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The imperial image in media of mechanical reproduction:

The tokens of Rome.

Clare Rowan

This contribution explores what the representation of the emperor on lead tokens can reveal about the dynamics of ideology formation. A discussion of the ubiquity of the imperial portrait is followed by an introduction to the material; the chapter then turns to a series of case studies that demonstrate the permeable nature of the imperial portrait on small, portable objects that are produced in large volume.

In the correspondence between Marcus Aurelius and his Latin teacher Marcus Cornelius Fronto is a letter in which Fronto plays around (*ludere*) and acts a fool (*ineptire*), detailing his devotion to his pupil. The third of his admitted “frivolities” before he turns back to more serious matters, is as follows:

scis, ut in omnibus argentariis mensulis perguleis taberneis protecteis
vestibulis fenestris usquequaque, ubique imagines vestrae sint volgo
propositae, male illae quidem pictae pleraeque et crassa, lutea immo Minerva
fictae scalptaeve; cum interim numquam tua imago tam dissimilis ad oculos
meos in itinere accidit, ut non ex ore meo excusserit jactum osculei et savium.

You know how at all the money-changers’ tables, and in booths, shops, colonnades, entrance-courts, and windows, anywhere and anytime, there are your images on display to the crowds. They are quite badly painted, and

many of them are sculpted and carved by heavy-handed (or more probably, talentless) artists. But even though I think your visage never looks more unlike you as I pass by, it still never fails to force a kiss from my mouth.¹

The ubiquity of imperial portraits of varying quality in the scene described by Fronto suggests that Rome was a city where the portrait of the emperor formed a backdrop to daily life. In spite of the unlikeness Fronto admits that he ‘sees’ Aurelius in the image and reacts accordingly, a response provoked by his affection and personal knowledge of the emperor.² But one imagines that not everyone reacted in the same way when they passed an imperial portrait, nor in an identical way every time - Fronto himself admits to occasionally being grumpy with Aurelius in the passage directly before that quoted here. The sheer number of imperial portraits in Rome provided innumerable viewing contexts, which, in turn, must have generated a wide variety of personal meanings and associations.

The image of the British queen might provide a parallel to think about the implications of Fronto’s statement: the monarch’s likeness is reproduced in newspapers, on coins, as waving dolls in storefronts, in graffiti, and on stamps, amongst innumerable other places. Many of these images may not bear a true likeness

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TURS: Rostowzew [Rostovtzeff], M. (1903). *Tesserarum urbis romae et suburbi*. St. Petersburg.
BMCRLT: *Roman Lead Tokens in the British Museum* (internal numbering system of the ancient lead tokens in the British Museum. A catalogue of these specimens is currently being prepared).

¹ Fronto, *Ad. M. Caes.* iv.12.4 (= 24.6 in Davenport and Manley, 2014). See Schneider, 2003: 61-2 for a discussion of this passage.

² The close personal relationship of Fronto with Marcus Aurelius is underlined in this passage by the allusion to the morning *salutatio* between patrons and clients, which, by this time, included a kiss from the client (Hurschmann, 2008). To be invited to the imperial *salutatio* was a sign of imperial favour; the passage thus also communicates Fronto’s own prestigious position.

to the monarch, either because she has aged, or, in the words of Fronto, because the reproduction is in a sorry style.³ The multiplicity of representations recalls the ideas expressed by Benjamin in his famous study *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this essay Benjamin traced the changing nature of visual culture in the modern age. Previously confined to a museum, church, or similarly ‘appropriate’ context, the technology of mass reproduction (e.g. photography, print) that arose during the industrial revolution meant that art came to be reproduced in a variety of media and displayed in a variety of contexts, which, in turn, changed the viewing experience.⁴ The sudden ability to mechanically reproduce works of art in large volume and relatively cheaply meant that, for example, a marble sculpture once only seen within a museum might suddenly be photographed, printed, put on postcards and placed in multiple viewing contexts. This was a new phenomenon, but Benjamin acknowledged that the reproduction of artwork had also occurred in earlier periods, albeit on a smaller scale. Benjamin cited bronzes, terracottas, and coins as examples of this practice in antiquity; here we must note that amongst the images cited by Fronto are those on the money-changer’s table. The effects of (mass) reproduction of images in antiquity, and how this contributed to the (co-)creation of imperial ideology, needs further scholarly attention.⁵

The mass of imperial portraits produced and reproduced within the Roman Empire must have resulted in individuals creating their own associations, as Pandey’s

³ For example, in Germany in 2015 the Queen was presented with a portrait of her younger self and was unable to recognise her father due to the poor quality of the painting:
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/24/queen-blue-horse-painting-german-state-visit>.

⁴ Benjamin, 1999: section 1.

⁵ Die and hoard studies of Roman coinage have begun to think about the effects of mass reproduction in terms of imagery reception and communication (e.g. Noreña, 2011), but much of the discussion of reproductive media in antiquity has focused on aspects of production (the identification of dies and moulds, pattern books, techniques of production) rather than the impact of these types of objects.

contribution to this volume explores for Ovid. Indeed, the imperial portrait may have meant different things to different people, depending on their gender, class, region, age and era.⁶ Studies of modern-day leaders have demonstrated just such a diversity of associations. Buck-Morss, for example, has shown that during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign the associations given to Obama and his image went well beyond the man himself or the control of his campaign team.⁷ The famous "Hope" poster, for example, was created independently by Shephard Fairey before it was adopted by Obama's campaign; the design is now a recognised visual *topos* reused in other contexts. Images live their own lives, and possess their own biographies. In particular, public, shared images that are open to reproduction have the power to shape a society and empower its users.⁸ Once shared or made 'shareable', an image increases in power (since more people connect to it) and escapes the control of its maker, since the meaning of the image is extended by those who use or view it. The image of Obama came to embody the contradictory aspirations of different individuals (e.g. a US soldier in Afghanistan hoping for increased American military strength and an Afghan woman hoping for peace). Similarly, the moving, circulating imperial portrait must have led to multiple viewing contexts, meanings and associations.⁹

I would argue that, to adopt the terminology of Buck-Morss, the imperial portrait was a 'shared' image. A shared image enters into collective consciousness, giving it a power to both reinforce and potentially disrupt social norms and conventions (as Ovid does in *Ex Ponto* 2.8). An image that is restricted (e.g. locked in a museum storehouse

⁶ A concept also explored in Clarke, 2003.

⁷ Buck-Morss, 2010.

