



## [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2](#)

The instauration of the Jewish tax

**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:** LXV.7.2

**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-fifth book of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* is one of the books that have not been preserved at all. As a consequence, we only know Book 65 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).

The first interesting point to note is that Cassius Dio, if Xiphilinus's *Epitome* is trustworthy, writes that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE occurred on a Shabbat, "on the very day of Kronos/Saturn" (?? ???? ?? ??? ?????? ?????) (about the day of the destruction, see [Tosefta Ta'anit 3:9-10. 14](#)). Dio's habit of calling the Shabbat the "day of Kronos" appears in other parts of his work which have been preserved directly through various manuscripts and not through the *Epitome* of other authors. This is the case, for instance, in *Roman History* XXXVII.16.1-4, when Cassius Dio narrates that Pompey's taking of Jerusalem had been made possible because the partisans of Hyrcanus ceased all activity during the Shabbat and the assailants were aware of this particular custom and took advantage of it. Josephus presents the same event also in connection with the issue of inactivity during the Shabbat, but through a slightly different perspective. He recalls that Jews were allowed to fight during the Shabbat and that the Romans did not take advantage of the inactivity during the seventh day to fight but rather to organise the imminent siege of the city thanks to levelling works or the conveyance of war machines (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV.63-64). Another interesting point of the text presented here is that contrary to Roman authors who used to stress the observance of the Shabbat to make fun of Jews' inactivity and to blame them for being an idle and lazy people (see [Juvenal, Satire XIV.105-106](#); [Tacitus, Histories V.4](#); [Rutilius Namatianus, On His Return I.391](#); see Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 86-89), Cassius Dio just insists upon the reverence that the Jews had for that day of the week, or even upon the fact that Jews ceased all activities (see *Roman History* XXXVII.16.2), without adding moral condemnation of the Jews. However, it remains possible that some details which were part of the original version of the text were suppressed during the epitomization.

Moreover, this text is mostly famous because it is one of the few texts that mentions explicitly that after the Jewish war, Vespasian ordered the instauration of the *didrachmon* (????????), that is of the tax of two drachmas that Jews had to pay to the *fiscus Iudaicus*, a tax that replaced the offering of two drachmas that went previously to the Jerusalem Temple – we shall return later to the issue of who was liable to pay the Jewish tax. It is interesting to note that before Cassius Dio, only Josephus and Martial explicitly dealt with the Jewish tax (called *phoros* in [Josephus, Jewish war VII.218](#); and *tributa* in [Martial, Epigrams VII.55](#); and *didrachmon* later in Origen, *Ad Africanum* XX(14).7-9; on the terminology, see Hadas-Lebel, "La fiscalité," p. 6; France, "Le vocabulaire," p. 353). Suetonius also implicitly alludes to it when dealing in a critical perspective with the reign of Domitian; he narrates that under Domitian's reign, the *fiscus Iudaicus* was administrated "in a stricter way" (*acerbissime*), and that the people who tried to conceal the fact that they were Jews were pursued ([Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.2](#)). The other important information given by Cassius Dio's narrative is that he explicitly states that the revenue of this Jewish tax was sent to Jupiter Capitolinus, that is probably for funding the rebuilding of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus that had been largely damaged during the civil war in Rome in December 69 CE. This echoes Josephus's words when he states that a poll-tax of two drachmas was imposed on all Jews wherever they lived, and that this tax should be paid annually into the Capitol ([Josephus, The Jewish War VII.218](#)). The rebuilt temple of Jupiter Optimus Capitolinus was symbolically closely associated with the celebration of Rome's victory over Judaea, first because the triumphal procession of 71 CE ended with sacrifices offered in the sacred precinct of this



temple (see Josephus, *Jewish War* VII.153-155). Secondly, this temple was part of the architectural memorialisation of the victory over Judea which was carried out in Rome by the Flavian emperors, with the construction of the temple of Peace, the arch dedicated to Titus in the Circus Maximus, and the Colosseum (see Gallia, "Remaking Rome," p. 152-151; Millar, "Last Year in Jerusalem").

