

Tokens and local religious identities in Theodosian Rome

Why are tokens important? What do they reveal about the religious transformation of late antiquity?



Fig. 1 - The 'Asina' tokens. Reproduction after Lenzi, 1913.

Like the tokens of the High Empire, the *tesserae* of late antiquity actively contributed to the formation of social relations, communities, and identity. Two series of late Roman tokens are of particular interest. Issued under Arcadius and Honorius, both series are understudied and our current understanding is dependent on A. Alföldi's analysis (Alföldi 1951; 1975). The Hungarian scholar interpreted these artefacts as evidence for an alleged 'pagan resistance' as well as a material proof of the 'religious conflict' between 'pagans' and Christians, believed to have taken place in late antique Rome. In actuality, these objects crystallized the social and religious memory of different Christian groups within late Roman communities, and allow us to shed light on aspects of their liturgical and community life during the late antiquity.

Techniques, Mint, and Chronology

The imperial portraits and their relevant titles shown on tokens give a *terminus post quem* of AD 393, the year the title *Augustus* was given to both Arcadius and Honorius. Comparison with official coins and medallions permits the establishment of a more precise manufacture chronology for both token issues.

Series no. 1	Legend break	Imperial bust	URF, a	Legend break	Imperial bust
	- IVS	Pearl and rosette-diademed		- IVS	Pearl and rosette-diademed
Series no. 2	Legend break	Imperial bust	URF, b1	Legend break	Imperial bust
	- VS	Pearl (and rosette-?) diademed		- VS	Pearl and rosette-diademed
	Legend break	Imperial bust	URF, b2	Legend break	Imperial bust
	- VS	Pearl (and rosette-?) diademed		- VS	Pearl-diademed only.
	Legend break	Imperial bust	URF, b3	Legend break	Imperial bust
	- VS	Pearl (and rosette-?) diademed		- VS	Pearl-diademed only.




Fig. 6 – AE, 'Urbs Roma Felix' issue., var. b1
British Museum, inv. no. 1951,1115.840

Legend break	Imperial bust
- VS	Pearl-diademed only.

GR

Official coinage. Both token series have close ties with the 'Urbs Roma Felix' (*URF*) issue, which was struck almost entirely by the Roman mint during the period AD 404-408. Based on the obverse legend break and details of the imperial busts, **Series no. 1** may have used the *URF* variants *a* and *b1* as a model, while **Series no. 2** appears closer to the *URF* variants *b2* and *b3*. The crude style and inferior fabric of Series no. 2 is also seen in the Roman 'Gloria Romanorum' (*GR*) issue (c. AD 417-423).



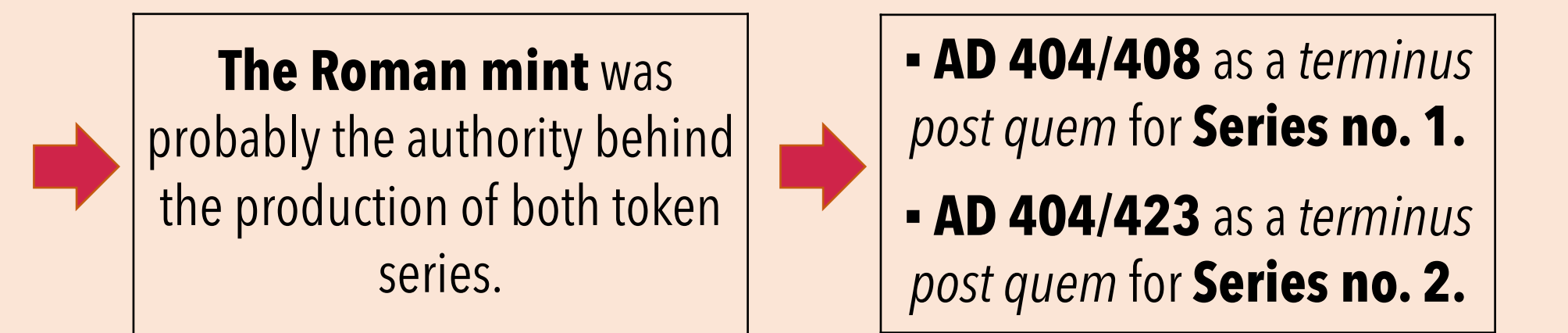
Fig. 7 – Contorniate – 'Alexander the Great' series, Münzkabinett - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. no. 18214786



Fig. 8 – Contorniate with motifs in incuse (4th century AD?), CNG, Auction 85, 15.09.2010, lot 1226.

