Principes and plebs: Nerva's reign as turning-point?

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THE YEAR 96
Did it Make a Difference?

Four papers presented at a panel
at the 128th Annual Meeting
of the American Philological Association

(1996)
Sri Lanka may be a good starting point for this question. The Elder Pliny in his *Natural History* tells a story that, during the reign of the emperor Claudius, a Roman freedman had his ship blown off course all the way to that tropical island. The freedman ended up staying on Taprobane (the ancient name of Sri Lanka) more than six months as a guest of its king. What especially impressed the good king of Taprobane, Pliny tells us, was the Roman imperial coinage the freedman had in his possession. The king took it as a remarkable sign of Roman *iustitia* that “the denarii were all equal in weight, although the different likenesses on them indicated that they had been struck by various emperors”. The king was right. At the time of Claudius, at any rate, Roman change had enjoyed remarkable continuity. And as the contents of the freedman’s pockets show, at any point the issues of several different emperors would be in circulation—and their portraits in tacit competition.

Like many other locales far from the Mediterranean, Taprobane was an exceedingly just place, and Pliny tells us the king was most anxious to enter into *amicitia* with honest Rome. So the king sent four envoys to Claudius. During their visit to Rome the ambassadors had occasion to explain the Taprobane way of life. For a start, Pliny reports, “they said...

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*I thank Professors W.E. Metcalf, R.P. Saller, an anonymous reader for this Journal, and (especially) the Editor for a number of valuable comments which greatly improved this article; the errors that remain are of course my own. For the photographs of Nerva’s coins (see Plate 1) I express my gratitude to Professor Metcalf and the American Numismatic Society.*

1 The story of the king of Taprobane and his envoys is at *NH* 6.84–85 and 89. (The translation in the text below is that of J.F. Healy in his Penguin edition of Pliny, *Natural History. A selection* (1991)).
their people had far more wealth than we had, but that we made greater use of ours. No one had a slave” on the island, “no one slept beyond daybreak or took a siesta.” But, as Pliny tells it, in other respects the people of Taprobane lived in Golden Age conditions compared to the urban population of Rome. “Their buildings were of moderate height; the price of grain never increased; [and] there were no lawcourts or lawsuits.” Furthermore, “the king was elected by the people—someone getting on in years, forbearing in attitude and childless. If the king had a child after his accession, he was forced to abdicate so that the monarchy should not be hereditary.”

Of course, like so many other ethnographic sketches, this story is above all an implicit criticism of some of the more irritating conditions right at home—in this case, the city of Rome. Indeed, the details of the story—though set in Claudius’ day—resonate suspiciously well against the reign of Vespasian, to whose son Titus the Natural History is dedicated. Vespasian, who sought to build a family dynasty, was absolutely unqualified to be king of justice-loving Taprobane. So were his sons. Titus, though childless, was too young—and Domitian was too young and too cruel.

“When [Domitian] was killed, the People took it with indifference, the army very seriously . . . and it was prepared to avenge it, except leaders were lacking; but the Senate on the other hand was delighted.” That is what Suetonius lists as the various reactions to the assassination of the

2 On these and other utopian aspects of Pliny’s Taprobane excursus, see most recently F.F. Schwarz, “Magna India Pliniana”, WS 107/108 (1994/95) 439–465, especially 446 n. 32 (earlier discussions of the embassy to Claudius) and 455–460.

3 C. Starr (“The Roman emperor and the king of Ceylon”, CPh 51 (1956) 27–30) took the account of the Taprobane embassy to be based on what Pliny himself heard at the time of Claudius, filtered through Roman aristocrats who opposed autocracy. Schwarz 460 half admits this anecdote can be taken as a general critique of the institution of the principate (“fast ist man versucht, beim Lesen derartiger Plitmoral an den Stoizismus à la Cato Uticensis und Lucan zu denken, an die republikanisch-spanische Résistance der jungen Kaiserzeit”), but does not entertain the possibility of a more specific Flavian reference. But few of Pliny’s readers could have missed the relevance to the contemporary situation, especially if he published the Natural History toward the end of Vespasian’s reign (as Schwarz accepts on p. 456), when it was obvious to all that Titus was next to rule. Pliny undercut Vespasian elsewhere in his work: see B. Baldwin, “Roman emperors in the Elder Pliny”, Scholia n.s. 4 (1995) 56–78, at 60 f, (and cf. his p. 78, suggesting the year AD 77 for publication).

4 Dom. 23.1 occisum eum populus indifferenter, miles gravissime tuit . . . paratus et ulcisci, nisi duces defuissent . . . contra senatus . . . laetatus est.
third and last of the Flavian emperors in September 96. No wonder the Senate rejoiced. Domitian treated that body with contempt, reducing its remaining functions to trivialities—as the Younger Pliny later loudly complained. Nor would it be difficult to understand the army’s chagrin at Domitian’s death. The emperor had fought hard for its allegiance. Soon after his accession Domitian raised the legionaries’ pay—by a full 33 per cent. He himself led five campaigns on the Rhine or Danube, the first Princeps to devote a significant part of his reign to the personal command of his military ventures. And Domitian’s triumphs were mostly deserved: in January 93 he even deliberately rejected a full triumph over the Sarmatians and celebrated an ovatio instead. Domitian also guaranteed a number of substantial legal benefits to discharged veterans and worked hard to improve the military bureaucracy. In short, Nerva at his accession had no good reason to think that the provincial armies would act as they did, remaining almost entirely quiet.

The reported “indifference” of the People at Domitian’s assassination does come as a surprise. True, Domitian was a tough censor perpetuus and prohibited actors from appearing on stage in public. But Domitian’s reign is also conspicuous for its lavish games and innovations in entertainment—including new gladiatorial schools, new circus factions, and the introduction of an important new festival (the Ludi Capitolini). He also staged the first proper Ludi Saeculares since Augustus. Then there is Domitian’s massive building program in the city of Rome. He finished the Colosseum, built a Stadium and an Odeum, and constructed so many arches that Suetonius tells us a wag scrawled on one ‘arci’, transliterated Greek for “enough”.

The trouble may be that so many of Domitian’s constructions were inward-looking, meant to aggrandize his family and (especially) himself, all with a view to the Flavian future. The most lavish of these was his

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7 Dom. 13.2. On the other structures, see n. 8 below.
8 The basic sources for Domitian’s building program are assembled by Jones (cit. n. 6) 79–98. This included—in addition to the Colosseum (p. 93), Stadium and Odeum (pp. 86 f.)—the construction of a Porticus Divorum in the Campus Martius, with temples to the deified Vespasian and Titus (p. 87); a Templum Divi Vespasiani on the Capitoline (p. 93); the Templum Gentis Flaviae, an imposing dynastic mausoleum on the Quirinal (pp. 87 f.); the Forum Pervium or ‘Transitorium’, a thoroughfare crammed with an elaborate iconographic program honoring Domitian’s patron Minerva (p. 85); and the Equus Domitiani, a towering eques-
massive palace complex, completed late in his reign, for which he leveled part of the Palatine hill. Plutarch, an eyewitness, calls this 40,000 square meter structure “a disease of building, and a desire, like Midas’, of turning everything to gold or stone.” Significantly, the private section was twice as large as the public—which Domitian anyway cheekily had named the domus Flavia.

