

Votive (?) use of coins in fourth-century Lusitania: the builders' deposit in the Torre de Palma basilica

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A B S T R A C T

During archaeological excavations in 1983 and 1984, ten coins of the House of Constantine were found in a group, sealed in the floor of the Torre de Palma basilica – evidently dedications made by the builders. Because of the configuration of the construction materials and the careful incorporation of the coins, it is clear that their deposition belongs to the first phase of the monument. As the coins range from AD 335-357, a construction date for this important church sometime in the third quarter of the fourth century is indicated.

The motive underlying dedicatory offerings of coins is examined. In addition, the speculation is advanced that the use of coins in architectural contexts such as that which we find here may correspond in a way to the concealment of time capsules in important public works projects in modern times.

R E S U M O

Durante as escavações realizadas em 1983 e 1984, foram encontradas seladas no chão da basílica de Torre de Palma, dez moedas da casa de Constantino, evidentemente, ofertas feitas pelos construtores. Devido à configuração dos materiais de construção e à maneira cuidadosa como as moedas estavam incorporadas, é possível dizer que as moedas pertencem à primeira fase de construção deste monumento. A data indicada para as moedas varia entre 335-357 d.C., o que coloca a data desta importante igreja por volta do terceiro quartel do século IV.

É feito um breve comentário sobre o que está por detrás do uso de moedas como ofertas, juntamente com uma especulação sobre o uso de moedas em contextos arquitectónicos (situações semelhantes às encontradas aqui), que de algum modo podem corresponder aos “time capsules” em edifícios públicos ainda nos nossos dias.

Archaeological investigation in the Christian basilica at the site of Torre de Palma¹ (Concelho of Monforte) in 1983 and 1984, met with a most fortuitous find. Ten coins were discovered sealed in the construction material of the building, and have provided what has been, until 1997, the only physical evidence for dating this very unusual and important monument² (Fig. 1). The find also provides us with a rare opportunity to observe the apparent belief and practice in Roman days of a custom (or superstition) which exists in our own time.

Excavations in the basilica during 1983 and 1984 yielded a total of 17 coins. These coins fall readily into two very distinct groups. Seven of the coins, all found in the western chapel, are of Portuguese monarchs, AD 1223-1557³. Investigations in the Eastern chapel (the original church) uncovered ten small Roman bronzes of the late Empire. These Roman issues are the artifacts which provide the date for the building's first construction phase and are the subject of the discussion, below.

All ten of the Roman coins were found embedded, evidently deliberately, in the matrix of the fine white floor of the Eastern chapel, approximately in front of the altar, which stood just in front of the East apse. The coins had been carefully sealed in the floor of the basilica during construction, within (not under) the actual flooring material itself, while it was still viscous (a fine white plaster-like substance which formed a dense layer 2-3 centimeters thick). The motive behind a coin deposit such as this cannot be determined today with certainty, but probably represents a dedication of sorts, or a good luck wish from workmen or individuals who took part in the construction, or who were simply present at the moment the floor was installed. Anecdotal evidence abounds for similar practices among builders today, who typically seal away a coin, religious medal, "lucky charm" or even a prophylactic talisman into a wall of a building (often, a dwelling) at some opportune moment during construction⁴.

One of the coins was excavated in an advanced degraded state and unfortunately disintegrated during stabilization treatment. The remaining nine coins are all poorly preserved, perhaps due to a corrosive property of the flooring material, but are identifiable by partial legends and reverse types. They include:

- a single specimen of the "GLORIA EXERCITVS" (two soldiers and one standard) - AD 335-337 (Constantine I) or 337-340 (Constantius II);
- a votis issue, "VOT XX MVLT XXX" within wreath, - ca. AD 346;
- three specimens of the two victories facing each other - AD 346-348;
- and four specimens of the fallen horseman "FEL TEMP REPARATIO" - AD 354-357.