'Contorniates' medallions. Stylistic and technical features of the tokens also reveal close parallels with contorniates, i.d. bronze medallions of the mid-fourth to fifth centuries AD that may have been minted only in Rome. These parallels, which can be seen in both style and manufacturing techniques, include:

- ▶ ▶ **Similar iconography and spelling errors;**
- ▶ ▶ **Impression of some of the designs in incuse,** revealing a technique unattested for coins and medals of the imperial period;
- ▶ ▶ **Metal inlays,** which were applied to both sides of the flan.



What was the purpose of the early 5th century AD tokens?

“What should one say about those people, who use magic charms and amulets, and carry bronze coins of Alexander the Makedonian around their heads and on their feet?”

(John Chrysostom, *ad illum. catech.* 2, 5)

While Alföldi regarded these artefacts as Christian gaming tokens used as a response to the 'pagan' chips (Series no. 1) or as anti-Christian tools (Series no. 2), the iconographic analysis discussed above suggests that these objects were religious devices employed within Christian communities in early fifth century Rome. The choice of imagery and the small volume of both issues seem to imply two different local Christian groups, who used these tokens to express their religious identity. Moreover, Roman numerals and Latin letters on Series no. 1 are suggestive of a practical function, perhaps for ritual/community purposes.

Selected bibliography:

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Cavedoni, C., "Médailles du temps d'Honorius portant des signes chrétiens mêlés à des types païens." *Revue Numismatique* (1857): 309–310.

Lenzi, F., "Di alcune medaglie religiose del IV secolo." *Bilychnis* 2 (1913): 113–131.

Acknowledgments:

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Roman tokens under Arcadius and Honorius: morphology and classification

Two extremely limited series of Roman tokens were produced under the reign of Arcadius (AD 395-408) and Honorius (AD 395-423) (labeled here as series nos. 1 and 2). Although circular in shape, the absence of any mintmark and the use of unusual revers types clearly identifies both series as *tesserae*. No context data is available for them, and their find spots remain unknown.



Fig. 2 – Glendining, H.P. Hall Sale, 21.11.1950, lot 2190



Fig. 3 – BnF, inv. no. 17082.

Series no. 1. Particularly rare, this token issue is currently documented by only four specimens (e.g., see Figs. 2-3).

- ▶ ▶ **Material:** Copper alloy; traces of metal (silver?) inlay on both sides of the token.
- ▶ ▶ **Diameter:** 19–20 mm. **Weight:** 2.22–4.67 g.
- ▶ ▶ **Obverse types:** Busts of Arcadius and Honorius, pearl and rosette-diademed.
- ▶ ▶ **Reverse types:** Figures of evangelists and saints, in incuse. Roman numerals (II, X) and Latin letters (P, E) are engraved in either side. Alternatively, a Roman numeral is incised in the exergue.

Series no. 2. This issue is known as 'Asina' series, for the type of a donkey suckling a foal depicted on some of the reverses. Only ten pieces belonging to this issue are known. (Figs. 1, 4-5).

- ▶ ▶ **Material:** Bronze.
- ▶ ▶ **Diameter:** 11–20 mm. **Weight:** 1.15–3.05 g.
- ▶ ▶ **Obverse types:** Bust of Honorius, pearl-(and rosette?) diademed; Bust of Alexander the Great wearing a lion skin.
- ▶ ▶ **Reverse types:** the so-called 'Asina' type, which is accompanied by the legend 'Asina' (= she-donkey) or 'Dominus noster Jesus Christus Dei filius' ('Our Lord Jesus Christ Son of God'); Hercules and Minerva; Centaur fighting a hero; a *symplegma* (erotic scene).



Fig. 4 - British Museum, inv. no. 1922,0317.164.b



Fig. 5 - 'Asina' token. Reproduction after Cavedoni, 1857.

