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# Slipping out of circulation: the after-life of coins in the Roman world

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*The family of the Servilii has a holy coin (trientem sacrum) to which every year they perform sacrifices with the greatest devotion and splendour; and they say that this coin seems to have on some occasions grown bigger and on other occasions smaller, and that thereby it portends either the advancement or the decadence of the family.<sup>1</sup>*

This story, preserved in Pliny's *Natural History*, borders on the fantastic. The *trients*, Pliny records, is also fed gold and silver by the family, and it consumes both these metals. Pliny reports that his source for this amazing phenomenon was the 'elder Messala', Marcus Valerius Messala Rufus, who was consul in 53 BC and who wrote works on augury and divination. The extraordinary nature of Pliny's account here led Melville-Jones to suggest that Pliny or a later copyist mistook his source, reading *trientem* instead of *serpentem*.<sup>2</sup> A snake that could increase or decrease in size certainly fits the passage better than a coin. But the fact that this mistake was not immediately realised by either Pliny or by subsequent commentators and readers suggests that the tale must have been, to some extent, believable in the Roman world. This in turn suggests a great deal about the Roman conceptualisation of coinage. Recent

studies of both the Republican and Imperial periods have illustrated that coins formed more than just a currency for the Romans. The imagery on a coin had power, as a monument of prominent Republican families and, subsequently, as a monument of the emperor.<sup>3</sup> As the edited volume by Parry and Bloch has demonstrated, perceptions of currency and exchange are determined by the cultural matrix of a society.<sup>4</sup> Roman society proves no exception. Money can mean different things and be used in different ways in different societies, and can have a variety of associations even within the same society. In addition to short-term transactions by individuals, money can also participate in more long-term cycles concerned with the social and cosmic order of a particular culture.

In the Roman world coins could transcend the market place and appear in numerous other contexts. Examining coinage from a more 'biographical' approach, by detailing the uses of coinage after it left the strictly economic realm, offers a glimpse of what associations coinage and its imagery had for the Roman people. Although coinage could leave circulation by accident, coins were also removed from circulation for a specific purpose. By exploring these conscious instances of removal we can begin to



Figure 1. Gold Pendant with an *aureus* of Gallienus (RIC 53). Third century AD. Diameter 2.9 cm; weight 116 gm. © Trustees of the British Museum

understand the numerous associations and beliefs that surrounded coinage in the Roman world.

Roman jewellery at times incorporated coinage into its design, meaning that the numismatic pieces were removed from circulation in order to function in a completely different context. Numerous specimens of rings and necklaces survive that incorporate Roman *aurei* (Fig. 1). An Egyptian funerary portrait, now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, illustrates the practice at first hand: the deceased is shown wearing a necklace containing a gold coin.<sup>5</sup> *Aurei* served as a display of wealth and, under the Empire, the pieces were also chosen for their Imperial portraits: it is the obverse, not the reverse, displayed on most known pieces.<sup>6</sup> Ancient literary evidence attests to the power of the Imperial image: under Tiberius it was reportedly illegal to enter a brothel or lavatory carrying a coin with the emperor's image on it, or to beat a slave who carried such a coin.<sup>7</sup> Tacitus observes the problem created by people clutching images of the emperor to escape legal

proceedings.<sup>8</sup> This 'charismatic' nature of the Imperial portrait, and thus Imperial coinage bearing this portrait, may have contributed to the use of coinage in jewellery. Just as wealthy individuals in Rome decorated their villas with busts of the Imperial family (for example the *domus* of the Villa Rivaldi and the *domus* of the praetorian prefect Plautianus, both in Rome), so too, individuals may have incorporated the Imperial portrait into their jewellery as an expression of their political power and connection with the Imperial house.<sup>9</sup> Remarkably, the preserved jewellery containing coinage is not only confined to the portraits of the 'good' rulers of Rome, but also includes emperors who were later subject to *damnatio memoriae*. Jewellery, containing coinage of Elagabalus, buried in a hoard dated to c. AD 260 (38 years after the emperor's downfall) suggests that these pieces were not necessarily altered after an emperor's overthrow.<sup>10</sup> In this case, however, the archaeological context (a hoard) may suggest that the jewellery was preserved for its monetary worth and perhaps was no longer worn.

