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Echoes of “Judaea Capta”: The Nature of Domitian’s Coinage of Judea and Vicinity

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Abstract
This article discusses the nature of Domitian’s provincial coinage of Judea and vicinity. Based upon dates of issue and comparison of types, it is suggested that even if these coins do not carry JUDAEA CAPTA legends, they nevertheless are likely to refer to the Roman victory in the Jewish War. Coins with portraits of Domitian struck under Agrippa II and at the city of Pella of the Decapolis, are also discussed in this context.

The coins of Domitian apparently struck at Caesarea Maritima were considered to be the final coins of the “Judaea Capta” series by Reifenberg (1947:33), Madden (1864:197), and others. In the 1960s, the mood began to change. In 1962 Weisbrem published an article suggesting that the Domitian coins do not belong in the “Judaea Capta” series because “the coins of Domitian in question were struck many years after the Roman victory over Judea by a ruler who had no particular interest in that victory and was not concerned to glorify it (Weisbrem 1962:6–7).” By 1983 Carradice had published an article which moved this theory forward: “The coins issued by the Roman administrators of the province of Judea during the reign of Domitian used to be classified a continuation of the early Flavian “Judaea Capta” series, but now it is generally recognized that they are a separate series whose types do not refer to the Flavian victories in Judaea (Carradice 1982–1983:18).”

The authors of Roman Provincial Coinage also tended to agree that these coins of Domitian “are now accepted as a separate series. They are strongly ‘Imperial’ in character, with the emperor’s portrait, Latin inscriptions and some designs clearly borrowed from the coinage of Rome (RPC 2:303).” Although, RPC also notes that “The bronze coins referred to as “Judaea Capta” under Vespasian, Titus and Domitian were circulating in the province of Judea...” (RPC 2:302). Several of Domitian’s coins of this series resemble Roman coins in both reverse types and portraiture, and RPC suggested that “minting in Rome cannot be ruled out” (RPC 2:309). Little information exists on the authorities who issued local Roman

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provincial coinage in the Flavian period, although in general, *RPC* noted that “there was a need — whether legally required or arising from the competitive desire to attract the emperor’s attention — for provincial coinage to have imperial or other Roman (e.g., gubernatorial) sanction” (*RPC* 2:xv).²

Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that the local officials in ancient Judea, including those who controlled or influenced the mint, wished, above all, to do what they perceived as the current Emperor’s bidding. The general nature of a series of coins also needed to be considered. For example provincial coin series might promote local deities, agriculture, or architecture, or, as in our case, coins with motifs that seem to have little other role than to proclaim the emperor’s victories.

While the nature of Domitian’s successors to the local Vespasian and Titus “Judaea Capta” coinage has changed, there is little doubt that it sounds an echo of the coins of his father and brother. Furthermore, other coins with Domitian’s portrait of both Agrippa II and the city of Pella repeat similar themes with nearly identical types.

Officials from the East who continued to serve the Flavian dynasty upon Domitian’s ascension, knew very well that Vespasian’s second son did not play a part in the Jewish War. On the other hand one finds no evidence that Domitian’s loyal followers made any effort to distance him from this major victory of his immediate family members.

The ancient sources state that Domitian was envious and competitive with his brother Titus. Some who argue against Domitian’s coins being part of the “Judaea Capta” series suggest that Domitian would never boast of a victory that was mainly associated with his brother and father. But there is no evidence that Domitian spurned association with the family victory in Judea, at least as long as his father and brother reigned.

In *The Jewish War*, Josephus reported that in Titus’ triumphal parade in Rome there appeared “… a large group carrying images of Victory, all fashioned of ivory and gold. Behind them Vespasian drove first, with Titus behind him, while Domitian rode alongside in magnificent apparel and mounted on a horse that was itself a sight worth seeing” (*Ant.* 7:152). Thus Domitian showed no embarrassment in being associated with the Jewish War victory. Josephus added that, “While he remained at Caesarea Titus celebrated his brother’s (Domitian’s) birthday with great splendor, dedicating to his honor on this occasion much of the punishment of his Jewish captives” (*Ant.* 7:37).