⁸ Mitchell, 2005; Buck-Morss, 2010.

⁹ See Mwangi, 2002; Rowan, 2016a for this phenomenon on coinage.

or subject to restrictive copyright regulations), by contrast, cannot perform the same function since it is not widely recognisable, nor reproducible. The hidden and/or unintelligible images that referenced the praetorian guard explored by Kelly in this volume might be seen as an example of a ‘restricted’ image; since these particular images were not widely recognised, the imagery was not reproduced in quantity. Although it is clear that in certain public or politically sensitive contexts the imperial image was tightly controlled - in the case of imperial cult (*neokoria*), for example, amongst client kings (as explored in Wilker’s contribution), and within public/elite space (as discussed by Hellström) - on small, everyday, portable objects the imperial image was, quite literally, placed in the hands of the Roman people. These everyday images of the emperor, those that, at first sight, might not even look like the emperor, are representations that need further exploration in scholarship.¹⁰

The Tokens of Rome

During building works in Rome in the eighteenth and nineteenth century hundreds of lead monetiform objects came to light, particularly during works along the Tiber. One of the first publications of these objects was by Ficorini, with a seminal catalogue later published by Rostovtzeff: *Tesserarum urbis romae et suburbi plumbeorum sylloge (TURS)*.¹¹ Rostovtzeff consulted major museum holdings across Europe in compiling his work; despite the title of his catalogue not all the pieces included came

¹⁰ Though see Dahmen, 2001.

¹¹ Ficorini, 1740; Rostowzew, 1903. An online version of these catalogues is underway and available at <https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-types/>.

from Rome and its surrounds.¹² The analysis of tokens from different regions reveals regional variation in terms of material, manufacture and design.¹³ This contribution focuses specifically on the lead tokens that have a recorded find spot in Rome, specifically those accompanied in *TURS* by the phrase *in Tiberi reperta*, the tokens Rostovtzeff acquired in Rome and later donated to the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris (published in Rostovtzeff & Prou), and those from the Tiber published by Dressel and now in the Münzkabinett Berlin.¹⁴

Ficorini labelled these objects *tesserae*, a name that has persisted until the modern day despite the fact that it may be erroneous; these are not the *tesserae frumentariae* of our texts, for example, and one noun cannot hope to encapsulate the differing designs, shapes and potential uses of these artefacts.¹⁵ A variety of purposes for these objects have been proposed: in addition to the *tesserae* mentioned by texts in connection with distributions, they have variously been thought to have acted as tickets for events, transport tickets for river boats, money used in household and local community economies, substitute ‘coins’ to be given in festivals, gaming pieces, or counting tokens (*calculi*).¹⁶ A bone token and several lead pieces have been found in excavations at Fregellae and are likely connected with the baths in the town, serving perhaps as entrance tickets, or as tokens to be exchanged for services once in the bath-house.¹⁷ The handful of known find locations from Rome suggest that tokens were distributed throughout the city: in addition to the banks of the Tiber, tokens and token

¹² e.g. *TURS* 64 (from Hadrumetum), 509 (Aquileia), 863 (Frascati), 1193 (Nemi), 3119 (Smyrna), Rostovtzeff also cites Postolacca as a source for several entries, who published tokens from Athens.

¹³ For example the tokens catalogued in Gülby and Kireç, 2008 display differences in fabric and design to those known from Roman Egypt, which are again different to those found in the Tiber, or from Athens.

¹⁴ Rostowzew and Prou, 1900; Dressel, 1922.

¹⁵ Virilouvet, 1988; Virilouvet, 1995: 310-62.

¹⁶ Rostowzew, 1905; van Berchem, 1936; Thornton, 1980; Turcan, 1987: 51-65; Virilouvet, 1995: 362.

¹⁷ Sironen, 1990; Pedroni, 1997.

moulds (made of Palombino marble) have been found in the Roman forum near the portico of the Vestals, on the Esquiline, at Ostia, Hadrian's villa, and most recently in Neronian strata on the site of the *Curiae Veteres* on the Palatine.¹⁸

Rostovtzeff's catalogue focused on lead pieces cast from moulds (characteristic of tokens from Rome and Ostia), but ancient tokens were also made out of other materials – the tokens from Palmyra, for example are mainly made from clay.¹⁹ In Rome tokens also existed in bronze, copper or brass; these pieces were struck rather than cast and are generally of much higher quality (the infamous “*spintriae*”, a series which carried portraits of the Julio-Claudian imperial family, sexual scenes and other playful imagery, should be included amongst these).²⁰ A terracotta piece from Rome and now in the David Eugene Smith Collection at Columbia University with the head of Jupiter Ammon on one side and TIBI ME(?) / XXIII inscribed on the other side suggests that clay might also occasionally have been used for tokens in the capital.²¹

The lead tokens from the city of Rome carry a wide variety of designs. Many are images of deities or of a religious nature, with direct references to the emperor (either through a portrait or an inscription) less common.²² The assortment of imagery and the distribution of tokens and token moulds throughout the city suggest that tokens

¹⁸ e.g. Rostovtsew and Vaglieri, 1900: 256; Cesano, 1904: 208; Vaglieri, 1908: 332; *NSc.* 1912: 227; Bertoldi, 1997: 209; Stannard, 2015; Pardini, Piacentini et al., 2016.

¹⁹ Raja, 2015: 173.

²⁰ Buttrey, 1973; Küter, 2016.

²¹ With thanks to Evan Jewell for bringing this piece and others to my attention. David Eugene Smith Collection of Mathematical Instruments (Box D6), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, no. 274. The final ‘E’ at the end of the first line is uncertain.