The Museo Nazionale Palazzo Massimo in Rome contains a different example of coin modification, but one that also resulted in a piece of personal property that communicated status and wealth. In this example, the reverse of a medallion of the emperor Commodus was altered to create a portable *horologium* or sundial.<sup>11</sup> Medallions served as presents of the emperor to high-ranking civilian and military officials.<sup>12</sup> Although the medallion provided a suitable surface to create a sundial, the modification of a prestigious Imperial gift did not necessarily detract from its original associations as an object

that communicated status and connection to the emperor. This is evident from another example that used one (or possibly two) medallions of Antoninus Pius.<sup>13</sup> Four discs that could operate as sundials in eight different areas of latitude were contained within a pill box-like structure, with an obverse of a Pius medallion serving as the lid, and a reverse serving as a base. With both these examples, as on coin jewellery, the Imperial portrait is preserved and acted as a form of decoration.

Coins were also used to decorate vessels. One of the more famous examples of this practice is the Rennes patera, found in a hoard in the city of Rennes in France in 1774.<sup>14</sup> The centre of the patera is decorated with a dining scene showing Hercules and Dionysus, symbolising the contest between strength and wine. Dionysus is shown raising his right arm in victory. The scene is framed by 16 *aurei*, all arranged to display the obverse or portrait side. The coins range from those of Hadrian to Julia Domna. Both the central scene and the outer ring of portraits strongly suggest that this piece was constructed in the Severan period, though it was not buried in the hoard until sometime during the reign of Aurelian. The imagery of Hercules and Dionysus is closely linked to the Imperial ideology of Septimius Severus, who utilised these two deities as patron gods during his reign.<sup>15</sup> The frame of *aurei* reflects Severus' proclaimed adoption into the Antonine dynasty: the portraits of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Faustina the Elder and Faustina the Younger are interspersed with the portraits of Severus, Julia Domna, Caracalla and Geta. The coins were probably specifically selected with this Imperial ideology in mind.

The patera is a sophisticated private interpretation of Severan Imperial ideology, one that made poignant use of coinage.

A similar, though less spectacular, example of vessel decoration is now preserved in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; it was once part of the von Aulock collection.<sup>16</sup> The piece is a bronze vessel that displays evidence of burning (it may have once been used for cooking) and is believed to have originated in Western Asia Minor. The body and handle of the vessel were once decorated with coinage affixed to the outside. Five coins were still attached to the vessel when it was purchased, all with the reverse side displayed. On the handle was a provincial coin of Cyzicus showing Dionysus.<sup>17</sup> On the body of the vessel were two coins of Hierocaesarea showing Artemis, and two of Smyrna showing a bull.<sup>18</sup> Two other coins acquired later are believed to have also been part of the original decoration. One is an Ilian coin showing Aeneas and Ascanius, the other is a Bithynian coin showing Hadrian standing between Bithynia and Roma in a distyle temple.<sup>19</sup> Viewed together, the imagery on the coins served as an expression of local culture and of a connection to Rome: local deities are placed alongside imagery showing the myth of Aeneas and the provincial cult of the emperor. This vessel uses provincial coinage instead of Imperial *aurei*, but, like the Rennes patera, the object attests to the significance attached to numismatic imagery as an expression of Roman culture and society. Remarkably, the coins on this piece come from a variety of cities with considerable geographical distance between them, suggesting that provincial coinage could move well beyond the city in which it was minted.





Figure 2. Mould-made pottery New Year lamp with Victory holding a palm-branch and a shield with the inscription ANN V NOV FAVSTV FELIC. Victory is surrounded by New Year gifts: a date, a fig, a fig-bundle and three coins. AD 51–100. 15.7 cm x 10.7 cm.