Domitian’s coinage is similarly self-absorbed. The chronology of his issues is clear, for this Emperor is careful to record on his coins all his numbered titles, most valuably for this purpose his tribunician potestas. The fact that he was consul seventeen times (a record) and received twenty-two imperatorial acclamations allows still greater precision. Ian Carradice, who has long worked in this period, has convincingly sorted out the main phases of Domitian’s “systematic, even monotonous”\(^9\) coinage. I cannot go into precise questions of development here, except to note that, starting in the mid-80s, Domitian’s brother and father recede into the background, and the emphasis is very much on the person of the Emperor himself. Domitian at the same time also gradually reduced the number of his reverse designs. But then in 95 and 96, years that saw no major warfare, Domitian apparently sought to freshen up his iconographic message. Carradice observes, “The coins show more variety in the use of portrait types and . . . unusual portraits [sc. of a bare-headed Domitian] are usually combined with new, unusual reverse designs . . . depicting monuments . . .”—to be precise, temples (five different ones, but on small precious-metal flans), an equestrian statue of Domitian, and a triumphal arch.\(^10\) “[T]here is a noticeable increase in the quantity of new reverses.”

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9 Publicola 15.5. The translation is that of Jones, who cites this and other sources on this palace (with discussion) at pp. 95–96.

10 This quotation and those that follow in the next paragraph are from Carradice’s article “Coin types and Roman history: The example of Domitian”, in M. Price, A. Burnett and R. Bland (edd.), Essays in honour of Robert Carson and Kenneth Jenkins (1993) (henceforth Coinage and finances in the reign of Domitian (1983) (henceforth Coinage), especially pp. 9–51.

The makeover did Domitian little good, for on 18 September 96 he was assassinated. Unfortunately, no literary source tells us much about how the *populus* and army regarded the Senate’s appointment of M. Cocceius Nerva as Domitian’s successor—or for that matter, what were the contemporary perceptions (leaving aside senators and praetorians) of the rest of Nerva’s brief reign. Nerva was over 65 years of age, childless, and reputed to be just. This emperor would apparently be ideal for the people of Taprobane—but how did those of Rome view his reign?

Here the numismatic evidence may help. Now, the coins of Nerva—like those of Domitian—carefully note on the obverse titulature, number of consulship (three covering the years 96–98), and year of tribunician *potestas*. The result is that we can establish a precise chronology for the main issues of his principate, six in all: those of (apparently) September and December 96 (= series 1–2), January, September and December 97 (= series 3, 4 and 5), and January 98 (= series 6).

The coin issues of this emperor have received a share of scholarly attention. There is the 1906 monograph of Alfred Merlin on Nerva’s reverse designs, and a number of subsequent detailed discussions, most recently those of David Shotter. Yet despite the valuable feature of a fixed chronology, the fact that Nerva’s reign lasted a mere sixteen months seems to have inhibited scholars from properly tracing the development (very real, as I hope to show) in his coinage. There are also a few issues that customarily have been passed over in the literature as “self-explanatory”, which I think admit further discussion.

Nerva’s reverse types are not all that numerous. There are thirteen for...
the gold and silver coinage, sixteen for the bronze. However, about three-quarters of these diverse types appear in a flurry, in the Emperor's first issue of September 96. Now, some of these are resuscitated from earlier emperors. Even Nerva's early obverse portraits derive somewhat from those of Domitian. Yet a significant number of reverse types are original (and would remain unique) to Nerva. Of these, many—indeed, for an individual emperor an unprecedented proportion of the whole coinage—distinctly refer to specific policies. Perhaps in this he was seeking to continue the spirit of adventurous experimentation seen on the "architectural" coinage of Domitian's last years. But pragmatic concerns must have been paramount. Nerva evidently understood what his fate would be, should he be slow to communicate his programs—many of which, as Ronald Syme demonstrated in one of his earliest papers, were tantamount to bribery.

Taken as a whole, these coins show Nerva energetically advertising change—but not too much change—in the first months after accession. For instance, the end of the Flavian dynasty is signalled by the issue ROMA RENASCENS (series 1–4)—a theme Claudius once also trumpeted upon succeeding Caligula, as did Galba when he took the place of Nero. The circumstances of Galba's accession made him an obvious model for Nerva, who revived his AEQVITAS, FORTVNA and LIBERTAS types as well. Entirely novel, however, is the bronze type FISCI IVDAICI

18 See the remarks of J.M. Pailler and R. Sablayrolles in *Pallas* 40 (1994) 19. However I would not go so far as these authors do and include these "anti-despotic" types as manifestations of *damnatio memoriae*. 
CALVMNIA SVBLATA (series 1–3), which commemorates Nerva’s quashing of the delatores who had aided his predecessor’s over-zealous exaction of the Jewish tax. A bit later, in January 97, we find two newly unharnessed mules with the legend VEHICVLATIONE ITALIAE REMISSA (series 3–4) quite graphically announcing that Nerva had now exempted Italy from the public-posting service tax.

Carradice notes in reference to these coins, “[W]hile Domitian’s coins neglect to mention some of the . . . positive aspects of his administration, there are on the coins of his successor Nerva explicit references to the removal of abuses which clearly point the finger at Domitian.” On the other hand, one type in particular betrays what must have been Nerva’s deepest anxiety: the telling CONCORDIA EXERCITVVM (Plate 1 no. 1), four types in all, in both precious metal and bronze. This reverse is the only one to make an appearance in some form throughout all six of the emperor’s mint issues. It is an eloquent reminder of what at the time may even have seemed likely: the threat of civil war instigated by provincial legions.

Nerva would never be a match for Domitian in military gloriam. Perhaps that is why he put a premium on winning something Domitian failed to attain, the enthusiasm of the plebs rustica and plebs urbana. I will say nothing here about Nerva and the Italian countryside, other than to point out that there the Emperor by his elimination of the vehiculatio and innovative and influential institution of alimentary foundations will have

\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{19}}\text{Cf. Suet. Dom. 12.2.}\]
\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{20}}\text{In “Coin types” (cit. n. 10) 172.}\]
\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{21}}\text{The latter institution is best surveyed by G. Woolf, “Food, poverty and patronage”, PBSR 58 (n.s. 45) (1990) 197–228.}\]
1 Aureus of Sep. 96, rev. legend CONCORDIA EXERCITVVM
2 AE sestertius of Sep. 96, rev. legend CONGIAR P R
3 AE sestertius of Sep. 97, rev. legend PLEBEI VRBANAE FRVMENTO
   CONSTITVTO
4 AR denarius of late 96, rev. depicting Diana
wholly eclipsed Domitian, who was viewed, we are told by Suetonius, as a “vine-eating goat”. 22