²² Direct references to the emperor also appear to be rare on tokens produced outside of Rome. Gülby and Kireç, 2008: no. 203 from Ephesus may represent an imperial portrait, but, as discussed below, it can be difficult to identify these images with certainty. Turcan, 1987: no. 120 shows a laureate bust (Caracalla?), likely found in Lyon. Milne, 1971: no. 5416 (Egypt) and Dattari, 1901: no. 6437 (Egypt) also shows an emperor. Antinous features on Egyptian tokens, but this may be because of his popularity as a god in the region. But these examples are a small amount within a much larger volume of material showing other designs.

served a variety of functions. If this hypothesis is correct, then this means that these objects must have been closely looked at: if small leaden circular objects could be used for distributions during a festival *or* during a banquet *or* for some other purpose, then it was only the image that communicated to users the object's validity.²³ Lead tokens, made cheaply from material that wears quickly, might have been single use objects in many instances. But even a token made for a particular festival would have been closely examined, since, for example, the imagery would indicate for which specific day, product, or event the token was valid. In this sense, tokens offer both similarities and differences to Roman coinage. Coins were made from more durable materials, and were reused as the coin passed from user to user. Tokens may have been closely examined at a particular moment in time, while coinage was glanced at repeatedly over time.²⁴

Rostovtzeff believed that the lead tokens were used by a variety of individuals and communities within Rome, but suggested the pieces carrying portraits of the emperor may have been created by the imperial government from Nero onwards in a cost saving measure (cast lead being cheaper than struck brass or bronze).²⁵ In reality there is little difference between the quality and production techniques of the lead tokens Rostovtzeff thought 'imperial' and those he labelled as 'private'. Rather, we should view Roman lead tokens as objects produced not at the mint, but by a dispersed series of individuals and groups (including the imperial house), all utilising a similar production technique. The tokens made of bronze, copper and orichalcum, the

²³ Other shapes (e.g. triangles, diamonds, squares) are known, but circular tokens are by far the most common.

²⁴ But the force of numismatic imagery is not lessened; see Mwangi, 2002 for a discussion.

²⁵ Rostowzew, 1905: 27-30.

materials of money, may have been made at the mint or a specific workshop at the request of individuals or groups.²⁶

Tokens invite a particular approach: these objects were designed for a specific purpose and a specific group, who would have understood the (frequently) abbreviated messages. This stands in contrast to other art reproduced on small objects, which were designed to appeal to a broader consumer base.²⁷ Indeed, handling lead tokens makes one realise just how much effort went into making particular messages clear on Roman coinage and other monuments. Many representations on Roman coins are labelled in the accompanying legend (e.g. a particular image is labelled as an *adlocutio* or *liberalitas* scene). This is not the case on lead tokens, and the targeted nature of their designs means that we can struggle to understand their significance, particularly in the case of the abbreviated Latin. Indeed, the abbreviation of both images and text that occurs on the tokens of Rome is, to my current knowledge, unparalleled in other media. These abbreviations may have been the result of the transfer of an image or text from one media (e.g. a statue, relief, inscription) to these small lead objects (a process of remediation, discussed further below); acts of translation inevitably alter the message. But these abbreviations display a fluency and playfulness with Roman (visual) language that offer the potential for a deeper understanding of how Romans interacted with the mediascape around them.²⁸

²⁶ Küter, 2016: 85 n. 6. The bronze tokens naming Gaius Mitreius, *magister iuventutis*, suggests that these higher quality pieces were created by the same groups as lead pieces - a *magister* of the youth is also named on a lead piece, *TURS* 834.

²⁷ Rostowzew, 1905: 94-5.

²⁸ Clark, 2010 suggests that people can better understand abstract or surrogate situations when there is less detail in the representation (e.g. a schematic map drawn on paper as opposed to a detailed 3D model). This might offer a future avenue for the exploration of abbreviated or schematic images in the Roman world. Tokens in particular display a playfulness with money, something also identified in cryptocurrencies of the modern day, see Tooker, 2014: 29. A similar interaction and playfulness with broader Roman visual culture can be traced on Roman gems and glass pastes; see Maderna-Lauter, 1988.

Coinage, Tokens and Monuments in Motion

1. A lead token and a bronze *quadrans*.

1a. Token: Q TERENTIVS CVLLEO around. / Clasped hands. *TURS* 1323, 17mm, 12h, 3.74g, from the Tiber River in Rome. Formerly in the Dressel collection. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 18268503. Photographs Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photos by Bernhard Weisser.

1b. *Quadrans*: Clasped hands holding a caduceus, PVLCHER TAVRVS REGVLVS around. / III VIR A A A F F around S C. RIC I² Augustus 423, 17mm, 6h, 3.02g. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, 1975.114.4.

Many of the lead tokens in Rome are the size of the smallest Roman coin, the *quadrans* (c. 14-18mm), and some of their designs recall Roman *quadrantes* of the first century. Take for example Figure 1, which shows a token found in the Tiber in Rome and a *quadrans* of 8 BCE. The token carries the name Q. Terentius Culleo, presumably the token's issuer.²⁹ The clasped hands echo the design of small change struck under Augustus, and the presentation of Culleo's name on the other side also imitates coinage, running around the edge of the token in a circle. The *quadrans* shown here may not be the precise model (other Roman coins from later periods also show clasped hands), but the shape, size and arrangement of the letters suggests that it

²⁹ *TURS* 1323; Dressel, 1922: no.4. See *NSc.* 1888: 439-40 for another of this type coming from the Tiber, along with 250 further tokens. Dressel (p. 181) identifies this as the Q. Terentius Culleo who is listed as suffect consul in 40 in the consular *fasti* (Gallivan, 1979). Given that a large proportion of the tokens from the Tiber seem, on the basis of similarities to coin imagery, to date to the first half of the first century, the identification is certainly possible.

is coinage that has formed the inspiration for this particular artefact. But the token does something that was no longer possible on coinage after Augustus: it carries the name of someone other than the emperor. (Moneyer's names, which frequently graced coinage of the Roman Republic, gradually disappeared from coinage under Augustus). A very common token type found in the Tiber (with 205 reported examples) carries a lituus on one side and an hourglass shaped altar on the other, images that also grace Augustan *quadrantes* in the first half of the first century.³⁰ Other images that appear on both tokens from the Tiber and Roman *quadrantes* of the first century are an eagle with open wings, balanced scales, and a modius with corn-ears.³¹

It is entirely unsurprising that imperial coin imagery should be adapted in this way, since coinage, as a monument in motion, operated in a different way to other imperial monuments that were fixed in the landscape. Like modern media (Benjamin's photographs of artwork, for example), coins were a mass medium with an inherently unstable viewing context; one might encounter a coin image at the market, in a military camp, on a festival day, at home, or elsewhere. Moreover, the coin's image would be consistently juxtaposed against other images (e.g. other coins in circulation, or in an individual's purse), meaning that new associations would be continually generated.³² The mobility of money meant that it was open to multiple meanings dependent on viewer and context, and, like Benjamin's work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, this opened up 'ways of seeing' not possible with a

³⁰ *TURS* 1072; Dressel, 1922: no. 21. See RIC 1² Augustus 421-5 for comparable images on Roman currency.

³¹ *TURS* 301, 306, 383, 369 and RIC 1² Augustus 227, Claudius 84, 85, 91.

