

## 1 | Introduction

Tokens remain one of the most enigmatic and under-utilised bodies of evidence from antiquity. Monetiform objects of varying materials have been known from Rome since the eighteenth century and yet our understanding of these objects has made precious little progress in the years that have followed.<sup>1</sup> Many tokens remain unpublished, and the few individuals that have attempted the study of these objects have despaired at their elusive nature. Rostovtzeff, whose catalogue and doctoral dissertation on Roman lead tokens still remains the most detailed work on the topic to date, observed that the volume of the material, the wear on most of the pieces, as well as the seeming unending array of inscriptions and representations on these pieces are enough to warn anyone off studying them, especially when, as he noted, the study does not appear to have any scientific promise.<sup>2</sup> Rostovtzeff's frustration with the subject matter manifested into a hope that future studies might better elucidate the pieces he could not understand, noting that a better understanding of tokens in the East, particularly Athens, would likely result in a better understanding of these objects in Rome.

More than one hundred years later, and with the tokens of Athens now much better understood, this work resumes Rostovtzeff's study of tokens in Roman imperial Italy.<sup>3</sup> It is now clear that monetiform objects were manufactured and used in multiple regions in the Roman Empire, although the tokens from Rome and Ostia remain one of the largest corpora currently known. The sheer variety of designs on these tokens can indeed be bewildering at times and many of the legends remain enigmatic. The majority of tokens from Roman Italy are made of lead, which certainly does not last as well as other metals. But these same characteristics also reveal to us how these particular artefacts functioned: a profusion of designs reflects an abundance of makers and contexts, the enigmatic legends must have contributed to a sense of belonging to a particular group (who could understand the meaning), while the popularity of lead

<sup>1</sup> Ficoroni, 1740.    <sup>2</sup> Rostovtzeff, 1905b: 9.

<sup>3</sup> The excavations of the Athenian Agora have contributed enormously to our understanding of how tokens worked in the city; see Lang and Crosby, 1964.

for these objects suggests that, in the main, tokens were created cheaply for use over a relatively short period of time. The challenges presented by this material are thus a gateway to better understanding their function.

It is hoped that this volume will demonstrate that the challenges of studying tokens are more than repaid by the insights gained. It is rare that a category of evidence from the Roman world has remained neglected for so long. An examination of the tokens of Roman Italy thus offers the opportunity to uncover new insights into Roman history and society. Tokens reveal acts of euergetism and different social groupings (cultic groups, *collegia*, Roman families and their networks). They shed light on particular Roman festivals, imagery and ideologies. They provide evidence for the imperial image and its reception, for particular identities and for the lived everyday experience of the ancient city. In sum, the potential of tokens as a source are manifold, and undoubtedly other ways in which tokens can be informative will come to light as the artefacts are once more integrated into mainstream scholarly discourse.

When the present author was studying these materials first hand, it became evident to her that Rostovtzeff's catalogue of this material (*Tesserarum urbis romae et suburbi plumbeorum sylloge* = *TURS*) contained numerous errors and omissions. The work still remains a feat of scholarship, especially given the early date at which it was compiled.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, as part of research into the area, a new and updated catalogue has been made available in English online, and readers wishing to find further detail on particular types are encouraged to make use of the resource.<sup>5</sup> A database of images, specimens and finds has also been compiled, and photographs of numerous tokens (which for obvious reasons could not all be illustrated in this volume) are available online.<sup>6</sup>

## Defining Roman Tokens

Rostovtzeff identified some of the lead pieces presented in his dissertation as the *tesserae* of ancient texts, picking up on the terminology used in the

<sup>4</sup> Rostovtzeff, 1903b, with a supplement published as Rostovtzeff, 1905c.

<sup>5</sup> <https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-types/>. Additional types not included in Rostovtzeff's original catalogue are given *TURS* (Supplement) numbers in this database.