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The ability of numismatic imagery to transcend purely economic spheres is also evident in the use of coinage in pottery moulds. There are numerous examples of this practice, in which a coin is taken and impressed into a mould to eventually contribute to the overall design of the vessel. At Cosa in modern day Tuscany, pottery fragments were found with impressions made from a coin of Sabina.<sup>20</sup> The Civic Museum of Arezzo in Italy preserves specimens decorated with a coin of Octavian.<sup>21</sup> A piece in the Gregorian Museum in the Vatican demonstrates this practice for the Republican period: here

two denarii with a head of Mars were used as a basis for the design of the vessel.<sup>22</sup> The practice can be traced back to Greek Megarian bowls produced from the third century BC<sup>23</sup>, but its continuation into the Roman period attests to the on-going attention paid to numismatic imagery in the Roman world. Numismatic imagery could transcend the currency it graced and be used and viewed in an entirely different context. The use of coins to create designs in other materials is also seen on a piece of glass showing the bust of the emperor Hadrian, now in the Getty Museum, which was probably cast from a coin and served as a personal ornament. The Getty also contains a loom weight from South Italy impressed with a coin of Metapontum.<sup>24</sup>

Coin motifs were also intentionally reproduced on Roman 'New Year' lamps (Fig. 2). These lamps were probably exchanged as part of New Year's festivities, and normally showed Victory with a branch and shield, the latter at times inscribed with the phrase ANN(um) NOV(um) FAVSTV(m) FELIC(em). Two coin types are also normally shown on these lamps: one is an *as* with the double head of Janus, and the other a coin showing clasped hands.<sup>25</sup> The inclusion of these coin types in the decoration of the lamp is likely connected to the role of coinage in New Year's festivities. Legends on some Roman medallions suggest that the emperor distributed these pieces on New Year's Day; Suetonius also records that Augustus had a practice of distributing coins as gifts at particular festivals.<sup>26</sup> The representation of coinage on the 'New Year' lamps likely reflects the fact that particular coinage came to be so closely associated with the festival that they could be used as a visual shorthand on other media.

In Cherchel (modern day Algeria), the Janus-head section of a 'New Year' lamp was found on its own, possibly because it had been used as a gaming piece.<sup>27</sup> This lamp fragment might have formed a substitute for an actual coin, since these were used in a variety of games. Macrobius records one example, an ancient version of 'heads' or 'tails' (*caput aut navia* = 'head' or 'ship').<sup>28</sup> The name of the game persisted in spite of the fact that the design of Roman coinage had changed radically by Macrobius' period. The name must have originally derived from early Republican coinage that showed the head of Janus on the obverse and the prow of a ship on the reverse. Julius Pollux also records a game called *Chalkismos* that involved spinning a coin on one's finger.<sup>29</sup> In Petronius' fictive work the *Satyricon*, the author observes that Trimalchio, a freedman characterised by excessive wealth and luxury, used gold and silver denarii instead of black and white gaming counters.<sup>30</sup> Though an invented character, Petronius' vision may have been inspired by the use of coins for games in Roman society.

The power of images and the 'magical' associations of coinage are particularly evident in the widespread use of coins as votive offerings in the construction of public buildings, private houses and other structures. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the Blackfriars shipwreck, discovered in the Thames in London. Found beneath the mast-post of the ship was an *as* of Domitian with an image of Fortuna holding a steering oar on the reverse.<sup>31</sup> Although the coin was struck in AD 88/89, the timber from the ship dates to the second century AD: so the coin must have

been quite old when it was placed in this final resting place.<sup>32</sup> Fortuna, particularly an image of Fortuna carrying a rudder, was no doubt an apt choice to place beneath a ship's mast, but it is worth remembering that the obverse displayed a portrait of Domitian, an emperor who was severely disliked and had undergone a *damnatio memoriae*. If the coin was specifically selected for its iconographic message, then the image of Domitian would make the selection a strange one, particularly since the portrait of the emperor was the most important aspect of a coin, providing it with authenticity. In view of the fact that there was a paucity of smaller denomination coinage in Britain in the Roman period, we should remain wary of assuming this coin was specifically chosen on the basis of its iconography.<sup>33</sup>

The act of placing coins beneath the mast of a ship is part of a wider Roman practice of votive offerings, in which coins and other objects could act as a means to influence the spiritual and divine worlds. Coins were placed beneath floors, in walls, and even between beam slots in public buildings and private dwellings.<sup>34</sup> *Insula* XIX (a possible bath building) at Verulamium in Britain had a mint condition Neronian coin in a beam slot, and a coin of Vespasian beneath the mosaic floor.<sup>35</sup> In Sardis, bronze coins were sealed beneath the mosaic in the Roman bath, a gold solidus of Justin I was placed in the wall of a military building, and coins were placed beneath the mosaic in the synagogue, with one coin being placed directly beneath the dedicatory inscription.<sup>36</sup> In the Capitolium of Cosa an *as* was found in the construction level of the building, and a *quadrans* was discovered in the flooring of the south cella

between the *rudus* and mosaic surface.<sup>37</sup> The excavation report records that the second coin looked as though ‘it had been purposely pressed into the moist mortar’. This is in fact a likely interpretation, with the coin acting as an offering to the gods for the protection of the building.

