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NOTE

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An Imperial '*Spintria*' Found in Vilches, Jaén (Andalusia, Spain)

by

DAVID MARTÍNEZ CHICO

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An Imperial ‘*Spintria*’ Found in Vilches, Jaén (Andalusia, Spain)

DAVID MARTÍNEZ CHICO¹

More examples of so-called ‘*spintriae*’ from the Roman Empire have been found in Hispania than anywhere else.² And yet the debate on their purpose remains open.³ Sadly, the lack of documentation surrounding the Spanish finds makes it impossible to carry out an in-depth archaeological discussion. Most *orichalcum* tokens in Spain are in private collections and the public collections of museums. Nonetheless the volume of the Spanish assemblage in comparison to the rest of Europe is clear. The concentration of tokens in Hispania suggests a colonial context connected with Baetica’s municipalisation. A starting point for exploring how these items came to be in Hispania might be the movement of Roman soldiers, citizens or colonists during the first years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.



Fig. 1. The new token found in Vilches. Private collection. 22mm, 3h, 2.96g. (1.5x)

In early 2021 a brass token was found near the Giribaile reservoir in Vilches, a village in Jaén (Andalusia) (Fig. 1).⁴ The area contains remains of an Iberian *oppidum*.⁵ To the south (the Giribaile reservoir covers several municipalities), a large Roman villa complex dated to the first or second centuries was recently discovered. The villa contained ceramic production ovens, an oil mill and residential rooms.⁶ Vilches belongs to the south of Tarraconensis, on the border of the province of Baetica.

¹ Universitat de València. I am very grateful to Alberto Campana for sending me the token deposited at the Museo Nazionale Romano, Medagliere (Fig. 2b) and Clare Rowan for her critical comments on the text.

² Martínez Chico 2019.

³ For overviews *in extenso*, Campana 2009; Le Guennec 2017; Martínez Chico 2018 and 2019; Küter 2019.

⁴ The *tessera* was reportedly found by a Spanish metal detectorist.

⁵ Gutiérrez Soler and Izquierdo Peraile 2001.

⁶ An unpublished archaeological site located in the neighbouring municipality of Rus. News: <https://www.aulamagna.com.es/restos-arqueologicos-giribaile> (12/01/2021).

The new Vilches token can be added to the rest of the Spanish corpus from Andalusian collections. The obverse bust was traditionally identified as Germanicus, but more recently an identification of Drusus the Younger (13 BC – AD 23) as *promachos* (champion) and *exemplum virtutis* (a model of manliness) has been proposed.⁷ The bust of Drusus faces right and is seen from behind, cuirassed with a *paludamentum* and a spear over his shoulder. The obverse carries a linear border with a wreath and the reverse a dotted border with wreath. The combination of the portrait of Drusus with the numeral XIII was unknown until now. Nonetheless, XIII is found on a unique issue showing Drusus without a spear (Fig. 2b), and on several other token types.

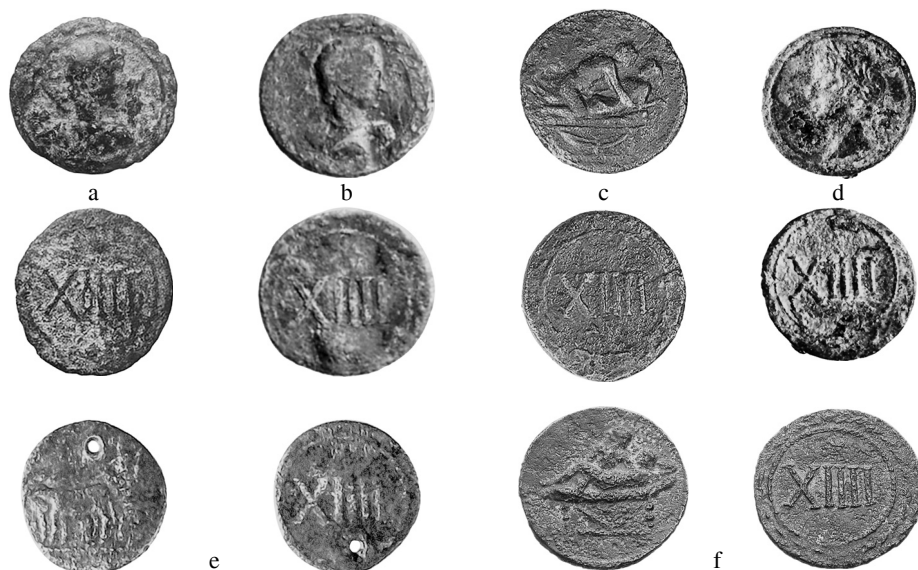


Fig. 2. Vilches' token (a)⁸ and possible reverse die links - (b) Museo Nazionale, Medagliere, Gnecci coll.; (c, d, e) Martínez Chico 2019, nos. 14 (Cores coll.), 39 (MNAC) and 42 (MAN); (f) CNG, Mail Bid Sale 78, lot 1716.

