

Ancient Tokens, Cults and Daily-Life in Hellenistic and Roman Sicily

Tokens can be defined as monetiform objects that are used in a variety of transactions instead of money. They can also allow the exchange of goods without using money or obtaining special rights in various contexts. We still use tokens in daily life. For instance, you might often need a plastic token – previously bought at the cashier – to ride in an amusement park. Moreover, if you have a membership of a hotel company, you can obtain a free drink by presenting a special token in its bars. Bitcoins can be considered tokens as well, since they are used in virtual transactions instead of money.

In the Greek and Roman world, the production of tokens, so-called *symbola* or *tesserae*, is attested from the fourth century BCE in many Mediterranean regions and sites (e.g. Greece, Italy, Syria, Turkey, etc.). These artefacts, made of lead, bronze, oricalcum, bone, ivory and clay, show a variety of iconographies, namely divinities, symbols, animals and objects. They were used in small transactions, religious festivals, banquets, brothels or trade operations. *Tesserae* are constantly found in archaeological excavations, but are often neglected by scholars, who still struggle to understand their use in a particular context. State-of-the-art scholarship has achieved some significant catalogues of finds, which, however, do not fully assess the function of these intriguing artefacts as a complex phenomenon (Rostovtzeff 1903; Ingholt, Seyrig, Starcky and Caquot 1955; Simonetta and Riva 1981; Turcan 1987; Bateson 1991, 385–97; Overbeck 2001; Gülaby and Kireç 2008).

Fortunately, *Tokens Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean*, a major research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) and undertaken at the University of Warwick (UK) (2016–19), is exploring the use and meaning of tokens examining substantial sets of finds kept at museums in Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy and the UK. As a Research Fellow currently working within this project, I am investigating the production of *tesserae* in

Sicily, which became the first Roman province in 241 BCE following the First Punic War. My research benefits from in-depth investigations in local Sicilian museums, like that in Palermo, which offer essential sets of unpublished archaeological finds.

The scope of my paper is to provide a summarizing outline of my research on tokens in Hellenistic and Roman Sicily, which ends in mid-2019 and will culminate in publishing a series of thematic articles on this subject. Therefore, my talk fully anticipates for the first time my final research results before the end of the ERC project. First, I contextualize *tesserae* production within its archaeological and historical contexts. Second, I essentially assess some vital case studies, analyzing sets of unpublished tokens from the sites of Marineo-Makella (Palermo), Patti Marina and Tindari-Tyndaris (Messina) and explaining why they were produced and what their use within religious festivals and civic life was. These *tesserae* show not only a variety of divinities and religious symbols (like some clay tokens depicting Demeter searching for Persephone, or the caps of the Dioscuri), but also erotic scenes for obtaining sex services in brothels. Finally, such “visual” data offer a good deal of remarkable information on cults, religion and daily life of small communities in the Hellenistic and Roman Sicily between the third century BCE and the first century CE.

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