This practice of placing coins beneath floors and in walls has a literary parallel in Tacitus’ description of the rebuilding of the Capitolium in Rome under Vespasian.<sup>38</sup> Tacitus records that the foundation stone of the new temple was dragged into place, and virgin gold and silver was deposited as ordered by the *haruspices*. The unusual nature of the unworked metals here prompts Tacitus to comment; the ceremony described no doubt also took place on a much smaller scale for other, less significant buildings throughout the Roman Empire involving previously worked metal like coins. Rather than seeing many of the coins deposited beneath floors and in walls as accidental loss, it is more likely that these objects formed a ritual purpose, as an offering for the protection of the structure.

Coins also assisted in marking boundaries within the Roman Empire. The land surveyor Siculus Flaccus provides a description of the various mechanisms for marking boundaries.<sup>39</sup> Beneath some boundary stones, he records, were buried ashes, charcoal, broken pottery or glass, as well as bronze coins that had been thrown down (*asses subiectos*). Here coins are placed with other broken or non-functioning materials; perhaps they had become too worn to be of use. The word *subiector* was used in Latin to refer to a forger, and the passage here might also suggest the use of counterfeit coins. The practice of burying materials beneath a



Figure 3: Gold Disc with the impression of a coin showing the heads of Agrippina and Nero. Findspot: tomb, Olbia. c. AD 60. Diameter: 2 cm; weight 10 gm.

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boundary stone was no doubt due to the fact that these markers could be moved; a deposit of non-perishable materials served to mark the boundary for time immemorial.

Coins were believed to transcend boundaries when placed within Roman burials. Greek and Latin texts frequently mention the practice of placing a coin in the mouth of the deceased as payment for the boatman Charon to ferry the soul into the underworld.<sup>40</sup> The coin had to be placed in the mouth at the moment of death (not after), since it was believed that the soul passed out of the body through the mouth the instant a person died.<sup>41</sup> Evidence for this belief can be found in Juvenal’s *Satires*, where the author envisages the death of a wealthy man caused by a cartload of Ligurian marble. Since the man’s slaves are at home, unaware of what has happened, the deceased is forced to sit upon the bank of the river since he has no coin (*triens*) in his mouth to pay the fare.<sup>42</sup> A gold disc impressed with a coin of Nero, found in a tomb in Olbia (Fig. 3), illustrates that the coinage in these funerary contexts did not always need to be real.<sup>43</sup>

The act of placing coinage with the deceased meant that the coin served as a link between the living and the dead, their abstract value able to be transferred into the next world.<sup>44</sup> The quantity and type of coinage, however, varies dramatically from burial to burial, even within the same cemetery.<sup>45</sup> Recent excavations in Rome at the small necropolis of Via Basiliano demonstrate the differences that can occur between individual burials. Evidence was found for the practice of placing coins in the deceased's mouth (a skull discoloured from prolonged contact with metal was discovered, and a coin with two teeth attached to it), as well as on the deceased's breast, in the hand, placed alone away from the body, or with/in a vase or vessel. Two coins were excavated that were still covered in fabric, as well as a coin of Faustina I that had been used as a necklace or amulet<sup>46</sup>. The use of coins as amulets is attested in St. John Chrysostom. In *Ad Illuminados Catechesis* Chrysostom details the superstitious practices of the Romans, including those who 'bind bronze coins of Alexander the Macedonian on their heads and on their feet'.<sup>47</sup> Once again, the abstract nature of money, and the power of its images, meant that coinage could come to function in a non-economic, almost magical manner, in this case to heal or to protect.

