



[Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVII.14.1-2](#)

The condemnation of Flavius Clemens for atheism

Name of the author: Cassius Dio

Date: 207 CE to 229 CE

Language: Greek

Category: Roman and Greek

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Roman History

Reference: LXVII.14.1-2

Commentary:

For a short biographical presentation of Cassius Dio and of his main work, the *Roman History*, see [Cassius Dio, Roman History XXXVII.16-17](#).

The sixty-seventh book of Cassius's Dio *Roman History* is one of the books that has not been preserved at all. As a consequence, we only know Book 67 through the *Epitome* of the work that the byzantine monk John Xiphilinus made at the end of the eleventh century CE (John Xiphilinus's *Epitome* includes books 36 to 80).

This text is particularly interesting as it is one of the few sources that attests the reason why in 95 CE, Flavius Clemens, a cousin of Domitian who had just fulfilled the consulship, and his wife Flavia Domitilla were accused of atheism (*atheot?s, ????????*) and were respectively condemned to death and exiled. Before Cassius Dio, only Suetonius speaks about Flavius Clemens's condemnation, but he does not mention the exile of Flavia Domitilla, nor make explicit the reason for his condemnation as Cassius Dio did later. Suetonius only writes that Domitian put Flavius Clemens to death "on a very slight suspicion" (*ex tenuissima suspicione*) and that Clemens was a man of "most contemptible inertia" (*contemptissimae inertiae*) (Suetonius, *Domitian* XV.1). This last description has been interpreted variously by scholars who have debated more generally the religion adopted by Clemens and his wife. Taking into account an excerpt from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (III.18.4), which mentions that in 95 CE the niece of Domitian, Flavia Domitilla, was condemned to exile on the island of Pontia because of "the testimony given to the Christ," some scholars have defended the idea that Flavius Clemens and his wife had adopted the Christian faith (see the bibliography presented in Keresztes, "The Jews, the Christians," p. 8, n. 22 and 23). They thus interpret Suetonius's remark about his inertia as a way to argue that he was not dangerous and that Domitian's condemnation was unjustified.

From a different perspective, some scholars have suggested that Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla may have been condemned for having adopted Jewish customs. These scholars quote the text of Cassius Dio presented here, a text in which the Greek author recalls that the charge of atheism which was used to condemn Flavius Clemens and his wife was frequently used against many others "who drifted into Jewish ways (?? ?? ??? ????????) ??? ?????????????)". For these scholars, this description made by Cassius Dio of the "drifting into Jewish ways" may correspond to Suetonius's first category of men who were concerned under Domitian's reign by the hardening of the policy towards Jews. These men were described by Suetonius as men "who were living a Jewish life without publicly acknowledging it" and have been identified by some with converts to Judaism, sympathizers, or even "Gentile Christians" (about the debated interpretation of this passage, see [Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2](#); about the Jewish tax see also [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2](#); on the association between Suetonius's text and this passage, see Keresztes, "The Jews, the Christians," p. 10; Heemstra, *The Fiscus Judaicus*, p. 28-29). One common point between the two texts is that the adoption of Jewish customs probably by some non-Jews becomes a motif of accusation leading to the confiscation of the properties of the convicted. Cassius Dio does not say that Flavius Clemens and his wife had been condemned because they were in an irregular situation regarding the Jewish *fiscus*, but writes that they had been condemned because they had been convicted of atheism, which was the equivalent of being accused of *impietas*. As rightly recalled by Xavier Levieils, if Flavius Clemens and his wife had actually adopted, at least partially, Jewish customs, these customs were not in themselves condemned by Roman laws. The adoption of Jewish customs was one element that the adversaries of Clemens and his wife could use to prove that the latter were actually guilty of impiety—that is of not fulfilling the compulsory religious rites which were indispensable for the preservation of good relations with the gods, and thus of the social order and greatness of Rome. From a broader perspective, the strengthening of Domitian's policy towards Jews, and more particularly



