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Shipping Tesserae from Ostia and Minturnae?

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[PLATES 16-19]

ON TWO occasions, some years ago, coin dealers in Rome showed me groups of small, square, single-sided, bronze *tesserae*, with a variety of types, which they said were usually found in Ostia, and allowed me to make casts of them.² Simon Keay and I recently discussed these pieces, and agreed that it was probable that they were used in some way in the working of the ports of Rome,³ and I have therefore sought out the material I present here, in order to better understand the phenomenon.

These *tesserae* are poorly documented in museum collections. Most of the specimens I found are from the internet, with a good number posted directly by collectors, others by dealers. The Internet is a useful source of information on oddities of low commercial value, but has the disadvantage that exact sizes are rarely available. My illustrations are at what I believe to be real size, but some may be slightly out. I illustrate the blank reverses, where my sources included them.

I illustrate all the pieces I know on **Plates 16–19**, and list them in the catalogue. They are grouped and numbered by die, with different specimens from a single die distinguished by a decimal number. I know twelve types, of which the first two are the commonest.

Type		Dies	Pieces
1	Two men in a boat, rowing right; MAD or MPV ⁴	14	32
2	Horse walking right; AT / NI, AN / I T, AN / T I, and uncertain	15	24
3	AC / AL in two lines	3	4
4	Mercury standing left, a cornucopia on his left arm and a purse in his right hand; T up to left, and A to right	2	3
5	Jupiter seated left, a sceptre on his shoulder and his left hand outstretched; something unclear to lower left	1	2
6	Rome seated left, leaning on a staff	2	4
7	Uncertain figure seated left	2	2
8	Uncertain image, ANT	2	2
9	Minerva (?) standing left	1	1
10	Griffin standing left	1	1
11	Figure left, holding out a wreath	2	4
12	Figure left, crowning a statue in a temple	3	3
	TOTALS	47	81

¹ I thank Lorenzo Zambetti for sharing his archive with me.

² I cite these in the catalogue as ‘Ostia’.

³ A few of the Ostia *tesserae* are mentioned and illustrated in Keay, forthcoming.

⁴ In some case, M looks like N, but I think that M was intended in all cases.

It is probable that other types and dies remain to be found. There are 27 singletons. Applying Esty's formulas,⁵ the projected number of dies is 111, with a coverage of 67 %; these figures are hypothetical and should not be relied on: the parameters of *tessera* production are probably not the same as for coins, and there is no way of estimating die output, and thus no basis on which to approach the number of pieces made. The *tesserae* are thin, and the reliefs relatively high: wear and damage to the dies in striking was probably heavy; output per die must have been less than in the case of coin-dies; and we cannot assume that dies were used to exhaustion. In the sample I have assembled, the survival rate of *tesserae* to die is 1:1.72. For what it is worth, François de Callataÿ believes that we now know, for silver, an average of about six Greek coins per obverse die, with output per die estimated at well over 20,000 coins.⁶ However we approach it, large numbers of these *tesserae* must have been made, as the 81 specimens I assemble here show.

In 1939, vol. XVIII of the *Corpus Nummorum Italicorum* attributed a specimen of type 2, horse walking right, AN / I T (our **8.1**) to Atenolfo, Prince of Benevento (877–901), as a fraction of a *follaro* from Capua.⁷

In 2006, Lorenzo Zambetti reviewed this attribution, on the basis of five specimens of type 2 (**2.2**, **4**, **5**, **6** and **10.3**), and the specimen of the uncertain type that I list as type 8, **1**.⁸ He drew attention to the fact that the legends of type 1 varied in ways that suggested—as did the new legend of type 8 (ANT)—that AN might not, in fact, indicate the name of a sovereign. Moreover, Lucia Travaini had thought that many of the bronze pieces attributed to Atenolfo in *CIN* were stylistically and iconographically different from most southern Italian coins of the period, and so might better fit the coinages of the Normans, for which reason she had tentatively reattributed them to Anfuso, third son of Ruggiero II, who was prince of Capua from 1135 to 1144.⁹ The blank reverses, Zambetti felt, also pointed to the possibility that the pieces were *tesserae*, as Giulio Sambon had suggested.¹⁰ Further research was needed.