The group is thus composed of either: one very late coin of Constantine the Great and eight of Constantius II; or nine coins of Constantius II. In any event, the coins are bracketed between AD 335 and 357. Not one of the coins retains a legible exergue and in no case can a mint or officina be determined.

If the practice of modern builders serves as our model, the most likely scenario is that on the day that the basilica's floor was installed, the workmen who were present — probably ten, judging from the number of coins (perhaps there were others who chose not to participate) — took a low-value coin from their pocket or purse and concealed them, more or less together, within the church's floor in the vicinity of the altar, where they became a permanent constituent of the construction. The position of the altar may be surmised from the survival, *in situ*, of footing blocks for three of the altar table's legs. Eight of the coins were clustered in a loose group immediately in front of the location where the altar must have stood, within roughly 1m. of the southern, front leg. The ninth coin (one of the fallen horseman issues) was

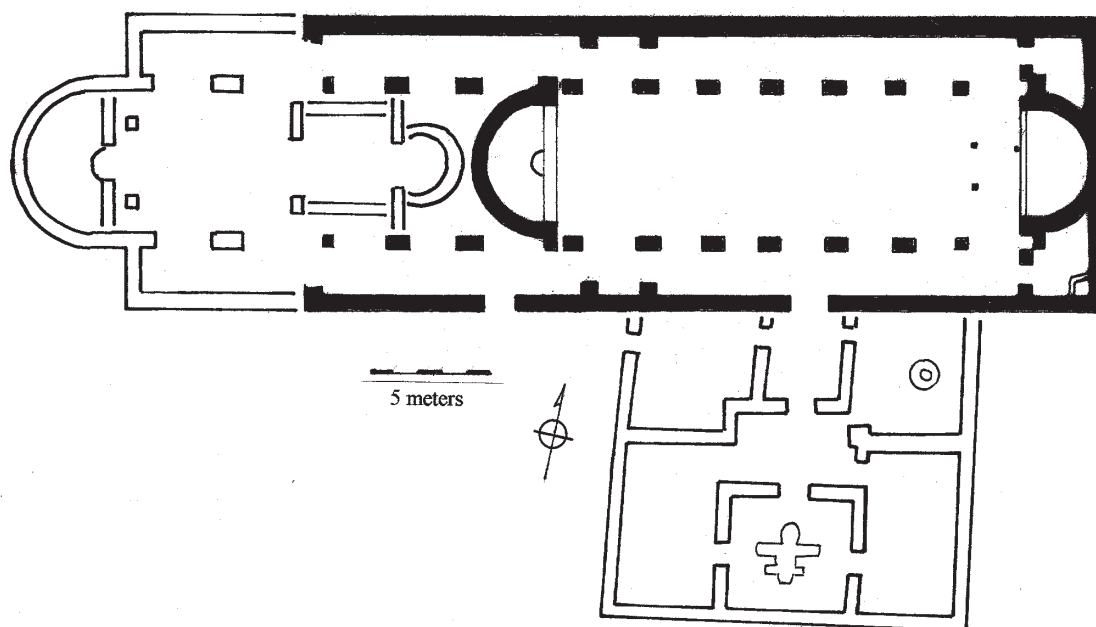


Fig. 1 The Basilica - Solid black indicates the original church.

Outline indicates later additions.

Plan by author after Maloney ; Hale (1996).

deposited apart, about 1m. to the north of the altar's northern, front leg (Fig. 2). This irregular positioning suggests individual placement by different hands, rather than placement by a single person.

Because the coins were concealed in a church, and in the vicinity of the altar, there is a temptation to view the deposition as a religious act. On the other hand, the modern builders' practice which can be observed today applies to any (including secular) construction. We are thus left with an unclear choice of identifying the deposition with religion or not. In order to better understand the nature of the deposition, we should first try to understand what it is that the coins represented to those who deposited them.