I do want to discuss Nerva’s courting of the plebs urbana, but first a word of explanation. In this era, the urban Plebs is a legal class, consisting of Roman citizens who still resided in the city, whose names were inscribed in the registers of the Urbs, and who were neither equites nor senators. The development of this class under the early Empire mainly has to be teased out of a single difficult chapter of the Res Gestae (15). There Augustus speaks first of giving members of the plebs Romana a series of congiaria (special gifts of money) and one major grant of grain over the years 44–11 BC, with these benefactions reaching “never fewer than 250,000 persons”. Next he states that in 5 BC 320,000 members of the plebs urbana—the reorganization of Rome into regiones (commonly dated to 7 BC) should explain the shift in nomenclature—benefited from a cash present. “As consul for the thirteenth time [i.e. 2 BC]”, Augustus soon adds, “I gave 60 denarii apiece to the Plebs who at that time were receiving public grain (plebei quae tum frumentum publicum accipiebat); these were a few more than 200,000 persons.” An epitomator of Dio supplements that last statement: “Augustus limited the number of people to be supplied with grain, a number not previously fixed, to 200,000; and, as some say, he distributed a largess of 60 denarii to each man.” 23

We can discern the faintest outlines of the story. For some time under Augustus, the individuals of the plebs urbana—regardless of their financial status—obviously had been entitled to participate in frumentationes or free monthly disbursements of grain. But that blanket privilege had lapsed by 2 BC. By that year it seems Augustus had fixed the plebs frumentaria at a notional figure—initially as high as 200,000, but perhaps later lowering it (to judge from the terms of his legacy in AD 14 and that of Tiberius in 37) to 150,000. In this way Augustus made grain recipients a privileged subset of the urban Plebs, which (as we have seen) in 5 BC had totalled 320,000. 24

22 See Suet. Dom. 14.2 with Jones (cit. n. 6) 77–79 (the “vine edict”).
23 See Res Gestae 15.1–2 and 4 with the commentary of J. Gagé, Res Gestae Divi Augusti (1950) 98–100; also Dio 55.10.1 (the translation is that of E. Cary in the Loeb edition).
24 For a good short discussion of the evidence on the composition and size of the plebs frumentaria in the Empire, see G. Rickman, The corn supply of ancient Rome (1980) 180–185. In contrast to the view expressed here, Rickman is inclined to think that in Augustus’ day the plebs frumentaria was the same as the citizen body in Rome, and only later grew distinct (see n. 56 below with text).
“Two things especially control the Populus Romanus, grain (annona) and entertainments (spectacula),” says Fronto in an often-cited passage. But Fronto then goes on to explain for us an important legal distinction: that, in the mid-second century AD, within the Populus only the privileged subset of the plebs frumentaria was entitled as a matter of course to receive congiaria. This emerges from his statement that “congiaria conciliate only the plebs frumentaria, on an individual basis and by name; [however] spectacula please the whole (People).” There is some Flavian-era evidence that goes some way toward supporting this general picture of the plebs frumentaria as a special class within the plebs urbana: that I shall have occasion to discuss below. For now, I should point out that children normally did not come into the grain rolls until the time of Trajan, who extended the privilege to a coterie of 5000 boys, setting a precedent for emperors who would follow. The evidence is too poor to determine exactly what was the general age of eligibility in Nerva’s day, but it was probably ten or eleven (though just possibly fourteen) years.

As Denis van Berchem demonstrated a full sixty years ago, the grants of grain and money that emperors shelled out were far from a welfare program. Rather they were a positive mark of honor, which differentiated

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26 See n. 56 below with text.

27 On the age requirement, the only really useful piece of evidence is Suet. Aug. 41.2, which reports that in Augustus’ time children below the age of ten or eleven normally did not receive congiaria (non nisi ab undecimo aetatis anno accipere consuessent); cf. Plin. Pan. 26–28 (especially 28.4), who praises Trajan for having 5000 young boys specially inscribed in the rolls of grain recipients (showing at least that an age limit was still in effect). The age of 14 (often offered in modern discussions) seems attested in no ancient source for the frumentatio at Rome, and is merely an inference from the end of male impuberty as defined in the late law (see Ulpian fr. 11.28 = FIRA II p. 276). Recent discussion of the age issue are (necessarily) brief: P.A. Brunt, Italian manpower (1971) 382; J.R. Rea (ed.), Oxyrhynchus papyri XL (1972) 13 f. (who, citing the Ulpian fragment, suggests emending undecimo in the Suetonius passage to quarto decimo); Rickman (cit. n. 24) 184; C. Virvoulet, Tessera frumentaria (1995) 187 n. 78.

citizens whose legal *domicilium* was Rome from citizens of municipia and colonies—not to mention from the many non-citizens who populated the city. That is why, for instance, in a dedication to Septimius Severus some *vigiles* proudly announce their acquisition of the right to the *frumentatio* after three years of service. Others saw fit to commemorate their right to the *frumentatio* on their tombstones. Indeed, we might view Nerva’s introduction of the *alimenta*—the receipt of which was also a positive distinction—as the Emperor’s attempt to extend some of the marks of status the *plebs frumentaria* enjoyed to citizens outside Rome. It was a clever invention, for by creating something new he avoided diluting the honorific aspect of the city *frumentatio*.

In seeking the good will of those who resided in the city, Nerva was to go far beyond Flavian practice—in both image and substance. For a start, we might look at Nerva’s issue ANNONA AVGVST (series 1–3), which, as Harold Mattingly long ago noted, “is simply a continuation of the type of Domitian which itself is in all essentials the beautiful ANNONA AVGVSTI CERES SC of Nero.” Nerva’s object, of course, was to reassure the *plebs frumentaria*—as well as the numerous residents of Rome who were wholly excluded from the grain dole and thus most affected by food prices—that this most senatorial of emperors would continue to guarantee its traditional perquisites. Another one of Nerva’s early issues, CONGIAR P R (September and December 96, series 1–2) (Plate 1 no. 2), blandly commemorates what is actually, however, an innovation: he is the first emperor to mark the mere fact of his accession with a cash *congiarium* (probably 300 HS, the module used by Domitian) to the eligible Plebs. Here Galba served as a negative exemplum: on his accession he had

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29 Van Berchem’s hypothesis that one needed to prove Roman *origo* as well as residency is not supported by the evidence: see Rickman (cit. n. 24) 182–185. The descendants of Augustus’ original *plebs frumentaria* presumably remained eligible for the distributions if they lived in the city. But how Roman citizens who moved to Rome after the time of Augustus could find their way into this list—as some must have—is unclear.

30 CIL VI 220.

31 As Woolf has recently argued (cit. n. 21). In brief, “we do not know how the recipients of the *alimenta* were selected, but all the evidence suggests that they were eligible by virtue of their privileged status, either as citizens and inhabitants of a privileged area—Italy—or just possibly as members of a more elevated group within the Italian communities” (ibid. 227).

32 BMC (cit. n. 13) xvlii.
promised a *congiarium* to the Plebs, but failed to make good on it, to his chagrin. I should note, however, that Nerva had no real precedent for his disbursement, wholly dissociated from the usual pretexts—a testament, *tirocinium*, or triumph.

Yet Nerva’s gesture, almost certainly born of profound anxiety, soon gave rise to an institution. In 99 Trajan also issued a *congiarium* at accession, even lowering the age limit of recipients to include boys under age ten; other disbursements came with his two triumphs. With Hadrian (who early on had trouble with the Plebs), the pace of *congiaria* quickens, as the occasions for them grow more trivial. There were three in his first three years, and seven to his reign in all. Antoninus Pius had nine in twenty-two years. Marcus Aurelius distributed seven in sixteen, and was the first to extend the benefit to girls. Subsequent emperors, through Severus Alexander, were to average one *congiarium* just about every two years. It is worth remembering that precisely three *congiaria* are attested for the combined reigns of Claudius and Nero, and that the Flavians had bestowed five or six in a quarter century of rule. So Nerva’s gratuitous *congiarium* was to prove a turning-point in imperial policy, one that had an impact on the reigns of Trajan, Hadrian, and indeed the emperors of the rest of the second century (and beyond). 33 This open-handed policy toward the Plebs was bound to be consequential, for it was largely non-reversible.