Margaret Williams further observed that “Domitian had a deep antagonism for Jews and their ways,” and she believed that this was reflected in the copycat

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² While Howgego takes this to be a “highly questionable premise” (1993:201), one cannot get around the reality that some responsible authority, who could ill-afford to insult the emperor or his minions, must have managed provincial mints.
attitudes of contemporary authors such as Quintilian; that Domitian is usually seen as being in conflict with Christians, but it was really the Jews who he abhorred (Williams 1990:197). Ciecielag acknowledged Domitian’s “aversion to Jews,” even while he argued that the Flavian Dynasty did not observe a general anti-Jewish policy (Ciecielag 2006:105). Once again it would be difficult for provincial officials or friends of the court, near or far, to have ignored their ruler’s feelings on the matter of Jews.

According to Suetonius, upon Vespasian’s death, Domitian claimed that “he had been left as a partner in the imperial position but that fraud had been applied to the will” and that Domitian had made “plots against his brother, both secretly and openly, until he ordered him, after he had been attacked by a serious illness, to be left as though dead, before he could completely breathe out his spirit; and after his death, he deemed him worthy of no honor except deification, but often even slandered him by means of indirect speeches and edicts” (Jones and Milns 2002:30). In spite of this “slander” (which may have actually been true), the Arch of Titus was built in Rome during Domitian’s reign. The arch specifically commemorated Titus’ victory in the Jewish War, but in general it is a monument to Flavian domination and victory in the Jewish War, thus indirectly a monument to Domitian himself.

Under Domitian, the mint of Rome did not issue any explicit “Judaea Capta” coins (Pl. 15:1; Hendin 2001:331, No. 796). Domitian’s mint officials actually copied the JUDAEA CAPTA legends and motifs for a series of GERMANIA CAPTA coins that did not begun until in 85 CE (CRE 2:362). For this discussion, however, our interest lies with the coins of Domitian struck in ancient Judea and its immediate vicinity.

Let us first consider coins struck in the name of Domitian by the Herodian king Agrippa II, a great friend of the Flavians. Under Agrippa II’s direct authority, a “Victory of Augustus” coin was struck at Tiberias near the end of the Jewish War in 69/70 CE (TJC:233, No. 134). This coin is Agrippa II’s explicit “Judaea Capta” coin celebrating the victory of his Flavian allies over the Jewish nation (Pl. 15:2; TJC:233, No. 134; Qedar 1989:33–36).

The next dated coins of Agrippa II were struck in Agrippa’s fourteenth year

3 However, there is a rare fourre denarius, with an obverse portrait of Domitian and a typical IVDAEA reverse (Hendin 2001:331, No. 796).
4 Regarding the dating of Agrippa II’s coins we shall follow the suggested dating with eras beginning in 55 and 60 CE (RPC 2:309).
5 RPC notes that “Agrippa II had co-operated with the Romans and the coins would celebrate the Roman victory. If, alternatively, the coin was to be dated by the era of 60 CE, it would have been minted in 74/5 CE and the victory might reflect the final Roman victory following the fall of Masada, or just the earlier main victory in 70” (RPC 2:309).
and the nature of the coinage changes significantly. One of these types bears closer examination: the coin with Nike standing left and writing on a shield resting on her knee (Pl. 15:3; TJC:234, No. 139). Similar coins were struck under Agrippa II in at least eight additional years, although after the first issue the direction of Nike shifts from facing left to facing right (Pl. 15:4; TJC:236, No. 152). The fourteenth year, when the first of these types was struck, corresponds to 73/4 CE. The coins of “year 14” undoubtedly relate to the victory in the Jewish War. One may not overlook the coincidence that these “year 14” victory coins were struck by Agrippa II within a short time of the capture of Masada, the final chapter in the Jewish War.

There is no connection between Agrippa II’s coins and Domitian’s later German affairs. The most likely prototype for these coins of Agrippa would have been the VICTORIA AVGVSTI sestertius, first struck by Vitellius (CRE 1:379, No. 61), and later copied in Rome under Vespasian (Pl. 15:5; Hendin 2001:324, No. 778; cf. CRE 2:138, No. 625, p. 191, No. 785, and p. 141, No. 638) both with and without mourning Jews seated beneath the palm trees. The legend was soon changed from VICTORIA AVGVSTI to IVDAEA CAPTA and the latter was copied in Judea with Greek legends and obverse portraits of both Vespasian (TJC:265, No. 380) and Titus (TJC:265, Nos. 381, 382). Another coin of Titus with the identical Greek inscription completely omits the palm tree, and depicts Nike standing to right with shield on her knee (TJC:265, No. 383).

