



Cancellaria's Reliefs depicting the Adventus of Vespasian and the Profectio of Domitian (93-95 CE)

Cancellaria's Reliefs



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Name of the artist: Unknown

Patron/Sponsor: Domitian

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):

Rome, Vatican Museums

Description:

The two so-called Cancellaria's Reliefs were discovered in 1937 and in 1939 underneath the Palazzo della Cancellaria in Roma. The two panels stood near by the remains of the Tomb of Aulus Hirtius, dated to the Republican period. Clearly the two reliefs had been reworked, and thrown out in this location, which was used as a waste. The two panels are known as Frieze A and Frieze B. They are composed of two planes. A high relief technique is used in the foreground, and a low relief technique in the background. Diana Kleiner emphasizes that the style of the relief is classicizing. The figures in the frontal row are depicted as frontal or as three quarters, although the head is always showed in a three quarters position. The two reliefs are characterized by the lack of landscape or architectural elements (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 191).

The first panel, usually referred to as Frieze B (the one below on the first picture), is the less well-preserved, and is considered to depict the ceremonial entry (*adventus*) of the emperor Vespasian in Rome in 70 CE, in the aftermath of the civil wars. It focuses on the figures of Domitian and Vespasian, who are depicted in the middle, towards the right. Domitian stands on the left. He is depicted as a youthful figure, wearing a tunic, and draped in a toga. He is holding the folds of the toga with both hands. Vespasian, depicted on his right, is in fact the dominant figure of the entire panel. The emperor, also dressed in a tunic and draped in a toga, is depicted speaking to his son. The atmosphere of the scene is quite informal, as the emperor is placing his right hand on his son's shoulder in a familiar gesture. Yet, it seems that a winged Victoria, the personification or goddess of victory, stood on his left, crowning him with a wreath. In the background, behind Domitian, stands the *Genius* of the Roman senate, depicted as an older bearded man, dressed in a tunic, and draped in a toga. Between the two members of the Flavian family



stands the *Genius* of the Roman people (on the *Genius populi Romani*, see the presentation in [Denarius minted by P. Cornelius Lentulus Marcellinus, representing Rome crowned by the Genius of the Roman People \(100 BCE\)](#) [6]). His youthful figure contrasts with that of the *Genius* of the Senate. He is depicted as just draped in a cloak, which leaves his breast bare. In his left hand, he holds a huge cornucopia, a symbol of plenty. Some scholars identify him with *Honos*, or the god of honor. On the two sides of Domitian and Vespasian stand two *lictors*. The *lictors* are dressed in a tunic and a mantle, and carry on their right hand the *fasces* with the axe. From left to right, on the background register, the figure of the goddess Roma is preeminent. The goddess is depicted as dressed in a short tunic which leaves her right breast bare, similar to the Amazons' tunic; she wears a helmet. The goddess, whom some scholars identify with *Virtus*, is depicted seated on a throne, and holding a spear in her right hand. In the frontal register, below, is depicted a Vestal Virgin, surrounded by two *apparitores*, or attendants. The Vestal Virgin is depicted dressed in a tunic and draped in the *stola*, which covers her head. The two *apparitores* are also dressed in a tunic, but they are draped in a formal toga. The fragments of the relief depict no less than other four Vestal Virgins, emphasizing the religious character of the relief (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 191).

