

This paper examines the emperor Domitian's attempts to forge a public image by hosting formal banquets (*cenae rectae*) as well as public and semi-public meals (*cenae publicae*; cf. J. Donahue [1996, 2004] for the terminology). D'Arms (1984) suggests the potential of Domitian's banquets for communicating ideological directives such as equality and prosperity. I will argue that the physical contexts in which Domitian organized his banquets and the literary representations of such affairs served both to remove the emperor from all social classes (*ordines*) and to enlarge his presence among them. Passages from historians and poets alike confirm that Domitian's convivial munificence made a distinct impression on the Roman populace and helped transform the very nature of the meal shared between ruler and subjects.

Attempts to measure the impact of Domitian's convivial strategies must first take into account Republican traditions of public and private largesse as well as the reform of such practices begun by Julius Caesar. Aware of the political implications of the convivial setting and its role as a gesture of aristocratic self-representation, the *dictator* passed sumptuary legislation restricting public banquets given as demonstrations of wealth by private citizens (Yavetz 1983). Augustus also limited these banquets, a practice upheld by his Julio-Claudian successors, and one that may reflect a process by which the emperor eliminated competition from the senatorial class and established himself as Rome's sole patron (Veyne 1990). In his own attempts to become Rome's sole patron, Domitian restored the *cenae rectae* that may have been cancelled by Nero (Suet. *Ner.* 16, *Dom.* 4), incorporated a strategically arranged *triclinium* in the Domus Flavia, and hosted large-scale banquets (*cenae publicae* or *epula publica*) in the amphitheater.

The efficacy of Domitian's attempts to enlarge his convivial presence can be gauged by the contradictory literary depictions of the emperor's behavior at shared meals. In his *Panegyricus* Pliny describes the sort of behavior in which Trajan does not engage and thus offers a scathing indictment of his predecessor who came to dinner "...already gorged before midday with a solitary feast, to sit menacingly over [his] guests, watching and taking note of all they do (*Pan.* 49.6)." Statius, by contrast, leaves us with the impression that there was a remarkable leveling of hierarchies during public and semi-public *cenae* hosted by Domitian: *datur haec iuxta, datur ora tueri / vina inter mensasque et non adsurgere fas est?* (*Silv.* 4.2.16-17; cf. *Silv.* 1.6, *Mart.* 8.50). The common denominator linking these accounts with other textual responses to Domitian's largesse is the remarkable visibility of the emperor in each context.

Capitalizing on the assumption that orderly conduct at a shared meal reflected the order maintained in the state, Domitian augmented his role as *hospes* and thus increased his authority as *princeps*. Though the emperor's convivial strategy failed in so far as he refused to respect certain class distinctions that appeased the senatorial order, his limited success is indicated not only by the reactions of the plebian class (cf. DC 67.4-5), but also by Trajan's subsequent use of the dining quarters in the Domus Flavia and the influence of its design on later imperial residences.