

Is that a *spintria* in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?*

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The erotic scenes on the obverses of *spintriae* leave little to the imagination but the meaning of the numerals found on the reverses remains more enigmatic as does the purpose of these objects. (Bateson 1991, 385)

Introduction

In pre-Christian Rome, before ‘sin’ and sacerdotal piety had taken hold, sex was a commodity which could be legally bought and sold like any other. The aristocratic male could, it is true, be seen to cover his head when leaving a brothel, but the implied shame came not from the acts which he performed therein, but rather, from having to have had recourse to such a plebian establishment; it certainly did not prevent members of his class from owning brothels and profiteering from the sex trade. But by what means did the customers, aristocrat and plebian alike, pay for the services provided in a brothel? This is the question to which this paper is addressed.

It is tempting to suppose that payment was by means of *spintriae* (s. *spintria*), coin-like devices bearing on the obverse an erotic scene and on the reverse a numeral.¹

If we accept *spintriae* as ‘Roman brothel tokens’, then we have evidence of a distinct sub-economy within the larger Roman economy, one with its own distinctive market (for sex), and *spintriae* as ‘a particular type of coin destined for special uses’ (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 35; hereafter, S-R); no other market, so far as I am aware, was so privileged. None of those (except, tangentially, Thomas McGinn) who have written on *spintriae* seems to have seen the fairly obvious, if never explicitly identified, ‘sub-economy’ implications of the ‘brothel tokens’ hypothesis. Why and on what evidence, supposing such a sub-economy never to have existed, it could have been imagined into existence, is a further question of interest in itself, with broader implications beyond just the study of the history of economic thought. Of course, if we reject the ‘brothel tokens’ hypothesis, then we are obliged to suggest at least one other without being distracted by the presence of erotic art – as indeed Bateson in effect suggests many have been (Bateson

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¹ *Spintriae* were true tokens of no intrinsic value, being of bronze or brass. Extant specimens are in the range 20-23mm. in diameter.

1991, 392) -- which was ubiquitous in Roman society, nor, for that matter, imposing our own value-judgements on the material, as some have².

'The games people play?'

The modern eye, as is suggested likewise was the eye of the Renaissance artist Giulio Romano (Talvacchia 1999), is drawn immediately to the erotic scenes which, when read together with the reverse numerals I-XVI, and the fact of there having been 16 asses to the denarius, along with our knowledge that prices charged by prostitutes were generally in the range 2 – 10 asses (McGinn 2004, 42 and Appendix 3), at a time when the daily wage for a labourer was 3-4 sesterces = 12-16 asses (Bastomsky 1990, 38) and the daily pay of a soldier 1 denarius (Simonetta and Riva, 1981, 19 n.25), leads almost without hesitation to the identification of *spintriae* as 'brothel tokens', with the reverse numerals indicating 'prices'. But this would be an identification altogether too readily made, for several reasons.

First, there is no one-to-one correspondence between obverse scenes and reverse numerals, as would be expected if the latter signified 'prices'. The suggestion (Bahn and Tidy 1999, 15, relying on the evidence of a careful enquiry among prostitutes by an unnamed 'coin specialist from Warsaw') that the numerals on the reverse might bear some relationship, in the sense of prices, to the acts depicted on the obverse of these objects is appealing, but loses much of its force when examples are considered where the same obverse motif is found associated with different reverse numerals [Plates 1, 2], or the same reverse numeral with different obverse motifs [Plates 2, 3]. Indeed, of the 39 specimens with reverse numerals listed by T.V. Buttrey (Buttrey 1973, Table A), there is no single combination of scene and numeral. Similarly, as Donald Bateson has more recently shown (Bateson 1991) with respect to the Hunter Collection (Glasgow), multiple scene-numeral combinations are known.

Second, we have as well many similar objects (from the same period) with reverse numerals and obverse heads of members of the imperial family (a matter of importance in respect of an edict of Tiberius, to be discussed further below), as well as similarly numbered tokens intended obviously for use in games [Plates 4, 5].