All examples of this victory coin type struck under Agrippa II carry the obverse portrait of Domitian (footnote 6). Furthermore, it is relevant that in the lengthy series of coins struck in ancient Judea by Agrippa II, the coins with Domitian’s portraits are in fact more common than those with portraits of Vespasian or Titus.

Perhaps Agrippa II adopted the design without the date-palm tree, which had

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6 This coin type was struck in year 15 (TJC:235, No. 141), year 18 (TJC:235, No. 144), year 19 (TJC:235, No. 147), year 24 (TJC:236, No. 152), year 25 (TJC:236, No. 155), year 26 (TJC:238, No. 165), year 27 (TJC:239, No. 170), and year 29 (TJC:239, No. 175).

7 Domitian’s greatest Germanic battles were against the Chatti, a ‘war’ that was ‘solved’ by diplomacy only in the mid-80s CE, and the tribe later sided with Saturninus during his rebellion in 89 (Jones 1993:144–49). Domitian did not issue his first GERMANIA CAPTA coin until 85 CE, and the title GERMANICVS first appears on Roman issues only in July or August 83 CE (RPC 2:xiii). In the Judean issues GERMANICVS was not used prior to 84 CE (Carradice 1982–1983:19).

8 Or, rarely, DEVICTA IVDAEA (CRE 2:184, No. 32).

9 Perhaps this is because Domitian ruled for more years, even though Agrippa II was definitely friendlier with Titus, who nearly became his brother-in-law by marrying Berenice, Agrippa II’s sister.
already become a symbol of ancient Judea (Romanoff 1944:16–19), in order not to underline for his fellow Jews the reality that this entire series of his coins was intended to reflect the defeat of his own people by the Romans. While these coins do not carry JUDAEA CAPTA legends, the population was by any account largely illiterate. Images must have spoken louder than words in conveying the “Judaea Capta” message during the two decades that followed issue of the explicit local “Judaea Capta” coins of Vespasian and Titus.

In addition to this Agrippa II ‘victory’ series with portraits of Domitian issued during his reign, we also have an almost identical Roman provincial coin struck under Domitian at the mint of Pella and dated to 81/2 CE, prior to Germanic victory references (Pl. 15:6; Spijkerman 1978:212, No. 3; RPC 2:297, No. 100). Is this a coincidence? If so, how can we then further explain another Domitian coin of Pella struck in the same year, this one depicting a palm tree (Pl. 15:7; Spijkerman 1978:212, No. 4; RPC 2:297, No. 2100). I also call the reader’s attention to Agrippa II’s palm-tree coin of Domitian struck in Year 25 (84/5 CE, Pl. 15:8; TJC:236, No. 156; RPC 2:297, No. 2101). Thus one Domitian Pella coin is nearly identical to the victory-and-shield coins of Agrippa II and a second depicts the palm tree, a clear reference to Judea during this period.

Meshorer noted, “Eusebius relates that after the destruction of Jerusalem, some Jewish-Christian inhabitants fled to Pella, and perhaps it is they who inspired the issue of coins commemorating Rome’s victory over Jerusalem.” Thus while on the one hand he did not espouse that the Domitian coins of Caesarea commemorated Rome’s victory over the Jews (TJC:192–193), on the other hand he also found clear reason to believe that Pella’s coins, with virtually the same iconography, memorialized this victory (Meshorer 1985:92). At any rate, since a coin minted in 81/2 is too early to refer to Domitian’s victories in Germany, a commemoration of the Roman victory in the Jewish War appears to be the only reasonable explanation here.

Thus far I have discussed some coins of Domitian struck at Pella and those from the Agrippa II series, minted locally, probably at Caesarea Paneas (RPC 2:309). With this background, we can address the coins of Domitian probably struck at Caesarea Maritima in the wake of the coins issued there with portraits of Vespasian and Titus (TJC:185–193). Carradice divided these coins into three groups based on obverse legends and portrait styles in a seminal article (Carradice

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10 While one could argue that the date-palm motif was used on many generic issues of other cities such as Carthage and Tyre, it is undeniable that from the time of the Jewish War through the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, the date-palm tree was widely known as a symbol of Judea.