If the coins were current on the day of the deposit, they were simply "small change." It may be, however, that the coins had been recently demonetized. Legislation of Constantius II in AD 354 and again in 356 mentions some of the lower-valued coins as being or having been withdrawn from use⁵. We should also consider the possibility that they were already old (part of a recovered hoard, perhaps), and that they were selected for deposition in the basilica's floor: 1) because they were held in some veneration (recalling, through his coinage, a memory of Constantine, who, under such a circumstance, would have been an earlier figure of obvious importance to the Church); or 2) because they were currently worthless.

The nine coins before us are typical of the base metal (AE4 and AE3) denominations that were circulating in the 350s⁶. Hoard evidence from other Lusitanian sites, however, suggests that Constantinian issues were still abundant into the fifth century (Pereira [et al.], 1974; Alarcão [et al.], 1990). Whether or not their apparent abundance should be construed as an indication that they survived as circulating specie is less than straightforward. Constantinian issues appear to have been produced in such great numbers, it is not difficult to imagine that a century later, even had the coins been withdrawn from circulation, there may still have been

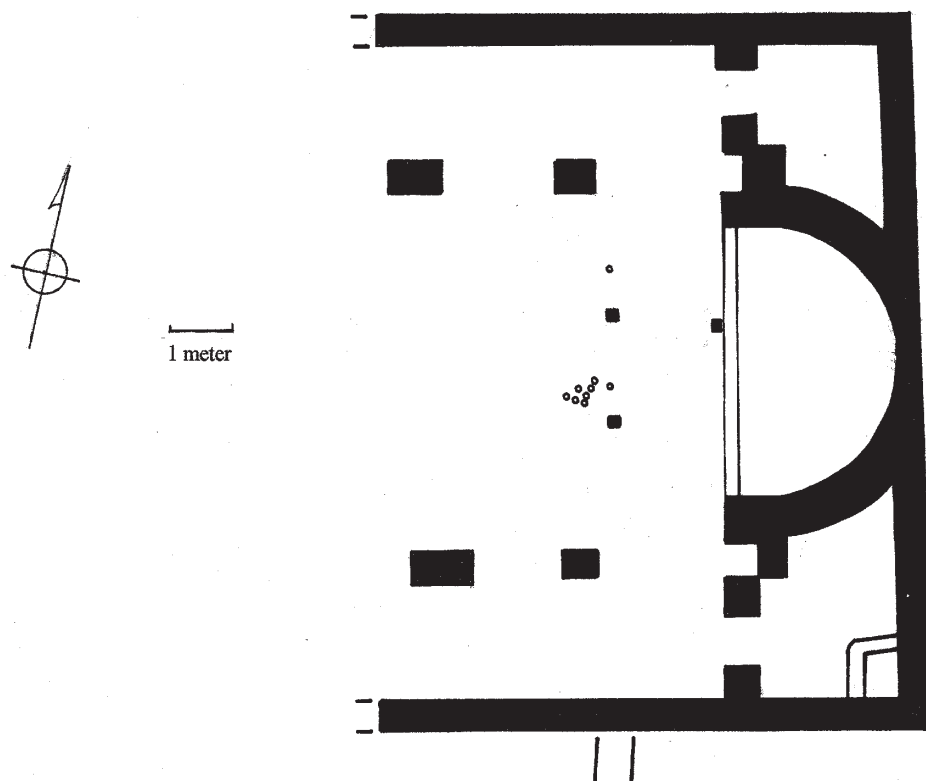


Fig. 2 East Apse and Position of the Coins - Plan by author after Maloney, *Excavations at the Early Christian Church of Torre de Palma 1983-1986*, unpublished report to the *Serviço Regional de Arqueologia da Região Sul* (nd), Plan XVII.

many household caches simply lying idly about. Complicated scenarios are imaginable, of course, but the simplest, and the one which most closely parallels the modern practice which is observable today, encourages us to concentrate on the probability that the coins were current (legal or otherwise) at the time of the basilica's initial construction and that they were most likely taken out of "active purses" for their deposition in the floor.