Frieze A, as the previous frieze, develops on two planes, using high and low relief. This frieze probably depicted the ceremonial leaving (*profectio*) of the emperor Domitian for the Sarmatian War, fought in 92-93 CE. Other scholars argue that it is rather the emperor's *profectio* for the campaign against the Chatti that is depicted. The panel focuses on the figure of Domitian, who stands in the middle, towards the left. Domitian's head has been reworked as that of Nerva, evidently in the aftermath of his murder and his subsequent *damnatio memoriae*. Domitian, dressed in a tunic, and draped in a mantle, is depicted as standing between the goddess Minerva, on his left, and the goddess Roma, on his right. Clearly the artist emphasized the close relationship between the ruler and the two goddesses. Thus, Domitian is leaning towards Minerva, who is taking his left arm, while Rome is gently touching his left elbow, in a gesture which can be interpreted as a gentle exhortation to proceed forward to victory and glory. Minerva is depicted as wearing a long tunic, the aegis, and wears a helmet on her head, while Roma is dressed in a short tunic, which leaves her left breast bare, and a helmet, as in the other frieze. Victoria, of whom only a wing survives, probably was depicted leading Domitian. On the left of Minerva stands Mars, the god of war, dressed with an armor and a helmet. The procession is in fact opened by a lictor, dressed in a tunic and a mantle, holding the *fasces* with the axe in his right hand. On the right of Roma stand the two *Genii*, first the *Genius* of the Senate, and then the *Genius* of the Roman people. As on the previous frieze, while the *Genius* of the Roman senate is depicted as an older bearded man, dressed in a tunic, and draped in a toga, the *Genius* of the Roman people is depicted as a youthful figure, draped in a cloak, and holding a huge cornucopia. Four Roman soldiers, dressed in a tunic and a mantle, carrying an oval *scutum* and a *pilum*, close the procession (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 191-192).

Date: 93 CE to 95 CE

Material:

Marble

Commentary:

The location of the original panels is disputed, although they stood in the forum or nearby. Thus various locations have been suggested, such as the Temple of Fortuna Redux, Porticus Divorum, and Porta Triumphalis. After the *damnatio memoriae* of Domitian, the two panels were recarved, yet to which extent is still a matter of debate amongst scholars. The most blatant example of recarving is of course the figure of Domitian in Frieze A, whose head was recarved as that of Nerva. Some scholars argue that also Frieze B may have been recarved and reshaped. Thus the figure of Vespasian, so central, would originally have been that of his son Domitian. According to this theory, Nerva had the panel recarved, replacing the head of Domitian with that of Vespasian, in order to emphasize his association with the founder of the Flavian dynasty, and to enhance his own legitimacy. This would explain why the head of Domitian was recarved as that of Vespasian and not as that of Nerva, who, therefore, appears only on Frieze A. In fact, a similar phenomenon happened under Vespasian himself, who strove to associate his public image with that of Augustus, or of Claudius, while leaving outside the figure of Nero. In connection with this interpretation, the figure of Domitian, facing Vespasian, has been identified with that of a young priest. Frieze B would then represent the depiction of the *adventus* of Domitian after the Sarmatian War. According to another interpretation, the main purpose of the two panels was to emphasize Domitian's imperial virtues. Thus, Frieze B emphasized the emperor's *pietas*, or religious piety, and the scene would be a religious one, as highlighted by the depiction of the Vestal Virgins. In this case, Domitian was depicted as *pontifex maximus*, or the head of the Roman state religion. As to Frieze A, according to this interpretation it focused on the emperor's *virtus*, or bravery. This possibility elucidates the presence of Mars, the god of war, of Victoria, the goddess of victory, and of the various soldiers.



The massive recarving and the successive removal of the two friezes from the public space demonstrate the supreme importance of this type of reliefs, funded by the state, as a medium of imperial propaganda (Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 192).

Thematic keywords:

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- [Nerva](#) [8]
- [Domitian](#) [9]
- [imperial virtues](#) [10]
- [bravery](#) [11]
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Bibliographical references:

[Roman Sculpture](#) [25]

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[“Les génies du Sénat et du peuple romain et les reliefs flaviens de la Cancelleria”](#) [26]

Béranger, Jean article-in-a-book *Principatus : études de notions et d'histoire politiques dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine* Jean Béranger, François Paschoud, Pierre Ducrey 399-410 “Les génies du Sénat et du peuple romain et les reliefs flaviens de la Cancelleria” Genève Droz 1973

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