Christian imagery on tokens: a gaze into early Christian art's pictorial schemes

The tokens discussed here carry Christian imagery in combination with the imperial portrait (Series no. 1-2) or even with depictions of Alexander the Great and other subjects taken from Greco-Roman myth (Series no. 2). Although associated with the 'pagan-Christian' conflict by Alföldi, these tokens are an expression of Christian identity, and provide a glimpse into the development of emerging Christian art.

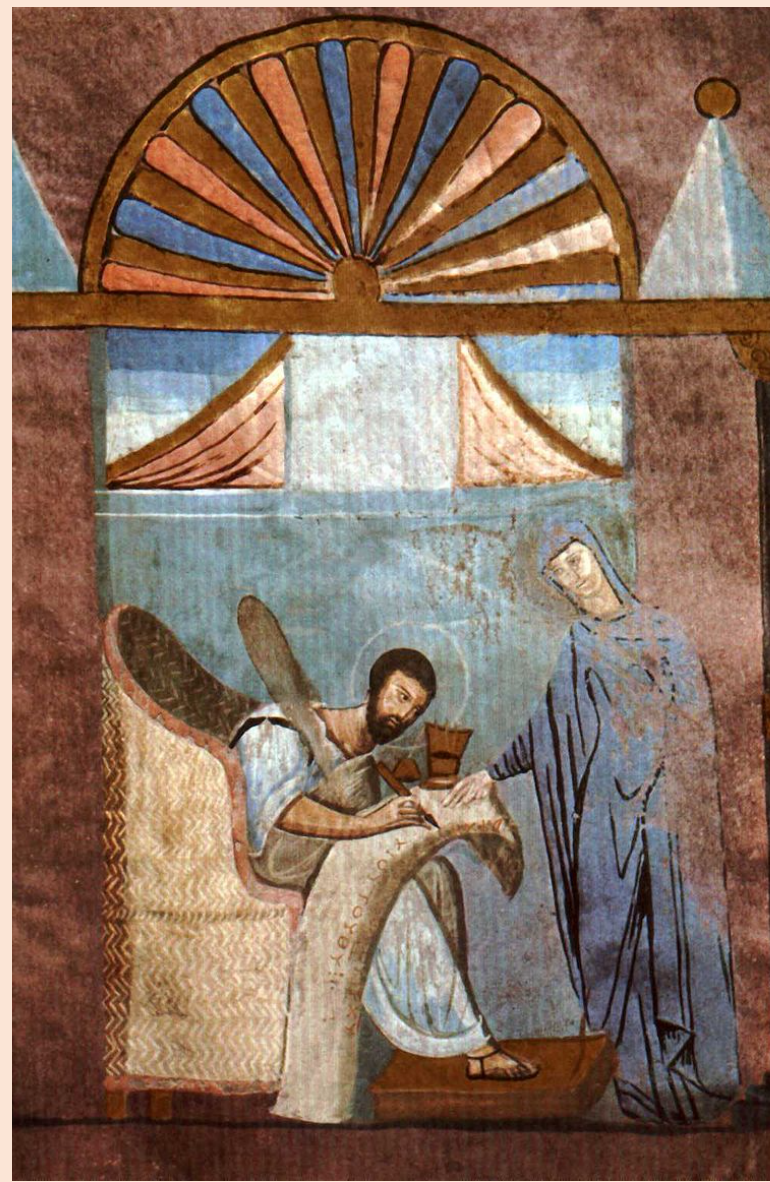


Fig. 9 - *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*, Gregory-Aland Σ or 042, f. 241r (c. AD 550)

On Series no. 1, the types depicted are a precious evidence of the spread of early Christian art, as they preserved some of the earliest known examples of pictorial schemes experimenting with the representation of the saints, whose compositional repertoire largely developed from the fourth century onwards. For instance, the figure shown on Fig. no. 3 may be **the earliest surviving illustration of the evangelist seated at his desk** ('scriptorium') while reading or drawing up the Gospel, given that the other known late antique and Byzantine examples are found in the mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (c. AD 525/550) as well as in two sixth century illuminated manuscript Gospel Books, i.e. the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (c. AD 550, Fig. 9) and the *Gospels of St Augustine* (late 6th century).

