DOMITIANUS 1.1: NERVA AND DOMITIAN

Michael Charles
Queensland University of Technology

ABSTRACT

The Suetonian locus describing Domitian’s sexual encounter, while no longer a pur, with his successor Nerva has long been a subject of contention. Given that the scurrilous locus was written under Hadrian, Nerva’s adoptive grandfather, it is unlikely that Domitian’s alleged penetration by Nerva was meant to cast the latter figure in a negative light. Rather, the locus reflects badly on Domitian, who is cast as effeminate and unworthy of his position – perhaps more so when Nerva did not exactly enjoy the most virile of reputations. Thus the original story of Nerva’s penetration of his now-hated predecessor may have been fabricated for political reasons, especially in order to emphasise the virility of the new emperor at Domitian’s expense. That Suetonius chose to replicate this story, even if he could not vouch for its authenticity, was in keeping with contemporary official attitudes to Domitian and his successor.

Pubertatis ac primeae adolescentiae tempus tanta inopia tantaque in famia gessisse furtur, ut nullum argentem us in usu haberet. Satisque constat Clodium Pollionem praetorium uirum, in quem est poema Neronis quod inscribitur Luscio, chirographum eius conservasse et nonnumquam protulisse noctem sibi pollicentis; nec defuerunt qui affirmarent, corruptum Domitianum et a Nerva successore max suuo.

The first section of Suetonius’ life of Domitian has been the subject of much debate over the years. In particular, what exactly is the correct way to interpret the claim that the much older Nerva had sodomised the young Domitian: nec defuerunt qui affirmarent, corruptum Domitianum et a Nerva successore max suuo (Suet. Dom. 1.1)? I have recently touched upon this theme in the present journal, as has Jones elsewhere.1 Both Jones and myself, contrary to

earlier views such as those of Abramenko, Ramage and Southern, hold that the relationship does not reflect badly on both parties and have argued that only Domitian, as the passive sexual partner, can incur censure for the same-sex encounter to which Suetonius clearly alludes. Domitian, apparently seventeen at the time, as Jones calculates, was not a puér and was therefore responsible for his own actions. The effeminate and thus unseemly nature of adult passivity among citizen males, although not entirely understood in terms of its legal ramifications (e.g. the application of the lex Sca[n]tinia de uenerre nefandae), is now well documented and needs no further defence.

But what of Nerva? Jones writes that Dom. 1.1. is ‘notable for the fact that it contains Suetonius’ sole reference to Nerva’, which is even more noteworthy given that Cassius Dio (67.15.5-6) mentions Nerva being named by astrologers as a future ruler. In Suetonius’ detailed account of Domitian’s last days, no mention of Nerva is made, although some, following Cassius Dio’s version (67.15.4-6), have suspected that he was privy in some way to

**nian: The Flavian Emperors** (London 2002) 122. This note was the result of a casual chat with Dr B.W. Jones, who also kindly read an earlier version of the text. Many thanks must also be expressed to Prof. A.R. Birley (who helpfully directed me to some divergent views on the matter and allowed me to see matters from a Hadrianic perspective more clearly), Dr Tom Stevenson, and the present journal’s two anonymous expert referees.


4 Jones 2002 (note 1) 236. Nerva, however, is mentioned at Dom. 5. forum quod nunc Nervae vocatur. But this reference to architecture (specifically, the Forum Transitorium) counts for little. Nerva is very obliquely alluded to at Ner. 15.2 (triumphatio ornamenta etiam quaestorae digitales ... tribuit nec utique de causa militari). Cf. Tac. Ann. 15.72.1 (which relates to the Pisonian conspiracy and specifically mentions Nerva); ILS 273. Precisely what Nerva did to deserve such extraordinary honours is uncertain, as R. Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 1 (Oxford 1958) 2, points out, although Tacitus’ collocation of Nerva and Tigellinus suggests a significant rôle in helping Nero to crush his enemies. On this, see W. Eck, ‘An emperor is made: senatorial politics and Trajan’s adoption by Nerva’, in G. Clark & T. Rajak (edd.), *Philosophy and Power in the Greco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin* (Oxford 2002) 217.
What follows, then, is that Suetonius must have felt that mentioning Nerva in an even remotely negative context regarding the conspiracy would be inappropriate. Domitian's successor, rather than being cast as a base intriguer, seems to have wanted to be portrayed simply as the right man at the right time, and, what is more, as a somewhat reluctant emperor. Thus Suetonius, by failing to mention Nerva's name in the context of Domitian's assassination, continues, with his silence, the prevailing dynastic version of events. Philostratus, writing almost a century later, reinforces this by characterising Nerva as a man incapable of conspiracy (VA 7.33; 8.7.10).