Third, and this has become more evident only in more recent times with further excavation at Pompeii, that the obverse scenes, far from being unique to *spintriae*, are later copies of scenes which have their origin in the Hellenistic period (Jacobelli 1995; 1997; 2000)³.

² As, for example, *osceni* and *pornografico* (Vitale 1941), *obscene* (Murison 1987), and *obszönen* (Schöffel 2002).

³ Jacobelli 1987 and 1988 carry initial general reports of the excavations at the *Terme Suburbane* (1985-88). In the first, the *scene erotiche* are identified (p.152) as accompanied by the numerals I-XVII, as also in Jacobelli 1991, 147; no known *spintriae* carry the numeral XVII, nor

Finally, any notion of *spintriae* as ‘brothel tokens’ must accommodate the simple fact that sex was sold so that real money (*specie*) would end up in the hands of brothel-owners, pimps, and last and usually least, the women themselves. Working back from this, a *spintria*, ‘invariably of bronze or brass’ (Buttrey 1973, 52), and so of no intrinsic value, would have had to have been purchased with real money, and to be redeemable in real money; in other words, a coin-token-coin circuit would have had to have existed – a simple enough point, it might be thought, but one not often recognised (but see Simonetta 1980, 55⁴, Simonetta and Riva 1981, 25 and 27; Talvacchia 1999, 61-2).⁵

Of course, none of this tells against *spintriae* as ‘brothel tokens’; but we must be reserved in our interpretation of the evidence, to which we now turn.

The principal purpose of coinage is obvious; that of tokens, often less so. Of *spintriae* and the like we have reasonably abundant physical evidence; as to literary evidence, we are on less solid ground. Indeed, only two passages have ever been cited as being directly relevant: the first, from Suetonius (*Lives of the Caesars, Tiberius*); and the second, from an epigram by Martial.

From Suetonius, to take the earlier first, we have:

... nummo uel anulo effigiem impressam latrinae aut lupanari intulisse ...
(Suet. *Tib.* 58)

... [no-one] to carry into latrines or brothels a coin with the head [of the Emperor⁶] stamped on it or cut in the stone of a ring ...

This passage has been taken as implying the existence of ‘brothel tokens’, as payment, by some means or other, would have been necessary in brothels. We are entitled however to draw attention to the necessity for a formal coin-token-coin circuit to have been in operation, as already mentioned, and as Thomas McGinn has raised, the problem of enforcement (McGinn 2004, 86). We are also entitled to raise the matter of the credibility of Suetonius (C. Suetonius Tranquillus). Not many writers have been

does any carry a scene of more than two persons, in contrast with two of the scenes at the *Terme Suburbane*, one of two males and a female, the other of two males and two females.

⁴ ‘... they [*spintriae*] after use must necessarily have been converted into current money’ (*dopo l’uso, dovevano necessariamente essere convertite in moneta corrente*).

⁵ Bartholomew Lee (Lee 1983, 143) records the use of brothel tokens in 19th-century America being, for example, ‘commonly issued in Denver for \$1 or six for \$5’. He does not say by whom they were issued, but notes their utility in keeping track of services provided by individual women, and as being more secure than cash kept on premises.

⁶ The reference, in context, is to Augustus but, as I believe Simonetta rightly notes (Simonetta 1980, 55), the prohibition, by extension, would have applied equally to images of Tiberius.

prepared to mount such a strong defence of Suetonius as have S-R (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 21 and n.28). Indeed, one writer has seen him as little more than a ‘Flavian propagandist’ (a reference to the imperial dynasty under which Suetonius lived and wrote, and which had every reason, including that of its own origin, for wanting to denigrate the preceding Julio-Claudian):

