

YALE UNIVERSITY

JUDAEA CAPTA COINS
AS IMPERIAL PROPAGANDA

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Coinage in the Roman Empire served as a powerful propaganda tool by which imperial authorities could exert their political influence throughout the empire. The use of coinage as propaganda is no more readily apparent than in the issuing of the *Judaea Capta* coins celebrating the suppression of the Great Jewish Revolt of 66 to 70 CE. While there was precedent for issuing coinage to celebrate military success, imperial authorities minted coins commemorating this victory in a surprisingly large quantity. The revolt required a massive Roman military effort to suppress, and the coinage seems to memorialize this massive display of Roman strength.¹

The coins celebrated the victory of the Romans over Judea and affirmed the power of the newly established Flavian dynasty. They featured prominently either the face of Vespasian, the Roman general called away from suppressing the revolt to become emperor himself, or his son Titus, who succeeded his father in command on the field in Judea and later on the imperial throne.² It, therefore, follows that the *Judaea Capta* coins were minted with the highest frequency from 70 to 73 CE, as Vespasian was securing his grip on power, and then again from 80 to 81 CE, when his son Titus succeeded to the throne.³

These coins made use of prevalent symbolism for the Jewish nation to commemorate the Roman victory. The palm tree in particular, a well-known symbol of Israel, appeared prominently on the *Judaea Capta* coins. These coins also generally included the phrase *Judaea Capta* (“Judea captured”) or *Judaea Devicta* (“Judea defeated”) and, on their reverse, often depicted a Jewess mourning, sometimes bound, under a palm tree. Other popular images included

¹ Robert Deutsch, “Roman Coins Boast ‘Judaea Capta,’” *The Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 1 (January 2010): 51.

² G. Anthony Keddie, “Judaea Capta vs. Mother Zion: The Flavian Discourse on Judaeans and Its Delegitimation in 4 Ezra,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 49, no. 4-5 (June 2018): 506; Deutsch, 51.

³ Keddie, 511-12.

a bound male captive appearing with the Jewess, or the emperor stepping on the helmet of a captive.⁴ A rare coin featured Vespasian riding in victory on a chariot leading behind him a bound and naked Simon son of Giora, the leader of the Jewish revolt.⁵ This image commemorated the actual execution of Simon in Rome (*Jewish Wars* 7.148-155).⁶ Notably, Simon is the only leader of a revolt known to appear on Roman coinage.⁷

The message of the Judaea Capta coins, however, were made more forceful by the fact that they were not the first coins to commemorate the Roman victory over the Jewish revolt. Shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the empire minted Judaea Recepta coins, more in keeping with previous coins commemorating the suppression of revolt. These coins depicted Vespasian on their front and, on their reverse, a Jewess standing next to a palm tree with crossed legs and her head resting on her right arm. The words “Judaea Recepta” appear on the coin. The later Judaea Capta coins depict Judea as a captured foreign territory, whereas the earlier short-lived Judaea Recepta coins depicted Judea as a reconciled province. Recepta coins were typical depictions commemorating the return of a rebellious province to the “embrace of empire,” having precedent in the commemorations of suppression of earlier revolts elsewhere in the empire. (For example, Asia Recepta coins commemorated Augustus’ subdual of an Asian revolt

⁴ Deutsch, 51. These were such well-known depictions of a conquered people being brought into empire that Michael Kochenash suggests that the writer of Acts in the New Testament appropriated this imagery in his depiction of the interaction between Cornelius’ and Peter in Acts 10:25-26 to make a statement about the counterintuitive equality that Gentile believers acquired within the new church. Michael Kochenash, “Cornelius’s Obeisance to Peter (Acts 10:25-26) and Judaea Capta Coins,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (October 2019): 636-37.

⁵ Deutsch, 51.

⁶ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, trans. H. St J. Thackeray, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 351-53; Deutsch, 51.

⁷ Deutsch, 51.

in the 20s BCE.) In that same spirit, the earlier Judea Recepta commemorated the restoration of the status quo of Judea as a Roman province.⁸

The depiction of the Jewish people on the later Judaea Capta coins, however, was reminiscent of the imagery the Romans used to represent the conquered “barbarians” of Gaul and Spain. Such imagery served to portray the captive people as barbaric and uncivilized in contrast to their Roman overlords. It was atypical to so depict a province that had already previously been under Roman control. The later coinage, therefore, suggests the beginning of an antagonistic relationship between Rome and Judea persisting after the suppression of the rebellion.⁹ Further, the fact that the words for “Judean” and “Jew” were the same meant that the Jews throughout the empire might have understood these coins as a mark of antagonism toward the Jewish race in general, not merely those residing within the territorial confines of the Judea.¹⁰

Coins were a powerful propaganda tool for imperial leadership, allowing the emperor to spread his message easily throughout the empire. Indeed, it is no coincidence that, when Jesus is questioned about paying taxes to Caesar, he asks for a coin depicting Caesar, which was readily available (Matt 22:15-22). Their ubiquity ensured that the imperial message permeated throughout the provinces, and the propaganda power of such coinage is no more clearly seen than in the Judaea Capta coins of the late first century CE.

⁸ Keddie, 503-05.

⁹ Ibid., 505.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 510.

Deutsch, Robert. "Roman Coins Boast 'Judaea Capta'." *The Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 1 (January 2010): 51.

Josephus, Flavius. *The Jewish Wars*. Translated by H. St J. Thackeray. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

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