

Zeitschrift: Schweizer Münzblätter = Gazette numismatique suisse = Gazzetta numismatica svizzera
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Numismatische Gesellschaft
Band: 28-32 (1978-1982)
Heft: 114

Artikel: The countermark on a Jewish coin in the British Museum
Autor: Kanitz, L.E.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-171179>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 03.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SCHWEIZER MÜNZBLÄTTER

Gazette numismatique suisse

Herausgegeben von der Schweizerischen Numismatischen Gesellschaft

Publiée par la Société suisse de numismatique

Redaktionskomitee: Prof. Dr. H. A. Cahn, Basel, Dr. H.-U. Geiger, Zürich, Dr. Colin Martin, Lausanne, Dr. L. Mildenberg, Zürich, Prof. Dr. D. Schwarz, Zürich

Redaktion: Dr. H. Voegtli, c/o Postfach 875, CH - 4002 Basel; Buchbesprechungen: Dr. B. Kapossy, Bernisches Historisches Museum, Helvetiaplatz 5, CH - 3000 Bern

Administration: Mme A. Schwartz, Petit-Chêne 18, CH - 1003 Lausanne, c. c. p. 10 - 23071

Erscheint vierteljährlich · Abonnementspreis: Fr. 50.- pro Jahr (gratis für Mitglieder der Schweiz. Numismatischen Gesellschaft) · Insertionspreis: Viertelseite Fr. 100.- pro Nummer, Fr. 350.- im Jahr. Die Mitglieder der SNG erhalten gratis: Münzblätter und Numismatische Rundschau. Beitrag für lebenslängliche Mitgliedschaft Fr. 1600.-, Jahresbeitrag Fr. 80.-

Revue trimestrielle · Prix d'abonnement: fr. 50.- par an (envoi gratuit aux membres de la SSN) · Prix d'annonces: Un quart de page fr. 100.- par numéro, fr. 350.- par an. Les membres de la SSN reçoivent gratuitement: Gazette numismatique et Revue de Numismatique. Cotation de membre à vie fr. 1600.-, cotisation annuelle fr. 80.-

Inhalt – Table des matières

L. El. Kanitz: The countermark on a Jewish coin in the British Museum, S. 25 – *Peter Kos:* Ostnorische Kleinsilbermünzen mit beidseitiger Darstellung, S. 31. – *Erich B. Cahn:* Münzfunde bei Kirchengrabungen in der Schweiz VI, S. 35. – *Erich B. Cahn:* Ein kleiner Fund im Jura, S. 42. – Berichte - Rapports, S. 44. – Ausstellungen - Expositions, S. 44. – Der Büchertisch - Lectures, S. 44.

THE COUNTERMARK ON A JEWISH COIN IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

L. El. Kanitz

One of the outstanding and intriguing problems in numismatics is the attempt to explain generally known symbols as well as countermarks on ancient coins, causing sometimes discussions for years till, eventually, a substantiated and proof solution is forthcoming.

A Jewish coin in the British Museum – according to latest conclusive research – from the fourth year of the Jewish War against Rome, i. e. 69 A.D., bears a countermark¹ (Fig. 1); the meaning or purpose of this countermark has never been definitely settled and since a century several scholars have proposed various solutions.

F. de Saulcy, in the year 1875, thinks this countermark is the letter «mem» of the Hebrew alphabet²; F.W. Madden, in 1881, describing the obverse of this coin³ remarks: «... partially covered with the countermark of an elephant»; thus he

¹ BMC (Palestine), 187, 35.

² *Mélanges de Numismatique I* (1875), 333.

³ *Coins of the Jews* (1881), 72–73, no. 4.

supports the previous acceptance in dating the coin concerned approximately 200 years earlier, namely by assigning the coins of «Year Four» to the Seleucid period; he assumes that this countermark (elephant) seems to confirm the then existing overlordship of the Syrian king «whose special type was the elephant»; Rev. E. Rogers, in 1914⁴, accepts this explanation; and G. F. Hill, in the same year,



Fig. 1

listing this countermarked coin⁵, refers to De Saulcy's as well as to Madden's suggestion with questionmark, but is not giving own comments; J. U. Gillespie, in 1950⁶, upholds the «elephant»-countermark on the coin as «almost conclusive evidence» that the «Year Four» coins were struck in the second century B.C.

More recently, viz. in 1960, Leo Kadman⁷ rejects the until now offered explanations; however, he, too, does not come to any solution or actual suggestion; he «... had an opportunity to examine the unique coin with the countermark very carefully: it immediately became clear that whatever the countermark may represent, it is certainly not an elephant...».

So far the attempted explanations and proffered opinions.

A considerable number of countermarked coins found in certain Near-East areas are those with the countermarks of the tenth Roman legion, which was stationed prior to the Jewish-Roman War of 66–73 A.D. in North Syria and was, subsequently, the backbone of the Roman forces during this war in the siege and in the conquest of Jerusalem. After the Roman victory the legion was garrisoned in

⁴ A Handy Guide to Jewish Coins (1914), 20.

⁵ BMC 187.

⁶ The Dating of the Shekel, *The Numismatist* 63, 8, 1950, 482.

⁷ *Corpus Nummorum Palaestinensium* 3, The Coins of the Jewish War of 66–73 C.E. (1960), 112.