<sup>6</sup> <https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-specimens/>. It should be noted that the tokens from Roman Italy in the BnF in Paris are now also online with images in Gallica (<https://antiquitebnf.hypot.heses.org/11049>), and all the tokens of the British Museum are also photographed and available online through their online catalogue. For example, for the Roman lead tokens in the British Museum see [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=bmcr1t](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=bmcr1t).

nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> *Tessera*, derived from the ancient Greek word *tessares* or ‘four’, refers to an object that has four sides. As Rostovtzeff noted, *tesserae* encompassed different things (e.g. cubic pawns, dice, tablets), meaning the word was often qualified – as *tesserae nummariae*, for example, or *tesserae frumentariae*.<sup>8</sup> Since then various scholars have sought alternative identifications for these objects. Van Berchem, for example, argued that many of the monetiform lead pieces from Rome were *calculi* or reckoning pieces.<sup>9</sup> Thornton suggested they might have acted as emergency small change, a sort of ‘peasant’s money’.<sup>10</sup> More recently, scholarship has become more sceptical of a ‘one size fits all’ interpretation. Turcan, for example, observed that these objects likely served multiple uses, with the purpose of the vast majority of these pieces remaining unknown to us.<sup>11</sup> Virilouvet’s exhaustive study, *Tessera Frumentaria*, noted that the word *tessera* possessed multiple meanings; she concluded that the monetiform lead objects we possess are not the *tesserae frumentariae* of our texts and that we should see these objects as private, rather than official, products.<sup>12</sup>

That we encounter issues in attempting to definitively define a ‘token’ is unsurprising. The enormous quantity and variety of work performed by tokens in societies across time is often overlooked, no doubt due to their unassuming nature.<sup>13</sup> Tokens are objects that represent something else: this might be people, objects, values, relationships, emotions, prestige, hierarchy or a particular entitlement. In ancient Greek a token was known as a *symbolon*.<sup>14</sup> In addition to *tesserae*, tokens might be described in Latin with the words *missilia* or *nomismata*. The former, which refers to things that might be thrown, is similar in sense to the French word for token, *jeton*, which derives from *jeter* (to throw, or to add up accounts). The words for token in Greek and Latin, as in modern languages today, embodied a large variety of objects and functions, some of which probably referenced the bronze and lead pieces that form the focus of this volume. But there can be no simple equation between a particular term mentioned in a classical text and these artefacts – tokens, after all, might also be

<sup>7</sup> Ruggiero, 1878: 149 (‘tessere di piombo’); Dancoisne, 1891 (‘tessères romaines de plomb’); de Belfort, 1892; Scholz, 1894 (‘Römische Bleitesserae’); Rostovtzeff, 1905b: 4.

<sup>8</sup> Rostovtzeff, 1905b: 10; Crisà, Gkikaki and Rowan 2019a: 2. The term *tesserae nummariae* comes from Suetonius (*Aug.* 41) and is thought to refer to something akin to ‘money tickets’ or a medium to enable the distribution of certain sums. It is to be distinguished from *tesserae nummulariae*, rectangular labels thought to be attached to bags by financial officials to act as a guarantee of the contents within. On the latter see Herzog, 1919.

<sup>9</sup> van Berchem, 1936. <sup>10</sup> Thornton, 1980. <sup>11</sup> Turcan, 1987: 51.

<sup>12</sup> Virilouvet, 1995: 321, 362. <sup>13</sup> Crisà, Gkikaki and Rowan, 2019a.

<sup>14</sup> Crisà, Gkikaki and Rowan 2019a: 2.

metaphorical or imagined, spoken or written (e.g. *tessera* might also refer to a watchword written on a tablet). As a word that refers to the embodiment of something else, a definitive description of the term and its material manifestations in classical antiquity remains impossible and, realistically, undesirable. Indeed, tokens probably performed even more functions than our surviving texts indicate, since everyday objects and processes rarely formed the focus of classical literature.

