



[Martial, Epigrams II.2](#)

Comparison between Domitian's victory in Germania and the successes of Vespasian and Titus in Judea.

Name of the author: Martial

Date: 86 CE to 87 CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Epigrams

Reference: II.2

Commentary:

This poem is part of the second book of Martial's *Epigrams*, a book which was probably composed at the end of 86 CE or at the beginning of 87 CE. It is the first epigram of this book which openly praises the emperor Domitian through a theme frequently used by Martial in the eulogies he addressed to him, namely Domitian's victory over Germania in 83 CE (Sullivan, *Martial*, p. 130).

As Craig Williams rightly remarks, this epigram follows a "gradual but irresistible buildup" (Williams, *Martial*, p. 27). It opens with some historical exempla of victorious Roman generals who received, as a cognomen, the name of the region they conquered. Martial mentions Q. Caecilius Metellus who fought in Crete between 68 and 65 BCE and who, after having subdued the entire island, celebrated a triumph at Rome in 62 BCE and received the cognomen of Creticus. With Scipio Africanus, Martial may refer to two Roman generals: P. Cornelius Scipio (also said the elder, *Maiores*) who defeated Hannibal at Zama in 202 BCE, or his adopted grandson P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus who destroyed Carthage in 146 BCE. Due to the presence of the adjective *maius* (v. 1), the first one seems more probable (Williams, *Martial*, p. 28; Rimell, *Martial's*, p. 127).

Then, Martial deals with the main theme of the epigram: his eulogy of the ruling emperor, Domitian. In verse 3, the poet explicitly says that Domitian received a nobler (*nobilius*) name due to his victory over Germany, here symbolized by the submission of the Rhine. Obviously, Martial refers here to Domitian's triumph over the Chatti, in 83 CE, a triumph which led him to receive the name "Germanicus", even if the final victory over the Chatti may have occurred only at the end of the year 84 CE (Southern, *Domitian*, p. 85). From 83 CE onward, Domitian associated his public image with a very martial ideology, and the commemoration of his victories over the Germans was its keystone. In 86/87 CE, when Martial was writing this epigram, the poet was totally fitting in with this ideological program which was going to last until the end of Domitian's reign. Actually, we know thanks to Statius that in 90 CE, an equestrian statue of the emperor Domitian was dedicated on the Roman Forum in honour of his victories against the Dacians and the Chatti (see [Statius, *Silvae* I.1.22-55](#)). This statue, probably represented on a group of [sestertii minted in 95-96 CE](#), shares a common pattern with Martial's depiction: Domitian's horse is represented crushing the head of a personification of the Rhine. Even a long time after 83 CE, Domitian's victory against the Chatti remained thus a major element of his propaganda. Martial fits in with this ideology and adds that Domitian was already worthy to bear the name Germanicus when he was a young boy (v. 4). The poet may refer to the fact that, in 70 CE, while he was 18 or 19 years old, Domitian accompanied Mucianus during the Batavian war (Williams, *Martial*, p. 29).

The most important point of this epigram is that, in verses 5-6, Martial compares Domitian's military success with that of his brother and his father in Judea, here mentioned as the *Idumaei triumph*, "Idumean triumphs". Instead of speaking about the "Judean triumph" (actually the victory was over Judea and not Idumea, see the [coins of the type "Judea capta"](#)), Martial may have wanted to present this event through a poetic perspective. Actually, many Latin poets used the words "Idumea"/"Idumean" to refer to Judea (see for instance the poetic image of Idumean palms or palm-trees in [Virgil, *Georgic* III.10-48](#); [Silius Italicus, *Punica* III.600](#); [Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* I. 12](#); Statius, *Silvae* V.2.138-139). The second characteristic of Martial's wording is the plural ("triumphs"), which is quite strange. One could argue that Martial is using a hyperbole. In my view, however, he may rather have wanted to emphasize that this triumph was a double one, since it was the triumph of both Vespasian and Titus. In verses 5-6, Martial adopts a point of view which is very different from that of Valerius Flaccus. Actually, in this poem of the *Argonautica* – maybe composed under Vespasian –, Valerius Flaccus mentions Domitian to associate him with



the conquest of Judea led by his father and brother. His role is limited to the depiction of his brother's exploits during the war ([Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* I.5-17](#)). In this proem Titus appears as the main orchestrator of the Jewish war, and Domitian is just mentioned to underscore the unity of the Flavian family (Kleywegt, *Valerius Flaccus*, p. 17). A few years after Valerius Flaccus's proem, Martial chooses to highlight Domitian's actions and claims that Domitian's victory over the Chatti has to be considered as as prestigious as the "combined triumph" of Vespasian and Titus over Judea in 71 CE (Coleman, *M. Valerii*, p. Ixiii-Ixiv). According to Craig Williams, Martial's flattery towards Domitian should even be understood under a more competitive perspective. Actually, the poet seems to have wanted to "downplay" "the objectively more significant triumph" celebrated by Vespasian and Titus in 71 CE, by highlighting the fact that Domitian fought the Chatti by his own (Williams, *Martial*, p. 27-28). The last two verses of the epigram clearly echoes some passages of Jupiter's prophecy about Rome's future splendour, in [Silius Italicus, *Punica* III.594-629](#) (for the intertextual relation Spaltenstein, *Commentaire*, p. 250-251). As the exact dating of *Punica*'s third book is uncertain (around 83 CE), we cannot confirm that Martial was influenced by Silius Italicus's work. Through Jupiter's prophecy, Silius Italicus presents the Flavians as a "warmongering race," and he insists on the fact that, due to his military operations in Judea, Titus was the upholder of his father's policy (III.603-605). But, as Martial, Silius Italicus underlines the association between Titus and Vespasian so as to throw into sharper relief Domitian's actions and qualities. In a more explicit way than the author of the epigrams, Silius Italicus says that Domitian transcends his father and his brother (III.607). However, as Martial, he insists on the fact that Domitian's exceptional victory over the Chatti was foreseeable due to his involvement in the Batavian war in 70 CE (III.608).

