf Thompson 1984). This sort of title also appears in traditions about other emperors, even good ones. The point is that the existence of this title in the tradition cannot be used to show Domitian as a crazy megalomaniac bent on tyrannical repression.

One should keep in mind that contemporary society could make a much more convincing case for Domitian as dominus et deus noster than the average Christian could for Jesus. The emperor, after all, as an all-powerful authority and visible benefactor was much more real than many a god. In any case, because emperor worship provided not only a common focus of loyalty
and devotion to heterogenous communities, but also a stabilising and acceptable symbolic discourse to interpret and define the world that was the reality of the Roman empire, it follows that there would have been pressure on the Christians to conform. Apocalyptic Christianity's resistance is graphically pictured in Revelation.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS: SOME HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES

Historical activity does not whitewash nor blacken. It tries to reflect past reality, and although it is natural and also necessary to discover heroes and bad guys it is important to realise that in the end they were only people like us. This reflects my (anthropological) presuppositions, seriously influencing my historiography.

It is impossible not to have value systems. Whom should we consider in the right: Domitian convicting those plotting against him, or the conspirators planning and eventually succeeding? In either case, people are killed: either to retain power or to achieve it. Although it is extremely difficult it is imperative to attempt some understanding of the points of view of the people involved.

We should also consider the underlying assumptions with which we interpret reality. Tacitus and Pliny believed that Domitian's ruddy complexion showed his cruelty (Agr 45.2; Pan 48.5). Ancient psychology dictated that character was a fixed given from birth (Breisach 1983:68,71; Martin 1981:105; Wallace-Hadrill 1983:150), which made it possible for Pliny and company to use select experiences from the end of Domitian's reign as final conclusions about his character.

Domitian was criticised for cruelty and avarice by certain senators who were never critical of themselves: "Let us never forget that the Roman passion for "ruling" was anything but disinterested or motiveless: the intensely practical Roman governing class ruled because that was the best means of guaranteeing the high degree of exploitation they needed to maintain" (De Ste Croix 1981: 28). In this they were not unlike the pigs and humans of Animal Farm becoming indistinguishable.

To my mind, by taking the cue from Domitian's "scrupulous and conscientious dispensing of justice" (Suet Dom 8.1) and his efforts for an efficient administration - having been "einer der sorgfältigsten Verwalter, die das Kaiseramt gehabt hat" (Mommsen 1885:99) - and by realising the sham libertarian ideals of his opposition, it is possible to read the data as "new" evidence. (More about libertas as slogan in the Roman ruler class in Baldwin 1980:87; De Ste Croix 1981:366-370; Pleket 1961:311; MacMullen 1966:33; Wallace-Hadrill 1982:38-39).

I hope to have shown that history always remains a challenge, both in rereading the sources and in re-examining our convictions, prejudices and presuppositions.
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For classical authors I have consistently used the Loeb Classical Texts. Translations are my own.

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