At the time, however, Nerva’s popular gestures must not have seemed to go far enough. January 97 marks the appearance of two new bronze issues with strident legends aimed at the city of Rome. The first, \textit{NEPTVNO CIRC[ENSES] CONSTITVT} is surprising, in view of the statement of Dio\textsuperscript{34} that Nerva “abolished many sacrifices, many horse races and some other spectacles, in an attempt to reduce expenditure as much as possible”. This coin type allows for the possibility that Nerva almost immediately had to reverse an unrealistic policy decision in the face of strong popular opposition. Indeed, we find such a U-turn in his treatment of pantomimes. Domitian had banned them, Pliny in his \textit{Panegyricus}\textsuperscript{35} claims that Nerva was forced to restore them, and he praises the emperor Trajan for breaking with Nerva and abolishing these shows anew. The fact

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33 For the sources, see Van Berchem, \textit{Distributions} (cit. n. 28) \textit{passim}; also the summary discussion of R. Duncan-Jones, \textit{Money and government in the Roman Empire} (1994) 248–250.

34 68.2.3 (Xiphilinus).

35 \textit{Pan}. 46.1–3.
is, when Nerva’s and Trajan’s “reforms” in the entertainment sphere are added up, we see little real contrast with Flavian policy.

Nerva’s second “city” type of January 97 contains the legend PLEBEI VRBANAE FRVMENTO CONSTITVTO (series 3–4) (Plate 1 no. 3), with the depiction of a modius and six wheat-ears. Scholars have linked this issue with the construction of the horrea Nervae, or a reorganization of the system of grain-doles, or both. But another possibility presents itself. The one parallel that I can find for the phrase frumento constituto occurs in the Digest, in a section excerpting Ulpian on the promise (constitutum) to pay a monetary debt. “Nothing prevents there being a constitutum of something different being made to replace a debt”, Ulpian is quoted as saying. “So if someone who owes a hundred makes a constitutum of grain to the same value, I think that is a valid arrangement” (si quis centum debens frumentum eiusdem pretii constituat, puto ualere constitutum). In light of this passage, it seems at least possible that the coin legend FRVMENTO CONSTITVTO has precisely this legal meaning, and that Nerva in late 96 or early 97 indeed disbursed grain worth such-and-such a price (the functional equivalent of a second congiarium) to each registered member of the entire urban Plebs.

A major point that has not been noticed regarding the legend PLEBEI VRBANAE FRVMENTO CONSTITVTO is that this is the sole mention of the plebs urbana in the whole of the coinage of the Roman Empire. It is rare in epigraphy, too. Now, no emperor could take the goodwill of the plebs urbana for granted, as Galba found out at his accession, Hadrian discovered during the affair of the four consulars, and (much later) Didius Julianus learned after succeeding Pertinax. So the almost total reticence of emperors in actually naming this group—especially on coins—is

36 On this see Shotter, “Principate” (cit. n. 15) 222.
37 Ulpian in Dig. 13.5.1.5. The translation is that of A. Watson in T. Mommsen, P. Krüger, A. Watson (edd.), The Digest of Justinian (1985).
38 Cf. already Syme (cit. n. 17) 62 [= Roman Papers I 9], adumbrating this interpretation (“extra doles of corn are apparently what are commemorated . . .”). At Res Gestae 15.1 Augustus records that in 23 BC he gave out a year’s worth of grain to the urban Plebs (plebei Romanae . . . consul undecimum duodecim frumentationes frumento privati coempto emensus sum); cf. Dio 55.26.23 (rations double the norm in AD 6 to the plebs frumentaria). But in these situations Augustus was reacting to severe food crises: see Suet. Aug. 41.2; also Gagé (cit. n. 23) 99 with 81 and 106 f. We cannot be sure the same was true of Nerva.
strange. One possibility, I suggest, is that they felt official commemoration of the *plebs urbana* would eventually lead to the creation of a *tertius ordo*, alongside the generally accepted ones of the senators and *equites*. Official recognition in turn might prompt the urban Plebs to demand costly privileges—perhaps for a start, expanded eligibility for the customary *frumentationes* and *congiaria*. Let us turn to the evidence to see whether there is anything to this hypothesis.

Augustus mentions the Plebs in his *Res Gestae* (apparently) four times by name, enumerating in Chapter 15 alone seven separate largesses to this group (including one solely to the *plebs frumentaria*).40 The Plebs sometimes responded in turn to the Princeps and his family.41 For example, the "plebs urbana of the thirty-five tribes" made dedications to Tiberius' son Drusus and his adoptive son Germanicus.42 Or the Senate might commend the Plebs. A *senatus consultum* of 23 detailing honors for the dead Drusus praises the *equester ordo* and then immediately the *plebs urbana* for their conduct as corporate units. The same collocation of equestrians and Plebs (plausibly) has been proposed for the *Tabula Siarensis*, a SC of AD 19 listing funerary honors for Germanicus.43

A new epigraphic instance of *equester ordo* followed by *Plebs* comes in the *SC de Cn. Pisones patres* of 20. There the Senate, after praising various members of the Imperial family for their conduct in the aftermath of Germanicus' death, goes on to commend also the loyalty and self-restraint of the equestrian *ordo*, the *Plebs*, and the *milites*.44 The issue here was that

40 See *Res Gestae* 15.1 (*plebei Romanae*), 15.2 (*plebis urbanae*), 15.4 (*plebei, quae tum frumentum publicum accipiebat*); App. 1 ([*plebei Romanae*] restored from the evidence of the Greek text of the *Monumentum Ancyranum*).
42 *CIL* VI 909 (=*ILS* 176) and 910 (=*ILS* 168) with Lebek 119–120 (and 82 n. 2 on the spelling 'Pleps' in this period). For a general discussion of the "thirty-five tribes" of the Plebs in the Empire, see T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* III (1888) 444–448; also C. Nicolet, "Plève et tribus: Les statues de Lucius Antonius et le testament d'Auguste", *MEFRA* 97 (1985) 799–839.
43 See Lebek 81–117, supplementing *Tab. Siar.* frg. II col b lines 2–10 (the Germanicus SC of AD 19, which mentions *Pleps* but not *equites*) largely on the basis of *CIL* VI 31200 b/c II lines 5–20 (the Drusus SC, where the collocation of *equester ordo* and *plebs urbana* is preserved) and Tac. *Ann.* 2.83.4.
the Plebs almost tore apart Piso Pater on his return to Rome. Yet "following the example of the equestrian order [the Plebs] allowed itself to be controlled by our Princeps". Of course, it was the urban populace in its non-organized form which tried to take vengeance for Germanicus. But the fact that the Plebs is listed amongst these other privileged groups implies a measure of official recognition and respectability—not to mention concern on the part of Emperor and Senate.

