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# The Animal Tokens of Rome



An example of a token

## Introduction

Tokens are coin-like objects from the Roman World, often made of lead, and of varying sizes. Unlike coins, they were privately produced as opposed to made by the state. While hundreds of tokens have been found, very little is known about their purpose. Moreover, only one catalogue has been produced, which is written in Latin, and so an additional part of my project is translating relevant sections to English. This can be accessed at [go.warwick.ac.uk/tokens/resources/](http://go.warwick.ac.uk/tokens/resources/). I focused on those showing images pertaining to Roman spectacles involving animals (called *venationes*), hunting, and chariot racing. These events were very important in the Roman era, and as suggested by Juvenal, all the Roman people desired was “bread and circuses” (*Satires X*).

## Methodology

I began by studying tokens in the British Museum, and then compared their iconography to similar depictions from the Roman World from various museums in London, Rome, and Naples. By noticing similarities in iconography, I better understood the significance behind the images on tokens, as well as the multitude of roles animals could play across the Roman World.

## Hunting

Hunting was a popular elite sport, and images of hunting are common on mosaics. Similar depictions are seen on tokens showing a hunter equipped with a spear attacking a boar. Perhaps these tokens were commemorative, invitations to a hunt, or they may have been distributed at the games, since boars were also hunted within the amphitheatre.



A mosaic depicting hunting

## The Games

A wide variety of animals were both used in the Roman games, and are visible on tokens. Elephants are commonly depicted on tokens, and are also seen on coins, where they were symbols of the emperor’s might and generosity, due to their size. Therefore they were common representations of the games as a whole. Moreover, elephants are recorded in literature, for example Cicero (*ad fam VII, 1.3*) tells us that during the games put on by Pompey in 55BC, the audience felt compassion for the animals.

Literature suggests the purpose of these tokens. Martial, a Roman satirical poet says: “now a large number of tessera allots animals which were watched...now a bird rejoices to fall into a safe lap, and is assigned owners by lottery in its absence to save it from being ripped apart.” (*Epigrams 8.78.7-12*). *Tessera* is the Latin word commonly believed to refer to these lead tokens. While disgusting, this provided a way to feed the populous, and deal with waste that would otherwise be left to take up space. Tokens could also commemorate a day out at the games, especially if it was a special occasion such as an anniversary, but their use to distribute meat from animals slaughtered in the arena seems to be a logical conclusion, especially since tokens have been found depicting birds, as is mentioned in this extract.



A coin depicting an elephant fighting a big cat

## Chariot Racing

Chariot racing was perhaps the most popular sporting event for the Romans. Within art, many objects show horses pulling chariots, and indeed the same imagery can be seen on tokens. Therefore tokens could be entry tickets for chariot racing events. Some show horses alongside palm branches, a clear sign of victory, suggesting they were made to commemorate a successful day out at the races, or perhaps they are connected with betting, as we know the Romans, like today, would bet on horses.



A wax mould showing a horse and palm branch, as can be seen on tokens



A token and a lamp showing a similar image of a chariot race



## Conclusion

Animals in the Roman world had important roles in entertainment. Tokens are likely to have been distributed on these occasions, in part to distribute meat. Tokens could also have commemorated hunts, games, or chariot races, and could have been used as part of betting in the latter. Like the animals themselves, tokens may have had a multitude of possible roles.

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