towards Roman citizens adopting Jewish customs and religion, may have been the result of the reinforcement of the policy concerning imperial divinisation. Actually, Jews had a derogatory status in that domain: probably since Augustus, as a sign of their loyalty to Rome, they could offer a daily sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple to God for the safety of the Roman emperor; and they were allowed not to be engaged in cultic veneration in imperial temples (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVI.162-163, XIX.289-291); in addition, from the end of the Jewish war onwards, they could continue to practice freely their religion under the condition of paying two drachma per person to the *fiscus Iudaicus*. Nevertheless, Domitian may have wanted to limit this freedom of action in the religious domain for the gentile Judaizers. Finally, the fact that Flavius Clemens and his wife may have been accused of atheism just on the basis that they had adopted some Jewish customs rather than the Christian faith may be confirmed by Suetonius's assessment that Clemens was a man of "most contemptible inertia" (*contemptissimae inertiae*) (Suetonius, *Domitian* XV.1). These last words may thus refer to the fact that during Shabbat, Flavius Clemens abstained from any religious or political activities, a behaviour that may have been interpreted as socially, religiously and politically subversive (about the assimilation of Shabbat to *blandiente inertia*, see [Tacitus, *Histories* V.4.3](#); see also Leveils, *Contra Christianos*, p. 113-114).

If the thesis that Flavius Clemens and his wife were accused of atheism because of their adherence to Jewish customs and laws is to be accepted, one has to explain the testimony given by Eusebius of Caesarea previously quoted. Apart from the hypothesis according to which the elements given by Eusebius are erroneous if we compare it to Dio Cassius's text (Flavia Domitilla is the niece of Flavius Clemens, not his wife, and she is exiled to Pontia and not to Pandateria), Paul Keresztes has argued that the discrepancy between the two passages can be solved if we consider that the Flavia Domitilla mentioned by Eusebius is different from the one mentioned by Cassius Dio, and that the first one adhered to the Christian faith (see Keresztes, "The Jews, the Christians," p. 15-20). He thus defends the idea that in the 90s CE some members of the *gens Flavia* adhered to Judaism and to the Christian faith, but that the Roman authorities considered them in a similarly suspicious way. Yet, we cannot be sure that Eusebius does not propose here a reinterpreted version of the exile of Flavia Domitilla in order to fit the aims of his apologetic demonstration.

This passage of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* enables us to see, however, that, in 95 CE the accusation of *impietas* or of *maiestas*, that is of criminal offence against the imperial figure, could be frequently used as a pretext to get rid of enemies, especially when they were part of the most influential families of the Empire (Leveils, *Contra Christianos*, p. 115-116). The repression of Flavius Clemens and his wife was highly political, and their condemnation was a way to get rid of potential conspirators against the throne (see Williams, *Jews*, p. 107-108). If we connect Suetonius and Cassius Dio's testimonies, the accusations of leading a Jewish life or of adopting Jewish customs appear clearly as a pretext used for the formulation of a more serious accusation, that of disturbing the social and religious order of the Empire, or worse, that of harming the *maiestas* of the ruling emperor. In the following book of the *Roman History*, as we know it through John Xiphilinus's *Epitome*, Cassius Dio narrates that under Nerva the situation changed considerably as the emperor "released all who were on trial for *asebeia* and restored the exiles," and he also forbade denunciations of persons for *asebeia* or for living a Jewish life (see [Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVIII.1.2](#)).

Keywords in the original language:

- [?????????](#)
- [?????????](#)
- [?????????](#)
- [???????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [atheism](#)
- [death penalty](#)



- [denunciation](#)
- [Domitian](#)
- [exile](#)
- [Flavia Domitilla](#)
- [Flavius Clemens](#)
- [Jewish customs](#)
- [Jewish tax](#)
- [Judaizers](#)

Bibliographical references: Heemstra, Marius, [The Fiscus Judaicus and the Parting of the Ways](#) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010)

Keresztes, Paul, "[The Jews, the Christians and the Emperor Domitian](#)", *Vigiliae Christianae* 27/1 (1973) : 1-28

Levieils, Xavier, [Contra Christianos. La critique sociale et religieuse du christianisme des origines au concile de Nicée \(45-325\)](#) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007)

Williams, Margaret H., [Jews in a Graeco-Roman Environment](#) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2](#)

Domitian's harsh policy towards the Jews

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Text

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The instauration of the Jewish tax

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