Martial is clearly less direct and talkative than Silius Italicus when he implies that Domitian's military operations against Germania were greater than those of his brother, because he achieved them all alone. In addition, when Martial mentions Titus's shared triumph over Judea, he takes the trouble to write that Titus *meruit*, namely that he won and that he deserved to win. So, Martial's aim was probably not to undermine the importance of the Jewish war, but rather to focus the attention on Domitian's successes in order to fit in his actions with the long list of Flavian's successes (Coleman, *M. Valerii*, p. Ixiii-Ixiv). Domitian's military successes against the Chatti during the first campaign of 82-85 CE have been reassessed in a positive way by Pat Southern, especially due to the fortification operations which, according to her, might have been led by Domitian from 83 CE onward (Southern, *Domitian*, p. 85-91). However, the dating of these buildings remains problematic, and some of them might have been built after 89 CE, that is after the second operation against the Chatti, during Saturninus's revolt. The fact that the operations of 82-85 CE against the Chatti were mainly defensive and not really decisive may show that Martial overestimated their scope. Thus, these operations could objectively not be compared to the military successes of Titus and Vespasian in Judea. Secondly, when Martial composed the second book of his *Epigrams*, namely at the end of 86 CE or at the beginning of 87 CE, Domitian was facing some difficulties with the Sarmatians who had crossed the Danube into Moesia in 85 CE. After a first operation, led by Domitian and the praetorian prefect Cornelius Fuscus, which successfully led to the eviction of the Dacians from Moesia, another punitive expedition was organised in the early summer of 86 CE. This expedition was, however, a disaster for the Roman armies. So, at the end of 86 CE, Domitian was back in Rome to celebrate the Capitoline Games, but the Sarmatian problem was still not settled. As John Sullivan rightly remarks, this situation could explained why in this epigram Martial chooses to use "carefully limited" praises "to Domitian's unshared triumph over the Chatti" (Sullivan, *Martial*, p. 133).

To conclude, this epigram of Martial shows that, nearly fifteen years after the associated triumph of Titus and Vespasian over Judea, this event was still perceived as one of the major military successes of the Flavians. However, when Domitian ruled the Empire alone, the memory of this triumph became troublesome for him and he may have pursued a twofold strategy to deal with it. On the one hand, it was necessary to maintain the memory of this success over Judea because the Flavian dynasty had previously based the main part of its prestige and image on it. Domitian needed to fit in with this dynastic inheritance. On the other hand, Domitian also needed to assert his own imperial stature. For this reason, the praise of his military successes in Germania and Dacia were thus constantly recalled during his entire reign.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Caesar](#)
- [Chatti](#)
- [dignus](#)



- [domitus](#)
- [frater](#)
- [Germania](#)
- [Idumaeum](#)
- [laurea](#)
- [nobilis](#)
- [nomen](#)
- [Rhenus](#)
- [triumphus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Domitian](#)
- [Flavians](#)
- [Germans](#)
- [Idumea](#)
- [Jewish war](#)
- [Rhine](#)
- [Roman conquests](#)
- [Roman triumph](#)
- [Titus](#)
- [Vespasian](#)
- [victory](#)
- [warrior](#)

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[Sestertius depicting a bust and an equestrian statue of Domitian \(95-96 CE\)](#)

- [Read more about Sestertius depicting a bust and an equestrian statue of Domitian \(95-96 CE\)](#)

Text

[Statius, *Silvae* I.1.22-55](#)

Description of Domitian's equestrian statue newly erected on the Roman Forum

- [Read more about Statius, *Silvae* I.1.22-55](#)

Text

[Silius Italicus, *Punica* III.594-629](#)



While Hannibal is about to conquer Italy, Jupiter comforts Venus by foretelling Rome's future splendour under the Flavians.

- [Read more about Silius Italicus, Punica III.594-629](#)

Text

[Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.5-17](#)

The affirmation of the dynastical principle in the proem of the Argonautica.

- [Read more about Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica I.5-17](#)

Numismatic item

[Aureus depicting the head of Domitian and the personification of Germania mourning \(88-89 CE\)](#)

- [Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Domitian and the personification of Germania mourning \(88-89 CE\)](#)

Numismatic item

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