Was the Plebs an ordo or not? There is very little to suggest that it generally was viewed as such, once we leave aside references to the archaic Roman Plebs contrasted with the Patricians. The usage is extremely rare in late Republican sources, and grows no more common under the Empire. Statius in describing a scene in Domitian’s Colosseum does call the Plebs an ordo, but he is quite non-technical. "Every ordo

46 SC de Cn. Pison patre line 158.
49 This category includes a passage in the Elder Pliny (NH 33.29), where he remarks on how the rings worn by members of the equestrian order mark it as second in rank, though it was the ordo third in creation after the patricians and plebs. Mommsen (cit. n. 42) 459 n. 1 (oddly) considered this usage an error on Pliny’s part. But Pliny’s reference is clearly to the Republic, and his choice of words perfectly correct—indeed (as the Editor has pointed out to me) cautious.
50 Cicero does sometimes speak of senatus, equester ordo, ceteri ordines (references in Cohen, “ ‘Ordo’ ” (cit. n. 48) 260 n. 1), but Cohen (ibid. 265) reasonably takes that as a negative indication: “[the phrase] montre en elle-même que la plèbe n’était pas une formation sociale homogène et qu’elle s’était elle-même divisée en plusieurs sous-groupes.” Of the other references Cohen assembles for the (non-archaic) Plebs as ordo in the Republic (ibid. 266 n. 7), only the speech Sallust gives the tribune C. Memmius (at BJ 31.7) seems relevant—and there the tribe’s reference to his audience as an ordo is surely a deliberate archaism for rhetorical effect (cf. the tribe’s talk of a plebeian secessio and his historical disquisition on the Gracchi in sections 6 and 7 of that chapter).
dines at one table—*parvi, femina, plebs, eques, senatus*. A vivid image, for here Statius lists each class in ascending rank, but descending as they were physically seated in the amphitheatre itself.\(^{51}\)

The evidence is more abundant for the Plebs as *non-ordo* in the Empire. In a way, the die was cast with Augustus’ *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, “on the marriages of the Orders”, namely the Senate and the equestrians. And so Valerius Maximus and Velleius Paterculus use the phrase “both Orders”, *uterque ordo*.\(^{52}\) Martial\(^{53}\) speaks of the *plebs et minor ordo maximusque* at the games. Finally, a letter of Domitian that refers to *uterque ordo* makes it clear that he did not consider the Plebs to be one.\(^{54}\)

We have seen that in Tiberius’ day the Senate several times lauds the Plebs as a corporate group. But henceforth nice words about the Plebs of the Empire are not easy to find in our sources. After Tiberius even the phrase *plebs urbana* practically disappears from official inscriptions in Rome.\(^{55}\) One exception is a dedication to Titus by that group which defines itself by its receipt of grain, terming itself the *plebs urbana quae frumentum publicum accipit et tribus [XXXV]*. One key to understanding this inscription’s puzzling formulation is Ch. 15 of the *Res Gestae*, where Augustus records separately cash grants to the *plebs Romana* or *urbana* and the Plebs *quae tum frumentum publicum accipiebat*. Another is the dedication mentioned above of the *pleps urbana quinque et triginta tribuum* to Drusus and Germanicus. G. Rickman must be correct in his suggestion that the inscription to Titus “seems to imply that *plebs frumentaria* and the thirty-five tribes were not coextensive under Vespasian”—nor (we may add) under any emperor after Augustus carved out an elite *plebs frumentaria* ca. 2 BC. Rickman has a far more convincing explanation than that of C. Nicolet, who (implausibly) interprets the Titus

\(^{51}\) *Silvae* 6.43–44 with Van Berchem, “‘Clientes’” (cit. n. 28) 189. For some other formulations showing the division Senate/Equestrians/Plebs in imperial literary sources of the first century AD, see Lebek (cit. n. 41) 91 n. 16; also *ibid.* in ZPE 85 (1991) 62 n. 37. For a much later period, Cohen, “‘Ordo’” (cit. n. 48) 266 n. 7 cites *ordo plebeiorum* at *Cod. Theod.* 9.45.5.

\(^{52}\) Val. Max. 7.8.4 and Vell. 2.32.3. For other instances of *uterque ordo* from the Imperial era, see Mommsen (cit. n. 42) 460 n. 1.

\(^{53}\) *Epigr.* 4.2.3.

\(^{54}\) *CIL* IX 5420 (letter of Domitian to the Falerienses [Picenum], AD 82) lines 12–13 *adhibitis utriusque ordinis splendidis viris cognita causa* . . .

\(^{55}\) To judge especially from the evidence assembled by Mommsen (cit. n. 42) 444–448 and 461 n. 2; see also Nicolet (cit. n. 42) 823–828.
inscription as a dedication by the urban Plebs in both its individual (i.e. as a recipient of *virītim* grants) and corporative aspects.\textsuperscript{56}

We do not find emperors in this general era responding to the Plebs in kind.\textsuperscript{57} Significantly, the Flavians themselves marked the seats in the Colosseum reserved for the equestrians and the *plebs frumentaria* as *equit(ibus)* and *client(ibus)* respectively.\textsuperscript{58} The thought here must be that those who were eligible for the *frumentatio* and *congiaria* were deemed clients of the state and clients of the Emperor, a usage attested in the younger Pliny\textsuperscript{59} and elsewhere—indeed, as late as the third century of our era.\textsuperscript{60}

Even leaving aside the hypothesis that the emperors were afraid to recognize a third *ordo*, it is clear from this survey that Nerva’s open courting of the urban *plebs* on his coins is very much at odds with standard Imperial practice.\textsuperscript{61} One wonders, then, whether the December 96 denarius

\textsuperscript{56} Dedication to Titus: *CIL* VI 943 = *ILS* 6045. See also *Res Gestae* ch. 15.4; *CIL* VI 909 and 910; Rickman (cit. n. 24) 185 n. 103 against Nicolet (cit. n. 42) 836.

\textsuperscript{57} Lebek (cit. n. 41) 115 notes in passing the asymmetry of titulature (sc. in the time of Augustus and Tiberius): “In den erhaltenen Zeugnissen spricht nämlich anscheinend nur die städtische Pleps selbst von sich als *pleps urbana quinque et triginta tribuum*. Princeps (*Res Gestae* 15) und Senat aber verwenden den Ausdruck *pleps urbana ohne quinque et triginta tribuum*.”

\textsuperscript{58} *CIL* VI 32098 = *ILS* 5654.

\textsuperscript{59} Plin. *Pan.* 23.1 with Mommsen (cit. n. 42) 444 n. 4.

\textsuperscript{60} Van Berchem, “‘Clients’” (cit. n. 28) 183–190, especially 184. One of Trajan’s earliest measures on coming to the throne was to reserve 5000 extra seats for the Plebs in the Circus Maximus, for which the “thirty-five tribes” thanked him in an inscription of 103: see Plin. *Pan.* 51.5 (*populo cui locorum quinque milia adieisti*) and *CIL* VI 955 = *ILS* 286 with Nicolet (cit. n. 42) 838; Virvoulet (cit. n. 27) 230. It would be good to know the designation he used to mark the places for this larger, less exclusive group.