In 2008, Mario Ladich commented on Zambetti's paper, documenting a number of new types (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9). He tells how, in the 1980s, he had seen some twenty pieces which had a certain Ostian origin, some of which he was able to photograph.¹¹

Mario Pagano also commented on Zambetti's paper, in 2012.¹² He illustrated two new new specimens of type 2 (**9.1**, **10.4**), the second of which had been associated in an auction with a specimen of type 1 (**11.4**). He also drew attention to two pieces with these types from Minturnae (type 1, **9.5**, and type 2, **14**). He recognised the obvious similarity between the two pieces, which might suggest that both were late Republican *tesserae*. Nonetheless, because of what he saw as a difference of style

⁵ Esty 2011, formulas 5 (p. 50) and 3 (p. 49), respectively.

⁶ Callataÿ 2000.

⁷ 1939, p. 240, no. 3. This piece is listed, without illustration, in Rasile, 1990, p. 48, no. 3.

⁸ Zambetti, June 2006. Pieces that he published are listed as 'Zambetti' in the catalogue.

⁹ Travaini, 1995, p. 287, n. 174: 'Incerta rimane l'attribuzione'. She had also recognised that *CIN* XVIII, p. 240, 4 (pl. XII, 4, 19) was really a coin of Massalia of the time of Augustus (Travaini, 1996).

¹⁰ Sambon, 1912, p. 76, p. 480. A piece was in the sale of his collection: Sambon 1897, p. 22, no. 265.

¹¹ Ladich, November 2008. Pieces that he published are listed as 'Ladich' in the catalogue.

¹² Pagano 2012.

between the two pieces, and a different distribution of the letters, he continued to regard type 2 as mediaeval. He proposed reattributing it to Atanasio II, bishop-duke of Naples (876–898), who had been deeply involved in the wars of succession of the counts of Capua, between 882 and 888. He associated the image of the horse on type 1 with an antique statue of a horse that stood in Naples until 1322, and was seen as the symbol of the autonomy of the Duchy of Naples.

Pagano did not take into consideration the three other square, bronze *tesserae* from Minturnae (type 7, Uncertain figure seated left (1), and type 11, figure left holding out a wreath (1.2 and 2)). All were published¹³ as coming from the underwater excavations conducted by Brother S. Domenic Ruegg, between 1967 and 1977,¹⁴ during which some 4,918 coins were recovered.¹⁵ Most came from the area of the present bridge, in front of the unexcavated *castrum*. They were published in three articles in *NC*.¹⁶ A large number of lead tokens and seals were also found.¹⁷ The *tesserae* from Minturnae are not mentioned by Ruegg, nor in the three *NC* articles. During my attempt to constitute a data-base of coins and *tesserae* that can be provenanced to the Liri, I have never seen further specimens. There is no obvious reason, however, to doubt this provenance.

We therefore have provenances at both Ostia and Minturnae, two major Roman ports. This suggests that these objects were used in some way in the working of the port of Ostia, and were brought back to Minturnae by sailors who had received them there. But what were they used for? The legends are opaque,¹⁸ but the differing layouts of the legends on type 2 (AT / NI, AN / I T, AN / T I) show that I and T, at least, are for separate words, and not abbreviations for IT... and TI.... The same may also be the case for the other elements of the legends.

The images on types 4–12 (15 dies, 21 pieces) are mostly generic, religious images, which do not provide any useful information. Those on types 1, with a boat (14 dies, 32 pieces), and 2, with a horse (15 dies, 24 pieces), are more interesting. They make up over two-thirds of the total number of pieces.

The boat on type 1 is not a realistic representation. The two rowers are emblematic, and stand for a larger crew. Many pieces seem to show five or six pairs of oars, sometimes pitched forward, at the beginning of the stroke, like 2, and sometimes pitched backwards, at the end, like 4: this number, too, may be emblematic. No mast is ever shown, which suggests an in-shore or river craft. Of the boats named and depicted in the mosaic at Althiburus in Tunisia, the type 1 boat is most similar to a *tesseraria*, a coincidence of names without significance.¹⁹ I illustrate Duval's

¹³ Vismara 1998, pp. 133–134 and pl. XI. These are cited in the catalogue as 'Minturnae'.

¹⁴ Ruegg, 1995.

¹⁵ Ibid, Part I, pp. 61–73.

¹⁶ Frier and Parker 1970; Metcalf 1974; and Houghtalin 1985.

