Sestertius depicting the head of Nerva and a palm tree (96 CE)

**Obverse (Image and Inscription):**
Image: Laureate head of Nerva looking right
Inscription: IMP NERVA CAES AVG P M TR P COS II PP

**Reverse (Image and Inscription):**
Image: Palm tree
Inscription: FISCI IVDAICI CALVMMNIA SVBLATA // S C

**Denomination:**
Sestertius

**Date:** 96 CE

**Material:**
Bronze

**Mint:**
Rome

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** State Coin Collection of Munich.

**Name of Ruler:**
Nerva

**Diameter (mm):** 34.40mm

**Weight (g):** 27.50g

**Commentary:** RIC II, Nerva, no. 58, p. 227.
This coin was minted in Rome the year of Nerva's accession to power, that is in 96 CE (Nerva actually became emperor in September 96 CE). It was one of four emissions of sestertii, minted in 96 and 97 CE, that advertised and celebrated a change made by Nerva to the Fiscus Iudaicus, and has been considered significant evidence for the relationship between the Roman state and the Jews (for the three other emissions see RIC II, Nerva, no. 59, 72 and 82, p. 227-228; see also Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 81; Shotter, "The principate of Nerva," p. 218). On the obverse of the coin the head of the emperor is depicted, with an inscription that refers to Nerva as imperator, Caesar, Augustus, pontifex maximus, holder of the tribunicia potestas, consul for the second time, and pater patriae, or father of the country. The reverse of the coin has attracted the most attention: the image is of a palm tree – a symbol commonly used to refer to the province of Judea –, around which is inscribed FISCII IUDAICI CALUMNIA SUBLATA. The legend is difficult to translate, as the following discussion shall demonstrate, but the coin appears to refer to a change to the functioning of the Fiscus Iudaicus, that is into the fund that had been established to collect the Jewish tax, enacted by Nerva and which he sought to advertise widely in the capital city.

The exact meaning of FISCII IUDAICI CALUMNIA SUBLATA has been much debated, largely because the unusual Latin formula is difficult to interpret. In his 2007 article, Martin Goodman analysed the different possible translations, and argued convincingly against how the coins have most commonly been interpreted. He concluded that the fiscus Iudaicus did not in fact refer to the Jewish tax itself, but rather "the exchequer dealing with Jewish affairs" or "the exchequer dealing with money from Judea" (Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 84). He noted that the legal term calumnia – which usually referred to the act of making a false accusation – could also convey a more general sense of 'a false statement'. In that perspective, the legend of the coin could be translated: "The malicious accusation [brought by] the treasury for Jewish affairs has been removed" As there do not appear to be any further cases of the use of specific legal language on coinage from the imperial period, the Goodman proposed that the "certain fuzziness" of the term was characteristic of coin legends, and similar to the expressions of the abstract virtues of the emperors, such as liberalitas (generosity) which are more commonly found (Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 84). Finally, Martin Goodman proposed that sublata should be understood as the 'lifting' or 'removing' of the calumnia itself, but that to find such a term on coinage was again highly unusual (Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 84).

Previous scholarship has attempted to understand this problematic statement in light of statements made in the literary record. Miriam Griffin, for example, suggested that the coin legend referred to the abolition of the Jewish Tax by Nerva following Domitian's abuses of its exaction (about these abuses see Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2 [5]; Griffin, "The Flavians," p. 74-5; see also Goodman, "Nerva, the 'fiscus Judaicus' and Jewish Identity," p. 40-44). Menahem Stern, on the other hand, interpreted the legend in light of a statement made by Cassius Dio, that Nerva made it impossible to accuse anybody of aseboia or of a Jewish life," to which the calumnia of the coin referred (Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2 [6]; Stern, Greek and Latin Authors, p. 385). Martin Goodman, however, has cautioned against making such direct links between sources, and instead proposes four possible meanings for the coin's legend. He suggests that Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata could be understood in the following ways: 1) [A specific case in which] a false accusation was brought to the treasury for Jewish affairs has been struck out; 2) [All bringing of] malicious accusation[s] to the treasury responsible for Jewish affairs has been brought to an end; 3) 'A [specific case in which] a false accusation was brought by the treasury for Jewish affairs has been struck out', and 4) 'The false accusation [against all Jews made by] the treasury for Jewish affairs has been wiped away' (Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 85-86). The third meaning represents the way that these coins have most commonly been understood, as advertisements that Domitian's excessive and abusive collection of taxes from the Jews came to an end under Nerva, who also prevented 'informers' from reporting non-Jews who practiced a 'Jewish way of life' (which may also have included converts to Judaism) to the State, making them also liable for the tax (Goodman, "The meaning of Fisci Iudaici Calumnia Sublata," p. 86; Bruce, "Nerva and the Fiscus Iudaicus," p. 39. For liability for the Jewish tax, see Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2 [5]). In his 1989 article on this subject, Martin Goodman concluded that Nerva would have led a reform to relieve apostate Jews of paying the tax, whereas the tax would have concerned only Jews officially declaring themselves as practicing Jews ("Nerva, the Fiscus Judaicus," p. 40-44); however, in more recent works he has proposed the fourth solution to be the most plausible, and has presented a different reading of the word calumnia which defends the idea that Nerva wholly suppressed the Jewish tax during his reign, even for practicing Jews. Although much of the scholarship concerned with these coins, and with the statements made by Suetonius regarding Domitian's approach to the tax, has argued that Nerva's actions were aimed at relieving the burden of taxation on non-Jews maliciously accused of 'Judaizing,' Martin Goodman has argued that the coin legend, together with the image of the palm tree – used explicitly in reference to Judea on coinage under the Flavian emperors (see Sestertius depicting Vespasian and a couple of Jews mourning under a palm tree (71 CE) [7]) –
must refer to the abolition of the tax implemented by the Flavians as a penalty for all practising Jews following the revolts in Jerusalem (see Goodman, “The Fiscus Iudaicus and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome,” p. 175-177; Goodman, “The Meaning of “Fisci Iudaici Calumniia Sublata” on the Coinage of Nerva,” p. 87-89; Goodman, Rome & Jerusalem. The Clash of Ancient Civilizations, p. 469-475). Other scholars continue to believe that Nerva’s decision to remove the tax did not apply to all the Jews of the Empire; for instance, Marius Heemstra has interpreted the calumnia as referring to the fact that accusations of “leading a Jewish life” were forbidden, and by crossing the legend of this coin with Suetonius and Cassius Dio’s narratives, he has reached to the conclusion that Nerva reserved the payment of the Jewish tax only for practicing Jews (see Heemstra, “The Interpretation and Wider Context of Nerva’s Fiscus Judaicus Sestertius,” p. 192-195).