³² Mwangi, 2002: 33-5.

monument fixed in a landscape, to which access routes were controlled.³³ We can trace this partly in texts: there are enough references to coins among ancient authors to demonstrate that the intended meaning of a coin was not necessarily the meaning ascribed to it by the user (at times to the detriment of the emperor concerned).³⁴ As mentioned above, images that are shared (not restricted) have the ability to escape the control of their makers and empower others, making the image more valuable as a communicative tool. It is thus not surprising that coin images should be readily adopted and remixed by the population of Rome.³⁵

But as the image moved from coin to token, the meaning and associations of the image will have shifted, in the same way as meaning might change as a coin circulated. As mentioned above, images and words are abbreviated on tokens when compared to coins. One token from the Tiber carries the legend LAS on one side, and crossed cornucopiae, each topped with a human head, on the other (Figure 2).³⁶ The design is similar to a sestertius struck under Tiberius: scholars identify the two heads atop the cornucopiae on the coin type as the sons of Drusus the Younger, Tiberius Gemellus and Germanicus Iulius Caesar. The type also appears under Antoninus Pius.³⁷ Imperial imagery, placed on an imperial monument in miniature (a coin), was then adapted and placed within a new context, now associated with the issuers of these tokens.

³³ Clarke, 2003 similarly explores how monuments may have been read differently by different types of viewer.

³⁴ Krmnicek and Elkins, 2014. e.g. Suetonius' comment that Nero struck coinage of himself playing the lyre (Suet. *Ner.* 25.2) may have simply been Suetonius' (or someone else's) interpretation of an Apollo type – there is nothing to indicate this is Nero on the coinage itself (RIC 1² Nero 73-82, 121-23, 205-11). Eusebius (*Vit. Const.* 15) records that Constantine portrayed himself on his coins with his eyes uplifted in prayer; the image, however, also recalls the uplifted eyes associated with posthumous representations of Alexander the Great, which may have been the intended reference.

³⁵ See also Dahmen, 2001: 274; Küter, 2016: 19.

³⁶ Dressel, 1922: no. 8.

³⁷ RIC III Antoninus Pius 185A-B, 857, 859, 961. With thanks to Charlotte Mann for pointing me to these types.

2. A lead token and a bronze sestertius.

2a. Token: Two crossed cornucopiae, each topped with a young male head. / LAS. *TURS* 2418, 17mm, 12h, 2.97g, from the Tiber River in Rome. Formerly in the Dressel collection. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 18268502. Photographs Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photos by Bernhard Weisser.

2b. Sestertius: Confronting heads of two boys on crossed cornucopiae (Tiberius Gemellus and Germanicus Iulius Caesar?), with winged caduceus between them. / *DRVSVS CAESAR TI AVG F DIVI AVG N PONT TR POT II* around *S C. RIC 1²* Tiberius 42, 34.5mm, 6h, 26.42g. Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, 1957.172.1518.

Although we are now comfortable discussing the social life of objects, we should consider that images too have a social life that goes beyond the media that carry them. The same image may exist on an arch, a coin, a token, as a descriptive piece of text, or in our mind as a mental image, and as it travels it gains new associations and creates new ways of seeing the world.³⁸ The extraordinary representation of Gemellus and Germanicus, once released on coinage, would have circulated as a monument in motion, glanced at in different contexts and alongside other monuments. The image was then adapted for representation in a different media, which in turn would have generated further associations. Once on a token, the image might then further act within this new context, shaping the event in which the token was used. On this particular piece, for example, the image may simply have communicated abundance,

³⁸ Kopytoff, 1986; Mitchell, 2005; Rowan, 2016a: 34-44.

or the ‘idea’ of a coin, rather than carrying a strictly dynastic message. Imperial ideology was adapted, and the resultant creation perhaps no longer bore any connection to the imperial house. The meaning of LAS remains a mystery, but it may be a *tria nomina*; Roman graffiti, amphora stamps and other media often name individuals via their initials (e.g. LVP, CIP).³⁹ The abbreviation may only have been meaningful to the group using this particular artefact: the ability to ‘understand’ the token may have served to consolidate the feeling of ‘belonging’ to a particular community, in opposition to others for whom the meaning of the Latin was not clear.⁴⁰

Given the similarities in shape and design between many tokens and Roman coinage, it has been suggested that some tokens might have functioned as small change, like the merchant tokens of more modern eras.⁴¹ A handful of the tokens from Rome do make a direct reference to monetary amounts, including Figure 3, which carries the legend OLYMPIANVS and a male portrait on one side, and the legend EVCARPVS around the amount of HS ∞, or 1000 sestertii.⁴² More than 100 examples of tokens of this type emerged from the environs of the Tiber.⁴³ Once again the similarities to coinage are striking: the legend around the monetary amount is similar in design to the legend around S C on the sestertius shown in Figure 2, which was a common reverse design for Roman bronze coinage of the early imperial period. Instead of a bust of the emperor it is probably the bust of Olympianus that is shown; a legend

³⁹ Benefiel, 2010: 73-4.

⁴⁰ This type of cryptic message is also known from Roman coinage, most famously with the issues of Carausius that carry the abbreviations RSR and I.N.P.C.D.A, which refer to specific lines of Virgil’s works and was probably only understood by a literate inner elite (de la Bédoyère, 1998).

⁴¹ Rostowzew, 1905: 104-9; Dressel, 1922: 182; Rostovtzeff, 1957: 182; Thornton, 1980: 338-9.

⁴² *TURS* 1038 and 2680 may carry the denarius sign, □, although the symbol might also be read as a star. Rostowzew, 1905: 99.

⁴³ Dressel, 1922: no. 5.

encircles the portrait, similar to the obverse design of the majority of Roman imperial precious metal currency.

3. Lead token. Male bust right, OLYMPIANVS around. / EVCARPVS around HS ∞. *TURS* 1460, 18mm, 3.8g. Image from the American Numismatic Society, 2002.42.3.

It is unlikely that this small lead piece was in itself worth 1000 sestertii. Rostovtzeff believed that many of the lead tokens must have functioned as money in small-scale economies, particularly within Roman household economies involving patrons and clients. This piece, then, might represent the fact that Olympianus and Eucarpus had created the equivalent of 1000 sestertii to distribute amongst their own client circle, similar to the way an emperor might communicate his munificence with a *liberalitas* coin type.⁴⁴ Martial uses the word *plumbeus* (lead) to refer to the low value of *sportulae* (money or food given by patrons) in his work and Rostovtzeff suggested this provided further evidence of lead tokens being used in this context.⁴⁵ It is difficult, however, to come to any firm conclusions on the basis of the satirist alone; other interpretations of his text have been proposed. Figure 5 and tokens like it might also have been used for gambling or for some other purpose; there is simply not enough evidence available at the present time to come to a definitive conclusion. Indeed, given that some lead tokens carry legends that connect them to the Saturnalia (discussed below), a satiric context for this particular type cannot be ruled out.