In general, we should note that the whole *spintriae* nexus is highly suspect. It probably arose from prurient imaginings about Tiberius’ seclusion on Capri in combination with an extraordinary series of monetiform tokens, struck (anonymously) between about A.D. 22-37, depicting on the obverse scenes of copulation or fellation and bearing on the reverse a Roman numeral from I to XVI; through these numerals the obscene tokens, known to numismatics as *spintriae*, are die-linked to another series of tokens, bearing obverse portraits of various members of the imperial family, including Augustus, Livia and Tiberius. In a recent study of these tokens T.V. Buttrey concludes that they are “the very source of Suetonius’ libels.” That may go too far, but they could well have given rise to some of the nastier Flavian propaganda of A.D. 69. (Murison 1987, 99)

The suggestion that *spintriae* were the basis for certain of Suetonius’ libels on Tiberius was, as Murison notes, first advanced by T.V. Buttrey:

... it would have been easy, indeed natural to draw all of this material together, to see in it an illustration of the high-minded debauchery which one can with some satisfaction attribute to one’s rulers. In that regard, note that some of the *spintriae* dies not only show the erotic scene but provide an interior setting of tastefully decorated furniture and swathes of draperies. Again whatever the intent, the *spintriae* could be read as illustrative of erotic comfort and well-being. No-one need have believed at the time that figurations of Tiberius and his court were actually intended; it would have been enough to draw the association out of wit. Later, historians could take the association seriously and cause it to live through the ages as a regrettable truth. (Buttrey 1973, 58)⁷

This interpretation is, however, firmly rejected by S-R (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 21) – although they, as has been noted, give far greater support to Suetonius than many other writers have been prepared to do and, as will be noted below, assign a much later date to the issue of *spintriae* anyway. In all of this, and whether *spintriae* were intended or not to

⁷ The objections of Buttrey and Murison to Suetonius (on Tiberius) are far from new: ‘... we know that Tiberius was not the monster of iniquity that Tacitus and Suetonius would have us believe him ...’ (Rolfe 1914, 41).

have been struck with any reference, directly or indirectly⁸, to Tiberius's time on Capri (27-37), we cannot but be reminded of the 'Mrs. Brown' cartoons which once appeared in British newspapers and satirical magazines – although no reputable historian would today regard these as shedding any light one way or the other on the true relationship between Victoria and her manservant.⁹

The second piece of evidence could possibly derive from a line in Martial:

Nunc veniunt subitis lasciva nomismata nimbis
(Mart. *Epig.* 8.78,9)

Now in a sudden shower come(s) *lasciva nomismata*

The date of the festivities held in honour of the emperor Domitian to which this epigram refers is not agreed: S-R support 88-89 (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 19), although Buttrey had earlier suggested the later date of 93 (Buttrey 1973, 56). Both dates lie in the middle years of the reign of Domitian (81-96), but the precise date is of less importance to us than the consideration that should the objects (*lasciva nomismata*) be *spintriae*; should, further, *spintriae* be 'brothel tokens'; and should, further, the first issue of such have been earlier in the century (as is suggested above) – then we would have evidence of an (at least for a time) embedded institutional arrangement with, as we have suggested already, the implication of the existence of a distinct 'sub-economy'. Unfortunately, there is a problem here from the very outset: how should we read *lasciva nomismata*? The problem arises because the word *lascivus* (*lasciva* here, agreeing with *nomismata*) had a

⁸ *Spintriae*, as Buttrey notes, very often suggest scenes of luxurious surroundings which, we may fairly safely conjecture, were not typical of the average Roman brothel. Should they indeed have been 'brothel tokens', this could have been simple fantasy, designed to suggest to the client that he, too, could imagine himself as having sex in the same comfort as his 'betters'. Suetonius, writing many years after the event, appears to have taken the fantasy seriously. Moreover, if we accept Suetonius, then how are we to reconcile the token bearing a Julio-Claudian head on the obverse and a reverse numeral with those bearing reverse numerals and an obverse erotic scene, if the latter are indeed 'brothel tokens'?

