

THE ROLE OF TOKENS

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Tokens are difficult objects. Even the most basic question ‘What is a token?’ proves surprisingly hard to answer. And beyond that, almost all of the information we might want in order to contextualise them – who made them? on whose authority? for what purpose? how were they used? by whom? – is usually very hard to access. They are objects, then, with very few fixed points from which to work. These difficulties have led to a relative scholarly neglect of tokens (as R. remarks at the start of her book: ‘It is rare that a category of evidence from the Roman world has remained neglected for so long’ [p. 2]), particularly in comparison with coins, objects that often share similar material forms, are collected in similar ways and are investigated by scholars with similar interests.

Recent years, however, have seen an upsurge in interest in tokens, and the bodies of material from Athens, Ephesus and Palmyra have been the focus of particularly productive attention. In the UK this ‘token renaissance’ has largely been spearheaded by R., under the aegis of her ERC-funded project ‘Token Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean’ at the University of Warwick (2016–2021). This book is one of the results of that project; it focuses on the (usually monetiform) bronze, brass and lead tokens from Italy, particularly Rome and Ostia, material that has seen little scholarly attention since M. Rostovtzeff’s work in the early twentieth century. This new book is resolutely not simply a catalogue or description of the material; rather, it has a clear focus on using tokens to write history. It is accompanied by two online databases of types and specimens (<https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-types/> and <https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-specimens/>), which update Rostovtzeff’s 1903 catalogue and provide users with a wealth of additional images and information.

Perhaps the most central theme of the book is the way in which tokens can contribute to the creation of identities. R. stresses how the possession of a token would create an ‘in-group’, a community of those with similar experiences and feelings of belonging, contrasted with an ‘out-group’ of those who did not possess a token. She explores how the imagery of tokens could shape and reinforce these identities for a whole range of different groups. The variety of topics with which this kind of analysis intersects is quite extraordinary: imperial events like triumphs and distributions, spectacles and games, religious festivals, bathing, civic office holding, professional associations, daily life, and the *vici* of Rome, to name just some. Standard works on these topics have paid little attention to tokens, but R. shows that such attention can be rewarded. She is careful never to overstate her case, and the lack of contextual information means that much of the discussion is necessarily framed in terms of possibilities, options and hedges. One example: ‘The token was likely used to facilitate the distribution; it might have been given to individuals during the ceremony and exchanged later for money, grain or other goods. Alternatively, the token might have granted access to the distribution’ (pp. 44–5), and this for a token whose use context is fairly certain, given its legend EX LIBERALITATE TI CLAVDI | CAE AVG. The reader is often left wanting a level of certainty that the material simply does not allow (a point conceded by R. at p. 216), but in instances where the lack of contextual information can be transcended, R.’s insightful analysis adds to our understanding. Two examples are worth highlighting.

In Chapter 2 R. discusses some late first- or early second-century tokens that show a laurel branch and the legend IO IO TRIVMP on one side, and a torque and two *armillae* on the other. These are clearly related somehow to a triumph, and R. shows expertly how, regardless of whether they were distributed or used before, during or after the triumph, the imagery could create a shared anticipation, experience or memory of the event. The legend, too, speaks to the user, evoking the chant of spectators at a triumph and encouraging their participation or perhaps recollection.


In Chapter 4 R. turns to tokens connected with the *Isidis Navigium*, focusing not on the much-discussed late antique material, but rather on pre-Constantinian lead tokens. Among these are a series of tokens bearing the image of a male figure with the dog-shaped head of Anubis. It is not clear whether this figure is the god or a priest, and R. suggests that this ambiguity might be a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries between deity, priest and worshipper. In this way readers are led closer to the experience of participants in the procession of the *Isidis Navigium*.

A further important theme in the book is the relationship of tokens to coinage. There are numerous examples of reverse types of coins that appear to have been copied on tokens, providing interesting evidence of ancient viewers engaging with numismatic iconography and adapting it to their own ends. Chapter 2 discusses the appearance of the imperial portrait on tokens. R. is at pains to stress that these images were not necessarily produced under the auspices of the emperor and are thus further evidence of engagement with officially produced imagery such as coins. Particularly interesting are portraits of figures who appear only infrequently or not at all on coins, for example, possible depictions of Claudia Augusta, the short-lived daughter of Nero and Poppaea (pp. 43–4). This section also highlights the paucity of imperial portraits on tokens in Italy from the second half of the second century onwards. R. attributes this to shifting attitudes towards imperial euergetism and a change in how such euergetism was commemorated materially. This might be connected with shifts in coin iconography, such as the appearance of a personified *Liberalitas* for the first time on the coinage of Hadrian.

The connection between tokens and coins is not just investigated in terms of iconography, but also in terms of function. In Chapter 5 R. asks whether tokens could have served as an alternative currency, an idea often suggested in scholarship, particularly for lead tokens. She concludes that the small quantities in which tokens were produced, as well as the clustered nature of finds of those that survive in larger quantities, mean that they more probably served a single purpose for one moment in time, before being discarded or melted down for re-use. She does note the frequent association of tokens with baths, not just through their legends and iconography, but also through their findspots. She suggests that they may have functioned as entrance tickets or served some purpose within the economy of the bathhouse. Here again, though, she stresses the small volume of tokens that were produced, and she finds it more likely that they were markers of momentary acts of euergetism (free entry, gifts of oil or other goods etc.). This is in line with the discussion throughout the rest of book that frequently emphasises how tokens provide a window onto small-scale and transitory acts of social life that might otherwise be hard to access.

R. has clearly set the study of tokens in Roman Italy on a new footing. While much work remains to be done, and the lack of contextualising information continues to frustrate at times, she has shown how these objects can contribute to the study of social history, and her book should prompt others working in a wide variety of fields to pay more attention to them.

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