This volume is focused on the bronze, brass and lead pieces from Roman imperial Italy, which are mainly, though not always, monetiform in nature. This material definition forms the parameters of the volume. These particular artefacts are different from other objects that have attracted the label *tesserae*, and we might better define Roman tokens by exploring what they are not. Our tokens are different from *tesserae hospitales*, for example. The latter were objects that recorded agreements of mutual assistance between individuals; they exist in bronze, ivory and, occasionally, silver, and come in a wide array of shapes.<sup>15</sup> *Tesserae nummulariae*, small ivory or bone rectangular objects that might be inscribed and which carry a hole in order to be attached to something, have been interpreted as artefacts that were attached to bags of money to indicate that the contents had been inspected and found to be sound.<sup>16</sup> Again, this is a very different category of object to the coin-like material presented here.

Similar in shape to the *tesserae nummulariae* (and indeed, at times often grouped with them) are the so-called *tesserae lusoriae* – rectangular bone or ivory pieces with a circular ‘handle’ at one end. These pieces are inscribed with playful words and numbers (the latter at times accompanied by an A or Λ).<sup>17</sup> The words mainly describe a person and can be positive or negative (e.g. *fortunate*, *amator*, *pernix*, *victor*); although found in ‘sets’ it seems there was no standard design for these pieces. *Tesserae lusoriae* are believed to have been used in a game or games of some kind and appear to be a phenomenon of the Roman Republic.<sup>18</sup> A further series of gaming pieces often labelled as *tesserae* (and at times conflated with the monetiform pieces that form the focus of this volume) are the circular bone and ivory pieces that carry a variety of designs in relief on one side (including imperial portraits and Egyptian imagery), with a legend identifying the image and a number (often in both Latin and Greek) incised on a flat surface on the other. Figure 1.1 is one example of this type of artefact: the bust of Nero is presented on one side,

<sup>15</sup> Sánchez-Moreno, 2001; Luschi, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> The objects often carry reference to a slave – *s(ervus)* – and carry the word *spectavit* (looked at or inspected). See Herzog, 1919; Andreau, 1999: 80–9; Kay, 2014: 125–6.

<sup>17</sup> Banducci, 2015: 203. <sup>18</sup> Rodríguez Martín, 2016: 207.



Figure 1.1 Bone gaming piece, 31 mm. Bare bust of Nero left / V | NEPWV | Ε.

while the other side names the image in Greek, with the number five given in both Latin and Greek. The discovery of a ‘set’ of these pieces in a child’s tomb in Kerch in Crimea overthrew the traditional interpretation of these artefacts as theatre tickets and today they are accepted as gaming pieces, used in an unknown game.<sup>19</sup> Bone gaming pieces may also carry no imagery, or come in a variety of shapes without legends.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the bronze and brass monetiform pieces referred to as ‘tokens’ in this volume have traditionally been identified as gaming pieces. The presence of numbers on tokens of the Julio-Claudian period (some accompanied by an A) has been central to this argument. Figure 1.2 is one example of this series (further examples can be seen in Figures 4.12 and 4.14), which is characterised by numbers within a wreath on the reverse.<sup>21</sup> The obverses of this series carry a variety of designs, most famously Julio-Claudian imperial portraiture and sexual imagery. The latter series is frequently dubbed *spintriae* in modern scholarship, although these objects were not known as such in antiquity; an example of a *spintria* is reproduced here as Figure 1.3.<sup>22</sup> The discovery of a *spintria* (likely a contemporary imitation) covered in gold leaf in a tomb in

<sup>19</sup> Rostovtzeff, 1905a on the Kerch discovery, since then see the studies of Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1971; Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1976; Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1980; Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1984; Bianchi, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Bianchi, 2015: 62 for circular pieces without imagery and simply numbers inscribed on the flattened side; Mlasowsky, 1991: nos. 113–210 provides a good illustration of the variety of this type of material.

<sup>21</sup> Some have identified the wreath as the *corona triumphalis*, see Martini, 1999: 13; Campana, 2009: 55.

<sup>22</sup> Campana, 2009: 43–4 on the term and 62–5 on the sexual scene shown in Figure 1.3.