This series utilised groups of obverse dies, including erotic scenes, busts of the imperial family and other scenes of daily life, like a *biga* of mules or donkeys (e.g. Fig. 2e). There are numerous reverse die links connecting these disparate images, with the numerals on the reverses forming a 'common denominator'.⁹ The die links documented between specimens carrying a representation of the game *morra* and tokens with sexual imagery (*spintriae*) leads one to think of monetized gaming pieces rather than brothel tokens.¹⁰ Another group of tokens alludes to a possible

⁷ Buttrely 1973, p. 62, n. 17 ('Armoured bust right, Germanicus?'), with new identification proposed by Küter 2016, p. 95 and 2019, p. 82.

⁸ It is a poorly preserved piece, which makes it impossible to be sure of die links.

⁹ Buttrely 1973, pp. 56–57; Göbl 1978, tab. 8; Campana 2009, p. 47; Martínez Chico 2018, p. 545.

¹⁰ Die links: Martínez Chico 2018, pp. 545–46. These monetised gaming pieces need not necessarily be connected to *ludus duodecim scriptorum* or *ludus latruncularum*, the games popular among Roman soldiers; on this see Bateson 1991, p. 392; Duggan 2017, p. 110 and 117; Martínez Chico 2019, p. 120. For written and material evidence on these games see Purcell 1995 and Carretero Vaquero 1998. On the idea of brothel tokens see Simonetta and Riva 1981, p. 18.

magistrate named Gaius Mitreius; Mitreius' bust is shown on the obverse surrounded by the legend C. MITREIVS L. F. MAG. IVVENT ('Gaius Mitreius, son of Lucius, master of the youth'). Die links between this series and *spintriae* with erotic scenes have revived the debate about the purpose of these pieces.¹¹

It is convincing that Gaius Mitreius, *magister iuventutis*, ordered the striking of these tokens from a Roman workshop, and that the dies were designed by engravers from the mint of Rome.¹² For Rowan, all brass tokens may have been produced for several groups or individuals over time (one series for Gaius Mitreius, the MORA type for another individual/group, and the sex scenes for another customer). She proposes that these pieces should not be considered gaming tokens and that 'the *iuvenes* groups of the Roman West were one set of users'.¹³ If this is correct, the correlative numbering of the reverse dies still requires explanation. But the connection between brass tokens with Gaius Mitreius, *collegia iuvenum* and *iuventutes* is very suggestive.

The main stumbling block is that the nature of *iuvenes* organisations is highly debatable, although Rostovtzeff argued that they were youth organisations in which training for later military service took place.¹⁴ In opinion of Bancalari Molina, the *collegia iuvenum* are organisations that are aristocratic, urban (Italian) and more Romanised in nature. By contrast, the *iuventutes* are more rural, provincial and militarised. In general, we can think that these organisations educated the youngest population in sporting, religious, political, military and educational fields. Youth associations became very important bodies for society and the regime that governed them and were closely related to the electoral politics of cities.

We might assume that the *magistri iuventutis* were of equestrian rank and exercised a purely official function. They were responsible for supervising physical exercises, military training, games and parades, as well as the educational process.¹⁵ The youth organisations practiced sports, games (*ludi iuvenales*) and shows that were part of imperial education. On the other hand, the representation of a game of *morra* on tokens may have been connected to this ludic activity.¹⁶ Nor should it be forgotten that *orichalcum* was a metal under imperial jurisdiction and its production must be seen in the context of Roman aristocracy.

The distribution of monetised tokens as gifts or awards is an equally acceptable explanation for the existence of these pieces - in this case to the fellows of the *iuvenes* organisations.¹⁷ No tokens struck in the name of Mitreius have been found to date in Spain. His epigraphic presence as an issuing authority is surely related to a good portion of the brass tokens. But the diffusion of *collegia iuvenum* thanks to Augustus' reform complements the theory put forward earlier in this article, that the presence

¹¹ Küter 2019, p. 84; Rowan 2020, pp. 101–3.

¹² Rowan 2020, p. 105.

¹³ Rowan 2020, p. 109.

¹⁴ Rostovtzeff 1937, I, p. 246. For the existence of lead *tesserae iuvenum* see Rostovtzeff 1903, pp. 101–9.

¹⁵ Bancalari Molina 1998, p. 49, n. 2 and Bancalari Molina 2000, pp. 56–57. For earlier work see Jaczynowska 1978.

¹⁶ Martínez Chico 2018, pp. 545–46.

¹⁷ Martínez Chico 2018, pp. 553–54.

of these pieces in Spain must be connected to municipalisation and the movement of troops in this region, as well as the presence of municipal nobility or the movement of Italian elite to Baetica.¹⁸

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¹⁸Martínez Chico 2019, pp. 119–20.