\textsuperscript{61} On the development of motifs involving the distribution of money—including Liberalitas (personified)—on Roman coins, see W.E. Metcalf, “Whose Liberalitas? Propaganda and audience in the Early Roman Empire”, *RIN* 95 (1993) 337–346. It is clear from Metcalf’s study that Nero was the pioneer in the graphic numismatic commemoration of such grants; one might add that he is the first emperor to place the legends CONG(nARIVM) and ANNONA on a coin. But it is Nerva alone who mentions the *Plebs urbana*—and for that matter the word *frumentum*—on his coinage. It is interesting that this Emperor simultaneously tried to flatter the Senate too. Nerva’s strident third series of bronzes (January 97) included alongside the new “city” issues a sestertius with the reverse legend PROVIDENTIA SENATVS. As it happens, the formulation is wholly unparalleled in the Roman imperial coinage: elsewhere providentia is a virtue of the gods, emperors or the imperial house. It
reverse that shows Diana hunting with hound (Plate 1 no. 4) belongs in this context. The type is worth discussing in detail, not least because it is the sole precious-metal coin Nerva issued in his second series. Furthermore, Diana is strictly speaking the only major deity to be featured as such on any of the coins of Nerva’s reign.  

It was Augustus who introduced the figure of “Diana Venatrix” to Roman coinage, in a brief series of issues in gold and silver between the years 14 and 9 BC. The next appearance of the “huntress” is not until Nerva. That Emperor’s coin—like those of Augustus—depicts the goddess in short tunic and accompanied by a dog, with no identifying legend. But the iconography is different in one important respect. Augustus’ issues had portrayed Diana at rest, while on Nerva’s coin she is in an action pose, wheeling about while drawing an arrow. Soon Trajan was to follow Nerva’s lead in placing the same “action” type on a quadrans and a semis issue. It then disappears until the reigns of Antonianus and Gallienus in the mid-third century.

Some scholars, because of the specific type, have connected Nerva’s coin with the beast-hunting spectacles a late source says the emperor revived at Rome. Or Nerva’s family, it has been suggested, may have worshipped Diana. Others have thought that some reference is intended in Nerva’s coins to the most famous Diana of Rome—the plebeian Diana of

is striking to see a Princeps acknowledging the body to which he owed his selection in this explicit (some might say belated!) manner. One might speculate that Nerva with this unusual (but ultimately short-lived, single-series) coin sought not just to shore up his support in the Senate but also to offer a suitable counterweight to his bold “bread” and “circuses” issues.

62 Though a statue of Minerva—probably that before the Temple of Minerva Chalcidica—appears among the figures on the aes issue CONGIAR P R, and a statue of Neptune on his NEPTVNO CIRC[ENSES] CONSTITVT.

63 For what follows, see M. Jentoft-Nilsen, Diana on Roman coins (diss. University of Southern California 1985) 167–179.

64 John Malalas 10.349, who speaks of Nerva putting a stop to gladiatorial shows (cf. Dio 68.2.3 (Xiphilinus), cited in the text with Note 34) and introducing in their place τῶν κυνηγητῶν ἡ θέα. For an overview of the venationes (but without reference to Nerva), see most recently D.G. Kyle, “Animal spectacles in ancient Rome: Meat and meaning”, Nikephoros 7 (1995) 181–205. In a quite discursive discussion, Kyle (p. 202) plausibly offers HA Gordiani Tres 3.5–8 and Probus 19.2–4 as evidence that the Emperor’s largesse might include the distribution of the animals’ carcasses to the crowd.
the Aventine. 65 Marit Jentoft-Nilsen, in a careful dissertation that surveys the entire repertoire of Diana coin types, adduces yet another possibly relevant item: both Nerva and Trajan held municipal office at Aricia, the site of the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis. 66

We can exclude none of these possibilities as the background to Nerva’s coin, though some are less likely than others. It must be emphasized that the suggestion of Diana as a goddess of the Cocceii rests on no actual evidence. And a direct reference to the Aventine or Nemi Diana also seems to be a stretch. Nerva’s lively Venatrix bears no significant resemblance to what we know of the archaistic cult statue of the Aventine Diana, 67 and still less to the triple statue of the goddess at Nemi. 68 The figure instead represents the so-called Diana of Versailles, a widely reproduced statue type that copied a (now lost) Greek original. 69 So it is odd that Jentoft-Nilsen, 70 though rejecting the connection with Diana Aventinensis, nonetheless suggests as her principal explanation that “Diana’s purpose here is probably allied to her political aspect . . . by presenting an image of Diana, a goddess with ancient political connotations, the type could serve the same function of reassurance [as Nerva’s AEQVITAS, IVSTITIA and LIBERTAS PVBLICA issues] especially in view of the fact that it was struck in 96, in the few months between Domitian’s death and the new year.” That hypothesis does not get us very far, especially since it is apparent that for Jentoft-Nilsen those “ancient political connotations” have to do with the Aventine. 71

65 For all these various interpretations, see Mattingly in BMC (cit. n. 13) xxxix f. Mattingly himself offers the following view (p. xl): “some reference to the most famous Diana of Rome—Diana of the Aventine, who is also Diana of the grove at Aricia, is probable, though we still lack the clue as to its exact meaning.” For what is known of the Aventine Diana and her surroundings, see L. Vendittelli in M. Steinby (ed.), Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae II (1995) 11–13.

66 Jentoft-Nilsen (cit. n. 63) 138–139 with 162 n. 28 (citing CIL XIV 2213 from Aricia). She adds (p. 139) “that Diana apparently was of some special significance to Trajan can also be inferred from his arch completed at Beneventum after his death in 118 . . . [where] she twice appears as the huntress.”

67 Which is said to have been based ultimately on the Artemis of Ephesus: see Jentoft-Nilsen 123–125.

68 On which see ibid. 126–129.


70 Jentoft-Nilsen (cit. n. 63) 179.

71 E.g. ibid. 219 f.: “Diana was regarded, above all, as a political goddess because of her ancient political traditions involving the founding of her temple on
In truth, we do not have enough evidence to determine with confidence what specific message (if any) this “active” Diana type was meant to convey. That Nerva and Trajan are the first and (for a long time) the only emperors to use it is intriguing, especially given the connection of both with Aricia. Yet even if Nerva was determined by this coin to advertise (for instance) a personal devotion to Diana Nemorensis or to publicize some new-style venationes, one still wonders how the Roman public would “read” this venatrix at the time of its issue. We must keep in mind that it is an exceedingly rare coin\(^\text{72}\) that few will have seen. Nerva minted the Diana type just once—early in his reign, in his second ever series—and then not again after December 96. On the most basic level, it seems reasonable to suggest that he intended his lively huntress (whatever her precise associations) to compare favorably with the boring “Minerva” reverses of his predecessor. Domitian’s portrayal of his patron goddess, though obsessive from 83 to the end of his reign, falls mainly into four predictable reverse types. Three of these show Minerva as static, and the fourth has Minerva stiffly advancing with javelin poised to strike.\(^\text{73}\)

As mentioned, the Diana denarius is the only precious-metal coin to appear in Nerva’s (adventurous) second series. As such it begged a reaction. Here is a very speculative suggestion. After Domitian’s monotonous series of reverses, Nerva’s energetic “Diana venatrix” was no doubt meant to come as a relief. Yet there is no telling whether that is how it was received. It would be hard for those who saw the coin in December 96 not to conclude, given the numismatic record of the previous fourteen years, that Nerva was merely replacing Domitian’s tutelary goddess with his own (whether Diana had that association for the new Emperor or not). If that indeed was the perception, it might explain why Nerva’s Diana so quickly

\(^{72}\) Professor Metcalf informs me that only four examples are known to be extant.