Judaea. The full name of the legion, viz. *Legio Decima Fretensis* derives its latter cognomen from Fretum Siculum⁸ (fretum = a narrow sea, Siculum = Sicily, i.e. the Strait separating Sicily from Italy⁹).

At the coast of Sicily Octavian – the later emperor Augustus – landed troops with a squadron from the Adriatic, strengthened by 130 ships from Antony¹⁰, and the legion was billeted, most probably, at Naulochus, a military naval station on the north-eastern coast between Mylae and Messina; and there it was that in 36 B.C.¹¹ during the battle between Octavian's forces, under the command of his admiral Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, and the forces of Sextus Pompeius the legion had won its laurels¹². Sextus suffered a crushing defeat¹³.



Fig. 2

Thus, Octavian became master of the Mediterranean: Naulochus had given him the Tyrrhenian, the rest was his after Actium¹⁴.

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa was later honoured by coins bearing his portrait together with that of Augustus¹⁵ and by other coins with his portrait alone on the obverse and the image of Neptune on the reverse¹⁶; the god of the seas is here shown holding his trident in the left hand and on his extended right rests a dolphin (Fig. 2). This reverse is appropriately introduced, inasmuch as Agrippa by his naval success had signally humbled the pride of Sextus Pompeius, who had passed himself off for the son of Neptune¹⁷.

The *Legio Decima* became from now on the «*Fretensis*» (in memory of its share) in Octavian's victorious war against Pompeius¹⁸. Relating to this spectacular event, it is rather obvious that we find among the symbols on the countermarked coins of the tenth legion – besides the markings LXF or XF or X or the figure of a boar –

⁸ Th. Mommsen, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (1883), 69.

⁹ Today: The strait of Messina.

¹⁰ Chester G. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy* 2 (1960), 7.

¹¹ Sueton, *12 Caesares*, Augustus 9 and 16.

¹² Mommsen, l. c.

¹³ Starr, l. c.

¹⁴ Starr l. c.

¹⁵ BMC (Rome) 110 and 112.

¹⁶ BMC (Rome) 142, 161; see also BMC 285, 281 and Domitianus BMC 416, 510.

¹⁷ S. W. Stevenson, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (1964), 27.

¹⁸ H. M. D. Parker, *Roman Legions* (1962), 261 f.

also the insignia of a galley. Those till now well known emblems appear during the first and second century A.D. as the legion's countermarks on coins of the Roman near-eastern provinces, as at Sidon, Antiochia, Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste (Samaria) and Judaea; there is an additional, now recognized sea emblem among the countermarks of the legion: the dolphin.



Fig. 3 a



Fig. 3 b

Some time ago the writer had the opportunity to acquire what was once a bronze coin (diam. 20 mm, weight 6 g), which now on both sides appears to be rather a «blank», obverse and reverse being filed, ground and polished off, except for the outlines of an emperor's head; but there are countermarks on both sides, viz. the obverse bears a small incuse (5x3 mm) showing a laureate head and the reverse has a larger incuse countermark (10x8 mm) showing in three lines: LXF, the boar and, beneath, the dolphin (Fig. 3 a and b).

In the writer's possession is a «Judaea Capta» coin of Titus, minted at Caesarea Maritima¹⁹. The obverse of this coin bears two countermarks, one representing a head, and the other one, after thorough cleaning, turned out to be the dolphin (Fig. 4).

Some more evidence exists connecting the dolphin emblem with the Legio Decima Fretensis.

The Benedictine monastery of Abu-Gosh in Israel²⁰ stands on the ruins of a Roman fort which was guarding there, at an advantage point of a road bend, the way to and from Jerusalem. A stone slab is still there to be seen, fixed in the wall of the church bearing the inscription VEXILLATO LEG X FRE. When the writer recently visited the place and examined carefully the tablet, he found an incuse on the slab right beneath the G – downwards to left, the dolphin (Fig. 5).

¹⁹ Y. Meshorer, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* (1967), 107 and 176, pl. 31, 236.

²⁰ The «Kiryat-Ye'arim» of the Bible, where the Holy Ark rested until King David brought it to Jerusalem. I. Chronicles 13, 5 ff.



Fig. 4

On the hilltop opposite the monastery, overlooking the road, where probably once stood the Roman watch-tower, stands today the church «Notre Dame de l'Arche d'Alliance», facing Jerusalem; there, in the courtyard, is a second tablet of the legion and, incuse beneath the G, the dolphin can be found again, this time in a half-upward position to left and smaller in size.

A significant identification sign by which to recognize the dolphin is the striking *two-pronged horizontal* tail fin; the muscular breast fin serves as helm and a back fin maintains the equipoise; the snout is rather beaklike.

Comparing the dolphin shown above, countermarks and emblems, with the countermark on the above mentioned British Museum's coin, it becomes apparent that the latter also represents the dolphin, and that this coin of the fourth year of the Jewish War against Rome has been countermarked by the Legio Decima Fretensis (Fig. 6).

Key of the illustrations

- 1 Bronze, Jewish War against Rome, dated Year 4. British Museum, BMC 187, 35; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 2 Agrippa, As struck by Tiberius. On the Market, ex Sale Auctiones SA Basel 6 (1976), 444; enlarged twice.
- 3 Bronze, Private Collection; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 4 Bronze, Titus, «Judaea Capta». Private Collection; enlarged 3,5 times.
- 5 Stone, inscription of LEG X FRE. Benedictine Monastery, Abu-Gosh.
- 6 As no. 1, enlarged 5 times.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6