Some tokens carry the portrait of the emperor and a legend naming him (discussed in the next section), but some simply carry a portrait. Given the style of many of these

⁴⁴ Rostowzew, 1905: 99.

⁴⁵ Martial I 99 11-15 and X 74, 1-4; Rostowzew, 1905: 110; Thornton, 1980: 349; with a more skeptical interpretation provided by Virlouvet, 1988: 123-4.

pieces, it is impossible to tell in many instances whether this is intended to be a representation of a member of the imperial family or a representation of the issuer of the token. One example is Figure 4, a token carrying the portrait of a woman with a distinctly Flavian hairstyle. Rostovtzeff suggested this was the daughter of Titus, Julia Flavia, while Thornton, in an unpublished catalogue of tokens kept in the British Museum, suggested Domitia.⁴⁶ But it is just as likely that this is a representation of a private woman; imperial women formed a focal point for elite female self-representation, and the legends on other tokens indicate that some might have been issued by women.⁴⁷ The very specific audience and context of these tokens meant that the image's meaning would presumably have been understood at the time, but it does create an ambiguity between the representations of individuals and representations of the emperor on everyday objects in Rome.

4. Lead token. Female bust right. / II. *TURS* 51. 20mm, 3h, 5.70g. Object on study loan to the teaching collection, Department of Classics and Ancient History, The University of Warwick.

Tokens and the Creation of Imperial Ideology

Lead tokens also bore clearer representations of the imperial family, with Nero appearing with relative frequency.⁴⁸ Figure 5 shows two examples of these tokens.

⁴⁶ There are no reported findspots for this token type, and to date the only examples known are two housed in the British Museum (Thornton, unpublished, BMCRLT nos. 878-9), and the specimen published here.

⁴⁷ Fejfer, 2008: 331-72 on this phenomenon for sculpture. Examples include *TURS* 1131 (Apronia), 1207 (Domitia), 1240 (Hortensia), and 1248 (Julia).

⁴⁸ Thornton, 1980: 336.

On the first the emperor's portrait is accompanied by the legend NERO CAESAR; on the other side is a representation of a soldier or the god Mars, with a palm branch behind.⁴⁹ Nero's portrait here brings to mind Fronto's comment about the varying quality of imperial images; but what Fronto suggests is that, no matter how poor the quality, the emperor might still be recognised. Examining the tokens that name Nero (and so we know the accompanying portrait is an intentional portrayal of the emperor), we find that several echo official imagery of the period, with types connecting him to Agrippina, to Roma, to Victory, and to Apollo playing the lyre.⁵⁰ Thus these objects would have contributed, in the small circles in which they were used, to the overall ideology surrounding the emperor. For these types of tokens, which only name the emperor and no other individual, we cannot know whether the authority was the imperial house or other individuals. The imagery we see on these pieces is reminiscent of provincial coinage, another medium that can provide a useful framework for the interpretation of these objects. Provincial coinage carried local variations of imperial ideology, often reacting to or extending official images, and tokens indicate that the same process was taking place in the imperial capital.

5. Two lead tokens showing Nero.

5a. Lead token. Bare head of Nero left, NERO CAESAR around. / Mars or a soldier standing, holding spear in left hand and resting right hand on shield; large branch behind. cf. *TURS* 17 (no branch), 18mm, 12h, 2.3g. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

⁴⁹ cf. Dressel, 1922: no. 2.

⁵⁰ *TURS* 14, 19, 25, 27. No find spots are recorded for these tokens.

5b. Lead token. Laureate head of Nero right. / Charioteer (*auriga*) in a chariot with eight horses right. *TURS* 31, 18mm, 12h, 2.44g. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Like provincial coinage, tokens also combined imperial portraiture with imagery not found on official money. One token from the Tiber juxtaposes Octavia on one side with Victory holding a wreath on the other, a connection not found on Roman coinage, which connects the goddess only with the emperor.⁵¹ One type portrays Nero on one side and Claudia on the other, and another combines the head of Nero with a chariot of eight horses rather than the usual four (Figure 5b).⁵² The rider appears to be carrying a whip, suggesting that what is represented is an eight-horse chariot race. The juxtaposition of a reference to an *octoiugus* and Nero brings to mind various comments from ancient authors about Nero's charioteering (once falling while riding a chariot of ten horses).⁵³ The token is a material manifestation of this aspect of Nero's public image, although it is impossible to reconstruct whether the imagery was meant to be an ironic or critical commentary, or a more straightforward communication of imperial ideology.

Abbreviation of the imperial image is also found: one token (with no recorded find spot) places the letters N E on either side of the soldier/Mars seen in Figure 5, and then the letters CAES above two clasped hands on the other.⁵⁴ The legend on both sides must be resolved as NERO CAESAR. Rostovtzeff suggests that a further token

⁵¹ *TURS* 33.

⁵² *TURS* 31, 34 (no reported find spots).

⁵³ Suet. *Ner.* 22.1-2, 24.2, Tac. *Ann.* 14.14, Dio 63.1.1, 63.6.2-3. Nero is also associated with chariot racing on tokens of late antiquity (contorniates). See by way of example BM R.4857; BM R.4829; BM 1846,0910.270; BM 1844,0425.709; BM 1853,0512.242.

