

Shaping creeds and identity in early Christian iconography: The roles and meaning of late Roman *tesserae*

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In recent years, academic interest has increasingly focused on a particular and mostly neglected category of material culture, tokens. Although limited studies dealing with individual token collections have been conducted over the past decades, the nature and the active roles that these objects played throughout the ancient Mediterranean have recently and more clearly been reconsidered by the ERC-funded *Token Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean* project at the University of Warwick (UK). Three workshops on tokens took place between 2017 and 2019, which examined tokens through a cross-regional and multi-period approach (*Tokens: Culture, Connections, Communities*, held at the University of Warwick, UK, from 8-10 June 2017; *Tokens, Value and Identity: Exploring Monetiform Objects in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, held at the British School at Rome, Italy, from 18-19 October 2018; *Tokens: The Athenian Legacy to the Modern World*, held at the British School at Athens, Greece, from 16-17 December 2019)¹.

Tokens of classical antiquity are mostly small monetiform objects, often made of bronze, brass, or lead. While *symbolon* (σύμβολον) was the ancient Greek word for ‘token’, the Latin word ‘tessera’ (from the ancient Greek word τέσσαρες, ‘four’, which refers to an object that had four sides) was given to these circular objects by Ficoroni and has been commonly employed in modern scholarship since the nineteenth century². Distinct from coins, tokens were used within the communities of the Greco-Roman world for a variety of functions. Like other everyday objects, tokens formed the familiar terrain of everyday life, (un)consciously reminding users of different groups, ideologies, and economic/social relationships.

This contribution focuses on two extremely limited series of bronze Christian *tesserae*, which were produced under the reign of Arcadius (AD 395-408) and Honorius (AD 395-423). For the sake of simplicity, these two token issues are labelled here as ‘Series nos. 1-2’. Through the analysis of this special numismatic evidence, the aim of this paper is to investigate the development of early Christianity iconography, and the roles that these *pseudo-monetiae* actively played within Roman Christian communities in late antique society.

1. Roman tokens under Arcadius and Honorius: morphology, classification and status quaestionis

The first token issue - Series no. 1 - is currently documented by only four specimens (Appendix, 1-4, figs. 1-4), two of which were studied by A. Alföldi³. The pieces carry the embossed bust of Arcadius and Honorius on the obverse, while the reverse types show depictions of evangelists and saints in incuse (‘in intaglio’), accompanied by Roman numerals and Latin letters. Also, the specimens from this issue show traces of metal inlays, which were applied on both sides of the piece.

The second token issue - Series no. 2 - is a more varied cluster of nine bronze *tesserae* (Appendix, 5-13), which are connected to each other through recurring depictions: the obverse type of Alexander

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¹ For the proceedings of the abovementioned workshops cfr. respectively Crisà 2019 *et alii*; Crisà 2021; Gkikaki (forthcoming).

² The problem of the denomination of these artefacts arises from the absence of any clear references to them in literary sources. Although the word ‘tessera’ may have at times indicated a Roman ‘token’, these objects may have been also defined by the words ‘missilia’ or ‘nomismata’. For a discussion about the use of the name *tesserae* as applied to these objects see Rostowzew 1905, 4; Virlovet 1995, 352-362; Crisà 2019 *et alii*, 2-3; Rowan 2020, 98.

³ Alföldi 1975, Taf. 7, 12.14 and 13.15. For a discussion and a catalogue of these token specimens see Mondello 2021.

the Great as Heracles wearing a lion's skin, which occurs on four pieces in the same style and with a legend bearing an abbreviated name (Appendix, 5-8, figs. 5-7); and the reverse type of a donkey suckling a foal shown on seven specimens, which is accompanied by the legend 'Asina' ('she-donkey') (Appendix, 11-12, figs. 8-9), 'Roma' (Appendix, 13, fig. 10), or by the Christian legend 'Dominus noster Jesus Christus Dei filius' ('Our Lord Jesus Christ Son of God') (Appendix, 5 and possibly 10, fig. 5); the donkey type also appears without a legend (Appendix, 6 and 9, fig. 6). The portraits of Honorius (Appendix, 11-12, figs. 8-9) and possibly of a Valentinian emperor (Appendix, 9-10) are also depicted on the obverse of four specimens. This issue is commonly known as the 'Asina' series, due to the depiction of the mysterious 'Asina' type which has puzzled scholars⁴.

Both series are struck in bronze, and the chosen sizes are small. The average diameter of Series no. 1 is ca. 19-20 mm, with a weight ranging between 2.22 and 4.67 g. The diameters of the pieces from Series no. 2 are more diversified, ranging from 11 to 20 mm, while individual weights vary from 1.15 to 3.05 g. Although circular in shape, the absence of any mintmark and the use of unusual reverse types clearly identifies these coin-like objects as *tesserae* or tokens.