Although the possibility remains that some of Suetonius' later Vitae may indeed contain snide remarks about Hadrian, this should not affect the present interpretation of the locus in question. While Abramenko claims that Dom. 1.1 can be used to demonstrate a 'kritischen, geradezu gehässigen Tendenz' against Hadrian's 'Kaiserhaus', the manner in which he uses the locus does not accord with our present understanding of Roman sexual propriety. Moreover, if Nerva's relationship with Domitian was really cause for censure, as Abramenko suggests, Suetonius would hardly have wanted to imitate the incumbent princeps Hadrian, the adoptive grandson of Nerva, in such an overt manner – it would take a considerable stretch of the imagination to think of Dom. 1.1 as one of Quintilian's figūrae (Inst. 9.2.65ff.), in this case against Hadrian. One would do well to recall that Suetonius had fallen from grace at some stage in Hadrian's reign (HA, Hadr. 11.3) and that we cannot be entirely sure when the Domitianus was written. Still, if the text was composed after Suetonius' removal from the important post of ab epistulis (a

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5 E.g. C.T.H.R. Ehrhardt, 'Nerva's background', LCM 12 (1987) 20: 'he knew'; and, most recently, J.D. Grainger, Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis of AD 96-99 (London & New York 2003) 5-6: 'since Nerva was the candidate in waiting ... he was one of the conspirators'; see also 30.

6 Similar thoughts are expressed by Jones 1996 (note 3) 14.

7 However, such remarks (which were pointed out to me in private correspondence with Prof. A.R. Birley), would have been designed to be as ambiguous as possible (for obvious reasons). On this theme, see Abramenko (note 2) 79-94; T.F. Carney, 'How Suetonius' Lives reflect on Hadrian', PACA 11 (1968) 7-21 (now very dated with respect to Suetonius' attitude regarding same-sex relationships).

8 Note especially Abramenko (note 2) 86: 'Nerva konnte also unmöglich weiterhin als optimus et sanctissimus senex [Plin. Pan. 10.4] gelten, wenn ihm nicht nur geschlechtlicher Verkehr mit Domitian, sondern sogar die Schuld daran (corruptum ... a Nerva) nachgesagt wurde.' It is worth remembering that Suetonius' 'official' position was that the present age was superior to that of the tyrant: sicut sane breue abstinentia et moderationes inequentium principum (Dom. 23.2).
distinct possibility), Suetonius would have had even less reason to cast negative aspersions on the emperor’s family in such an obvious fashion. Hadrian, clearly enough, was not a man to vex twice. Although it seems possible that Hadrian had sought to distance himself in some respects from Nerva (perhaps because of the dubious means of the latter’s accession and his reputation as something of a Domitianic toady), one should remember that Nerva was still Hadrian’s grandfather. This being the case, Hadrian would surely not have approved of unflattering sexual remarks being made about members of his family.

While recent commentary on the locus in question emphasises Suetonius’ allusion to Domitian’s immoral behaviour, Nerva’s position also warrants discussion. Jones has previously exculpated Nerva from any degree of guilt, but says little about why this emperor is even mentioned in the first place. And I have done likewise. Let us see if we can redress that imbalance. Of course, Suetonius’ nec defuerunt qui affirmarent (Dom. 1.1.) does little to increase the authority of the accusation, especially given that similar formulae are typically used to introduce items that might be imagined to test the reader’s credulity. Note that Suetonius, before he mentions Nerva, asserts that

\[\text{9 I am not necessarily convinced that one can prove beyond question that the } \text{Domitianus was written after Suetonius’ dismissal. But this matters little: Suetonius would not have wanted to ignite Hadrian’s anger deliberately at any time in his reign. For convenient résumés of the controversy and a survey of recent scholarship, see either Jones 1996 (note 3) x-xii; H. Lindsay, } \text{Suetonius. Tiburii (London 1995) 8, or, most recently, D. Wardle, } \text{‘Suetonius as ab epistulis: an African connection’, Historia 51 (2002) 462-80, where the views espoused by H. Lindsay, } \text{‘Suetonius as ab epistulis to Hadrian and the early history of the imperial correspondence’, Historia 43 (1994) 454-68 are rejected.}