⁹ There is a risk, it must be admitted, of cherry-picking Suetonius to suit the argument, specifically, of accepting Suet. *Tib.* 58 (regarding the carrying of coins into brothels), whilst rejecting as 'Flavian propaganda' the earlier Suet. *Tib.* 43 (regarding sexual antics on Capri). It is perhaps worth noting that no entirely satisfactory explanation has yet been given as to why the term *spintriae*, as originally used by Suetonius for young male prostitutes, should have come to be applied to erotic tokens, that is, a transference of meaning from *homosexual persons* to *heterosexual* (depicting) *objects*. For discussion and possible history of this curious shift in meaning see, for example, Vitale 1941, 81, Simonetta 1980, 53, Simonetta and Riva 1981, 14ff., and Talvacchia 1999, 56ff. and especially (p. 59) '... it is clear that in the sixteenth century [when the practice of applying the word *spintriae* to the tokens appears to have started] the erotic medals were as well known among collectors and connoisseurs as were Suetonius's text and term; the transfer of the term *spintria* from the ancient actions and actors to the numismatic remains that were believed to portray them could have been common coin among specialists'.

range of meanings: ‘wanton, petulant, sportive, playful, frolicsome, roguish’. Thus, Shackleton Bailey translates as ‘sportive tokens’, whilst acknowledging an earlier translator’s (Friedländer) opinion that ‘*lasciva* refers to tokens giving free access to brothels or to prostitutes in the theatre’ (Bailey 1993, 227 n. f). Other translators and commentators have followed one or other of these readings with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Of these, S-R (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 19ff.) give perhaps the strongest support of all to ‘brothel tokens’ – indeed, making this passage, rather than that from Suetonius, the cornerstone of their (literary) evidence. Christian Schöffel (Schöffel 2002, 658) supports the – ‘if hardly appealing to modern tastes’ –reading of Friedländer of ‘brothel tokens’ (*Bordellgutscheine*). On the other hand, Donald Bateson (Bateson 1993, 393) follows T.V. Buttrey (Buttrey 1973, 56) in reading ‘playful’, and Walter Ker had ‘sportive tokens’ ‘entitling the holder to receive presents’ (Ker 1968, 61 and n. c); these, Schöffel rejects as a ‘toned-down interpretation (*eine abmildernde Deutung*), ‘barely compatible with the word [*lascivus*] (*mit der Vokabel kaum vereinbar*)’. Bette Talvacchia similarly writes of ‘tokens that could be exchanged for particularly piquant rewards’ (Talvacchia 1999, 59). Vitale (1941, 81) identifies *lasciva nomismata* as referring to *spintriae*, but does not endorse these in turn as ‘brothel tokens’; further, he sees (p. 82) a satiric intent in the use of the word *nomismata*.¹⁰

Let us accept for a moment that *lasciva* indeed indicates that the *nomismata* bore erotic scenes. What licence do we have for concluding therefore that they were ‘brothel tokens’? None at all. It is the modern eye which sees such scenes as ‘erotic’, in the sense of being intended for, or associated with, arousal. It is difficult to see how, except with imagination or proceeding from a preconceived notion, that *lasciva nomismata* implies anything one way or another. The objects might have borne erotic scenes, but this does not necessarily imply that they were ‘brothel tokens’, or in any way connected with sexual activity; they could well have indeed been intended as ‘play money’, in the spirit of the festival at which they were distributed, even perhaps bearing erotic scenes for the amusement of the crowd.

Other kinds of games?

If *spintriae* were not ‘brothel tokens’, then what were they? The most direct approach to answering this question must surely lie in the suggestion by Bateson that we have been looking, in effect, the wrong way around. We should, he suggests (Bateson 1991, 392), give the obverse to the numerals and the reverse to whatever appears on the other side.