However, some of the specimens from both series have unfortunately been lost, with only seven pieces currently available for examination. Moreover, their contexts of discovery are unknown, as the tokens existed as part of museum and private collections from at least the eighteenth century. Therefore, any find spots are lost to history.

Both token issues have been poorly studied and our current understanding is mainly dependent on Alföldi's analysis. The Hungarian numismatist connected two of the pieces from Series no. 1 to a larger group of Roman imperial coins carrying obverse types of Julian and Theodosius I, which were transformed into gaming tokens by erasing their reverses and engraving Roman numerals (from I to XVI) on the surface instead (fig. 11). According to Alföldi, the bronze tokens with incuse designs constituted a 'Christian counterpart' to the modified imperial bronze coins, which were instead reused as chips by 'pagans' around AD 400⁵. On the other hand, the Hungarian scholar regarded the 'Asina' tokens from Series no. 2 as documents «für die Existenz einer krypto-heidnischen Bewegung»⁶. Reshaping a theory by Tanini⁷, Alföldi connected the imagery shown on these pieces to the charge of onolatry (the worship of a god with a donkey's head) levelled against early Christians: the she-donkey and her foal displayed on tokens would be a satirical depiction of Mary and Jesus Christ, the latter mockingly defined as *Dei filius* ('Son of God') by the legend⁸. In Alföldi's view, both token groups would reflect, for opposing sides, the so-called pagan-Christian 'conflict', believed to have taken place during the fourth and fifth centuries in Rome. Intended to promote Graeco-Roman religion against the repressive measures carried out by Theodosius I (AD 379-395) and his sons, a conservative senatorial trend was thought to have been expressed by the alleged anti-Christian polemic of the *Historia Augusta*⁹ as well as through a variety of 'pagan propaganda' material, which also included the 'Vota Publica' tokens (late IIIrd-IVth centuries AD), and the 'contorniate' medallions (IVth-Vth centuries AD)¹⁰. However, there is no evidence to support the connection of these artefacts with an alleged 'pagan reaction'. It is no surprise that Alföldi's theory has been harshly criticized in

⁴ A discussion and a catalogue of the 'Asina' token specimens has been recently provided by the author in Mondello 2020.

⁵ Alföldi 1975, 20, Taf. 7.1-8 and 11.

⁶ Alföldi 1951b, 94.

⁷ Tanini 1791, 352.

⁸ Alföldi 1951a, 65-66.

⁹ Straub 1963.

¹⁰ The 'Vota Publica' tokens bear depictions of Roman emperors and Egyptian deities, and were struck from the Tetrarchy to the time of Gratian and Valentinian II: cfr. Alföldi 1937. On the anti-Christian nature of Roman contorniate' medallions (ca. AD 355/60-472) see Alföldi-Alföldi 1976; Alföldi-Alföldi 1990.

recent decades¹¹, while a remarkable revision of the once-dominant paradigm of ‘pagan revival’ disseminated in the early twentieth century scholarship has recently taken place¹².

2. *The imperial busts on tokens: Techniques, Chronology, and Authority*

The imperial portraits of Arcadius and Honorius and their relevant title “P(ius) F(elix) AVG(ustus)” shown on tokens from the two considered series have a *terminus post quem* of AD 393, that is 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 issues¹³. Both token series have close ties with the ‘Urbs Roma Felix’ (URF) issue, which was struck almost entirely at Rome in the names of Honorius, Arcadius and Theodosius II during the period 404-408, with a possible revival after Attalus¹⁴. According to the internal structure of the URF issue, there are two major variants based on the reverse type:

a) head of Roma facing front;

b) head of Roma facing right, which is in turn subdivided into 3 classes (*b1*, *b2*, *b3*) on the basis of style, legend division, and fabric.

Of these, *b2* and *b3* rapidly deteriorated in style and fabric, and were apparently struck in the name of Honorius only. On the obverses, the imperial bust appears with a pearl and rosette diadem (variant *a* and *b1*, but occasionally a plain pearl diadem appears), but also with a pearl-diadem only (variant *b2* and *b3*).

On Series no. 1, the portraits of Arcadius and Honorius are depicted with the rosette variant while the legend is divided -IVS. They have similarities with the variant *a* and *b1* of the URF issue, with the closest coin dies found on variant *b1* (with legend break -IVS, but occasionally divided -VS, as shown in fig. 12). On Series no. 2, the bust of Honorius is displayed on the obverse of two ‘Asina’ pieces, with the legend divided -VS. Of these, the piece published by Tanini is no longer available for study (Appendix, 11, fig. 8)¹⁵; this leaves only one specimen currently available, which is kept at the British Museum (Appendix, 12, fig. 9). Due to the poor quality of the piece, it is not clear whether the imperial bust wears a pearl and rosette-diadem or merely a pearl-diadem. However, the style of the token appears quite crude, similar to the variants *b2* and *b3* of the URF issue, which carry a pearl-diadem and divide the legend -VS. As already argued by Kent, this ‘Asina’ token also appears close to the ‘Gloria Romanorum’ issue struck by the Roman mint, which was probably issued prior to AD 423 (AD 417-418?)¹⁶.

