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### Tokens and the History of Roman Imperial Italy

This book is intended as a beginning, a demonstration of what the study of tokens might offer the student of antiquity after decades of neglect. There are far more tokens from Roman Italy than have been discussed here, and one imagines far more will be uncovered in the future: in excavations, museum stores and archives. Our knowledge of the potential uses of these objects is thus likely to further develop. The understanding of token use in Roman Italy will also be better contextualised as detailed studies of tokens in other regions are finalised and published.<sup>1</sup> Once the imagery, findspots and possible uses of tokens in other regions are better known, particular aspects of tokens from Rome, Ostia or elsewhere in Italy that are unique to the region will be better identified.

What can tokens contribute to our understanding of Roman history? As the title of this volume suggests, these artefacts provide an abundance of information about Roman social life: relationships between individuals, participation in (and identification with) different communities, euergetism, commensality, festivals and communal occasions (and associated emotions and experiences), as well as an individual's life course, whether this was participation in a youth organisation or the burial of an individual with a token to pay Charon. In the daily social life of Rome and Ostia, tokens served to mediate relationships, distributions and benefits, while prompting users to call forth different identities and actions, whether this be a reminder of one's place in a particular *collegium* or the community-forming action of shouting chants in unison with a larger crowd. As with other objects in the Roman world, tokens acted upon their users to achieve particular desired results.

Although at first glance tokens may look similar to Roman coinage, the information offered by these categories of objects, and their use contexts, are very different. Roman coinage circulated amongst a variety of people for a significant period of time; coin types were thus designed to be intelligible

<sup>1</sup> For example, Gkikaki is finalising a new monograph on Athenian tokens, Bricault and Mondello a new volume on the *Vota Publica* tokens of late antiquity, Spagnoli continues her work on tokens found in Ostia, while Stannard continues to work on the Italo-Baetican material. The author intends to move onto a detailed study of the tokens of Roman Asia Minor.

to a range of people and to act upon them over time, while first and foremost serving the needs of the Roman economy. Coinage was issued, in the main, by governmental bodies. By contrast, tokens appear to have been issued for specific occasions or use contexts. The users of a particular token series were smaller in number, and at times, one imagines, also known to the token issuer. As a result, the designs on tokens did not need to be generally intelligible, but rather only had to be able to communicate a particular message to a small group over a defined period. Tokens were issued by a variety of individuals and used in a variety of contexts. Their potential for historians is thus broad, if their seeming unintelligibility can be overcome.

Although tokens may reference the imagery of Roman coinage, their designs also interact with a broad array of other artefacts, including wall paintings, lamps and gems. Tokens also carry imagery that has not survived elsewhere: the possible representation of bathers discussed in Chapter 5 is one such example, as are the various representations of rivers discussed in Chapter 3, or the satirical representation of the Roman triumph discussed in Chapter 4. Representations of the imperial family found on tokens also offer a unique repository for better understanding the creation of the imperial image by multiple sectors of society. Tokens contain formulations not found on other media, for example the combination of Vespasian's portrait with a palm tree on a platform on wheels discussed in Chapter 2. Tokens offer the student of Roman visual culture a rich abundance; the creativity of token issuers in Italy, adapting and remixing the imagery that surrounded them to create new meanings and formulations, underscores the vibrant visual world in which the Romans lived.<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the various references to particular coin types on tokens provides a solution to the age old question of whether the Romans actually looked at their coinage – evidently they did, and were even inspired to adapt the designs for their own purposes.