¹⁷ Ruegg 1995, Part 2, pp. 148–153; 55 of them were catalogued, 292 not.

¹⁸ I thank Michael Crawford and Regula Frei-Stolba for having tried to read the legends.

¹⁹ 'Le nom ... est un adjectif dérivé de *tessera*, mais la forme d'une embarcation ne peut avoir aucun rapport avec la forme d'une tessère. L'adjectif substantif *tesserarius* désignant le soldat ou l'officier chargé d'aller distribuer la tablette (*tessera*) portant le mot d'ordre, on pourrait voir dans la *tesseraria navis*, à l'origine, le « bateau portant le mot d'ordre », puis, plus couramment, un bateau-courrier, léger et rapide (Duval 1949, p. 135). He also comments (p. 147) that boat shape does not determine its use: 'La connaissance de la forme ne suffit ... pas à décider de la nature des navires'.

drawings of *tesserariae* from the mosaic—as an example of an equally emblematic image, where the convention is to show a single rower, not to suggest that this is the precise type of craft.²⁰

The use of bronze, rather than lead, shows that the *tesserae* were intended to last, and be used and re-used. With the *caveat* that this is mere supposition, a possible use for such pieces could have been as tallies for off-loading cargoes from sea-going ships into river boats to go up the Tibur to Rome, or for actually undertaking such trips. The horse may also suggest the transport of goods, or the towing of boats on a tow-path. Type 3, with the legend AC / AL, is also probably a ‘working’ type, distinct from the generic, religious types, but its meaning is opaque.²¹

It is not easy to date the *tesserae*. The heavily seriffed letters suggests Imperial times, perhaps the late first or second century AD.

CATALOGUE

TYPE 1 - TWO MEN IN A BOAT, ROWING RIGHT; MAD OR MPV

Type 1A - MAD above.

1.1	12/11 mm	0.86 g	Künker eLive Auction 20, 24 July 2013, 83
1.2	11/14 mm		Ladich

Type 1B - MPV above.

2	13/12mm	0.9g	Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
3	14 mm	1.47 g	Tietjen Auction 115, 29 June 2015, 385
4	13/11 mm	1.60 g	CNG 116, 249
5	14 mm	1.15 g	Ostia
6	13 mm	1.28 g	London Ancient Coins Auction 38, 200
7	12/10 mm	0.97 g	Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 18247156, photo Reinhard Saczewski
8	13 mm	1.0 g	Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
9.1	13/11 mm	1.19 g	Forum Ancient Coins AA16655
9.2	13/12 mm		Triton VIII, 2061 (part)
9.3	13/12 mm	0.96 g	Raffaele Negrini Auction 31, 10 June 2010, 493
9.4	12/11 mm		Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 18201276, photo Reinhard Saczewski
9.5	11 mm	0.68 g	Minturnae, p. 134, no. 5
9.6?	13 mm	2.17 g	Alessandra Brunetti Asta elettronica, 15 April 2010
10.1	14/12 mm		Ladich
10.2	14 mm		Ladich
10.3	16/13 mm	1.05 g	Vilmar Numismatics website, 19 Dec. 2014
10.4	12/13 mm	1.41 g	Jenken H. Enterpr. 31 Oct. 2012
10.5	12 mm		Forum Ancient Coins
11.1	14/11 mm	1.48 g	CNG 228, 303

²⁰ Nor are rudders shown in the images from the mosaic or on our *tesserae*.

²¹ None of the lead *tesserae* in Rostovtzeff, 1905, are similar enough to types 1–3 to aid in understanding them or their use. Emanuela Spagnoli, who has extensive knowledge of excavation material from Ostia and Portus, has also kindly told me that she knows nothing similar in lead.

11.2	13/14 mm	1.82 g	CNG MBS, Auction 53, 15 March 2000, 1435
11.3	15/11 mm	1.39 g	Ostia
11.4	12/14 mm	1.29 g	H.D. Rauch, Auction 87, 956
12.1	14/12 mm	1.93 g	CNG MBS, Auction 53, 15 March 2000, 1434
12.2	16/12 mm	1.15 g	CNG Electronic Auction 320, 12 Feb. 2014, 328
12.3	12 mm	0.87 g	Ostia
13.1	13 mm	1.48 g	CNG Electronic Auction 313, 23 Oct. 2013, 203
13.2	14/11 mm	1.05 g	Ostia
13.3	13 mm	1.15 g	Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 18247155, photo Reinhard Saczewski
14.1	13 mm	1.51 g	Forum Ancient Coins
14.2	14 mm	0.86 g	Künker Auction 124, 16 March 2007, 9461 = Schulten & Co., 19–21 March 1986, 280