\[\text{10 This is the view put forward by B.W. Jones, } \text{The Emperor Domitian (London & New York 1992) 195 and, more recently, by C.L. Murison, } \text{‘Cassius Dio on Nervan legislation (68.2.4): nieces and eunuchs’, Historia 53 (2004) 355: ‘a Domitianic loyalist’. To support this point, an anonymous referee wondered whether one might aducle the belief that Hadrian deprived Nerva of the temple that Trajan had intended for him. But J.B. Ward-Perkins, } \text{‘Columna divi Antonini’, in Milangs d’histoire ancienne et d’archéologie offerts à Paul Callat (Lausanne 1976) 352, supposes that the otherwise ‘constitutional’ Trajan had planned the temple for himself all along, the initial plan of dedicating the edifice parentibus suis (i.e. to the defied Nerva and his defied father and sister) being a nod to contemporary religious susceptibilities’. For a brief summary of this problem, see J.E. Packer, } \text{The Forum of Trajan in Rome. A Study of the Monuments I (Berkeley, Los Angeles & Oxford) Appendix 11, 466-67.}

\[\text{11 The nec defierunt qui affirmarent is more or less equivalent to a Suetonian fama erat (e.g. Ner. 282). But cf. Suet. Aug. 100.4: nec defiit ur praetorius, qui se effigiem cremati suntam in caelum nidiisse iuravit.}

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Clodius Pollio had also had an assignation with Domitian. This was widely known, for Pollio had kept and sometimes exhibited a dierograhm i eius (i.e. of Domitian) in which incriminating particulars were recorded (Dom. 1.1). Personal names in the later Vitae are less frequent than in the earlier ones, which suggests that Suetonius is here taking care to make his accusation as authoritative as possible. The use of two names in close proximity to each other, viz. Clodius Pollio and Nerva, shows to what extent Suetonius deemed that Domitian's 'perversion' must be impressed upon the reader. As Jones has pointed out, the Suetonian bias against Domitian is 'consistent'.

Given the dearth, however, of specific detail with respect to Domitian's relationship with Nerva, the latter accusation emerges in quite a different light compared to that regarding Pollio. Thus we see that a popular story (at least among the elite) had emerged that may have had no basis in reality. In this tale, Nerva had sodomised Domitian, presumably in exchange for financial recompense – the contrived reference to Domitian's inopia clearly introduces this sordid and well-worn rhetorical topos (Dom. 1.1). The reason for this story is not difficult to imagine, and Suetonius' use of max is important. And this is perhaps for two reasons. Firstly, Nerva's supposed penetration of Domitian has a more symbolic and perhaps even metaphorical purpose than Pollio's similar deed. Nerva being 'on top' of Domitian in a sexual sense as the active partner reminds us that Nerva would eventually emerge 'on top' after the former emperor's assassination. As far as I am aware, this possible literary subtlety has not been commented on previously, but it does explain why stories surrounding Nerva and Domitian had been created and circulated in the first place. Nerva would not have discouraged their circulation, and Hadrian would have done likewise. Secondly, Suetonius' rather curious use of max might even suggest that Domitian's vice continued into his reign (i.e. when he obviously had no need to prostitute himself), which would make his passive sexual activities even more lamentable from a Roman point of view.

If the above reasoning holds, recent studies of Suetonius' attitude to same-sex relationships could benefit from further refinement. Certainly,

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12 Jones 2002 (note 1) 239. O. Kiefer, Sexual Life in Ancient Rome (London 1934) 331 also casts doubts on the veracity of the allegations.

13 This inopia is effectively refuted by Jones 1992 (note 10) 1-2 and 1996 (note 3) 12-13. The 'official' Flavian version of Vespasian's status under the 'bad' emperors Gaius and Nero is here used against Domitian.

14 This possibility was noted by one of the present journal's anonymous referees. I did not initially think of this interpretation but, in my opinion, it certainly warrants consideration.
great strides have recently been made in terms of understanding ancient sexuality. This being the case, some aspects of my recent discussion on the topic, when cast in the light of recent scholarship, enable an even firmer understanding of Suetonius' attitudes to emerge. It would be fairer to critique my own previous thoughts on the matter than to do so to others. Witness the following:

Same-sex activities in the Cæsares appear to be closely associated with tyranny. Still, we are not treated in the Domitianus to a detailed account of such behaviour as we are in the lives of Tiberius, Gaius and Nero....