By virtue of the evidence considered, the URF issue may have been the model used by the engravers for the imperial portraits occurring on the two token issues. Based on the legend division and style, it is likely that Series no. 1 was struck after AD 404, probably not beyond the time frame of the production of the URF issue (AD 404-408)¹⁷. Close ties to the variants *b2* and *b3* of the URF issue as well as to the late ‘Gloria Romanorum’ issue may instead point to a larger time frame between AD

¹¹ For the reception of Alföldi’s theory by the scientific community cfr. Mittag 2015, 265-267.

¹² Cameron 2011; Lavan-Mulryan 2011; Salzman 2016 *et alii.*; Lizzi Testa 2017.

¹³ The selection of each issue of the regular coinage used in this paper for comparisons has been based on a few constraints that have proved useful in identifying the coin typology adopted, including the obverse legend layout, bust details and style.

¹⁴ Cfr. Kent 1988, 282-84; *RIC* X, 130-31 and 140-41; Grierson-Mays 1992, 207-9. A single known specimen in the name of Honorius (obverse legend divided R-I, mint-mark SMAQ) shows that there was a small issue of the type struck in Aquileia: cfr. *RIC* X, 130-31. For the renewal of the series under Attalus see Bruni 2017.

¹⁵ Tanini 1791, 352, pl. VIII.

¹⁶ Kent 1988, 284, n. 6.

¹⁷ Mondello 2021.

404 and 423 for the manufacture of the ‘Asina’ tokens¹⁸. A later period of time for production of Series no. 2 might be suggested by the two of the ‘Asina’ pieces. Here the legend DN VA [...] S (?) PF AVG (Appendix, 9-10) shown on the obverse could identify the imperial portrait as Valentinian III (AD 425-455), as suggested by Alföldi¹⁹. However, the poor condition of the two pieces now lost does not allow a precise identification nor extensive discussion.

Stylistic and technical features of the tokens also reveal close parallels with contorniates, i.e. bronze medallions of the mid-fourth to fifth centuries AD, whose place of production was in all likelihood *mainly* Rome. These parallels, which can be seen in both style and manufacturing techniques, include:

– Similar iconography and spelling errors. As for the iconography, the obverse type of Alexander the Great (Appendix, 5-8, figs. 5-7) and the reverse image of Hercules and Minerva (Appendix, 7, fig. 7) on Series no. 2 runs parallel to some of the contorniate dies from the ‘regular’ series (AD 355/360-395/423) and the so-called ‘Kaiserserie’ (AD 379-472) bearing the same types²⁰. Some of the tokens from Series no. 2 carrying the name of Alexander the Great in the genitive case (= *Alexandri*) even show similar legends and spelling mistakes similar to those found on contorniates (e.g., the combination of X and S, a variant marked by a double X, or the delta in place of the Latin letter A which evokes the Greek legends referring to Alexander on contorniates)²¹.

– Impression of some of the designs in incuse. On all four *tesserae* from Series no. 1, the reverse design has been impressed below the surface ‘in intaglio’. Significantly, these technical features are found on a special sub-group of contorniates, the so-called ‘graviert/ingelegt’ series (IV century AD?), which differ in morphology and technique from the ‘regular’ contorniate series and the so-called ‘Kaiserserie’²². In terms of manufacturing techniques, the designs on the ‘graviert/ingelegt’ contorniate issue, which all are in incuse or rendered in engraved outlines, are the examples most comparable with the tokens from Series no. 1, given that this technique is not attested for Roman coins or medals during the early and middle imperial period.

– Metal inlays applied to both sides of the flan. All three *tesserae* from Series no. 1 available for examination (Appendix, 2-4, figs. 2-4) have traces of metal inserts (maybe silvering or gilding) adorning both the obverse and reverse. A number of contorniate specimens from both the ‘regular’ series and the ‘Kaiserserie’ also show metal inlays: these were generally applied on the obverse in order to adorn the main types, as well as the additional symbols (e.g. palm branch, leaf, solar symbol, swastika, trident) that were engraved, scratched or stippled²³.

The techniques used for the manufacture of the bronze *tesserae* thus reflect some of the methods that were implemented in Rome to produce contorniates from the mid-fourth century until the seventies of the fifth century. Moreover, the similarities with the contorniates as well as with some of the variants of the URF issue and the ‘Gloria Romanorum’ series are suggestive of the idea that the tokens from both Series no. 1 and 2 originated from the same workshop, possibly the Roman mint. Yet, the idea that these *tesserae* were produced by private workshops operating in Rome cannot be completely dismissed, due to the limited volume as well as the imagery of the series, which is suggestive of

¹⁸ Mondello 2020, 297-300; Mondello 2021, n. 28.

¹⁹ Alföldi 1951b, 92.

²⁰ Cfr. Alföldi-Alföldi 1976, 1-13, nos. 1-44 (Alexander the Great); Alföldi-Alföldi 1976, 19, no. 64, 93, no. 283, and 157, no. 485 (Hercules and Minerva).

²¹ On this point see Mondello 2020, 284-285.

²² The nomenclature mentioned for this series is that of Mittag 1999, 33, 180; cfr. also Gnechi 1895, 279-83. It is a matter for debate whether these rare contorniate medallions, almost all found in Gaul and Germany, were produced in Rome as with the other contorniate series or elsewhere, specifically in along the Rhine and Danube: cfr. Alföldi 1943, 23-24; Mittag 1999, 33-34, and 180.

²³ Cfr. Mondello 2019.

private interests and sponsorship. Whether Roman citizens and organisations might freely use the official mint to produce coinage themselves – what is known as ‘free coinage’ in modern scholarship – remains an open issue, and no consensus has been reached to date.²⁴ Similarly, one might wonder whether the official mint could be employed at the request of private citizens to create paranumismatic objects for use within small communities. If not created at the Roman mint, the quality of the dies of the tokens discussed here suggests that they were products of a workshop that employed well-trained and skilled engravers.

3. *Christian imagery on tokens: a gaze into early Christian art’s pictorial schemes*

A variety of depictions not otherwise known on coins and medallions are shown on some of the reverses from the two considered token issues. These reverse types are combined with an imperial portrait (Series nos. 1-2) or with the bust of Alexander the Great or a female bust accompanied by the legend ‘Providentia’ on the obverse (Series no. 2). Although associated with the so-called ‘pagan-Christian’ conflict by Alföldi or even interpreted as ‘anti-Christian’, some of these images are regarded here as referring to Christian iconographic themes, and provide a glimpse into the development of emerging Christian art.

On Series no. 1, the reverse types preserved some of the earliest known examples of pictorial schemes experimenting with the representation of saints, whose compositional repertoire largely developed from the fourth century onwards. The image depicted on the token published by Glendining (Appendix, 1, fig. 1), which was once part of the Fröhner collection, bears a figure advancing left carrying a cross over their right shoulder. According to the description provided by Glendining, this subject should be identified as Christ, with the scene referring to the Gospel episode of the ‘Way to Calvary’²⁵. However, this type differs in some details from the earliest known images of Christ or Simon of Cyrene bearing the cross as they appear on the sarcophagus of Domitilla (AD 340)²⁶, the Maskell ivory casket (ca. AD 420-330, Rome?)²⁷ and the wooden doors of the Roman Basilica of Santa Sabina (ca. AD 432-444)²⁸. Unlike Jesus and Simon of Cyrene, the male figure depicted on the token wears garments stylistically characterized, consisting of a singular ear flap hat, and a dalmatic (a long, wide-sleeved tunic with fringes and two vertical stripes of fabric - ‘clavi’ - which served as a luxury liturgical vestment); a similar dalmatic is also worn by the figures on some of the other pieces from Series no. 1. The subject on the Glendining piece might evoke other figures bearing the cross in early Christian art, such as one of the apostles shown on the city-gate sarcophagus in Verona (ca. AD 400)²⁹ or St Lawrence approaching the fire (the instrument of his martyrdom) with all his typical attributes (the processional cross, the psalter, the dalmatic) as depicted in the mosaic of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (AD 425-450)³⁰. The cross and liturgical garments may identify the figure on the token not as Christ, but as a deacon or a saint *lato sensu*, who is portrayed with the symbol of Jesus’ martyrdom.

Also, the reverse image on another token piece from Series no. 1 (Appendix, 2, fig. 2) may be the earliest surviving illustration of an evangelist seated at his desk (‘scriptorium’) while reading or drawing up the Gospel. As far as is known, the other existing examples of this image date from the

²⁴ Around the third century, the creation of currency is described as a prerogative of the State by the jurist Julius Paulus, who states that only striking with the *forma publica* marks the transformation of a piece of metal into a Roman coin: *Dig.* 18, 1, 1, pr. (Paul 33 *ad Ed.*). The possibility for private citizens to produce currency through the official mint would thus appear unlikely for the imperial period. For Republican Rome see Woytek 2016, 188 ff. (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 8, 7, 3, is a key passage cited here).

²⁵ Glendining 1950, 151, pl. LIV, 2190.

²⁶ Schiller 1972, 5 and 231, fig. 1

²⁷ Harley 2011, 114; Lazzara 2019.

²⁸ Spiesser 1991.

²⁹ Schiller 1972, 6 and 231, fig. 4.

³⁰ Cfr. Zovatto 1968, 90-97; Deichmann 1974, 75-78; Rizzardi 1996, 223-225.

sixth century, such as the mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna (ca. AD 525-550)³¹, and the illustrations provided in two illuminated manuscript Gospel Books, i.e. the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (ca. AD 550)³² and the *Gospels of St Augustine* (late 6th century)³³. However, it is quite likely that pictorial examples of the four evangelists at work in the scribal process existed well before the sixth century, given that evangelist portraits were a usual feature of illuminated Gospel books. Such depictions were not limited to the pages of books, but could be found in other media (e.g. ivory plaques, gold glasses). It is thus reasonable to believe that the engraver who carved the bronze token die in early fifth century was inspired by a pictorial scheme that was already canonical in portraying the evangelists.

On the other hand, the reverse type of a bearded old man standing right, holding a *rotulus* in his left hand and raising his right hand to the right in a gesture of acclamation, which is shown on another piece from Series no. 1 (Appendix, 3, fig. 3), is based on the pictorial formula applied to the iconography of evangelists and apostles in early Christian art. This is the case, for example, with the front of the Throne of Maximian, the first Archbishop of Ravenna (AD 546-554), where the four evangelists are portrayed standing around John the Baptist with a variety of acclamation gestures while holding their Gospel books³⁴. The gesture of acclamation, which early Christian artists modelled on the accession *acclamatio* attested in Roman imperial iconography, was also applied to the figures portrayed on some of the fifth century mosaic lunettes of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, which may be possibly represent some of the apostles, given their dress and solemn stature.³⁵ The figure depicted on the token, whose grave aspect and solemnity of pose reveal an origin in classical prototypes of philosophers' portrait-types, might represent one of the four evangelists, portrayed in a more dynamic gesture of acclamation. Alternatively the image may be one of the apostles, whose physiognomic traits and posture were not clearly defined in the very first stage of Christian art³⁶.

The *tesserae* from Series no. 2 present a more varied cluster of reverse images, including some Greco-Roman subjects, such as Hercules and Minerva (Appendix, 7, fig. 7) and a *symplegma* or erotic scene (Appendix, 8), as well as the 'Asina' type, which is accompanied by a Christian legend on some of the preserved specimens.

While the depictions of Hercules and Minerva as well as the erotic scene (a satyr embracing a maenad?) were borrowed from the visual and figurative repertoire of classical myth, a Christian meaning might be found in the mysterious type of the she-donkey and her young. The alleged anti-Christian significance of this image suggested by Alföldi does not fit into any ancient tradition on the charge of onolatry ascribed to Christianity. In fact, this charge mocked Christians for worshipping a donkey's head or a donkey-headed god³⁷. Conversely, the type on tokens consists of two donkeys (a mother and her foal), while the legend *Asina* stresses the female gender of one of the two beasts. While no significant parallel with the *Asina* type can be found in 'pagan' Greco-Roman material culture, the image of a she-donkey with her foal appears in the early-Christian depictions of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This episode is usually represented in one of the two variants depending on the Gospel used: either Jesus riding on a donkey³⁸, or a donkey escorted by a young foal³⁹. Both versions occur on at least 21 known sarcophagi with a 'continuous frieze', all dated

³¹ Bovini 1968, 237-38; Deichmann 1974, 163.

³² *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (designated by Σ or 042 in the Gregory-Aland numbering system), f. 241r.

³³ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Lib. MS. 286, f. 129v.

³⁴ Kitzinger 1977, 96.

³⁵ See Rizzardi 1996, 231 ff.

³⁶ On this point cfr. Pillinger 1994; Giannitrapani 2000, 181; Dijkstra 2016, 8-14.

³⁷ Min. Fel. *Oct.* 9, 28; Tert. *apol.* 16.

³⁸ Mk 11, 1-10; Lk 19, 29-40; Jn 12, 12-15.

³⁹ Mt 21, 1-11.

between the first and last quarter of the fourth century⁴⁰. This demonstrates that the Gospel narrative mentioning the two beasts was used from the period preceding the minting of the *Asina* tokens. In light of this, the donkey with foal on tokens might refer to the mount of the Messiah, which must have had a particular theological or symbolic meaning for the Christian groups who used these tokens. Rather than implying a derisive meaning, the legend ‘Dominus noster Jesus Christus Dei filius’ accompanying the donkey type may have had the function of qualifying the Christian character of the image by evoking the figure of Jesus, the image of whom is never represented on official coins in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. It is noteworthy that this type, which reflects an unknown variation of the iconography of the Gospel episode of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the author’s opinion, is combined with motifs taken from Greco-Roman myth. This iconographic choice seems to imply a singular Christian identity by the users of these objects, which was influenced by Greco-Roman polytheism.

On the whole, the types depicted on the bronze tokens preserve unseen components in the development of some of the experimental pictorial schemes in early Christian art. The iconography attested on the *tesserae* reflect, with a few variations, some of the conventions occurring in funerary sculpture, monumental cycles in mosaics and frescoes, as well as luxury artefacts (e.g. ivory carvings, such as caskets and diptychs) that were produced in Italy and the Roman West over the fourth and fifth centuries, and afterwards on sixth century illuminated manuscripts from the Byzantine East. The evidence reveals a developing Christian pictorial repertoire that circulated from West to East and vice versa. Parallels in iconography and the compositional arrangement of scenes across media also raise the possibility that models were developed and transmitted among artisans as sketches, which may have taken the form of manuscripts, pattern books, or may have occurred via other methods of direct copying within the workshop.

4. *Why issue Christian tesserae and who were they for?*

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), some clues can help shed light on the distribution context as well as the users of the two token groups.

As for Series no. 1, the reverse types referring to the cult of saints allows us to exclude a ludic function. In particular, the figure bearing a cross on the Glendinning specimen evokes the dramatic Gospel episode of the Way to Calvary, a story central to the biblical narrative of the Passion of Christ. This iconography and, by association, the object on which it is portrayed, had a serious dogmatic meaning, which is far from suitable for gaming tokens. In regards to the ‘*Asina*’ tokens, the donkey type should refer, as outlined above, to the mount of Jesus mentioned in the Gospel episode of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This image presupposes an in-depth knowledge of Christian culture, which seems difficult to ascribe to groups supporting Hellenistic and Roman religion. Moreover, the donkey and her colt as a mount of Jesus attracted attention by the biblical exegetes from Justin Martyr, who interpreted the she-donkey mother as the Synagogue of the Jews and her young colt as the ‘pagan’ people, subject to the yoke of Christ and converted to true faith⁴¹. Since the she-donkey and foal motif as the mount of the Messiah did not constitute one of the symbolic images of Christianity nor did it allude to the charge of onolatry, Alföldi’s idea about the use of the *Asina* tokens as anti-Christian medals by pagan circles in Rome is unlikely.

⁴⁰ For an overview on the sarcophagi with a ‘continuous frieze’ bearing the depictions of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem cfr. Mondello 2020, 287 (with earlier literature).

⁴¹ Just. *Tryph.* 53, 1. On this point, see Ciccarese 2002, 155-176. Moreover, the interpretation of the donkey as a symbol of pagans by the Christian exegesis also applies to other Biblical passages mentioning this animal, which is explained as an allegory of the pagan people becoming a mount of Jesus: see, for example, Or. *hom.* 15, 3; Ambr. *Abr.* 1, 8, 71.

The choice of imagery and the the small volume of both issues seem to imply two different local Christian groups active in Rome, who employed these objects within their communities as devotional items (*devotionalia*) or for ritual/community purposes.

The images of evangelists and saints shown on Series no. 1 appear indicative of an ‘institutional’ Christianity, as they fit the localism of the fourth-century Roman Church and its developing cult of saints and relics. In addition to the tokens, archaeological evidence and applied arts show that cultic veneration was increasingly paid to saints and martyrs on an official and ‘institutional’ basis from the second half of the fourth century, especially in Rome. This is attested not only by sarcophagi and mosaics – which furnish the richest source of evidence for the representations of saints in early Christianity – but also by a range of Christian gold-glass vessels (the so-called ‘fondi d’oro’) and bronze medallions,⁴² which were probably used both for domestic and liturgical purposes. This increased attention to the evangelists and the apostles in art (with both groups gradually portrayed with more individualised features) occurred in conjunction with the emergence of the official iconographies of the *crux invicta* and the *traditio legis* after AD 350.⁴³ Such new pictorial schemes not only embodied feelings of piety on behalf of Christian devotees, but also clearly helped to separate emerging Christian art and iconography from the ‘pagan’ culture of classical antiquity. Moreover, Roman numerals and Latin letters on Series no. 1 are suggestive of a practical function. The information provided by the Roman numerals and Latin letters on the tokens, which must have been intelligible to the recipients, could have had the purpose of expressing a value or giving an indication for the purpose of the token on the occasion of liturgical events or services connected to community life.

The arrangement of the motifs on Series no. 2 combining the ‘Asina’ type, which is considered here as a Christian motif, with depictions drawn from Greco-Roman history and mythology might instead refer to ‘non-canonical’ Christian groups, maybe Gnostic Christians who were influenced by Hellenism. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Christian apologists and writers inform us of the existence of Gnostic Christian groups, including the Borborites, whose worship incorporated elements of the pagan myth and sexual rituals⁴⁴. As seen above, this combination of elements placed between ‘pagan’ and Christian as well as between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ is also significantly evoked by some of the images on the ‘Asina’ tokens. Moreover, the prominence of Alexander’s portraits on the obverse of the *Asina* tokens fits the reception of legend of the Macedonian king by some Christian circles from the fourth century. A homily of John Chrisostom, which dates back to AD 387-388, condemns those from the Christian community of Antioch who ‘tie bronze coins of Alexander the Macedonian around their head and feet’⁴⁵. Some 4th century literary works of supposedly Christian character, such as the *Commonitorium Palladii* and *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, focused on the history and myth of the Macedonian king, who was considered as a sort of prophet inspired by Brahmins’ philosophy⁴⁶. Alexander’s images depicted on the *Asina* tokens probably constituted one of the first attempts to Christianize the figure of the Macedonian king in the Latin West, the stories of whom were later transferred into the medieval Christian and Arab world. Through their legends and imagery, the ‘Asina’ tokens probably reflected messages and ideas by Gnostic Christians active in Rome, fostering a sense of community and contributing to the formation and expression of one of the many Christian identities in late antiquity.

Although the actual function of the tokens is difficult to identify due to the lack of any reference to these objects in literary sources, further archaeological or archival finds might be able to solve this point, allowing us to discover more information about the entire iconographic cycle of these two token issues and their purpose.

⁴² For instance, see the Roman bronze medallions showing Peter and Paul *in concordia* published by Huskinson 1982, 51-9, which are probably to be assigned to the fourth century.

⁴³ Huskinson 1982, 62.

⁴⁴ Epiph. *Pan.* 26, 2, 2; 26, 5, 2; 26, 10, 6; 26, 11, 9.

⁴⁵ Jo. Chrys. *ad illum. catech.* 2, 5 = PG 49, 240.

⁴⁶ Cfr. Cracco Ruggini 1965, 21-54; Di Serio 2018.

APPENDIX

Where the information is available, diameter and weight of the token specimens are provided.

1. Fig. 1
AE, no recorded data.
Obv.: D N ARCAD-IVS P F AVG, pearl and rosette diademed, draped and cuirassed bust of Arcadius, r.
Rev.: Figure advancing l. carrying a cross over right shoulder, all in incuse; symbols engraved on either side: II in l. field, P in r. field.
References: de Belfort 1892, 131, pl. V, 8 (Fröhner coll.); Glendining 1950, lot 2190; *RIC X*, 1272 n; Mondello 2021, cat. no. 1.
2. Fig. 2
Paris: BnF, 17082. AE, Ø 19.06 mm; 3.09 g.
Obv.: D N ARCAD-IVS P F AVG, pearl and rosette diademed, draped and cuirassed bust of Arcadius, r.
Rev.: Youthful male figure seated l., reading a *codex* held in his hands, all in incuse; symbols engraved on either side: X in l. field, E in r. field.
References: Alföldi 1975, Taf. 7,12.14; Mondello 2021, cat. no. 2.
3. Fig. 3
Bologna: Museo Civico Archeologico, MCABo 53828. AE, Ø 21 mm; 4.67 g.
Obv.: D N HONVR-IVS (*sic*) P F AVG, pearl and rosette diademed, draped and cuirassed bust of Honorius, r.
Rev.: Bearded mature male figure standing r., looking back l., raising his r. hand and holding a *rotulus* in his l. hand, flanked by two palm trees, all in incuse; XIII incised in the exergue.
References: Alföldi 1975, Taf. 7,13.15; Mondello 2021, cat. no. 3.
4. Fig. 4
London: British Museum, 1844,0425.2592. AE, Ø 19 mm; 2.22 g.
Obv.: D N ARCAD-IVS P F AVG, pearl and rosette diademed, draped and cuirassed bust of Arcadius, r.
Rev.: Quadruped standing l. with long neck, flanked by two palm trees, all in incuse; XIII incised in the exergue.
References: Kent 1988, pl. I, no. 6; Mondello 2021, cat. no. 4.
5. Fig. 5
Once Paris: BnF. AE, Ø 20 mm; 3.05 g.
Obv.: ALEXSA-DRI, bust of Alexander the Great left, wearing a lion skin, its paws knotted on his chest.
Rev.: D N IHV XPS DEI FILI-VS, donkey standing right suckling a foal, with a scorpion above.
References: de Montfaucon 1719, 372-73, pl. 168; Alföldi 1951a, 61, no. 5; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 1, pl. 23, 1.
6. Fig. 6
Paris: BnF, 17375. AE, Ø 16 mm; 3.19 g.
Obv.: ALEXA-ND [...], bust of Alexander the Great right, wearing a lion skin.
Rev.: Donkey standing right suckling a foal, with a scorpion above.

References: Alföldi 1951a, 61, no. 4; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 2, pl. 23, 2.

7.

Fig. 7

Paris: BnF, 17377. AE, Ø 16 mm; 2.80 g.

Obv.: ALEX-XANDR, bust of Alexander the Great right, wearing a lion skin.

Rev.: Hercules standing left holding a club in his right hand and extending his left hand to Minerva, who stands on the right, holding a spear in her left hand, with a shield at her feet.

References: Alföldi 1951b, 93, no. 9; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 3, pl. 23, 3.

8.

Once Paris: BnF. AE, Ø 12 mm, 1.80 g.

Obv.: ALEXS-ANDRI, bust of Alexander the Great right, wearing a lion's skin over his head, its paws knotted on his chest.

Rev.: Erotic scene showing an ithyphallic man standing left, who touches the back of a woman right, leaning against a vase, with her head turned back towards the man.

References: Alföldi 1951b, 94, no. 10; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 4, pl. 23, 4.

9.

Once Paris: BnF. AE, Ø 11 mm; 1.15 g.

Obv.: D N V [...], laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of a Roman emperor.

Rev.: Donkey standing right suckling a foal, with a scorpion above.

References: Alföldi 1951b, 92, no. 6; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 5, pl. 23, 5.

10.

Once Paris: BnF. AE, no data recorded.

Obv.: D N VA [...] S (?) P F AVG, draped and diademed bust of a Roman emperor (Valentinian II or III?), right.

Rev.: Donkey standing right suckling a foal, with a scorpion above. This piece is missing the legend D N IHV XPS DEI FILI-VS, or the legend was erased.

References: Alföldi 1951b, 92, no. 8; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 6.

11.

Fig. 8

Once Tanini collection. AE, no data recorded.

Obv.: D N HONORI-VS P F AVG, pearl-diademed, draped, and cuirassed bust of Honorius, right.

Rev.: ASINA, donkey standing right suckling a foal.

References: Tanini 1791, 352, pl. VIII; Alföldi 1951a, 59-61, no. 2; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 7, pl. 23, 6.

12.

Fig. 9

London: British Museum, 1922,0317.164.b. AE, Ø 15 mm, 1.25 g.

Obv.: D N HONORI-VS P F AVG, pearl-diademed, draped, and cuirassed bust of Honorius, right.

Rev.: ASINA, donkey standing right suckling a foal.

References: Kent 1988, 291, no. 14; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 8, pl. 24, 7.

13.

Fig. 10

London: British Museum, 1940,0401.57. AE, Ø 14 mm; 2.04 g.

Obv.: PROVI-DENTIA R M, female bust with a crown ending in a crescent shape (Isis?)
right, R M below the bust.

Rev.: ROMA, donkey standing right suckling a foal, with a scorpion above.

References: Alföldi 1951a, 61, no. 3; Mondello 2020, cat. no. 9, pl. 24, 8.



Fig. 1. AE token. Not to scale. Source: Glendining 1950, pl. 54, 2190. © Glendining & Co., Ltd.



Fig. 2. AE token (Ø 19.06 mm, 3.09 g). Paris: BnF, 17082. © BnF, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques.



Fig. 3. AE token (Ø 21 mm; 4.67 g). Bologna: Museo Civico Archeologico, MCABo 53828. © Museo Civico Archeologico of Bologna.



Fig. 4. AE token (Ø 19 mm; 2.22 g). London: British Museum, 1844,0425.2592. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 5. AE token. Source: de Montfaucon 1719, pl. 168.



Fig. 6. AE token (Ø 16 mm; 3.19 g). Paris: BnF, 17375. © BnF, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques.



Fig. 7. AE token (Ø 16 mm; 2.80 g). Paris: BnF, 17377. © BnF, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques.



Fig. 8. AE token. Not to scale. Source: Tanini 1791, 352, pl. VIII.



Fig. 9. AE token (Ø 15 mm, 1.25 g). London: British Museum, 1922,0317.164.b. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 10. AE token (Ø 14 mm; 2.04 g). London: British Museum, 1940,0401.57. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 11. AE coin repurposed as a token (Ø 18mm, 2.14g). Paris: BnF, 17081. © BnF, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques.



Fig. 12. Copper alloy coin, 'Urbs Roma Felix' issue (1.79 g). London: British Museum, 1951,1115.840. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Abbreviations

PG 49 = J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 49, Parisiis, 1862.

RIC X = R.A.G. Carson, J.P.C. Kent, A.M. Burnett (eds.), *The Roman Imperial Coinage. Volume X. The Divided Empire and the Fall of the Western Parts AD 395-491*, London, 1994.

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