⁵⁴ *TURS* 18.

with the letters N C in a wreath might also refer to NERO CAESAR.⁵⁵ Abbreviations also exist for other imperial names, with several variations known for Titus and Domitian (e.g. Figure 6).⁵⁶

6. Lead token. IMP TCA = *Imp(erator) T(itus) Ca(esar)* / DOM CAE = *Dom(itianus) Ca(e)sar*. *TURS* 46, 16mm, 12h, 1.59g. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

A series of tokens made from pewter with very thin flans and carrying images of the Julio-Claudian dynasty also demonstrate how tokens might adapt and extend the imperial image. A pewter token found in the river Garigliano, 80 miles south of Rome and 35 miles north of Naples shows on one side the bare head of Claudius and the legend TI CLAVDIVS CAES. On the other side is Venus standing left with her left hand resting on the head of the cupid, who holds a rudder, accompanied by the legend COLO VEN (another specimen of the same type is reported from the Liri).⁵⁷ The location of the find, the legend and the image strongly suggest a reference to the colony of Venusia, the 'City of Venus'.⁵⁸ This token was found alongside others showing Julia (daughter of Germanicus), Octavia (with Victory on the other side) and Nero.⁵⁹ Other artefacts from the river (small handled amphora, other tokens, small statuettes, curse tablets) are suggestive of a watery votive deposit. Another votive context is known from the sanctuary of Hercules at Alba Fucens. In the well within the sanctuary were found two lead tokens: one of the thin flan series showing

⁵⁵ *TURS* 22, no recorded find spot. The other side of the token carries the legend ARM REG, which Rostovtzeff resolves as *Armenis Regis* (?).

⁵⁶ *TURS* 43-7, no recorded find spots.

⁵⁷ Mitchiner, 1984: 107. The token is 21mm, 3g. Mitchiner's description of the token as showing Messalina and Britannicus is incorrect; for a better description and image see Clive Stannard's unpublished collection of cast lead tokens from the river Liri, 29.015.

⁵⁸ A detailed discussion of this particular subset of tokens is forthcoming by the author.

⁵⁹ Mitchiner also suggests tokens are present showing Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian, but these specimens carry no legend, and the portraiture quality makes it difficult to be conclusive.

Claudius on one side and Messalina on the other, and the other a lead token showing Nero on one side and Jupiter on the other, accompanied by the legend MAN FOR.⁶⁰ It is likely that the tokens were became votive objects after fulfilling their original function. In selecting these items as an offering the dedicants may have been influenced by the imagery on the tokens and/or their materiality - these were lead 'coin-like' objects with little 'real world' value.⁶¹

It is thus clear that as the imperial image moved from one medium to another it attracted new meanings and was 'remixed', abbreviated, or extended. In this context it might be useful to borrow a term from media theory: remediation. The term was created to describe the process of translation of one media into another: the text found on an ostraka, for example, transferred into a book, and then into code to be saved onto a computer.⁶² Media constantly comment on, reproduce and replace each other; indeed, media need other media to survive.⁶³ Moreover, acts of remediation (the reproduction of particular texts, images, topoi, etc) solidify community and cultural memory, creating a shared and accepted 'history'.⁶⁴ In our case, the imagery carried on coinage (and perhaps elsewhere) was translated onto a token, whose design then simultaneously reinforces particular shared images even as they develop in meaning. We can take this concept further with the idea of premediation, which recognises that we see, remember and record events according to culture; and culture is contained

⁶⁰ Ceccaroni and Molinari, 2017. The token types are *TURS* 531 and *Alba Fucens* 1 (<https://coins.warwick.ac.uk/token-types/id/albafucens1>).

⁶¹ Lead objects that imitate coinage are known from votive river contexts in Britain (e.g. Portable Antiquities Scheme BM-512402, BM-60DF84, SWYOR-7600E1). Sauer's analysis of the votive offerings at a spring in Bourbonne-les-Bains (France) indicates that very small value coins (*quadrantes*) were frequently chosen as offerings, but it is clear that individuals consciously chose to offer coin pieces showing Augustus rather than Agrippa, so imagery also played a role in the selection process (Sauer, 2005: 20).

⁶² Bolter and Grusin, 2000.

⁶³ Erll, 2007: 29-30.

⁶⁴ Erll, 2008; Rowan, forthcoming.

within media (books, sculpture, paintings, coins, etc). Media not only solidify cultural memory and identity, but also shape our future experience and how this is recorded. This process has most clearly been explored for the wars of the twentieth century. British participants in World War II, for example, recorded their experiences according to class and culture: high-ranking officers often used the classical world as a framework to write about their experiences, while those from the middle class more commonly used Shakespeare.⁶⁵ As this contribution has begun to demonstrate, coinage may also have premediated and shaped experience in the Roman world.

Imperial Ideology, the Emperor and Festivals

It is clear that one of the most pervasive imperial media in the Roman world, coinage, premediated experience and shaped its representation. Coinage was a key contributor to tokens' form and language of expression. A further example is Figure 7, a lead token carrying the legend P GLITI GALLI around a male bust, presumably the representation of Gallus himself.⁶⁶ The other side of the token carries the image of a rooster (a pun on the name *Gallus*) carrying a wreath and palm-branch, the traditional attributes of Victory.⁶⁷ Here, however, they are very clearly connected to Gallus and his *gens*. The wreath and palm branch were also connected to other victorious or joyful moments in Roman life: they are shown carried by victorious charioteers, for example, or in connection with festivals (Victory with a palm branch appears on the

⁶⁵ Fussell, 1975; Erll, 2009.

⁶⁶ An additional image can be found at *TURS* Pl. IV, 33. Rostowzew, 1905: 105 suggests this is the P. Glitius Gallus known from Tac. *Ann.* 15.56.71 and who lived under Nero.

⁶⁷ The visual pun on Gallus' name ("canting type") has precedent on the coinage of the Roman Republic, where moneyers used coin types to advertise familial identity and history. e.g. the Torquati often placed a torque on coins when they were moneyers (e.g. RRC 411/1a-b).

New Year's lamp discussed in Russell's contribution in this volume). Wreaths and palm branches also appear on lead tokens connected to the Saturnalia, which include the chant IO SAT(VRNALIA) IO!⁶⁸ Gallus' piece may also have been produced for the Saturnalia or some other festival; whatever the context, the occasion was represented on a token within a set visual language premediated by coinage. As a medium that circulated and pervaded daily life, coinage played a role in shaping people's experience; the process may have been unconscious, but was no less powerful for this. Banal objects like coinage are powerful 'background media' to the everyday, acting upon us even if we are not aware of them.⁶⁹

Figure 7: Lead token. P GLITI GALLI around male head. / Rooster standing right holding a wreath and palm branch. *TURS* 1238, 19mm, 12h, 2.66g. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The Saturnalia, of course, turned social norms upside down temporarily, allowing satirical interaction with the emperor and other modes of power, if only to reinforce normative orders.⁷⁰ Thus some 'liberties' that might be taken with the imperial image appear to have been constrained by time; it is surely no accident that many of our surviving satirical works are set within the context of the Saturnalia. But the tokens representing the imperial family might have been created at any time; logic suggests that the government cannot have formally approved each and every use of the imperial portrait by each and every individual within the Roman Empire. Small objects like these tokens may not have necessarily needed imperial permission or attracted imperial notice, but they would nonetheless have formed part of the material

⁶⁸ e.g. Rostowzew and Prou, 1900: no. 102 (from Rome); *TURS* 501-10.