Given that Suetonius, despite writing under Hadrian, did not seem to approve of either same-sex relations or Domitian ..., the biographer’s failure to assault the emperor’s supposed penchant for homoerotic practices is somewhat puzzling, especially when one considers that Domitian’s ‘passion’ for the eunuch Eunus was notorious. 15

At a general level, it is more or less true that same-sex activities 16 are associated with tyrants, but only (a) if the emperor is the passive partner, (b) if the frequency of sexual behaviour – even if the emperor was the active partner – could be described as excessive; 17 or (c) if some abnormal cruelty or perversion was involved, i.e. Nero’s castration of Sporus and his supposed marriage to him (Ner. 28.1-2), 18 or Tiberius’ violent sexual assault on two comely

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15 Charles (note 1) 42.

16 The use of words such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘homoerotic’ is best avoided. Recent scholarship points out that these terms have modern ethnocentric connotations that would have made little sense to the ancients. Romans essentially thought in terms of ‘active’ and ‘passive’, i.e. the one who penetrates and the one who is penetrated. Interested readers are well advised to consult H.N. Parker, ‘The myth of the heterosexual: anthropology and sexuality for classicists’, Arthusa 34 (2001) 313-62, which provides a thought-provoking introduction to the theme; see also F. Dupont & T. Éloi, L’érôtisme masculin dans la Rome antique (Paris 2001) 9.

17 Over-indulgence in ‘manly’ sexual activity could be characterised as a sign of effeminacy by Roman writers, especially since it demonstrates an inability to exercise self-control. A good overview of this is provided by P.S. Peck, ‘Feeding Aurelius’ hunger: Catullus 21’, AClass 45 (2002) 93-95.

18 I have discussed this locus previously; see Charles (note 1) 38. For a more detailed interpretation, see E. Champlin, Nero (Cambridge, Mass. & London 2003) 145-50, who believes that the ‘marriage’ had theatrical overtones: ‘it must have been played as a farce’ (149). Using Dio of Prusa’s account of the incident (21.6-7) and Cassius Dio’s (63.13.1) reference to ‘a contract (symbolion) ... which was a Greek legal form’, Champlin plausibly demonstrates that the wedding was a mixture of Roman and Greek customs: ‘Nero was making it up as he went along.’ See also Aur. Vict.
altar attendants (Tib. 44.2). Over-developed libido was wont to be criticised by Suetonius, but it is important to bear in mind that the sex of the partner is immaterial. That Suetonius ‘did not ... approve of same-sex relations’, which is also suggested by Baldwin and Carney, is not borne out by a critical inspection of the Caesares. What I should have said, perhaps, was that Suetonius did not approve of same-sex relations in which an adult free-born citizen male was penetrated by another male, or let his libido interfere with the very serious business of running the Empire. To cast it in plain terms, Suetonius could not have disapproved of licit same-sex relations any more than he could have disapproved of a man penetrating a female of the appropriate social and marital status.

A good example of Suetonius’ ambivalence towards appropriate same-sex activity is found in his life of Titus, who is characterised as a ‘good’ emperor. Titus, as a privatus, was suspected of leccuria and also of libido; and this latter charge papyri existorum et spadonum greges (Tit. 7.1). ‘Catamites and eunuchs’, as Rolfe translates, should obviously be regarded as sexually passive. Thus Titus is here criticised for excessive lust rather than the act itself. Note the telling appearance of greges. But, upon becoming emperor, Titus – at least according to Suetonius’ version of events – ceased all contact with some of his most cherished lovers or delicati: quosdam e gratissimis delicatorum quanquam tam artifices saltationis, ut max, scannam tenerint, non modo juvere, sed spectare omnino in publico coetu superedit (Tit. 7.2). These lovers,
who are identified as dancers (witness *artifices salutatorii*), probably number among the exorbitant mentioned above. What Suetonius praises, then, is not that Titus left off penetrating males, but that he restrained the frequency of such activities. Likewise, Suetonius’ statement that Claudius had no interest in same-sex relationships (*Claud. 33.2: marum omnino expers*) should not be regarded as a positive statement regarding the emperor’s proclivities, as some have interpreted it. Rather, the assertion is neutral in tone and merely conveys information that would be of interest to the biographer’s audience. Unfortunately, I did not take such loci into account when writing the quotation introduced previously. But, to be fair to myself, I later pointed out that the biographer did not refer to Domitian’s relationship with Earnius because the emperor would have played the dominant, i.e. *virile*, rôle in their relationship. There was nothing abnormal to comment on here, especially as this relationship more or less mirrored that of Hadrian and Antinoüs.