The other question raised by this text of Cassius Dio is who was liable to pay the Jewish tax? Whereas only adult males were affected by the payment of the Temple dues, the instauration of the Jewish tax might have led to an enlargement of the number of Jewish taxpayers, as women and children may also have been included (Williams, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman environment*, p. 42). However, the scope of the Jewish tax as it was instituted by Vespasian after the Jewish war remains debated. Three elements have to be kept in mind to understand the problem. First, Josephus narrates that from the moment the Jewish tax was instituted it concerned "all the Jews" wherever they lived in the Empire (see Josephus, *Jewish War* VII.218 quoted above). The difference is thus noticeable with Dio's words when he writes that the tax concerned "Jews who continued to observe their ancestral customs". The second element is the hardening of the fiscal policy towards the Jews under Domitian as narrated by Suetonius: "Besides other taxes, that on the Jews was levied with the utmost rigour; were prosecuted those who were living a Jewish life without publicly acknowledging it, as well as those who, concealing their origin, did not pay the tributes levied upon their people" (on the issue of which Jews Suetonius targets here, see the various interpretations presented in [Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.2](#)). Suetonius also narrates the anecdote that during an official meeting, a fiscal agent asked a ninety-year-old man to show the officials whether he was circumcised or not, a characteristic which thus determined his tax liability. Once again, the contrast is striking with Cassius Dio's words. Circumcision was of course a fundamental indicator of Jewishness, but it was first and foremost an indicator showing that a man was part of the Jewish *gens* and not a marker that proved that one lived according to Jewish laws (see [Martial, Epigrams VII.55](#)). The third important element to keep in mind is that the emperor Nerva may have taken measures to avoid the false accusations of leading a Jewish life that occurred under Domitian, and which were used to get rid of enemies (see the debated legend *fisci Iudaici calumnia sublata*, which appears on sestertii minted in 96-97 CE, a legend that could be translated as "The malicious accusation [brought by] the treasury for Jewish affairs has been removed"; see [Sestertius depicting the head of Nerva and a palm tree \(97 CE\)](#); about false accusations under Domitian see also [Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVII.14.1-2](#)). The point that divides scholars is how to understand the scope of Nerva's softer policy towards Jews. Some scholars think that Nerva wholly suppressed the Jewish tax during his reign, even for practicing Jews, whereas others have suggested that Nerva only suppressed abuses that existed under Domitian but that practicing Jews were still concerned by the payment of the Jewish tax (for the first interpretation see among others Goodman "The Meaning of 'Fisci Iudaici,'" 88-89; Goodman, *Rome & Jerusalem*, 469-475; for the second interpretation see Heemstra, *The Fiscus Judaicus*, p. 67-84; Heemstra, "The Interpretation and Wider Context," p. 189-195). Because of the difference of perspective that exists between Josephus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio's narratives about which Jews were liable for the payment of the Jewish tax, Marius Heemstra has suggested that "... Nerva very likely changed the definition of the tax payer from 'each one of the Jews' (Josephus) or those belonging to the Jewish *gens* (Suetonius) to those Jews 'who continued to observe their ancestral customs' (the definition as used by Dio, which he wrongly backdates to the introduction of the tax by Vespasian). By doing this, Nerva changed the Roman definition of 'Jew' from an ethnic into a religious one" (Heemstra "The Interpretation and Wider Context," p. 192-195, quotation taken from p. 195). Marius Heemstra thus suggests that when Cassius Dio wrote that the Jewish tax, when it had been instituted under Vespasian, concerned the Jews "who continued to observe their ancestral customs," he may have presented the conditions of application of the Jewish tax in 70 CE through the lens of the situation under Nerva's reign in 96-97 CE (Heemstra, *The Fiscus Judaicus*, p. 79-80; this idea was originally suggested in Goodman, "Nerva, the Fiscus Judaicus," p. 41 before the author revised his point of view on Nerva's policy towards Jews).

The last interesting point of this text is that Cassius Dio underscores how Vespasian and Titus's victory in Judea took part durably in the glorification of the new Flavian dynasty (in that perspective, see also Silius Italicus, *Punica* III.594-629; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* I.5-17; Martial, *Epigrams* II.2). Cassius Dio's remark about the fact that both generals did not get the title (?????/onoma) of Iudaicus can be explained by the fact that they had waged war inside a Roman province and not against a barbarian people located outside or at the margins of the Roman Empire.

This famous text of Cassius Dio is one of the few texts that attest the existence of the Jewish tax and the fact that the money that went to the *fiscus Iudaicus* may have been affected, at least for a given period of time, to the reconstruction of the Capitoline Temple to Jupiter. Cassius Dio's definition of the Jews who were concerned by the payment of the tax seems quite restrictive, as it does not concern all the Jews, whatever their way of life may have been, but is limited to Jews that followed Jewish customs, a definition which, according to some scholars, may have not been the one in use after the Jewish War or under Domitian's reign, but rather under Nerva.



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

- [Capitoline Temple](#)
- [destruction of the Temple](#)
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- [Great Revolt](#)
- [Jewish customs](#)
- [Jewish tax](#)
- [Jews](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [Shabbat](#)
- [Titus](#)
- [Vespasian](#)

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