

This is the first page only. On how to acquire the full article please click this link.

Rings, fibulae and buckles with imperial portraits and inscriptions

Ida Malte Johansen

Since MacMullen's much-cited paper "The emperor's largesses",¹ a number of articles have dealt with the problems involved in establishing the extent of the imperial and magisterial 'gift-exchange' or *largitio*; due to the nature of the preserved material, these studies have centred mainly on the rôle of silver plate.² Other studies have aimed primarily at unravelling the structural organisation of the *sacrae largitiones*, which, apart from minting coin, were also responsible for the production of some of these objects.³ The present article relies on those previous studies, but considers mainly the finger-rings, fibulae, and belt-buckles with inscriptions or decorations, which link them to the imperial sphere; special emphasis has been placed on the rôle of the imperial portrait in this context.

Terminology

In late antiquity the relevant terminology was rather blurred, with no clear distinction between 'gifts', on the one hand, and wages, bribes, taxes, and tribute, on the other. The elevated status of the late-Roman emperor probably played a part in this. His divine character is reflected in the vocabulary used for anything imperial; for example, the imperial treasuries were known as the *sacrae largitiones*, the sacred largesses. In consequence, subjects had no right to demand anything from this august being, and payments from the emperor were theoretically regarded as munificence.⁴ Generally speaking, the blurring of terminology affects only the vocabulary, not the different concepts; our sources are fully aware of the difference between gifts and wages, voluntary or compulsory.

The codification of late-Roman gift-exchange

There was, of course, nothing new in giving or receiving gifts. It was also a well-known custom in earlier Roman times.⁵ What distinguished 'gift-exchange' in the later Roman period was what appears to have been a certain codification of this custom, and also a change in the range of objects distributed. This codification may well have taken place as part of the administrative reforms of Diocletian and Constantine in the later 3rd and earlier 4th c. However, only from the late 4th c. onwards do we possess laws reflecting the rigid hierarchical system

1 *Latomus* 21 (1962) 159-66.

2 E.g. B. Overbeck, *Argentum romanum* (München 1973); F. Baratte, "Les ateliers d'argenterie au bas-empire," *JSAV* 1975; R. Delmaire, "Les largesses impériales et l'émission d'argenterie du IVe au VIe siècle," and K. Painter, "Roman silver hoards: ownership and status" in F. Baratte (ed.), *Argenterie romaine et byzantine* (Paris 1988); K. Painter, "A fragment of a glass dish in the Antiquarium Comunale, Rome," *KölnJb* 22 (1989) 87-98; id., "The silver dish of Ardabur Aspar" in *Papers of the 4th Conference of Italian Archaeology II* (London 1991) 73-80; Alan Cameron, "Observations on the distribution and ownership of late Roman silver plate," *JRA* 5 (1992) 178-85; M. Hendy, "The administration of mints and treasuries" in *Variorum reprints* (Northampton 1989); also W. Grünhagen, *Die Schatzfund von Gross Bodungen* (Berlin 1954).

3 E.g. Delmaire (supra n.2); id., *Largesses sacrées et res privata* (Paris 1989); Hendy (supra n.2); id., *Studies in the Byzantine monetary economy* (Cambridge 1985) 371 ff.; C. E. King, "The *sacrae largitiones*" in *The 5th Oxford Symposium on coinage and monetary history* (BAR S76, Oxford 1980) 141 ff.; A. H. M. Jones, *The later Roman empire*³ (Oxford 1964) 427 ff.

4 MacMullen (supra n.1) 159.

5 F. Millar, *The emperor in the Roman world* (London 1977) 135 ff.