To conclude, Suetonius’ reference to Nerva sodomising Domitian certainly casts the latter in an effeminate and thus entirely negative light: Roman citizen males should not allow themselves to be penetrated by their sexual partners. At the same time, Suetonius’ accusation casts Nerva – at

interpretation, though one need not necessarily believe the historicity of this. The same reference also suggested that, in the passage in question, Suetonius is straining to produce as stark a contrast with the unformed Titus as possible.’ Cf. D. Wardle, ‘Suetonius: the “change” in, and the “generosity” of Titus’, *Antichthon* 35 (2001) 64-69. Wardle believes that, for Suetonius, the negative aspects of Titus’ pre-accession character were the stuff of rumour, whereas the good qualities exhibited after his accession revealed the emperor’s true nature: ‘he was at all times fundamentally good’ (66). See also Murison (note 10) 350. Cass. Dio 67.2.3 also describes Titus’ penchant for eunuchs.


24 D.W. Hurley (ed.), *Suetonius. Divus Claudius* (Cambridge 2001) 206, correctly notes that ‘The fact that S. felt it necessary to note that C. did not have homosexual contacts indicates that these were expected and acceptable – provided the partner was of inferior status and played the female [i.e. passive] role.’ Similarly, A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius* (2nd ed., London 1995) 184, describes Claudius’ behaviour as ‘the exception’.

25 Charles (note 1) 42-45.
least at an ostensible level – in a rather more masculine and thus positive light, at least within the bounds of what might be deemed acceptable. It follows that the statement about Nerva is not simply neutral, as others (including myself) have somewhat tacitly supposed. Jones, for example, concentrates almost entirely on how the *locus* reflects badly on Domitian. On the contrary, when one recalls that Nerva, according to the extant historical record, did not exactly comport himself as the most virile, dominating, assertive and thus ‘Roman’ statesman imaginable (Cassius Dio’s account certainly suggests that this was the case), *Dom. 1.1* could, on one level, serve as a defence of what might have been the official dynastic view by Suetonius’ day, i.e. that Nerva was a ‘real’ Roman man and one eminently worthy of leading the Empire. On another level, a more critical reading might take into account the stories regarding Nerva’s rather feeble nature and make Domitian’s submission to him even more worthy of scorn. For the attuned reader, the *locus* might even be interpreted as ‘he was even sodomised by that old woman Nerva, who soon afterwards succeeded him.’ While the veracity of *Dom. 1.1* is entirely debatable, Suetonius’ intention should now be relatively clear: it was his aim to deride Domitian and – at least ostensibly – emphasise Nerva’s somewhat questionable virility.

miguelbcharles@hotmail.com

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26 That Nerva, as far as we are aware, had never commanded an army or travelled to the provinces was also an indictment of sorts against the emperor’s fitness to rule, and, by extension, his virility; for the classic overview, see Syme (note 4) 1-9. See also Grainger (note 5) 28: ‘little or no experience of the army’; and A. Garzetti, *Nerva* (Rome 1950) 35: ‘non aveva rivestito mai comandi militari.’ That Nerva was closely associated with the notoriously effeminate last of the Julio-Claudians (Tac. *Ann. 15.72.1; ILS 273*) would have done little to raise Nerva’s standing in this respect. Of relevance, too, is that he was an erotic poet of some repute, the *naturī ... temporīs ... Tibullum* (Mart. 8.70.7; cf. 9.26.9-10 and Plin. *Ep. 5.3.5*, where the exact nature of Nerva’s verse is not mentioned). Consider Syme (note 4) 628: ‘Which genre of erotic poetry knew Nerva as an expert is not a theme to linger on.’ In divining the meaning of *lasiamum in suis cum stipite lusit opus* (Mart. 9.26.10) in the context of Mart. 8.70.7-8, Syme (note 4) vol. 2, 628 n. 4 draws our attention to Tibullus’ erotic poems about Marathus (1.4; 1.8) – not really the sort of thing about which a non-hereditary emperor with no real governing experience might necessarily boast.

27 This interpretation was helpfully suggested by an anonymous referee.
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