Figure 1.2 AE token, 22 mm, 4.52 g, 4 h, 27 BC–AD 57. Laureate head of Augustus right, FEL beneath, all within linear border and wreath / XIII within dotted border and wreath. Buttrely 1973, B5/XIII.



Figure 1.3 AE token (*spintria*), 22 mm, 4.92 g, 6 h, 27 BC–AD 57. Sexual scene. A man wearing a cape kneels on a *kline* and enters his partner from behind, who rests on her elbows. Drapery above, beneath the *kline* crouching figure on the left and jug on right / III within dotted border and wreath. Buttrely 1973, A9/III = Simonetta and Riva 1984 Scene 4.

Mutina dated to AD 22–57 provides a *terminus ante quem* for this series.<sup>23</sup> In a seminal work on these pieces in 1973, Buttrely suggested one possible use for these objects was as counters in gaming: this theory has since been developed by Campana.<sup>24</sup> In spite of the presence of numbers on these pieces and gaming counters, the current state of material evidence suggests that we should not interpret the so-called *spintriae* as gaming pieces. After all, these artefacts form a small subset of a broader collection of bronze, brass and lead monetiform pieces, of which only a few carry numbers. Moreover, objects

<sup>23</sup> Benassi, Giordani and Poggi 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Buttrely, 1973: 54; Campana, 2009: 55. The idea is also discussed by Küter, 2016: 87; Le Guennec, 2017: 425; Martínez Chico, 2019: 109.

used as gaming pieces – the bone *tesserae* with numbers in Greek and Latin, the rectangular *tesserae lusoriae*, other circular bone and terracotta pieces – have been found as ‘sets’, gathered together ready for play.<sup>25</sup> We have no such find for the *spintriae* or the other monetiform objects discussed in this volume. Although an argument from silence, it does suggest that we should *not* interpret these pieces as counters used for gaming on a board; use in lotteries, however, cannot be ruled out.

It is evident from this brief overview that the word *tessera* not only had a variety of meanings in antiquity but has also been used as a ‘catch all’ term for numerous objects in modern scholarship. In many cases the application of the word *tesserae* to these objects in publications and museum collections does not reflect ancient usage. Indeed, since the word encompasses a bewildering array of objects (to say nothing of mosaic *tesserae*), the term can be downright unhelpful in the age of keyword searches in electronic catalogues. While *tesserae* might have occasionally been used to refer to tokens of brass, bronze and lead by ancient authors (specific instances will be discussed throughout the volume), there can be no simple equation of the term with these objects. A more fruitful approach is to define Roman tokens on a more material basis: identifying the common characteristics of these objects and the differences between tokens and other categories of artefact.

Since tokens look like coins, another obvious category of material to consider as a point of comparison to tokens is Roman coinage. Several scholars have interpreted the lead pieces found in Rome and Ostia as emergency small change.<sup>26</sup> How do we separate ‘tokens’ from imitation coinage, lead coinages or test pieces, pseudo-currencies or coin forgeries? While the tokens discussed in this volume may reference the materiality of coinage in terms of imagery, shape and (for some pieces) metal, it is also very clear that the creators of tokens took pains to ensure these artefacts could not easily be mistaken for official Roman currency. The widespread use of lead was an important factor here, as was the design of these pieces. Although tokens might reference particular Roman coin types, no token directly copies a full coin design – these are no imitations or forgeries. As will become clear throughout this volume, the majority of these pieces carry designs that clearly indicate they are products of individuals and groups outside the imperial government. By contrast, lead

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the ‘set’ published by Rostovtzeff, 1905a from Kerch, further ‘sets’ of circular bone gaming pieces with numbers are known from ancient Rudiæ (*NSc.* 1886, 240) and Le Marche (Mercando, 1974: 103). A set of seventeen *tesserae lusoriae* was found in a second century BC tomb in Puglia, and another set of sixteen is known from a Hellenistic tomb from Perugia, see Banducci, 2015: 204. For an overview of the materiality of gaming see Dasen, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Rostovtzeff, 1905b: 108; Dressel, 1922: 182; Thornton, 1980: 338.

test pieces and lead currencies in antiquity are struck from official dies or carry designs that clearly indicate a governmental authority.<sup>27</sup> Lead currencies might possess ‘token’ characteristics, in that they represent a value higher than their metal content, and may have been intended as a temporary issue, but they are materially different from the objects that form the focus of this volume.