\(^{73}\) For a detailed study, see L. Morawiecki, “The symbolism of Minerva on the coins of Domitianus”, *Klio* 59 (1977) 185–193; cf. Carradice, *Coinage* (cit. n. 10) 21 f.
disappeared from his denarii, only to reappear on Trajan’s coins, when the memory of Domitian did not matter so much.

For what seems to be an unambiguous attempt at attracting popular favor, consider Nerva’s institution of a so-called funeraticium. This was a cash grant specifically for the plebs urbana (sc. quae frumentum publicum accipit?) at a hefty 62½ denarii per head, recorded in the Chronographer of the Year 354. Nearly forty years ago Attilio Degrassi offered an enticing interpretation, that the funeraticium had nothing to do with Domitian’s death or Nerva’s funeral (as had been suggested). Rather, it was a subsidy Nerva offered toward the burial expenses of any member of the plebs urbana (for Degrassi (p. 701), apparently identical with the plebs frumentaria) who should die. Indeed, Degrassi makes a good philological case for funeraticium in the sense of “funeral allowance”, and the epigraphic evidence shows that 250 sesterces (=62½ denarii) was quite enough for a modest funeral. Degrassi—supposing a total of 150,000 were on the rolls of the plebs urbana—calculates that, given an average mortality rate of 4000 of these citizens per annum, the treasury would disburse a million sesterces a year.

How seriously should we take this estimate? Now, Degrassi’s figure (which seems based simply on his own guess) assumes an annual death rate of about 26 or 27 per thousand recipients of public grain. That in turn implies an average life expectancy at time of eligibility—wherever one places it (as we have seen, it is uncertain whether the qualifying age for Nerva’s day was 11 or something above)—of about 37 additional years. As it happens, Degrassi’s mortality estimate for the imperial city of Rome is not far off the figures T.G. Parkin recently has suggested for the early Roman empire. Parkin, working from the portions of the Coale–Demeny life tables considered most applicable to ancient demography, suggests a model for the Roman empire where total birth and death rates are both around 40 per 1000 per year. In such a population, a plebs frumentaria

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74 Text in T. Mommsen (ed.), Chronica minora I p. 146: Nerva imp(eravit) ann(os) V [sic], m(enses) III, d(iem) unum. cong(iarium) de(dit) (denarios) LXXV et funeraticium plebi urbanae instituit (denarios) LXII s(emissem). excessit hortis Salustianis.


76 See A.J. Coale and P. Demeny with B. Vaughn, Regional model life tables and stable populations2 (1983) 43 (Model West Mortality Level 3 Female) and 385 (Model South Mortality Level 3 Female); T.G. Parkin, Demography and Roman society (1992) 67–90, cf. 145–150, 158–160 (reproducing these particular tables and adding corresponding figures). Parkin offers a lucid description and
of 150,000 in which membership came at age 11 would see approximately 3740–4070 deaths per year; if the age of eligibility was set at 14, that number would increase somewhat (to roughly 3940–4300 deaths). A plebs that numbered 200,000 would have correspondingly larger figures: a range of 4985–5430 deaths per year if inclusion in the group came at age 11, or 5250–5730 if membership started at age 14.77

But it seems possible that wretched conditions in the city of Rome would make its inhabitants shorter-lived than Degrassi’s model allows. Hence we cannot rule out W. Scheidel’s recent hypothesis that Rome’s seasonal mortality might have brought the city’s projected annual death rate “to anywhere up to perhaps 60 per thousand”.78 A “stationary” explanation of the model life tables, and demonstrates why the Coale–Demeny “West” (especially) and “South” regions are “the best source of information available” (p. 82) for arriving at least at an approximate picture of mortality schedules in the Roman empire. In the Coale–Demeny compilation average life expectancy at birth (which is the basis for estimating the various mortality rates for every age group) is given for females at 2.5 year intervals (Level 1 = 20.0, Level 2 = 22.5, Level 3 = 25.0, etc.). That makes those particular life tables more convenient than the male ones (where the numbers are not rounded) for determining the shape of age distribution in a hypothetical population (Parkin 83). On the applicability of the Coale–Demeny statistics for either gender to a general population, see C. Newell, Methods and models in demography (1988) 138; also (more briefly) Parkin, loc. cit. In any case, certain changes in the pattern of mortality among Coale–Demeny “West” males over the period during which their data were collected (1871–1959) make “the female model life tables . . . more closely representative of mortality experience [for that area] . . . than are the male model life tables” (Coale, Demeny, Vaughn 17 n. 6). For the general Roman population, a birth/death rate much higher than 40 per 1000 per year for a long term is difficult to accept: see Parkin 84 on B. Frier’s (implied) estimate in HSPh 86 (1982) 213–251 (based on the Ulpianic life table) of a birth and death rate of 47.4 per 1000 per annum. Since dividing an age cohort by its death rate yields its life expectancy, a population of 150,000 with 4,000 funerals per year yields a mean life expectancy of 37.5 years. This means that about 2.67% of that population are dying each year, i.e., about 27 per thousand.

77 The Coale–Demeny2 tables divide the life-course after the first year into five-year stages (5, 10, 15, etc.), and so these death rate figures for ages 11 and 14 represent my own calculations, with the Coale–Demeny “South” region providing the low number and the “West” the high in each case. It seems legitimate to assume (as I do here, in what is in any case just an attempt at a rough estimate of the annual death rate of the plebs frumentaria) that the mortality rate is constant between these two particular ages: see Parkin 76–77 with 92.

population cannot sustain that rate of mortality for long, but it is different with a great city. The heavy mortality at all times would be hard to detect given the inexorable inflow of newcomers, both free and slave. 79

For the purpose of argument, let us consider an estimated total annual death rate in the range of 50 per 1000 to be a more reliable model for the citizens of Rome. Judging from the relevant Coale–Demeny tables, 80 that would give us annually 27–31 deaths per 1000 grain-receiving residents of Rome, and so a rate somewhat higher than the one Degrassi implies. A plebs frumentaria reckoned at 150,000 members in which eligibility came at age 14 would mean roughly 4275–4700 funerals each year, with a corresponding annual cost to the treasury of up to 1,175,000 sesterces. If there were 200,000 on the rolls (as there very well may have been) aged 14 and above, that is 5700–6275 publicly funded funerals at an expenditure (up to 1,568,750 HS) considerably above what Degrassi imagined.

Still, our highest estimate does not seem to be an impossible figure, even if the Emperor had to pay it out at that level annually. The amount would be perhaps a little more than two and a half percent of the total cost of Nerva’s congiarium at accession. Under normal (grim) conditions, Nerva’s policy cumulatively would have the same effect as disbursing an extra congiarium every generation and a half. So Degrassi’s interpretation of funeraticium as a standing “funeral allowance” is not excluded on economic grounds, and I fully accept his view (though not his precise figures) here. Yet one problem for the actual administration of the funeraticium would be the ever-present possibility of major human disasters. Fires, plagues, 81 and the like would place sudden drains on the treasury and (in a catastrophe) conceivably might break it altogether.

