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Observations on the distribution and ownership of late Roman silver plate

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Presentations of silver plate

In a recent article, K. S. Painter argued that most late Roman silver plate was distributed “by a mechanism of central political control”.¹ In support, he was able to cite no more direct evidence than (a) some hardly relevant anthropological parallels of gift-exchange between mediaeval kings, and (b) the fact that the silver used in most late Roman plate is so uniformly pure (apparently for the most part 96-98%) that its quality must, he suggests, have been officially maintained by a central authority — which he assumes to have been the emperor. This second argument may be disposed of at once: from c.500-640 a high proportion of Byzantine silver was hallmarked with a series of official stamps, but it is no purer than unstamped silver of the same period.² The purity of late Roman silver tells us nothing about its function and distribution. Again according to Painter, the owners of silver plate were all men of “high status”. Painter never attempts to define this vague term, but from other passages it seems that he envisaged only a single hierarchy, a single élite comprising landowners, bureaucrats, generals, and even church dignitaries. All, he seems to think, were caught up in a vast empire-wide web of official, reciprocal gift-giving, “a deliberate use of wealth, through the mechanism of a gift system, to maintain the political and social structure of late-Roman society” (p.104). This is heady stuff.

Silver dishes were certainly presented to officials by the emperor: they are clearly marked as such, with inscriptions naming emperors and specifying the anniversaries that they commemorate — the decennalia of Licinius, Valentinian I, Theodosius I.³ The smaller and cruder Licinius plates were presumably intended for less important people than the grander missoria of Valentinian and Theodosius. These inscriptions bear an obvious relationship to the legends on the presentation coinage and medallions of the same period. Those were undoubtedly presented by the emperor on the occasions specified by the inscriptions — imperial consulates, anniversaries, and victories.⁴ In the case of the Beaurains hoard, for example, we can almost prove this assumption: a series of gold multiples commemorating most of the important imperial occasions between 285 and 310, and evidently hoarded in mint condition, must all have been donatives presented to a single officer at the western court during those years. He kept them together, and eventually they were buried together with the rest of the family treasure.⁵ In today’s less gracious age, presidents present people with ballpoint pens engraved with their names, but the principle remains the same: a memento from a head of state announces what it is.⁶ We are *not* entitled to assume that the vast bulk of Roman silver plate that lacks such inscriptions also comprised presentation pieces. Most of it was surely designed for private purchase. Luxury objects such as the ivory diptychs consuls and other officials presented to their peers were inscribed with their names and titles in full. It is hard to believe that presentation silver plate would not have been similarly inscribed.

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- 1 “Roman silver hoards: ownership and status,” in (F. Baratte, ed.) *Argenterie romaine et byzantine: Actes de la Table Ronde, Paris 11-13 octobre 1983* (Paris 1988) 103, with C. Johns, *JRA* 3 (1990) 35-36.
 - 2 M. M. Mango, *Silver from early Byzantium: the Kaper Koraon and related treasures* (Baltimore 1986) 14; D. Feissel, *RevNum* 6 sér., 2 (1986) 132-42.
 - 3 D. E. Strong, *Greek and Roman gold and silver plate* (London 1966) 199-201; R. MacMullen, “The emperor’s largesses,” *Latomus* 21 (1962) 160-61; R. Delmaire, *Largesses sacrées et res privata: l’aerarium impérial et son administration du IV^e au VI^e siècle* (Paris 1989) 564-84.
 - 4 J. M. C. Toynbee, *Roman medallions* (reprint, ed. W. E. Metcalf, New York 1986) 73-121.
 - 5 P. Bastien and C. Metzger, *Le trésor de Beaurains (dit d’Arras)* (Wetteren 1977); Alan Cameron, “An unknown general,” *CP* 83 (1988) 149-50.
 - 6 See P. Glanville, “The sociology of silver: gifts and obligations,” *Silver in England* (London 1987) 302-37, for presentation silverware in England from the 17th c. onwards – naturally always so identified from the inscription.