TYPE 2 - HORSE WALKING RIGHT; AT / NI, AN / I T, AN / T I, AND UNCERTAIN

Type 2A - AT above, N below belly, and I before

1.1	12 mm		Forum Ancient Coins
1.2	12/11 mm	0.78 g	Ostia
2.1	12/11 mm	1.30 g	Ostia
2.2	12/11 mm	1.46 g	Zambetti, no. 1
2.3?	10 mm		Private collection
3	12 mm	1.1 g	Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
4	10 mm	1.00 g	Zambetti, no. 2
5	15/10 mm	0.72 g	Zambetti, no. 5
6	11 mm	1.01 g	Zambetti, no. 4

Type 2B - AN above, NI below belly

7	11/9		ACR Auctions, E-Auction, lot 269 (part)
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Type 2C - AN above, I between back legs, and T below belly

8.1	12/11 mm	1.08 g	Künker Auction 124, 9459 = Schulten & Co., 1–3 April 1987, 586
8.2	11 mm	0.78 g	Numismatica Varesi Auction 64, 618 (as fraction of follaro of Capua, Atenolfo, AD 877–901)
9.1	12 mm	1.00 g	Artemide Asta XXIX, 446 (as fraction of follaro of Capua, Atenolfo, AD 877–901)
9.2	10 mm	1.19 g	Gorny & Mosch Auction 181, 13 Oct. 2009, 2825 (part) = Emporium Hamburg Auction 67, 10 May 2012, 375 (part)
10.1	11 mm	0.96 g	CNI, vol. XVIII, p. 240, 3 & pl. XII, 18 (as fraction of follaro of Capua, Atenolfo, AD 877–901)
10.2	12/11 mm	1.28 g	Ladich
10.3	9/11 mm	0.92 g	Zambetti, no. 3
10.4	12/8 mm	0.97 g	Asta Inasta 33, 18 February 2010, 1554
11	11/10 mm	1.13 g	Gemini. LLC, Auction V, 844 (part)
12	11/10	0.9 g	Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 October 2015, 3113 (part)

Type 2D - AN above, T between back legs, and I below belly

13	13 mm		Private collection
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TYPE 9 - MINERVA (?) STANDING LEFT

- 1 11/12 mm Ladich

TYPE 10 - GRIFFIN STANDING LEFT

- 1 15/14 mm 1.63 g London Ancient Coins Auction 34, 289

TYPE 11 - FIGURE WEARING A TOGA LEFT, HOLDING OUT A WREATH (?)

- 1.1 10/11mm 0.6g Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
 1.2 11/10 mm 0.74 g Minturnae, p. 133, no. 4
 1.3 11/13g 1.2g Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
 2 11/13 mm 1.01 g Minturnae, p. 133, no. 2

TYPE 12 - FIGURE WEARING A TOGA LEFT, CROWNING
A STATUE STANDING LEFT, IN A TEMPLE (?)²⁴

- 1.1 9/13mm 1.1g Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
 1.2 12mm 0.8 g Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)
 1.3 10mm 0.6g Gorny & Mosch Auction 233, 6–7 Oct. 2015, 3113 (part)

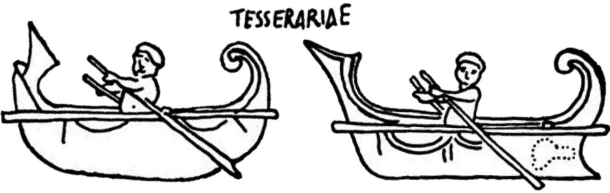
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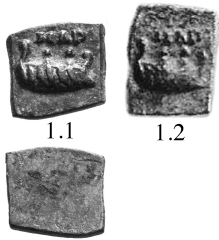
²⁴ This interpretation assumes that the object to the left of the left-hand figure stands for a column. The figure may be a winged Victory.