It is uncertain whether coins were specifically chosen for their imagery in funerary contexts; it is likely that there existed a mixture of random selection (particularly in areas with very small pools of bronze currency) and conscious type choice. A particularly compelling example of type selection can be found in a Christian grave in the catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, on the Via Casilina

in Rome. Ten coins frame a child's grave that was sealed with mortar.<sup>48</sup> All ten coins were the same rare type: a follis of the Roman mint struck to mark the consecration of Romulus, the son of the emperor Maxentius.<sup>49</sup> Alföldi is no doubt correct in asserting that these coins were chosen specifically for their imagery: not only, as Alföldi believed, for the youth of the obverse portrait, but perhaps also for the message contained in the reverse legend (AETERNAE MEMORIAE). The consecration type meant that the coin had associations with life after death, an idea connected to Christian beliefs. The death and consecration of a young boy, communicated by these particular coins, may have thus inspired the family of another deceased child to use these coins as decoration.

The connection of coins to the underworld is also preserved in another ritual, in which Romans each year threw a small coin into the Lacus Curtius as part of a vow for the health of the emperor.<sup>50</sup> Livy states that early in Rome's history a chasm opened up in the Roman forum that could not be filled. Soothsayers declared that the Romans would have to sacrifice the chief strength of the Roman people. A soldier by the name of Marcus Curtius, understanding that this strength was arms and valour (*arma virtusque*), sacrificed himself into the chasm.<sup>51</sup> This myth surrounding the structure was current from the Augustan period: the emperor erected a relief portraying Curtius near the chasm. The hole was revered as a port to the underworld; hence any coins thrown into it were once again believed to be able to transcend worlds.<sup>52</sup>

The ritual use of coins is developed further in a series created in Colonia





Figure 4. Copper alloy coin struck for Octavian and Agrippa, with appendage shaped like a pig's trotter. (RPC 1 526.2). AD 10–14. Mint: Nemausus. Weight 21.84 gm. © Trustees of the British Museum

Nemausus, modern day Nîmes. Coins celebrating the victory of Octavian and Agrippa over Antony were altered to have an appendage in the shape of a pig's trotter (Fig. 4).<sup>53</sup> These coins are not well studied, but are believed to have formed votive offerings, perhaps for the goddess of the Spring, Nemausus. In this case, the user(s) might have felt the need to modify the coin in order to create an appropriate offering. The modification of coinage for ritual use is also seen in the mutilation of coins in Britain.<sup>54</sup>

The use of coins as ritual offerings is also known from the writings of Lucian. In the *Philopseudes* Lucian describes a statue of Pellichus with obols lying at the statue's feet and other coins stuck onto it with wax, 'votive offerings or rewards from those who through him had been cured of fever'.<sup>55</sup> Pausanias also records several rituals that involve offering coins. In Pharae those inquiring at the statue of Hermes of the Market put a local coin to the right of the statue and then asked a question in the god's ear.<sup>56</sup> In Oropus

'when a man has been cured of disease through a response the custom is to throw silver and coined gold into the spring, for by this way they say that Amphiaraus rose up after he had become a god'.<sup>57</sup>

An excellent case study of the archaeology resulting from numismatic ritual offerings is provided by the temple of Sulis Minerva in Bath. During excavations on the site 12,597 coins were uncovered from the sacred spring.<sup>58</sup> This represents only a small proportion of what must have originally been offered to the goddess; the site had undergone earlier destruction and only part of the spring was excavated. Analysis of the finds demonstrates that coins were offered to the goddess along with other personal and professional items, and curse tablets. The coins varied greatly in value, from small bronzes to gold pieces. Two gold coins of Allectus, a Roman usurper in Britain and Gaul, are so unusual that they were perhaps offered to the goddess together at the same time, representing a substantial part of a person's annual salary.<sup>59</sup> Analysis of the reverse types of these coins uncovers an unusual predominance of Britannia and Fortuna types, but this may represent the make-up of Roman bronze in the province of Britain rather than any specific type selection.<sup>60</sup> These votive offerings are in many senses convenient; a portable and, in the main, relatively inexpensive offering to the god in fulfilment of a vow. And yet, these examples once again illustrate the persistent Roman belief that coins were able to transcend worlds, this time to the realm of the divine.