Valentinianic coins began to be produced in vast numbers in AD 364 and gained rapid dispersion throughout the Empire (*RIC VIII*, p. 82), and if the basilica coins were drawn from active purses after this date, we might well expect to find Valentinianic issues represented among the group. The absence of even a single post-Constantinian coin among the nine identified is an argument that the deposition took place in the years running up to *ca.* AD 360, plus or minus a few years. The coins thus provide us with a date for the construction of the original basilica, as well as date by which this non-monetary (be it votive, good luck, etc.) use of coins was in practice.

It is probable that the modern practice of tossing coins into fountains and construction projects derives from similar, if not identical, ancient rituals of sacrifice. The act of including coins in building construction may find antecedents some eight centuries earlier in dedications of wealth and cult objects, also within architectural contexts. Coins, which were emerging as an extension of movable wealth, were selected along with other precious or otherwise coveted items to serve as votive objects. The very earliest coins (and proto-coins) which we know of, in fact, were recovered from a deposit in the foundation of the *Artemision* in Ephesus,

made ca. 600 BC. The parallels are immediately striking: 1) coins (and at Ephesus, other items); 2) buried irretrievably in the construction materials of; 3) a cult building (at Torre de Palma, a Christian church — at Ephesus, the Temple of Artemis). Still, we should probably not leap to this apparent connection as a neat and instant explanation. The practice of making architectural deposits may not be continuous throughout all of the intervening centuries, or geographically; there may be independent invention of practices which appear to be similar; or it may be that the 7th-century Lydian Greeks were, themselves, simply mimicking an earlier, and profane, builder's tradition which had origins elsewhere.

Coins which are tossed into public fountains and pools today are almost certainly the cultural descendants of coins dedicated at ancient water shrines or used as petitions/offerings at river crossings. Well-known examples are the sacred spring of the Celtic goddess, *Coventina*, at Carrawburgh (England), which produced some 16 000 coins upon excavation; the healing spring of *Sulis-Minerva* at Bath; or the River Tyne at Newcastle, where travellers threw a coin to the river god in hopes of a safe crossing (De La Bédoyère, 1989). Ancient rites of sacrifice, now vague and degenerate, are thus probably the ultimate source of the urge we so often observe today to toss the coin into water or wall, even when manifested by practitioners who may not be consciously expressing a religious act. Modern-day builders who similarly add a coin etc. into a wall probably do so with varying degrees of religious motive - varying all the way down to zero, where it may not be unlikely to find a construction worker professing atheism, who nevertheless tosses a coin into the wet mortar or concrete, as he might into a wishing well, "just for good luck."

It is yet possible to explore another avenue of thought, however, in our search for the motive for this architectural coin-deposit.

There may be something to be gained by considering an incentive which is more challenging. Let us entertain the possibility that these coins addressed a yearning which was more secular, indeed.

In addition to bearing and storing wealth, be it great or small, coins carry strong messages. Aside from the obvious affiliation with issuer and content of reverse themes, a coin embodies additional and sometimes nebulous notions of nationality, cultural identity, and *time*, in the sense of era, emperor, specific events or dates, or lifetime of user. By means of these dimensions, a coin can make a convenient badge, a handy souvenir, or a ready and tangible testimonial to one or more of the facets of the culture which produces and uses it — at the societal level, down to the personal, individual level.

Whether or not the depositors of the basilica coins at Torre de Palma embraced any "cultural/temporal" overtones of their small change is problematic, although it may be safe to muse that such a notion did exist in the greater Roman psyche. The propaganda role of coins, and Roman coins in particular, was recognized by the Romans themselves and by their contemporaries, as it is today. The prospect that instead of, or in addition to, their role as votives (in the mainstream sense), the coins may have been carefully put away in the basilica's floor for the edification or amusement of a future generation is thought provoking. It is not impossible that these coins could be construed as fourth-century ancestors of the time capsules which are often concealed in the cornerstones, walls and floors of *highly-prized public buildings* in our own age.