¹⁰ ‘E se il termine *numismata*, in luogo di *tesseræ*, fu usato dall’autore degli *Epigrammi*, lo fu senza dubbio in senso traslato e probabilmente satirico’ (‘And if the term *numismata*, in place of *tesseræ*, was used as such by the author of the Epigrams, it was used without doubt in a transferred and probably satirical sense’ – the satire deriving, we must presume, from the fact that not real money, but ‘monetiform tokens’ (Murison), was distributed). This is an appropriate point at which to note the practice of (some) Italian authors – Vitale 1941, title, 81 and *passim*; Simonetta 1980, 55; Simonetta and Riva 1981, 19 -- of using *numismata* in place of *nomismata*, even when quoting the original Latin. *Numismata* is not known in Latin, so far as I have been able to ascertain, nor does it appear in any standard collection of the *Epigrams*.

With the erotic scenes no longer privileged – that is, if we look at *spintriae* through the eyes of those who had once used them, for whatever purpose – we can now bring tokens of all types, whatever they might display on the non-numeral side, into one (potentially) single group. This permits a wide variety of interpretations, as follows.

(a) Gaming tokens.

We are led to the idea that *spintriae* were no more than a particularly exotic form of gaming-token or counter first, by the numerals (assigning these, as Bateson suggests, to the obverse), and second, by long-known examples of similar objects which are unambiguously gaming-tokens. Henry Cohen illustrated (Cohen 1892, 266) two instances of such. On one [Plate 5] are shown ‘Deux joueurs assis en face l’un de l’autre et tenant sur leurs genoux une tablette ressemblant à un damier ...’, with the numeral XIII on the other side; the other shows a female head on one side and on the other the motto QUID LVDIT ARRAM DET QVOD SATIS SIT (‘Qui veut jouer, qu’il donne des arrhes suffisantes pour répondre’). The possibility of *spintriae* as involved in some sort of game is supported by Bateson 1991, 392 (‘The best alternative explanation apart from brothel tokens is perhaps some use as gaming tokens with the numerals playing a role in position, moves, or scoring in an as yet unknown fashion but with lively scenes on one side rather in the manner of a particular type of modern playing cards the backs of which display the charms of individual young ladies and which no doubt exist with more risqué scenes which cannot be displayed for public sale’), and Jacobelli 2000, 36. This said, it cannot be ruled out that *spintriae* served as both ‘brothel tokens’ and ‘playing tokens’.

(b) Admission tokens

That the numerals I-XVI should correspond to seating at the theatre or games is a possibility, although there is no real evidence that seating was so arranged (Simonetta 1980, 55). Whatever the case, Bateson’s instinct that the solution to the problem lies in the numerals, rather than in the motifs, would appear to have been vindicated by subsequent excavations at Pompeii led and reported by Luciana Jacobelli (Jacobelli 1997; 2000). Most striking of her findings is a large fresco in the *Terme Suburbane* (‘Suburban Baths’) of a series of scenes, identical to those which appear on the obverses of *spintriae*, with accompanying numerals, as appear on the reverses (Jacobelli 1997, 8, Fig. 1). Some of these scenes, as she also illustrates, appear on other objects of the period, such as vases. She presents a strong argument (Jacobelli 1995, 158; 1997, 7) that the scenes and numerals in the *Terme Suburbane* correspond to containers (for clothes whilst bathing) in a locker-room, from which it would seem natural (I suggest) that *spintriae* could have been handed out as ‘locker tokens’, as is still the case today (albeit with more mundane representation!).¹¹

¹¹ Bateson, in writing that ‘On the whole the eroticism on the [Pompeiiian] wall paintings is not the same as that on the *spintriae* and the same seems to be the case for the pottery lamps. ...’ (Bateson 1991, 392) was of course writing before the more detailed (and revised) reports and illustrations of Jacobelli. Jacobelli (1991, 147-8) initially speculated on the possibility that some part of the Baths might have functioned, at some stage in its existence, as a brothel (*lupanare*),