Indeed, the efforts of token makers to distinguish their creations from official currency appear to have worked: tokens in Roman Italy are not found intentionally hoarded or stored alongside coinage. They were clearly seen as a different type of artefact by their users and treated accordingly. In this way tokens differ substantially from the ‘pseudo-coinages’ known to exist in Italy, particularly in Pompeii – these pieces have been found in purse hoards alongside official Roman currency, for example, and were clearly used as small change.<sup>28</sup> Another noticeable difference between imitations, pseudo-currencies and tokens is that of scale. While the former were produced in large quantities (as befitting a medium intended to be used to fill a lack of specie in the economy), the production of tokens was, by contrast, far more modest. They were simply not produced in sufficient quantity to have functioned as a replacement medium of small change in the bustling economies of imperial Rome and Ostia.

In terms of bronze and brass pieces, a definitive listing of all known token types has not yet been produced. For bronze tokens carrying numerals, Buttrey identified thirty-nine different scenes, although a few more designs are now known than presented there.<sup>29</sup> Bronze and brass tokens not carrying numbers are not as common but still known; in Cohen’s nineteenth century catalogue under *Médailles sans le S.C.* we find some eighteen types that have not since been classified as official coinage (in earlier scholarship anonymous *quadrantes* and sometimes also provincial coinage were misidentified as *tesserae*).<sup>30</sup> Some additional bronze types are now known, but the number of these is not large.<sup>31</sup> Given that Cohen published some eight volumes of material, we might see here the relatively small amount of bronze and brass

<sup>27</sup> See de Callatay, 2010 for an overview of the different types of lead monetiform artefacts that exist from the classical world, including lead coinages and test strikes in lead.

<sup>28</sup> For example Stannard, 2019; the topic is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>29</sup> Buttrey, 1973: 60–2; Küter, 2019 includes more types (e.g. the MORA board game type, the Mitreius series).

<sup>30</sup> Cohen: vol. VIII, 271–3.

<sup>31</sup> For example, the so-called shipping *tesserae* published in Stannard, 2015b, another issue connected to Gaius Mitreius (published in the auction catalogue *The Thomas Ollive Mabbott Collection Part 2: Coins of the Roman World* no. 5264), a type showing a satyr (published in Arzone and Marinello, 2019: no. 353), and another a *venator* and bull (published in Martínez Chico, 2019: no. 44).



tokens produced in comparison to official coinage. This is also evident in terms of archaeological finds – bronze or brass tokens are not found frequently in excavation, and where they are found it is in small numbers. This suggests a small production in comparison with official coinage. Campana's preliminary catalogue of *spintriae* gathered together 322 examples, which he estimated was some two thirds of what exists today; the study identified thirty-one obverse dies for the tokens carrying sexual scenes.<sup>32</sup> Similar studies for other bronze or brass tokens remain to be performed. But the data suggests a relatively modest production.

By contrast, there are more than 3,750 known types for lead tokens created in Rome and Ostia. This number is very probably going to increase in future as excavations and the exploration of museum collections continue. As outlined below in this chapter, lead tokens in Rome and Ostia were produced from moulds that might carry several designs – a single casting may thus produce multiple different designs at once. It is thus difficult to know how to interpret the overall number of types known, but in comparison with other settlements in Italy (which have a much smaller number of known locally produced types, often just in the tens), Rome and its harbour stand out as a centre of token production. Although the study of tokens across the Roman world is still ongoing, we might identify already some other settlements with relatively large token production as a point of comparison. One of these is Lugdunum (Lyon): c. 2,700 tokens from the region were catalogued within the collection Récamier, with additional specimens published by Turcan.<sup>33</sup> In Palmyra more than 1,500 banqueting *tesserae* are known, while in Athens the excavations at the Agora have resulted in the publication of 900 identifiable lead tokens; further tokens have been found in excavations since and have also been found elsewhere in the city.<sup>34</sup>