In truth, Nerva himself was probably not thinking very much of the long-term effects of such policies. In general, the emperor seems to have

Rome”, JRS 86 (1996) 100–138. Shaw—unlike Scheidel—is reluctant to attribute the higher mortality rates the evidence suggests for the summer months to the single cause of malaria (see especially Shaw p. 133).

79 See the remarks of A.R. Burn, JRS 55 (1965) 257.
80 Coale et al. (cit. n. 76) 42 (Model West Mortality Level 1 Female) and 384 (Model South Mortality Level 1 Female).
81 See e.g. Parkin (cit. n. 76) 36 on Jerome’s notice (Chron. p. 188 H) of a plague of AD 77 allegedly so severe ut per multos dies in efemeridem decem milia ferme mortuorum hominum referrentur. Yet this reckoning—approximately 10,000 dead entered into a daily register for “many” days—must be vastly exaggerated. (The plague that was to come in the Antonine period could hardly have been worse!)
been looking not forward but backward, and flattery of the *plebs urbana* is one area where he evidently perceived he had to outdo the Flavians. On Duncan-Jones’ admittedly rough estimate, Nerva’s *congiarium* pro-rated over his sixteen months of reign makes him the most profligate emperor until Commodus. Of previous emperors, only Caligula (another short reign) comes close. That judgment (it may be argued) is a bit unfair to Nerva, since at his accession he obviously did not expect to die so soon. Yet one might add that he probably continued many Domitianic building projects—we are explicitly told he did in the case of the *Forum Pervium* or *Forum Nervae*—at least partly to keep people employed. Indeed, before the year 96 was up, the Senate saw the need to set up an “Economy Commission” to examine the state of the *aerarium*. All the same, in 97 Nerva appointed Sex. Iulius Frontinus to oversee the complete reorganization of the aqueducts that served the city of Rome.

There is more. Nerva even went so far as to set up an inscription calling Domitian’s Palatine complex the *aedes publicae*, and no doubt opened up a greater part of it to the public. The object obviously was to mark a break with his predecessor’s despotic style. Here it is just possible that Nerva was trying to evoke the spirit of the old Villa Publica—the principal public building during the Republic—in the Campus Martius. Pliny treats the renaming as very much “alive” at the time of the *Panegyricus*, though we do not hear of it afterwards. Perhaps Trajan, Hadrian or one of the Antonines took the inscription down. Though Nerva’s successors may

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82 Duncan-Jones (cit. n. 33) 248–249, duly separating short from long reigns; cf. Syme (cit. n. 17) 63 [=Roman Papers I 9] (yet supposing that Nerva gave out more than one cash *congiarium*).
83 Suet. Dom. 5 with *CIL VI* 953. Biraghi (cit. n. 17) 259 collects the evidence on Nerva’s building projects.
85 Front. *Aq.* 1.1.
86 Plin. *Pan.* 47.4 magno quidem animo parenis tuus hanc ante vos principes arcem publicarum aedium nomine inscriperat . . . quam bene cum titulo isto moribus tuis convenit, quamque omnia sic facits tanquam non alius inscripsit!
87 As often noted, e.g. (most recently) by R. Sablayrolles, *Pallas* 40 (1994) 123.
88 As the Editor has suggested to me. On its use, see e.g. Varro *RR* 3.2 (a place where one could go simply to get out of the sun). For the Republican building itself, see the bibliography assembled in J. Linderski, *Roman questions* (1995) 290 n. 2, to which add L. Richardson, *A new topographical dictionary of Ancient Rome* (1992) 430–431.
have been constrained by his over-liberality among the Plebs, there is no reason to assume they felt compelled also to adopt his slogans.

I might note that no coin commemorates Nerva’s most famous act, the adoption of Trajan—who just happened to be the commander of Upper Germany—and his immediate appointment as Caesar. This silence speaks eloquently as to the circumstances of that decision. But the security brought by the arrangements of autumn 97 is reflected obliquely in the coinage. Nerva introduces only one new type in this latter part of his reign, a Ceres in precious metal (series 5). Indeed, all the specific types I have mentioned are discontinued, except for CONCORDIA EXERCITVVM—but significantly now with legend omitted. The need for extravagant gestures and frantic sloganeering evidently had passed. The odd thing is that it is this final, relatively placid phase of Nerva’s reign which has left the greatest impression on subsequent ancient writers, and thus most modern scholarship.

It is time to take stock. Nerva’s coins evidently aimed to outshine Domitian’s monotonous types, which were still very much in circulation. His issues show an emperor hurriedly casting and then recasting his public image in an anxious attempt to win support where he could find it—or to forestall crisis where he could not. This examination of the numismatic evidence adds further substance to an interpretation offered long ago by Ronald Syme, who pieced together (mostly) literary and epigraphical evidence to illustrate the “extravagance and inefficiency” of “the anarchical reign of Nerva”.89 Indeed, to judge from the coins, the plebs urbana—to require so much attention—may have been more resistant to Nerva than is suspected.

I will conclude on a metrological note—for it was the uniformity and consistency of Roman money that so impressed the king of Taprobane. Under Domitian the weight (though not the fineness) of the denarius gradually increased, a trend that peaked with Nerva’s reign. However the bubble burst under Trajan, who in a monetary crisis right after his accession was forced to reduce the aureus sharply, and later also the denarius. He even called in all Republican silver from circulation.90 There was no recovery from this debasement: minting standards were to fall inexorably during the second century AD. From the perspective of Taprobane,

89 Quotations from Syme (cit. n. 17) 70 [= Roman Papers I 17].
90 See in general Sutherland (cit. n. 17) 161 and (for the details) Duncan-Jones (cit. n. 33) 219–230, 238–247.
Trajan’s actions will have seemed in contravention of the customary *iustitia* of Roman emperors. Those closer to Rome must have realized that the blame was better placed on Domitian and (though they could hardly say it) Trajan’s adoptive father.

Bryn Mawr College

T. Corey Brennan

APPENDICES: CHRONOLOGY OF NERVA’S COIN ISSUES

All charts adapted from Shotter, “Principate” (cit. n. 15) 217–218

APPENDIX A. Dating of Nerva’s issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Titulature</th>
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<td>AD 96</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>TR P COS II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Between mid-October and December</td>
<td>TR P COS II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>AD 97</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>TR P COS III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>September</td>
<td>TR P II COS III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Between mid-October and December</td>
<td>TR P II COS III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>AD 98</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>TR P II COS IIII</td>
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APPENDIX B. Nerva’s reverse legends (with dates of issue) discussed in this paper

X* = the type without the specific legend

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<th>Jan 97</th>
<th>Sep 97</th>
<th>late 97</th>
<th>Jan 98</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sep 96</td>
<td>late 96</td>
<td>Jan 97</td>
<td>Sep 97</td>
<td>late Jan 97 98</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X* X*</td>
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APPENDIX C. Nerva’s reverse legends (with dates of issue)—excluding “restorations” and provincial types—not specifically discussed in this paper [abbreviations as in Appendix B]

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<th>Sep 97</th>
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