The Torre de Palma basilica should probably be visualized as a civil construction project of sorts, in spite of its location on what was evidently a privately-owned *villa* complex, and regardless of whether it was built with private or communal money and contracted or donated

labor. At the very least, it evidently served a community of Christians, and it is probable that a fair number of local workers (Christians?) took part in the construction. In terms of its use, it was a pivotal community/civic center and almost certainly a focal point of public attention and local pride. All of these factors combined to make this edifice into what was probably the grandest representative of a public building in the immediate vicinity.

If the coins were intended solely for the benefit of future generations, it is unlikely that so many need have been concealed. Still, in the minds of the depositors the coins may have carried some sense of signature as time marker or cultural banner, imparting to vague descendants something of the “days of the lives” of the basilica’s creators and in a broad way, their own identities. Such a scenario would sit well with the tight chronological grouping of the basilica coins as well as support the probability that they were taken out of active purses for their deposition in the floor.

The suggestion of a “time capsule” dimension for the basilica coins takes us well into the realm of speculation, but perhaps merits more than passing consideration. Probably most modern historians would postulate a latter date for the communal manifestation of concern over such a thing as a time capsule. But the coin deposit in the floor of this basilica invites us to wonder about the roots and antiquity of the intriguing human longing to “speak” to future generations through the concealment and transmission of artifacts representing one’s own transient era.

NOTES

- ¹ The excavations from 1983-86 were a joint project of the University of Louisville (USA), the *Universidade de Évora* and the *Serviço Regional de Arqueologia, Região do Sul*, under the direction of Dr. Stephanie Maloney, University of Louisville, with liaison support of Dr. José O. Caeiro. Since 1987, the Portuguese co-Director has been Dra. Maria da Luz V.C. Huffstot, *Universidade Lusitana, Lisboa*. Earlier excavations in the basilica and villa were carried out by M. Heleno from ca. 1947 through the 1950s, and by Dom F. de Almeida in the mid 1960s.
- ² The site also includes an extensive *villa* of multiple dwellings and industrial complexes, the earliest phase of which probably dates to the middle of the 1st century AD. For the most recent discussion of the continuing investigations at Torre de Palma, see Maloney and Hale (1996).
- ³ The western chapel is composed of architectural additions made after the construction of the original basilica and contains many medieval burials, most of which had been previously disturbed. The coins are: three *dinheiros* of Sancho II, AD 1223-1248; a *dinheiro* of Afonso III, AD 1248-1279; a *real preto* of Afonso V, AD 1438-1481; a *ceitil*, unattributable reign, AD 1438-1568; a *ceitil* of João III, AD 1521-1557.

At least one of these coins, and possibly two, had been included in these late burials. The unattributed *ceitil* (26-TP-84) was recovered from the rib cage of the skeletal remains of a child in one of the undisturbed graves, as if it had been clutched in the hand and the arms crossed over the chest. This type of *ceitil* was struck under five kings, from 1438 to 1568. The other *ceitil* (10-TP-83), of João III, was possibly also from a grave context. The remaining five coins were found in the earth fill associated with the raising of the floor level during medieval architectural modifications.

- ⁴ Locations which the author is aware of tend to favor bedrooms and positions over doorways.
- ⁵ The Codex Theodosianus, Lib. IX, Titulus XXIII, refers somewhat obliquely to sanctions against unofficial copies, the *Maiorina* and the “common” *Centenionalis*. Names and tariffing of the smaller base metal fractions, however, remain unclear, and whether or not coins such as those from the basilica were the object of this legislation cannot be determined at this time. It is, furthermore, impossible to know whether or not the builders at Torre de Palma knew of the legislation or, knowing of it, were willing to respect it.
- ⁶ Reference to this by K.W. Harl, in Maloney and Hale (1996) p. 290, n. 42

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