⁶⁹ Yarrow, 2013.

⁷⁰ Dolansky, 2011; Miller, 2012.

experience of the Empire's inhabitants. They, and their creators, thus participated in the co-creation of the imperial image and imperial ideology.

Imperial portraits appear on tokens of collegia, *municipia*, and other organisations. Rostovtzeff suggested that the appearance of the imperial portrait in these contexts indicated that the associated festivals or groups were formed with the permission of the emperor, or that the emperor provided (partial) funding.⁷¹ While this might be the case in some instances (the tokens themselves reveal nothing in this regard), the use of the imperial portrait across a variety of everyday media suggests that imperial permission or funding cannot have been the motivation in each case. Indeed, given that many collegia were created with the hope of increased social advancement or prestige, the imperial portrait may have been placed on the tokens of these associations because it was an image that connoted power and elite status, one that suggested a connection between the (relatively humble) community group and the very top of Roman society.⁷² Figure 8, for example, a token type found in the Tiber, carries a deified image of an emperor (Rostovtzeff believed it was Nerva) with the legend DI AVG, and the name of the association (*sodales consuales*) placed on the other side.

8. Lead token. Radiate head of an emperor, DI AVG on left. / SODAL CONSVVA in two lines. *TURS* 879, 20mm, 6h, 2.42g. Image from the American Numismatic Society, 1967.160.10.

⁷¹ Rostowzew, 1905: 86.

⁷² Perry, 2011: 508-11.

Rostovtzeff suggested this token, and others like it, may have been used in *collegia* distributions during imperial celebrations (e.g. the *dies imperii*); inscriptional evidence from Rome demonstrates that associations did distribute money, bread and wine on such occasions.⁷³ Tokens carrying well wishes to the emperor (*feliciter*) may also have been created for similar contexts, although we have no evidence beyond the design of the tokens themselves to support this.⁷⁴ But if they were used on imperial festival days, or during festivities associated with the emperor, then we should pause to consider the implications: it is the organisations themselves who contributed to the creation of the material (and thus the experience) associated with this festival. Analogous evidence is a terracotta token from Palmyra that carries the name of the city in Greek and a female portrait that resembles an empress, perhaps Sabina (Marciana has also been suggested); given that many tokens in Palmyra are connected with banqueting, this object may have served as an invitation or ticket to a feast held by the city in Hadrian's honour when the emperor visited.⁷⁵

The role festival objects had in contributing to the image of the emperor might also be seen on the tokens that carry the names of *curatores*. Rostovtzeff believed these referenced *curatores ludorum*, officials responsible for the games; however, *collegia* also had positions with this title.⁷⁶ What role, if any, these tokens played in festivals remains unknown, but the objects do join imperial imagery to the name of a *curator*. One example from the Tiber carries the legend CAECILIVS IVSTVS around the word CVR (again similar to the way that the legend moves around S C on Roman

⁷³ Rostowzew, 1905: 98; CIL VI 33885.

⁷⁴ e.g. *TURS* 66 (no recorded find spot) with HAD AVG on one side of the token and P P F on the other, plausibly an abbreviation of *Hadriano Augusto patri patriae feliciter*. FEL also appears on bronze tokens with the portrait of Augustus, see Buttrey, 1973: 61 no. 5. On tokens and imperial acclamations see Burnett, 2016: 75-95.

⁷⁵ Salzmänn, 1989.

⁷⁶ Rostowzew, 1905: 49-51.

bronze coinage), while the other side of the token carries a shield decorated with a bust (of Caligula?) above an eagle with its wings spread.⁷⁷ Another token carries a laureate bust (Tiberius has been suggested) and the legend Q. CAECILIVS Q.F. OINOGENVS F around the word CVR.⁷⁸ Whether these objects were used as tickets, to organise distributions, or for some other purpose, we might plausibly connect them to particular events connected to the named *curatores*. The image of the emperor, then, would have formed a backdrop for the experience of the event, perhaps even unconsciously forming part of the individual or collective memory of a particular moment. This, in turn, would have shaped how the event was remembered.

Several tokens in museum collections or that have appeared on the market are pierced. Although some may have been altered more recently, it is safe to assume that some examples must have been pierced in antiquity, with the token then perhaps serving as a memento of a particular event.⁷⁹ The discovery of tokens in tombs also suggests that they might have transformed into souvenirs, a form of ‘commemorative materiality’.⁸⁰ In a tomb from Mutina a copper ‘*spintria*’ was found with traces of gold leaf on it, which makes the suggestion that these short-term single use objects might be converted into long-term objects of memory even more compelling.⁸¹

A banal image?

⁷⁷ *TURS* 515, Pl. IV 32.

⁷⁸ Rostowzew, 1905: 48; Franke, 1984; Gregori, 1997: 165; Harris, 2000. Oinogenus was probably an equestrian.

⁷⁹ e.g. BMCRLT 524, a token with the image of Fortuna on one side and two facing busts on the other, which may, or may not, be imperial portraits.

⁸⁰ Munzi, 1997; Saunders, 2001: 479-80.

⁸¹ Benassi, Giordani et al., 2003; Campana, 2009: 49. On *spintria* see Buttrey, 1973 and Martini, 1999.

Fronto's comment to Marcus Aurelius suggests that the imperial image may have formed an (unconscious) backdrop to the everyday life of Rome's inhabitants, a 'banal' symbol much like a flag hanging limp in the corner of a post office building.⁸² The imperial portrait, whether a good likeness or not, was likely present during numerous everyday occurrences inside and outside the home; in addition to coins, tokens, sculpture and large monuments, we should also think about seals, weights, paintings, lamps, cakes, military equipment, and other everyday objects.⁸³ Not all of these images will have been a high quality likeness, but nonetheless they were likely 'viewed' as the current ruler, as Fronto 'sees' Marcus Aurelius. It is from this perspective that we might begin to better understand activities like the reuse a bust of Caracalla for a dedication to Constantine: perhaps many of the imperial images, like some of those we find on tokens, did not necessarily 'look like' the emperor, and perhaps they did not need to be a true likeness, at least in some contexts.⁸⁴

A further example of the use of imperial portraits in the everyday can be found on another class of object commonly labelled as 'tesserae'. These are the bone or ivory circular pieces with an image engraved in relief one side and an incised inscription on the other accompanied by an incised number in both Greek and Latin. These objects have been found throughout the Roman Empire, including Rome.⁸⁵ The discovery of 15 such objects neatly stacked in a box in a child's tomb in Kerch (Russia) means we now believe they are counters used to play a game whose rules have been lost to

⁸² Billig, 1995: 8, and 41 on the role of coinage.