(c) Dole/gift tokens

Apart from a possible reading of *lasciva nomismata* as no more than a particularly exotic form of token distributed by Domitian (see above), we have evidence that he, and at least one other emperor, were in the habit of distributing tokens:

dieque proximo omne genus rerum missilia sparsit, et quia pars maior intra popularia deciderat, quinquagenas tesseras in singulos cuneos equestris ac senatorii ordinis pronuntiauit.
Suet. *Dom.* 4

The next day he scattered all sorts of things among the crowd, and as the greater part of these fell amongst the people, he had five hundred tokens thrown among the knights and senators

sparsa et populo missilia omnium rerum per omnes dies: singula cotidie milia auium cuiusque generis, multiplex penus, tesserae frumentariae, uestis, aurum, argentum, gemmae, margaritae, tabulae pictae, mancipia, iumenta atque etiam mansuetae ferae, nouissime naues, insulae, agri.
Suet. *Nero.* 11

Every day many thousands of all sorts of things were thrown amongst the people: many kinds of fowl, grain tokens¹², clothes, gold, silver, jewels, pearls, pictures, slaves, beasts of burden and even tamed beasts, the very latest boats, islands, farms.¹³

There is no reason, to repeat a point made earlier, why some such tokens could not have carried erotic scenes.

with consequent meaningful connection between scenes and numerals; although she in no way suggests this, some possible support for the 'brothel tokens' hypothesis could follow. Whether so or not, her later opinion assigns a more mundane role to the scenes.

¹² In this case their free distribution being an example of Imperial largesse. But such tokens, when purchased, were cheap, as we see in a satire of Juvenal (Juvenal, *Satura* VII, 174-175) where the 'textbook orator' (as we might say), 'comes [into the courts] for his cheap grain-token' (*uillis tesserae uenit frumenti*) 'for that is assuredly the most lavish fee [he can command]' (*quippe haec merces lautissima*).

¹³ It is difficult to imagine that all such objects, especially those in the latter group, would have been literally 'thrown amongst the people to scramble for'. The reference must, most sensibly, be to tokens entitling the lucky recipients to such things.

The creation of History.

We ought never to be surprised at the creation of History where matters of a sexual nature are concerned (*vide* Murison's charge against Suetonius, *supra*). Notoriously, for example, Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa. A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (1928) was, it has been alleged, the product of misinformation and fanciful imagination which did, nonetheless, fit perfectly with the temper of its time and subsequently with common preconceptions of life in 'unspoilt' societies. Can we not suppose that the same could be said of the interpretation of *spintriae* as 'Roman brothel tokens'?

A relatively few (in comparison with official coinage) specimens, and just two passages of arguable interpretation as literary evidence: this is not much to go on¹⁴. Yet here, as elsewhere, a desire to supply with imagination what is lacking in solid evidence, and a tendency perhaps to see the world of others (in this case, the Romans) through modern eyes can, with all the best will in the world, and with the sincerest of scholarship, lead to the creation of a world which owes perhaps more to what we would like to be or have been the case, than to what is or ever was. Thus, on a matter over which disagreement is far from lacking, Bono Simonetta and Renzo Riva have taken perhaps the firmest of all positions on *spintriae* as 'brothel tokens':

The *spintriae*, like the earlier erotic lead *tesserae*, were to be used as a means of payment in the brothels, where, by order of the emperor Tiberius, it was a punishable offense to use coins which depicted the emperor's image. ...

One can presume that the *spintriae* of Groups A and B [following their system of classification of specimens] were coined between 70 and 75 A.D., while those of Group C were coined between the years 75-95. It is likely that the *spintriae* were issued periodically, as needed, generally on a yearly basis, and that each scene represents a different issue. After the death of Domitian we must suppose that the ban imposed by Tiberius was revoked or fell into disuse, and thus the *spintriae* were no longer coined. (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 35. 'Summary', in English)

This conclusion the authors reach after examination of what they assert to be a wider range of specimens than had previously been considered (Simonetta and Riva 1981, 5); but no subsequent writer supports their position, and indeed, Luciana Jacobelli (Jacobelli 1997, 4-5) flatly rejects it.