The iconography attested on these *tesserae* reflect, with a few variations, some of the conventions occurring on funerary sculpture, mosaics, frescoes and luxury artefacts, and thus reveal unseen intersections of a developing Christian pictorial repertoire which circulated from West to East and vice versa.

The *tesserae* of **Series no. 2**, which present a more varied cluster of images, are connected by the mysterious reverse type of a donkey suckling a foal (= the 'Asina' type). Alföldi interpreted this depiction as an allusion to the charge of onolatry (the worship of a god with a donkey's head) levelled against early Christians (Fig. 10); the 'Asina' *tesserae* would therefore be 'satirical medals' struck by 'pagans' to mock the intolerant emperor Honorius. However, this theory does not fit into any ancient tradition on the charge of onolatry ascribed to Christianity. Instead, the 'Asina' type more likely refers to **the mount of Jesus during the 'Entry into Jerusalem'**, the representation of which was widespread on a number of sarcophagi since at least the time of Constantine I (Fig. 11). The motifs attested on these tokens not only embodied the religious anxiety of a Rome poised between two worlds, the 'pagan' and the Christian, but also helped to clearly separate Christian art from the 'pagan' culture of classical antiquity from which it arose.



Fig. 10 - The Alexamenos graffito, Palatine Museum

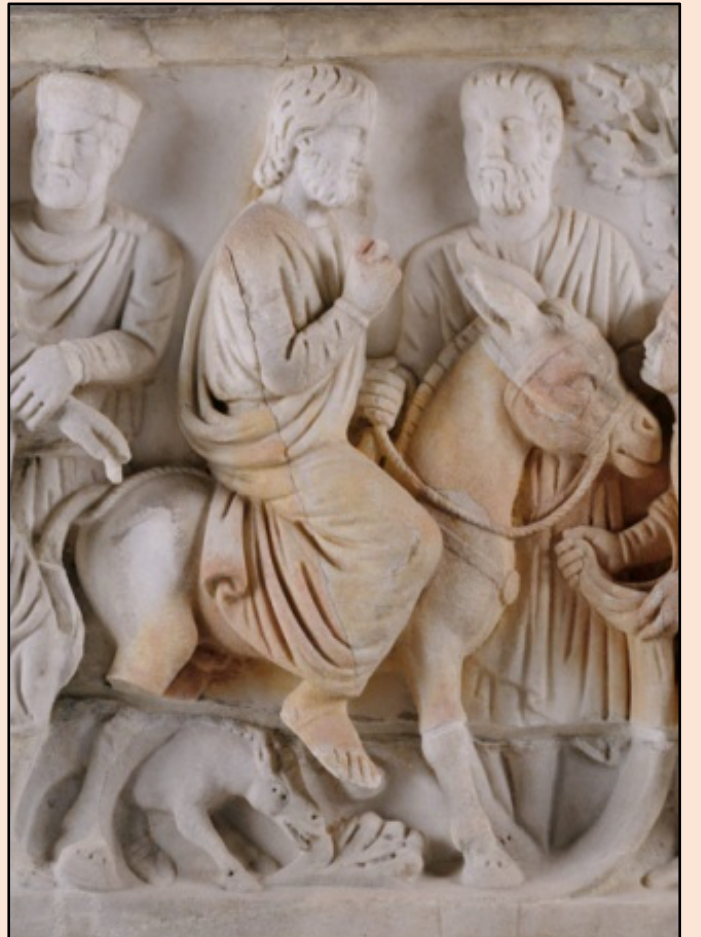


Fig. 11 - The Entry into Jerusalem (detail), MET, acc. no. 1991.366

Conclusions

The Roman tokens issued under Arcadius and Honorius are morphologically uncommon and rare objects, which were produced in small amounts after AD 404, probably by the mint of Rome. Based on the above analysis, it is likely that both token series were distributed within small Christian groups active in Rome, perhaps for self-representation and ritual/community purposes. These *tesserae* highlight unseen components of an emerging Christian iconography and, like other late antique media, prove to be crucial documents for understanding the religious transformation that went through the late Roman world.