Divina Moneta

Coins in Religion and Ritual

Edited by

Nanouschka Myrberg Burström
and Gitte Tarnow Ingvardson

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Written sources and numismatic evidence reconsidered

Claudia Perassi

Coins and baptism: a starting point

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that in Roman times coins were used in widespread rituals and practices. They could be placed beneath the mast of a ship or sealed in foundation deposits; they could also be placed in graves or tossed into healing waters; they could be drilled and strung to make baby rattles or pendants with amuletic powers. Contemporary textual sources mention some of these customs, but they do not provide many insights into the deeper reasons behind these ritual uses of money. Also, the numerous Greek and Latin literary sources (from the late-fifth century BC to the late-second century AD) that describe the so-called 'obol of Charon' – the custom of placing a single coin in the mouth of the deceased as a fee to be paid to the ferryman Charon for a ride into the underworld – are not very revealing in this respect. Susan Stevens has pointed out that the archaeological evidence shows that Charon's obol 'was only one manifestation of a much wider funerary use of coins and suggests a richer and broader context in which it can be understood' (1991:215; cf. Doyen 2012).

The ritual of placing coins into baptismal fonts is mentioned in Canon 48 of the so-called 'Council of Elvira', which also explains why the baptised performed this custom. The canon is therefore the starting point for any consideration about this kind of practice, as already indicated by Franz Josef Dölger in a series of studies (1932a, 1932b, 1936). This chapter will compare this textual source with the material evidence to ascertain its veracity, especially with regard to the reason behind the ritual. I will start by examining the complex text of the canon. I will then present the archaeological and numismatic evidence; that is, five coin accumulations found in water systems used for the administration of baptism. The combination of these three sources will allow me to propose some alternative interpretations of the ritual.

Canon 48 of the Iliberri/Elvira or pseudo-Iliberritan Council

The first part of Canon 48 of the Iliberri/Elvira or pseudo-Iliberritan Council states: 'The custom of placing coins in the baptismal shell by those being baptised must be corrected so that the bishop does not seem to sell for money what he has received freely' (Laeuchli 1972:132[1]). The textual history of the so-called 'Elvira canons' is tangled (for their tradition, see Vilella & Barreda 2002:545–6; Lázaro Sánchez 2008:522–7; for the *status quaestionis*, see Ramos-Lissón 2005; Lázaro Sánchez 2008; Vilella 2014).

Iliberri/Iliberis was a town in *Hispania Baetica*, in the area of modern Granada (Fuentes Vázques 2002; Orfila 2005), called Elvira during the time of the Visigoth and Muslim domination: for this reason, the gathering is also called the Council of Elvira. Actually, there is no evidence that a council really took place at Iliberri/Elvira and the scholars disagree on this matter. A consolidated, unitary interpretation ascribes all 81 canons to a single council held in the Spanish town during the fourth century, although scholars do not agree on the exact date (Sotomayor Muro 2005). Conversely, Maurice Meigne (1975) first formulated a heterogeneous interpretation that considers the proceedings of the council to have been the result of a collection of canons that were originally separate. More recently, Josep Vilella defined the prescriptions attributed to the so-called Council of Elvira as a 'compilation of compilations' (2014:215): according to him, they were created by assembling at least three previous lists of canons (2014:218–32). The canons of a council or a synod really held at Iliberri/Elvira at the beginning of the fourth century may also have been integrated into it. During the compilation, probably completed in the late sixth century, the original texts were combined through glosses and additions (Vilella & Barreda 2002:549–51, 2006:312–27; Vilella 2014; contra Sotomayor & Berdugo 2005:99–106; Sotomayor Muro & