

Tokens and the Reproduction of Divinities in Hellenistic and Roman Sicily: Some Preliminary Case Studies

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Introduction

A token can be defined as a small object, variously shaped (circle, square, rectangle, etc.), produced and distributed by a private, commercial or state authority, normally used instead of money to exchange objects, obtain specific rights/privileges in certain contexts or communities, or to approve a payment as a receipt. We still use tokens in daily-life. For instance, if we are at the theatre and need to store our coat before a performance starts, an operator gives us a token with a number or code on it. This token has to be returned to the operator to get the coat back. Moreover, tokens are often distributed in hotels to obtain special services or free drinks. A more intangible form of tokens is represented by Bitcoins, which are now used in online transactions as an alternative, virtual currency.¹

Tokens have been produced since protohistoric times, serving as an easy calculation system which preceded alphabetic symbols and numbers. In the Classical world, these artefacts were still produced; tokens in this period were mostly monetiform objects. Called *symbola* in Greek and sometimes *tesserae* by the Romans, they were extremely widespread in the Mediterranean world. Tokens in the Mediterranean were made from a variety of materials (clay, lead, bronze, oricalcum, bone, ivory, etc.). They usually bear iconography, legends or symbols that have significant links to the economic, social, civic and religious aspects of the communities in which the token was produced and circulated. A short (but not exhaustive) outline of this phenomenon can help us to contextualise token production in the broad Mediterranean context.²

Lead and clay tokens were issued in Athens and showed a variety of religious symbols, Greek legends and even the names of commanders. In the Middle East Palmyra is well-known for its production of clay tokens (fig. 1), which carry religious and civic iconographies (divinities, priests, symbols and legends in Palmyrene language); these *tesserae* were used to access local banquets. We also know some small clay discs reproducing Hellenistic coin types were circulating in Syria. Substantial numbers of Roman lead *tesserae* were discovered during works along the banks of the river Tiber in Rome, and during excavations in Ostia. However, many issues concerning this complex phenomenon are still unresolved; much has been neglected by scholars and further investigation is necessary.³

Since 2016 the *Token Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean* project has been running at the University of Warwick a research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC), which will end in 2021. The on-going project aims to understand the role



Fig. 1: A typical banquet *tessera* from Palmyra (Syria).

of tokens in ancient communities in the Mediterranean from the Classical period to the 3rd century AD, focusing on a selection of thematic and geographical case studies.

This paper presents some preliminary results on the *tesserae* found in Sicily and recently 're-discovered' in the island's museums. Research has been carried out within the *Token Communities* ERC project between 2016 and 2019. In particular, we seek to outline two limited sets of archaeological finds, found in the province of Palermo and Messina. These tokens were produced at *Makella-Marineo* and *Tyndaris-Tindari* (fig. 2).

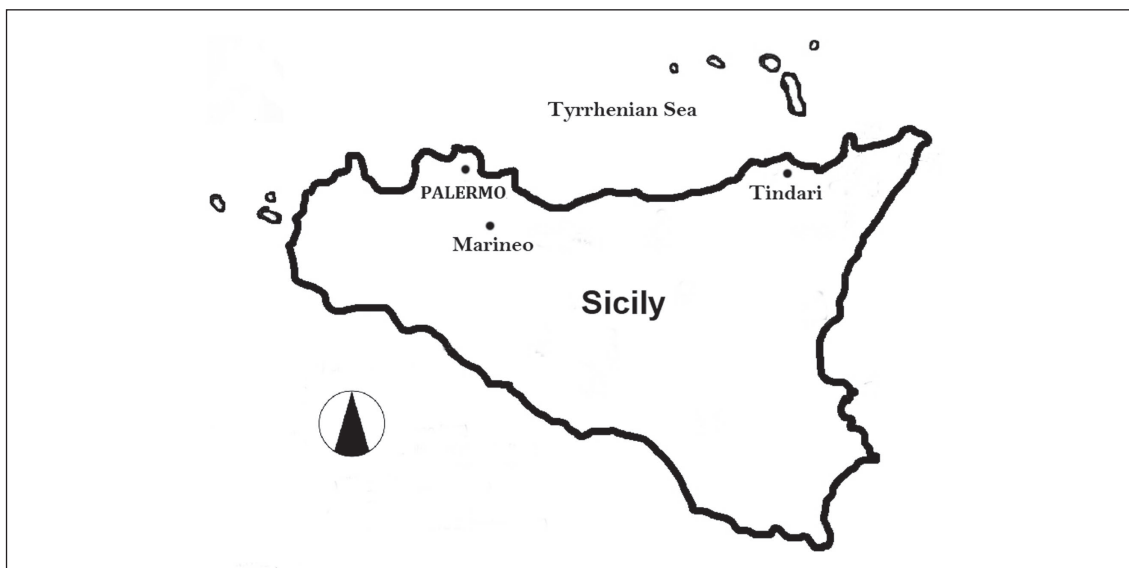


Fig. 2: Map of Sicily, showing the sites of Marineo (Palermo) and Tindari (Messina).

They provide essential data on token production in Sicily, which has never been studied before. Second, as small monetiform objects, they offer information on local religion in the region.⁴

Makella's Tokens: Directly Reproducing Demeter

Marineo (fig. 3), a small town ca. 40 km south-east from Palermo and 14 km east from Santa Cristina Gela, was of interest to antiquarian scholars. For instance, G. Calderone published a substantial monograph on Marineo at the end of nineteenth century, when the archaeological potential of "La Montagnola" was already known. More recently, I. Tamburello performed excavations between the 1960s and the 1970s. On that occasion, the local city council was planning to widen the small cemetery of Marineo close to the archaeological site. F. Spatafora continued investigations in the 1990s. We know that the archaeological structures and houses discovered correspond to the Sicilian settlement of *Makella*, whose name is reported on many tiles found on the site



Fig. 3: View of Marineo.



Fig. 4: Clay token from *Makella*-Marineo (Courtesy of Museo Archeologico “A. Salinas” Palermo, inv. n. 65041).

(ΜΑΚΕΛΛΑ). Historical sources are scarce and only report that *Makella* was conquered by the Romans in 260 B.C. (Pol. 1, 24.3) and revolted against them in 211 B.C. (Liv. 26, 21.14).⁵

Most trenches were opened by Tamburello and Spatafora to partially explore the settlement; they uncovered housing areas, walls and few necropoleis. It is not entirely clear when the early centre of the settlement was founded, but it can be inferred that *Makella* had a vital role in commercial activities in the Eleuterio River valley even before the 7th century BC. As far as we know, the site, which requires more in-depth investigations, had several different phases: a) Archaic and Classical (7th–4th century BC); b) Hellenistic (3rd–1st century BC); c) Medieval (6th–12th century AD). Among the small finds a fairly good number of tokens emerged in the last twentieth-century excavations.⁶

We have currently ‘re-discovered’ 22 unpublished finds from Marineo in two different Sicilian institutions: 17 tokens are preserved at the Palermo Museum and 5 are kept at the Civic Museum of Marineo (the “Museo della Valle dell’Eleuterio”). These *teserae* have moderately standard physical characteristics. They are stamped small discs of purified light orange clay; each disc has fairly regular dimensions (Ø ca. 30 mm).⁷

The reverse is always blank; the obverse shows a recurring iconography, namely a draped female figure standing and holding two torches. It certainly depicts Demeter searching for her daughter Persephone (or Kore), ready to descend into the underworld with her torches; these are one of the most common attributes of the goddess and also appear on Sicilian coins (e.g. the *Menaenum*-Mineo mint) (fig. 5). On the left there is a Greek legend – vertically arranged in two or three lines – which is difficult to read due to its tiny dimensions (ca. 3 mm) and the worn state of most of the tokens. In terms of



Fig. 5: Bronze coin of *Menaeum* showing a veiled head of Demeter and two crossed torches (Roman period).

dating, Marineo's tokens might be considered Hellenistic (4th–3rd century BC?), even if it is hard to determine conclusively a specific date: no specimen can be linked to stratigraphical data relevant to the Hellenistic phases of *Makella*. Of the two tokens with recorded findspots, one was a surface find and the other was found in a medieval layer. However, the Greek legend arranged in a similar manner to Hellenistic coins.⁸

As a goddess of agriculture, Demeter was popular in Sicily, not only in the main centres (e.g. Enna and Selinunte), but also in the inner and less urbanised regions, where grain cultivation and harvesting made her cult and ritual practices widespread. The search of Demeter for her daughter Persephone, who has been kidnapped by Hades and brought in the underworld, echoes the plantation, growth and harvest of cereals. Festivals in honor of Demeter were common in Sicily, Magna Graecia and Greece, and celebrated the goddess through sacrifices and initiation ceremonies, like the *Thesmophoria*, *Katagoge* and *Eleusinian Mysteries*. We also have a significant record of sanctuaries that have preserved votive deposits in Classical and Hellenistic Sicily.⁹

Tyndaris' Token: Reproducing the Dioscuri Indirectly

Tindari (fig. 6) is today a small town on the Tyrrhenian Sea, ca. 60 km from Messina in the municipality of Patti. It was founded in 396 BC by Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse, and conquered by the Romans in 254 BC (Diod. 14, 78, 5–6; 23 18, 5). From its beginnings ancient *Tyndaris* had a strong link to the Dioscuri, as the centre's name clearly proves: Tyndareus, mythical king of Sparta, was the father of Castor and stepfather of



Fig. 6: View of Tindari's promontory and the Tyrrhenian Sea.



Fig. 7: Bronze coin of *Tyndaris* showing a veiled head of Demeter and two caps of the Dioscuri with stars (Roman period).



Fig. 8: Clay token from Tindari's necropolis, found in 1896.

Pollux. The city's founders imported the cult of the sacred twins to the new colony, and the veneration of Castor and Pollux continued into the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as coins and mosaics at the *insula* IV quarter vividly demonstrate. In particular *Tyndaris'* coinage shows a substantial record of imagery linked to the Dioscuri (protectors of knights and sailors), who are represented directly as standing warriors or on horseback, or indirectly by symbols, like their caps (fig. 7).¹⁰

Two stylised caps of the Dioscuri also appear on a small clay token recently discovered among the small finds of Tindari's Antiquarium (fig. 8). Originally found in the excavations of the ancient necropolis directed by Antonino Salinas (1841–1914), Director of the Museum of Palermo, the specimen is an *unicum* so far. As with the tokens of Marineo, Tindari's *tessera* is a stamped disc of small purified orange clay (Ø: 34.59 mm; weight: 7.18 g) with a blank reverse. The caps of the two Dioscuri are represented as small ellipses with two crosses or stars above. The stars were symbols of the twins' rebirth.

As already mentioned, Tindari's token was found in late nineteenth-century excavations, when stratigraphical methods were not yet adopted in Sicily. Since we do not

know exactly in which stratum the token was discovered, the lack of such information makes stratigraphical dating method impossible. However, we can use other dating criteria. In particular, a coin issue of *Tyndaris*, dated to the second half of 1st century BC, shows an iconography which is very similar to that on the clay token. This might be used as a cogent dating comparison.¹¹

Conclusion

This paper has presented two sets of archaeological finds, which represent only a limited record of token production in Sicily. This subject is currently under investigation and needs further analysis. Nevertheless, our preliminary data offer much information on the process by which divine imagery was reproduced on a fairly new (and previously neglected) class of archaeological artefacts in Hellenistic and Roman Sicily.

Marineo's tokens provide further evidence on the cult of Demeter in the inner areas of the Palermo province, where Greek and Hellenistic cults found close connections with local (and also indigenous) traditions. All the Demeter tokens have emerged from *Makella*'s archaeological site. The number of tokens discovered so far is remarkable and has to be connected to a well-established diffusion on a local scale, the duration of which we do not know. In terms of production, *tesserae* stamps have not been found. This occurs very rarely: a stamp to produce so-called 'terracotta coins' ('monete di terracotta') has been discovered at Metapontum, but this appears to be an *unicum*. Even if the tokens of *Makella* seem to have a very narrow area of circulation, we cannot exclude the suggestion that further tokens might be found in other neighbouring centres in future excavations.¹²

Demeter also had a dominant role in a variety of ceremonies and religious services, like the Eleusinian Mysteries. It might be argued that the ancient city of *Makella* could be involved in such rites or festivals, in which Demeter was locally venerated and tokens might be used to obtain certain privileges within those events, or perhaps produced as votive objects. Although we do not have any archaeological evidence of a sacred area dedicated to Demeter at *Makella*, the city's inhabitants might have used a suburban sanctuary, the remains of which have not been discovered yet.

Although Tindari's *tessera* is so far unique, it adds further evidence to the cult of the Dioscuri in the city, whose community maintained local traditions. The Dioscuri's veneration was evidently common among sailors, since *Tyndaris* was a small centre on the Tyrrhenian coast and its economy was largely based on maritime activities (i.e. commerce and fishing), as well as on agriculture. Thus, local festivals and ceremonies dedicated to the Dioscuri were presumably common at Tindari and this small clay disc might be used to obtain specific privileges within those events, as occurred for instance in Palmyra with the banquet *tesserae*. As an alternative, the token might be used as an obol of Charon.¹³

Only further investigations in museums and a full analysis and publication of finds may offer a more detailed and thorough outline of this remarkable (and often neglected) class of material, which has significance for archaeology, history, numismatics, religion and local traditions.

Notes

¹ On new tokens and Bitcoins see: Wilding et al. 2017.

² On protohistoric tokens from Middle East see: Schmandt-Besserat 1992.

³ On Roman *tesserae* from the River Tiber see: Rostovtzeff 1903. On clay coin reproductions see: Milne 1939, 93–100. Contributions on Palmyra’s clay tokens are substantial; we only mention: Ingholt et al. 1955; Raja 2015, 165–186. On Athenian tokens see: Kroll 1977, 141–146; Kroll – Mitchel 1980, 86–96; Gkikaki 2019.

⁴ All archaeological materials are under publication by the author, including tokens from Marineo (Palermo) and other sites. He will fully publish more detailed and extensive articles (including relevant find catalogues) soon, assessing a variety of finds from Sicilian museums. For instance, a new article analyses a novel clay token from the archaeological excavations of Tindari’s necropolis (1896): Crisà 2019.

⁵ Calderone 1892, part II, 105–126; Tamburello 1969, 78–82; Tamburello 1970, 31–38; Tamburello 1991, 365–375; Spatafora 1993/1994, 1187–1198; Spatafora 1997, 111–136; Spatafora – De Simone 2007; De Simone 2015, 105–120.

⁶ Tamburello 1988, 23–29; Tamburello 1991, 366–373; Spatafora 1997, 131–136; Spatafora 2000, 895–918.

⁷ As said, a detailed paper and relevant find catalogue is currently under publication by the author. At present, we only have scant references to these tokens: Tamburello 1972, 40; Tamburello 1983, 63; Tamburello 1988, 45; Tamburello 1991, 370; Spatafora 1993/1994, 1195; De Simone 1997, 225–226, 233, nos. V1–V3.

⁸ On *Menaeum*’s coin see: Gabrici 1927, 145, nos. 13–20, pl. 7, n 34; De Simone 1997, 225 f.: however, the author had dated these artefacts to 375–50 B.C; Spatafora 1997, 117 f.

⁹ Ciaceri 1911, 3–5; Burkert 1985, 160–161; De Angeli 1988, 844–847. 891 f.; Graves 1992, 89–92; Hinz 1998; Chirassi Colombo 2008, 25–43; Sfameni Gasparro 2008, 25–40; Zoppi 2015, 25–43.

¹⁰ Burkert 1985, 212 f.; Crisà 2008, 235–268; Gulletta 2011, 606–654. On *insula* IV excavations and mosaics see: Bernabò Brea – Cavalier 1965, 205–209; Spigo 2005, 52–54.

¹¹ Calciati 1983: I, 83, n. 26; Crisà 2018, TIND.7.90, 319; TIND.7.91, 323; Crisà 2019.

¹² Mannino 2002, 286 f.

¹³ It can be inferred that more tokens might be kept in the storehouses of the local Superintendence of Messina, which we could not investigate due to a lack of permission. Moreover, archaeologists might unearth other similar specimens at Tindari in the future. On the token, used as an obol of Charon, see: Crisà 2019.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Ingholt et al. 1955, pl. 14, n. 252. – Fig. 2: by the author. – Fig. 3: by the author. – Fig. 4: photo by I. Carollo. – Fig. 5: Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 130, 4 January 2006, lot n. 163. – Fig. 6: by the author. – Fig. 7: Bertolami Fine Arts – ACR Auctions, E-Auction 49, 12 November 2017, lot n. 338. – Fig. 8: Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. Messina, with no inv. n.; photo by the author.

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