¹⁴ Even less so, I should suggest, is the *absence* of literary evidence where we think it 'ought' to be. Thus, in respect to the dating of *spintriae*, Bono Simonetta (Simonetta 1980, 56-7) was prepared to find it of some significance that they are not mentioned in the list of presents distributed by Nero (quoted *supra*) or that the allegedly notoriously greedy Vespasian, who taxed even urine, is not recorded (Suet. *Vesp.* 23) as having turned to brothels as a source of revenue.

Against this must be placed the more straightforward scenario originally advanced by T.V Buttrey (with reference to the material he had examined): ‘It is certain that all of this token material was produced together, whether serially or simultaneously, at a single office. The *spintriae* too can be dated to c. 22-37 B.C.’ (Buttrey 1973, 57. ‘B.C.’ is clearly a typographical error, as he states further below: ‘But Tiberius is of the early emperors the most thoroughly maligned, and it was precisely in his reign, and most likely during his years on Capri, that an erotic novelty appeared, the *spintriae* which picture couples in copulation.’). More recently, C.L. Murison (Murison 1987, 99), Donald Bateson (Bateson 1991, 393), and Luciana Jacobelli (Jacobelli 1997, 3-4) support Buttrey.

A compromise interpretation.

The case for *spintriae* as ‘brothel tokens’, and so, for the existence of a ‘sub-economy’, is not strong. *Spintriae*, whatever their purpose, were produced for only a short period. Compared with the hoards of official coinage which survive, examples are relatively few and many show little of the wearing which would have been brought about through extensive circulation. An interpretation which seeks to accommodate these facts is that *spintriae* are evidence of a short-lived experiment aimed not so much at control as at revenue-raising¹⁵, this being possible at each stage of the coin-token-coin cycle which, as noted earlier, would necessarily have had to have taken place – with all of this deriving from, or perhaps even under the guise of, the prohibition on the carrying into brothels of coins bearing the emperor’s image. It might have become quickly evident that ‘routine enforcement of such a rule would have brought the brothel business to a standstill or at least seriously compromised it. Interfering with the revenues generated by brothels was in nobody’s interest’ (McGinn 2004, 86).¹⁶ The experiment was discontinued.

With the end of such an experiment *spintriae*, deprived now of any exchange-value, and of no intrinsic value, would have been largely discarded, save for some kept for amusement or as keepsakes. Contrary to what we might expect, many of these perhaps survived the advent of Christianity as the State religion in the late fourth century under the emperor Theodosius I as he ‘abstained from destroying the not very decent statues and other relics of the heathen, in order to perpetuate and expose all the absurdity and infamy of false religions, and to inspire contempt and hatred of them’¹⁷. Thereafter,

¹⁵ The notion of imperial revenue-raising from brothels should not be readily dismissed: Bono Simonetta clearly implies that Vespasian would have done so if he could have (n. 14 here), and Caligula was said to have opened a brothel on the Palatine (Suet. *Cal.* 41), a story which as Thomas McGinn has argued, might well contain some truth (McGinn 1998).

¹⁶ Luciana Jacobelli had earlier (Jacobelli 1997, 4) expressed the same reservation.

¹⁷ Attr. Sylvain Mareschal (Famin 1871. Introduction.)

those specimens which were known disappeared, until fairly recent times, into private ‘cabinets’ available only to the select few¹⁸.

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¹⁸ As, for example, in the ‘Cabinet Secret’ of the Royal Museum at Naples (Famin 1871). Note that Famin uses the word ‘*spinthria*’ (*sic*) to refer to erotic *frescoes*.

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PLATE 1



PLATE 2



PLATE 3



PLATE 4



PLATE 5