How many lead tokens did this quantity of types actually produce in Rome and Ostia? Many types are only known from a single example. More rarely, we read reports of a particular token design being discovered in quantities of hundreds, as with Figure 5.2, discussed in Chapter 5. As this volume will go on to explore, it is likely that lead tokens were meant to be used in a singular context, and then melted down for reuse; the tokens that survive to be excavated are those that did not undergo this life cycle. Unlike coins, it seems that lead tokens did not circulate to be used again and again. When they do turn up in

<sup>32</sup> Campana, 2009: 56; de Callatay, 2021: 185 points out that most of the surviving *spintriae* seem to have been known before 1800.

<sup>33</sup> Dissard, 1905; Turcan, 1987; with discussion in Wilding, 2020: 166.

<sup>34</sup> Lang and Crosby, 1964: 76 (Athens); Raja, 2015: 165 (Palmyra). A detailed study of the tokens of Athens is in progress by Gkikaki, with a dedicated edited volume imminent: Gkikaki, in press.

archaeological excavation, it is predominately in contexts of fill or abandonment. We thus cannot know whether production in the hundreds was a regular occurrence for lead tokens or a rare one, or to what extent the volume of lead token production varied between issuers and issues.

Another category of material to consider in relation to tokens of the imperial period are contorniates. Contorniates are largely a phenomenon of late antiquity (mid-fourth to fifth century AD) and are monetiform objects that have been given their name due to their raised edges (*contorni*). So-called protocontorniates are known from the imperial period until the fourth century AD, created by people hammering the edges of coins or medallions to create a small raised ridge around the edge. It has been suggested these early pieces may have been converted in this way to serve as gaming pieces (the raised border would protect the design).<sup>35</sup> The contorniates proper of late antiquity, however, are made of bronze and carry designs that differ from the official coinage of the period; long-deceased emperors are portrayed and much of the imagery is related to the games and the circus.<sup>36</sup> Often luck-bringing signs are engraved onto contorniates, recalling the imagery of good luck on earlier tokens discussed in this volume.<sup>37</sup> One contorniate shows the consul of AD 433 and 443, Petronius Maximus, seated frontally holding a *mappa* as a sponsor of the games; Valentinian III is shown on the other side.<sup>38</sup> A unique representation for contorniates, the portrayal of game giver and emperor on a single object is very similar to earlier lead tokens that name the *curator* of the games on one side and portray the emperor on the other.<sup>39</sup>

The precise purpose of contorniates remains the subject of debate. Similar to tokens of the earlier imperial period, contorniates have been viewed as objects produced by private individuals, with some specimens perhaps issued in a more official, governmental capacity. Mittag has proposed that contorniates were multi-functional, used as gifts for a variety of recipients in a variety of contexts.<sup>40</sup> Those carrying representations of the emperor may have functioned as gifts during new year's festivities, while the group labelled

<sup>35</sup> Mittag, 1999: 19–25.

<sup>36</sup> Mittag, 1999; Mondello, 2019: 145. Mittag's catalogue collects contorniates that show Alexander the Great, Roma, theatre masks, authors (e.g. Euripides, Homer, Apuleius), emperors (e.g. Augustus, Caligula, Nero, Galba, Vespasian, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Caracalla, Philip the Arab and rulers of late antiquity), empresses (Agrippina, Faustina I, Faustina II, Lucilla), Antinous, chariot racers, scenes of *venatio* and scenes from the Circus Maximus. Scenes from myth (e.g. Hercules) are also shown.

<sup>37</sup> Mittag, 1999: 193–4. <sup>38</sup> Mittag, 1999: 184–6, no. 204.

<sup>39</sup> See the example of Oinogenus, discussed in this chapter in the section 'Authority'.

<sup>40</sup> Mittag, 1999: 182–214.