11 Agrippa II’s coins were minted north of Judea proper, although circulation of the local coinages invariably overlapped and certainly circulated in regions with Jewish populations.
1982–1983). The first group, dated to 81/2 CE contains the rarest examples, the foundation coin (TJC:266, No. 386) and Emperor in military dress (TJC:266, No. 387), Victory with wreath (TJC:266, No. 388), and rudder (TJC:266, No. 389). One must keep in mind that these coins were struck well before either Domitian’s Germanicus title was used and before the Roman mint issued any coins related to Germany. Therefore, these types associated with victory logically refer to the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt.

Carradice’s second group, dated perhaps to 86–92 CE, contains the Minerva and victory series (TJC:266–267, Nos. 391–393). According to Suetonius, Domitian claimed Minerva’s special protection (Jones and Milns 2002:38), and her worship was highly popular under his rule. It is often noted that Minerva was the goddess who bestows victories.

The reverse of one bronze coin in this series depicts Minerva standing to right on galley prow, small owl on right at her feet, with shield in left hand and spear in right, on left is a trophy, and on right is a palm branch (TJC:266, No. 391). This reverse is clearly patterned after the reverse of a Domitian aureus and denar struck at Rome (Pl. 15:9; CRE 2:306, No. 40). Some important iconography is, however, missing from the Roman issue, even though it is otherwise detailed right down to the small owl standing at Minerva’s feet. The missing symbols that appear on the Judean issue are the palm branch of victory and the field trophy of arms, each prominent in the earlier, undisputed “Judaea Capta” type of Titus (Pl. 15:10; TJC:266, No. 391). Thus even on these Minerva coins we have reminiscences of Judaea Capta motifs.

Carradice’s third group, dated to 92–93 CE, contains the palm tree (TJC:267, No. 394), Victory (TJC:267, No. 395), and field trophy of arms (TJC:266, No. 390). The smallest coin of this third group, depicting the trophy, appears ironically to have been closely patterned after a Vespasian aureus of DE IVDAEIS (Pls. 15:11–12; Hendin 2001:321, No. 769; p. 266, No. 390; CRE 2:82, No. 402). We also note that this trophy appears on five different types of the Domitian Caesarea series (TJC:266–267, Nos. 390–393, 395).

Furthermore, the palm tree coin of the third group (Pl. 15:13; TJC:267, No. 394) is likely to be also connected to the earlier palm tree motifs of Pella and Agrippa II, as well as other palm tree coins linked directly to Judea, especially the bronze half shekel of the fourth year of the Jewish War (Pl. 15:14; TJC:243, No. 211).

As one looks at the various coin types described above, the question arises: Why should Victory motifs play such a prominent role on various coins struck in the region under Domitian, if it was not intended as a continuing message to the local populace? The coins appear to be conveying the following: the Flavian dynasty has defeated you and Domitian is the current representative of that dynasty and its power.

It seems quite logical that local officials, perhaps even Agrippa II himself, was
communicating the message to the populace that what applied to the father and the first son also held true for the second son (Domitian). While the local coinage follows Domitian’s Roman series and does not mention Judea specifically, how could the interests of Domitian have been hurt by the self-glorification and positive propaganda that came from associating himself with the victory in the Jewish War? While it is true that Domitian was not directly involved in that conflict, did that ever stop a Roman emperor, or his officials, from basking in the glory of victory? Domitian’s claim was closer than most — victors Vespasian and Titus were his father and brother.

The Talmud contains a legal status called *chazaka*, essentially that the *status quo* is always assumed unless compelling factors mitigate against it (Malamed 2005:172). It would seem that, similarly, Domitian invoked the *status quo*, and followed Vespasian and Titus by striking a series of coins depicting Victory-style reverses in mints very close to the not-yet-forgotten battlegrounds of the Jewish War. It must be assumed that the people of Judea interpreted this as nothing less than a continuation of the “Judaea Capta” coinage.

It appears then that *Judaea Capta* motifs had not disappeared from the local coinage with the death of two actual victors, Vespasian and Titus. Some coins with the Victory motif issued under Domitian — minted before this emperor’s successes in Germany — seem logically to relate to the Roman victory in the Jewish War. On other coins of the same emperor, types previously associated with the Jewish War were repeated. These latter types were deliberately open to interpretation, but their association with the Jewish War, both in the minds of the issuing authorities and of the local population, appears more than likely.

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