Although some tokens may have been issued under imperial authority, or carried portraits of the imperial family, one is led to conclude that a very great many of the lead tokens that survive in Italy were issued by individuals outside of the Roman elite. Many token issuers were members of *collegia*, belonged to lower ranking magistrates, or were individuals not otherwise known in the historical record. Tokens are thus a source base that offers a rare insight into 'history from below'. The organisations,

<sup>2</sup> See the studies, for example, of Zanker, 1988; Clarke, 2003; Dunbabin, 2016; Russell and Hellström, 2020b amongst the vast scholarship on this topic.

frameworks and activities that led individuals to issue tokens were, in the main, connected to the value that Roman society placed on social prestige – if one was not born of the elite, then participation in particular associations, the holding of minor offices (e.g. of vicomagistrate), or acts of euergetism offered a method to gain prestige and thus status amongst one's peers.<sup>3</sup> Under the Empire, when the emperor increasingly monopolised traditional Republican expressions of prestige (e.g. the triumph), the Roman elite had to adapt their activities, for example by using circus processions as an occasion to demonstrate their status.<sup>4</sup> The issuing of tokens during particular occasions (whether by elites or non-elites) would have served to highlight the prestige of the issuer as well as the bearer, who possessed a token (and resulting benefit) that was not available to just anyone. In a discussion of modern day tokens and their classical Athenian antecedents, Maurer suggests that even when coins and tokens circulate alongside each other, tokens are associated more with status than with economic value.<sup>5</sup> This volume suggests the same holds true for tokens of Roman imperial Italy; they are objects that communicate and confer status over and above any economic value they might have possessed.

While scholars of the Roman eastern provinces might use provincial coinage issued by local authorities as a source to uncover local myths, civic identities, festivals and cults, no such coins were issued in Rome and Ostia.<sup>6</sup> But here tokens offer the historian an alternative. Issued by multiple individuals and multiple groups, rather than a civic authority, tokens differ significantly from coinage in the ways outlined above. But the tokens of Rome and Ostia nonetheless offer us an insight into particular cults, identities, statues, festivals and other ideologies that existed at a local level; indeed, the wide variety of types available offer a more diverse view than provincial coinage, and reflect a broad spectrum of society.

It is evident that the phenomenon of tokens in Roman Italy is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of Rome and Ostia. Far more tokens have been found here than anywhere else in Italy, and although the picture might further develop in the future, one imagines that this overall trend will not change – it seems logical that the capital of the Roman Empire and its harbour should possess the highest number of specimens in Italy. This might be attributed to the high populations of these areas, but also to the localised nature of token production in the Roman world. The production

<sup>3</sup> Lott, 2004: 82.    <sup>4</sup> Latham, 2016: 147.    <sup>5</sup> Maurer, 2019: 226.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Howgego, Heuchert and Burnett, 2005.

of a series of tokens by one person might encourage another to do the same in the future, with the ensuing mass the result of a local culture in which token production was a recurrent event. Since the who, how and why of token production differed from region to region (as discussed in Chapter 1), the low presence of tokens in other regions in Italy may have been due to the fact that the culture of token use did not take off to the same extent. Work on other regions has also uncovered that tokens are more widely used in some towns than others (e.g. an extraordinary quantity are known from Lugdunum, far more than anywhere else in Roman Gaul), while other regions (e.g. Germany, Britain) had very little token use at all.<sup>7</sup>

As with any study of material that does not form a significant focus in surviving ancient literature, one might hope for a more solid understanding of tokens than what has been possible here. But through a careful collation of the evidence, this volume has moved beyond Virlouvet's conclusion that these objects were not *tesserae frumentariae*, and has demonstrated the variety of possible uses and effects these objects may have possessed in antiquity, as well as their potential as a historical source. The benefits of studying tokens of different metals alongside each other, viewing them as the products of a single tradition, has also been established. We should not be surprised that tokens had a variety of roles; a token, after all, is defined as something that represents something else, multifarious in its very definition.<sup>8</sup> Some of Rostovtzeff's frustrations with tokens remain true today (the bewildering inscriptions, the poor preservation of many specimens), but the body of material is significant, and significantly understudied. The tokens of Roman imperial Italy no doubt continue to hold many future discoveries; it is my hope that this volume convinces readers that the analysis of tokens more than repays the effort.

<sup>7</sup> Wilding, 2020. <sup>8</sup> Crisà, Gkikaki and Rowan 2019a: 3.