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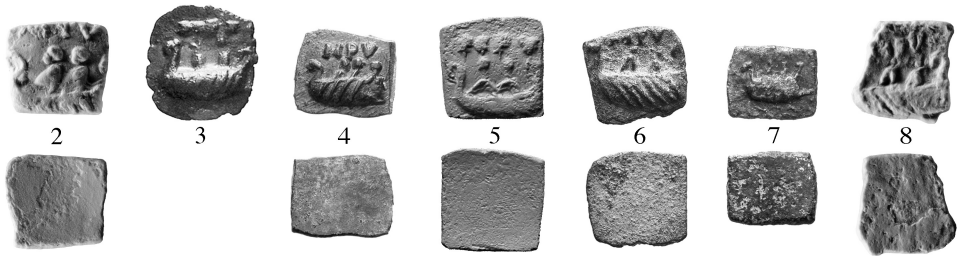
PLATE 16

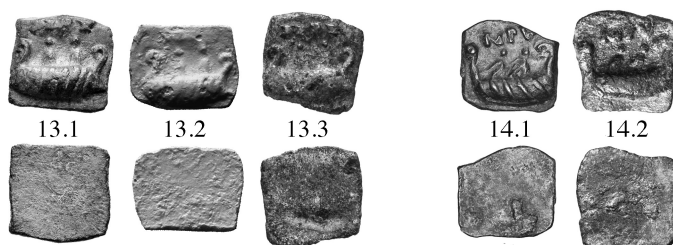


TYPE 1A - SHIP, MAD

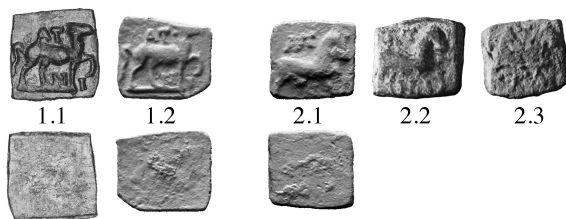


TYPE 1B - SHIP, MPV





TYPE 2A - HORSE, AT / N I



TYPE 2B - HORSE, AT / NI



7

PLATE 18

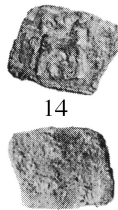
TYPE 2C - HORSE, AN / I T



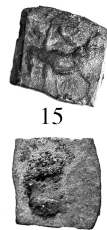
TYPE 2D - HORSE,
AN / T I



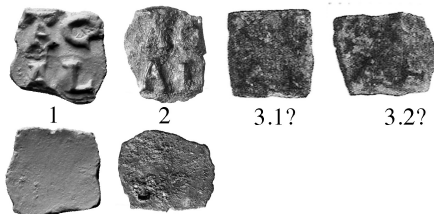
TYPE 2E - HORSE,
AN / ? ?



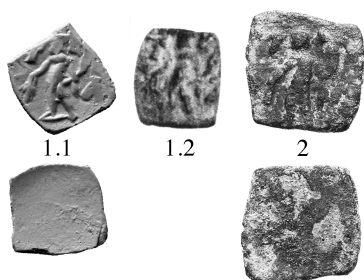
TYPE 2F -
UNCERTAIN



TYPE 3 - A C / AL



TYPE 4 - MERCURY, T / A



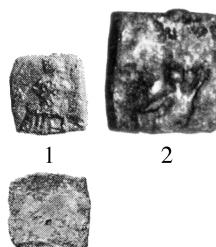
TYPE 5 - JUPITER



TYPE 6 - ROMA



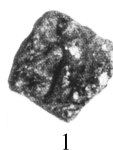
TYPE 7 -
UNCERTAIN SEATED FIGURE



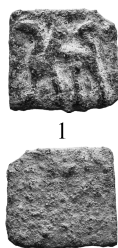
TYPE 8 - UNCERTAIN, ANT



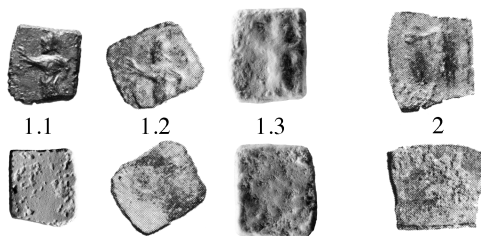
TYPE 9 - MINERVA



TYPE 10 - GRIFFIN



TYPE 11 - FIGURE LEFT,
HOLDING OUT A WREATH



TYPE 12 - FIGURE LEFT,
CROWNING A STATUE IN A TEMPLE (?)