If we opt for the interpretation that Nerva did indeed abolish the tax, the question remains as to what circumstances might have motivated such an action; a simple answer would perhaps be that while the Jews, and the Jewish community of Jerusalem in particular, were a longstanding problem for the Flavian dynasty, Nerva had no specific personal reason to discriminate against them (Goodman, “The Fiscus Judaicus,” p. 176). Although loyal to the Flavians, holding consulships under both Vespasian and Domitian, he was not descended from them or connected to the dynasty by marriage or adoption, and so could perhaps afford to distance himself from their political decisions and behaviour. If the calumnia of the coins was indeed the imposition of the tax on all Jews, it could be argued that Nerva’s description of it as a ‘malicious falsehood’ was problematic given that it had been instituted by a now deified emperor, Vespasian. Domitian had been acknowledged as a tyrant, but his father was acclaimed as one of the ‘good’ Flavians, and criticism of his policies may not have been received well. Nerva’s coinage appears to have ignored any connection with the Flavian emperors altogether, however, preferring to emphasise his similarities with the Julio-Claudians and Augustus instead (Mattingly and Sydenham, Roman Imperial Coinage, II, p. 232-233). The abolition of the tax may have been an act of generosity that aimed to win support across the empire for the new princeps. The use of coinage as the medium by which to spread this message was deliberate and carefully considered, and a method to which Nerva returned when advertising other acts of similar generosity; statements regarding his provision of the alimenta to the urban plebs (PLEBEI VRBANAE FRVMENTO CONSTITVTO and ANNONA AVGVST) and the cessation of transport obligations for Italians (VEHICVLATIONE ITALIAE REMISSA) also appeared on coins in 97 CE, in a deliberate attempt to impress his benevolence and largesse upon his subjects, which also highlighted the differences between Nerva and his predecessor Domitian, whose reign had been based on the actions of delatores and upon false accusations (Shotter, “The principate of Nerva,” p. 218; 222-223). Nerva’s reign, by contrast, marked a return to order, especially in the field of justice. Irrespective of the exact meaning of the coin legend presented here, it is clear that it was intended to communicate a positive change in the Roman administration’s relationship with the Jewish population of the empire; whether protecting the rights of non-Jews to practice certain Jewish behaviours, or eliminating an unfair and burdensome tax, these coins represented an interruption to the discrimination faced by the Jews and Judaizers of the whole empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- imperator [8]
- Caesar [9]
- Augustus [10]
- tribunicia potestas [12]
- consul [13]
- pater patriae [14]
- calumnia [15]
- fiscus iudaicus [16]

Thematic keywords:

- Nerva [17]
- Jewish war [18]
- Roman benevolence [19]
- Jewish tax [20]
- tribute [21]
- Jews [22]
- Jewish rights [23]

Bibliographical references: Bruce, Iain A.F., *Nerva and the Fiscus Judaicus* [24], Palestine Exploration Quarterly 96 (1964) : 34-45
Goodman, Martin, "Nerva, the "fiscus Judaicus" and Jewish Identity" [27], Journal of Roman Studies 79 (1989) : 40-44

Other sources connected with this document: Text

**Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2** [5]

Domitian’s harsh policy towards the Jews

- Read more about Suetonius, Life of Domitian XII.1-2 [5]

Text

**Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2** [37]

The instauration of the Jewish tax

- Read more about Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.7.2 [37]

Numismatic item

**Sestertius depicting Vespasian and a couple of Jews mourning under a palm tree (71 CE)** [38]

- Read more about Sestertius depicting Vespasian and a couple of Jews mourning under a palm tree (71 CE) [38]

Text
**Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVIII.1-2** [39]

Nerva’s measures to forbid the excesses of Domitian’s policies

- Read more about Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVIII.1-2 [39]

**Realized by:**

**Caroline Barron** [40]


**Links**

[4] http://hdl.handle.net/428894.vzg/b9b8bb8-92f4-4d45-a0d7-a282e4cf668f
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[37] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/cassius-dio-roman-history%C2%A0lxv72