Thousands of coins have been found in the river Moselle in Trier, offered to the river god, probably in the hope of return to the city. River offerings, including

offerings of coins, are also known from other sites, including the Thames in London and the bridge over the river Garigliano, where the Via Appia crossed the river.<sup>61</sup> Pliny provides us with literary evidence for the Roman practice. In a letter to Romanus he observes that one can see the pebbles and little pieces of money (*stipes*) in the river of Clitumnus.<sup>62</sup> The coins thrown into these rivers and lakes had the potential to be recovered: at Narnia an inscription records the use of resources *ex stipe quae ex lacu* (small coins from the lake), prompting Michael Crawford to envisage priests “wading into the lake in green wellies” to collect the wealth.<sup>63</sup> Amongst the Trier finds were two Roman provincial types: a protocontorniate of Elagabalus minted in Philippopolis and a coin of Severus Alexander from the city of Perinthus.<sup>64</sup> The presence of these types has led to the suggestion that they might have acted as souvenirs, perhaps for a soldier, and then later offered to the goddess. If this were the case, it would provide further evidence for the idea that coins were seen as markers of particular events, and that they formed an important medium through which rituals, games and other ceremonies could be recorded for posterity. That coins functioned in this context is suggested by the fact that the Roman mint was originally located near the *Tabularium* (Record Office) in Rome, and temple of Juno Moneta (Juno the ‘Advisor’).<sup>65</sup> The use of numismatic evidence in literary authors such as Dio and Suetonius, as well as the phenomenon of ‘restitution coinage’ (indicating an internal dialogue and intertextuality within the mint), also hints at the fact that coins were considered part of an official record.<sup>66</sup>

Coins also appear in very unexpected

places in literary texts. Pliny records that Lartius Licinius, the praetorian official responsible for the administration of justice at Cartagena in Spain, found a coin enclosed in a truffle he was biting, and bent his front teeth on it.<sup>67</sup> Martial reports that a goose that was sacrificed to the emperor happened to have eight coins in its entrails.<sup>68</sup> These stories recall the story of the Servilii family coin mentioned at the beginning of this article and, though they seem fantastic to us, they reveal a world where unusual portents could occur and were often seen as a sign from the gods. Coins were crafted into these contexts, if in a satirical and biting manner. Pliny’s comment was aimed at the individual who had tried to purchase his uncle’s notes; it seems the author took his revenge by writing Licinius into the very work that he would have liked to produce.<sup>69</sup> Martial finishes his piece by wryly noting ‘a sacrifice that gives good omen on your behalf with silver, not blood, Caesar, tells us that there is no further need for steel’.<sup>70</sup>

Currency is perceived according to the culture and hierarchy of each particular society. The numerous functions of coinage in the Roman world reveal a society that placed importance on visual media, and that was heavily concerned with appeasing the divine. Coinage was used in what Bloch and Parry labelled the ‘long-term’ cycle of exchange, to reproduce and reinforce the social and cosmic order. This might occur through the offering of a coin to a god or goddess, to ensure the protection of a particular structure, or as part of some other divine exchange: for good health, for a safe return, or for any other purpose.

The use of coins and numismatic imagery in the decoration of other media (bowls, jewellery, pateras, lamps, vessels)

underlines the power of images in the Roman world, and the significance attached to imagery that was believed to be emanating from the emperor himself. It also highlights the interconnected role of numismatic imagery in the wider visual culture of Rome. The intrinsic place that coins held in Roman society is demonstrated by their appropriation into Roman games, literary tales and moral stories. The rather outrageous behaviour of particular coins (growing in truffles, allegedly increasing and decreasing in size) is a product of the inherently superstitious world inhabited by the Romans, where divine will manifested itself in daily life. By considering the different and varying after-life of Roman coinage we not only gain a better understanding of how coinage was viewed in the Roman world, but we also glimpse Roman society itself.

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8. Tacitus *Ann.* 3.36.1.
9. The Roman house uncovered in the Villa Rivaldi possessed a gallery with portraits of different emperors and their wives, sculpture that is now preserved in the Centrale Montemartini Museum in Rome. The *domus* that once belonged to Septimius Severus' praetorian prefect Plautianus contained a bust of Lucilla, and another of Macrinus, also now in the Centrale Montemartini. Although the house and its sculpture passed through several hands after Plautianus' death, the Imperial busts remained, advertising a link between the house owner and the Imperial family. See M. Bertolotti *et al.*, *Centrale Montemartini Musei Capitolini*, (Rome, 2006) 69, and 101–102.
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