



Marco Malvagio - poorly explained history stuff @MalvagioMarco *Fri Jun 10 15:40:29 +0000*

2022

Our understanding of the past is fragmentary.

Most of *everything* is lost, and we're left with great, fascinating mysteries.

But today let's talk about a small, weird mystery.

■■A THREAD ABOUT ROMAN SEX TOKENS■■

(very mildly NSFW) <https://t.co/H7oJh8yA0C>



(note: those in the pic above are modern replicas, since I couldn't find as good a picture of the originals, but they give you the right idea)

The romans left us plenty of confusing bullshit, both in their writings and in their artifacts.

Including this set of coin-sized metal tokens, with sexual acts depicted on one side and roman numerals (with a couple exceptions) on the obverse.

Here, some found in pompeii: <https://t.co/D9WbOsCe0D>



Romans used a lot of tokens, made of metal or clay and probably wood, for a variety of purposes - for example the free distribution of food in Rome and (probably) as admission tickets to theatres.

But what were the sex ones for?

The NSFW tokens were called (in modern times, we don't know how romans called them) "spintriae", latin slang for male prostitutes.

We found only a few of them - it's difficult to get the precise number because historians, strangely, don't seem to care much about this vital topic.

We know, however, that they were minted in a short time, during the early empire, and a lot of them were minted together.

While rare, they were found from London to Pompeii, so for a while they got around!

It's also a reminder of how interconnected the roman empire was.

So, what were the sexy coins for?

Besides showing off the romans' favourite sex acts - they liked their threesomes and blowjobs, but that we already knew, we have plenty of full-color proof, like this from pompeii. <https://t.co/AV2GZH3TaN>



(Incidentally, some papers claim all the acts on the tokens are het, others are less certain - some look pretty gay to me. And the one thing about which I'll never, ever trust historians is admitting ancient gays were gay)

You might easily find a pop-history explanation that they were used to purchase services in brothels - with the erotic picture showing the requested sex act, kind of like a menu, and the number its cost.

That could be convenient in the large, cosmopolitan roman cities, where customers wouldn't always speak the local language.

Also, there's a dubious text claiming it was forbidden to pay for prostitutes with the emperor's effigy (which was on all regular coins).

This interpretation is often presented as fact, especially by media who like to call ANCIENT BROTHEL any place where any roman ever drew a dick (which, like modern people, romans did A LOT.)

There's not much proof of this hypothesis, though, and most modern historians doubt it.

To begin with, the sexual act and the number are unrelated: the same scene can be found with different numbers, with no apparent pattern.

The cost range - 1 to 16 - would be strange, too: we kind of know how much brothel services cost, and the lower numbers would be cheap, the higher numbers unusually high (there were highly paid sex workers, but they didn't work in brothels).

Another hypothesis is that they were "locker tokens" for public baths - mostly because public baths *did* have very explicit frescoes in the locker room, probably to help customers remember where they put their stuff.

"by the threesome" is easier than "locker 114", admittedly.

There's no clear evidence for this, however, and tbth it seems impractical to me.

Maybe I'm missing something, but the whole point was that you went naked into the baths, so where would you carry the token? Just kept it in your hands? It looks very inconvenient.

I find more convincing the possibility that they were gaming pieces!

There's no clear evidence for this, but we know romans loved board games, and since literary authors were snob, we know nothing about most of their games.

It would explain the 1-16 range - they're like the cards in a deck, not like coins, so the numbers have no specific pattern. And the sexual scene might just be middle-schooler humor, like porn-themed gaming cards. Maybe it was a fad for a while.

One piece of evidence that the sexual imagery wasn't actually very meaningful is that there are two similar (far more commonly found) sets of tokens, numbered 1-16, one with imperial family portraits, one with conventional non-sexual pictures, a bit like playing cards.

This similarity suggests the sexy set *was for the same thing*, as the regular ones, but doesn't prove it was a board game.

One author specifically suggests the sex-themed set and the boring set were used in the same game, to mark the pieces of two different players.

Not super-convincing, but I like it.

"I'll take emperors, you take sex"

(also, I really want to see people playing that game. "I SEE YOUR THREESOME, AND RAISE YOU A FELLATIO!")

One more theory is that they were all sets of "festival coins" - basically monopoly money, with the silly obverse making clear they weren't real money.

The small amount of these tokens, and short time interval of their creation, makes them look like some short-lived fad.

So, long story short: we don't know, and likely never will.

We have so much information about the roman empire, sometimes it's easy to forget how small a fraction of the whole thing it is.

We try to piece together a world, as vast and complex as our own, from the bits and pieces and miraculously arrived to us through the millenia.

It's amazing, how much we learnt!

But it's like having a single page, patched together from scraps, out of a whole library.

Still, I like this small mystery.

We don't get the point of these tokens, and still I think they give us a glimpse of the real, lived-in early roman empire in many ways.

These tokens remind us how far and easily people and things travelled.

How casual romans were about sex compared to a modern public.

How they had an irreverent streak in their culture which gets easily lost in the Very Serious depiction of Rome, all marble, armies and gravitas.

Well, that's it! If you have your own pet theory about these tokens, feel free to write it here, I'm curious, and it's not like one more hypothesis can hurt.

And if you like absolutely irrelevant rambling about history and occasionally physics, I do them sometimes!

Well, very rarely, I have ADHD after all.

<https://linktr.ee/Malvagio>

Fortunately, we live in a more enlightened age, and we don't waste our time and energies on juvenile humor.

Pic unrelated. **<https://t.co/rACCfdCmHC>**



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