⁸³ Dahmen, 2001. Examples include the Severan tondo, Harvard Art Museums 1949.82 (a weight with an imperial bust), Getty 83.AQ.377.206, 83.AQ.377.92 (lamps with a laureate portrait of Hadrian (?)), BM 1854,0717.53 (horse trappings from Xanten in Germany with an imperial bust of either Claudius or Nero). Boon, 1958 published a pastry cook's mould from Silchester with the representation of the Severan imperial family, see also Alföldi, 1938-1941: 313-14, for the use of imperial imagery on Roman baked goods.

⁸⁴ Dahmen, 2001: 153, Kat. 24, pl. 24.

⁸⁵ Graillot, 1896 on find spots in Rome and its environs. See also Capitoline Museums inv. AntCom 18584, 18586.

antiquity.⁸⁶ The pieces from Kerch are characteristic of the wider series in that they displayed a variety of deities, Alexandrian suburbs, and muses, all named in Greek on the other side. Amongst the 15 was a piece showing a male bust. The other side of the counter names the bust as Augustus, CEBACTOC, and is accompanied by the number one (I and A). The imperial portrait on the other side bears only a vague resemblance to the official portraits of the first *princeps*. It appears then, that amongst this elite child's playing counters was an image of Rome's first emperor; we should pause to think how the imperial image in this context sat alongside images of gods and Egyptian buildings, essentially to be used for play. Caesar, Tiberius, Nero and empresses are also known on these playing pieces, at times represented almost in caricature.⁸⁷

In certain contexts, however, portrait likeness did matter. Arrian writes in the *Periplus* that Hadrian's statue at Trapezus had some merit, but looked nothing like the 'original' and was of indifferent execution. Arrian goes on to request a statue from Hadrian "worthy to be called yours", since the location was a good one for perpetuating the emperor's memory (he also requests new statues of Hermes and Apollo Philesius).⁸⁸ Arrian's last comment, the quality of the location, provides a clue to interpreting the request. Highly visible images were controlled in a way that less conspicuous images were not (for example the imperial *imagines* of *corpora* discussed by Tran in this volume). It is thus frequently these very public images that are called into action or 'weaponised' in particular contexts, as explored by Rowe. But many of the images carried on smaller objects, like those discussed in this

⁸⁶ Rostovtsew, 1905; Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1976; Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1980; Bianchi 2015 (with further find contexts).

⁸⁷ Alföldi-Rosenbaum, 1984.

⁸⁸ Arr., *Peripl. M. Eux.* 1.2-3.

contribution, escaped the *damnatio memoriae* or ‘weaponising’ that took place on larger media.⁸⁹

“The reproduced image increases in value by being shared”.⁹⁰ If we return to the idea of the ‘shared’ or empowering image, we may begin to explore how the image of the emperor shaped the cultural memories, identities and experiences of different communities in the Roman world. The imperial image had its own life; it escaped the control of its maker. But this process only made the image more valuable: all who saw the emperor’s visage may have had different associations dependant on time, experience and place, but all recognised the image and could connect with it. The ability to communicate and connect to a disparate group of people through a single image is what gave the imperial portrait its value as a communicative, and community-building, tool. The very act of allowing wider use of the imperial likeness by multiple groups gave it power, as much as the image itself embodied the ultimate power of Roman society. As it lived its social life, the ‘value’ of the emperor’s portrait in the minds of its users would only have increased as they too contributed to its reproduction.

Although this contribution has focused on the person of the emperor, tokens also engaged with imperial ideology beyond the emperor’s portrait.⁹¹ This, however, must remain an area for future study. Token images and contexts contributed to what ultimately must have been a perception of the emperor shaped by personal

⁸⁹ For example most coins of condemned emperors continued to circulate unaltered for years after the pertinent *damnatio memoriae*; even on provincial coinage alterations or erasures of condemned emperors occur on relatively few specimens. Acts of *damnatio* are also rare on small personal objects like gems and cameos. See Calomino, 2016: 15-17.

⁹⁰ Buck-Morss, 2010: 58.

⁹¹ e.g. through the representation of buildings. *TURS* 107-110 shows a triumphal arch (no recorded find spots).

experience: location, time, and status would have determined how one understood the emperor and his family. To end with a provocation: adopting the idea of the *musée imaginaire* of the French theorist Malreaux, might it be useful to think about an ‘imperial image without walls’, in which images moving in a social life were juxtaposed in the mind to create unique and differing understandings of the Roman emperors?

Conclusion: Reproduction and the Imperial Image

Scholars since Benjamin have identified the revolutionary effect of media of reproduction, and I would argue that it is no surprise that similar technology in the Roman world had similar effects. Coinage in particular was a technology of reproduction that formed a mass medium in motion that consciously or unconsciously shaped the daily experience of the Empire’s inhabitants. Coinage was also a medium that contributed to the memory of past events and shaped future representations: the similarities between tokens and coinage demonstrate this. Lead tokens, along with lamps, cakes and other objects that were easily manufactured from cheap materials, contributed to a ubiquitous imperial image of the sort described by Fronto. The imperial image was ‘shared’, meaning that the emperor came to embody more associations than the Roman government ever intended. In this sense it might be better to talk of the ‘imperial images’ of a particular ruler. This type of perspective adds complexity to our traditional understanding of imperial ideology, but it is perhaps an approach more in keeping with how people experienced images and messages in the Roman Empire.

Alongside the large statues, triumphal arches and other monuments that often attract scholarly attention, there was a world of images and ideology that did not require governmental approval or attract close government scrutiny. And this is important: I suggest that if the imperial image were tightly controlled at all levels of society, then it would not have been as effective. A powerful image is one that all sectors of society might connect with, even if each person had a different idea of what the image 'meant'.⁹² Allowing the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to be co-creators of imperial ideology meant that ultimately a more personalised, and thus more powerful, connection to the emperor was generated. The emperor was not simply the head of government, but an image that was connected to the very fabric of one's lived experience, even if the image of the ruler looked nothing like the man sitting on the throne.

⁹² Rowan, 2016b.

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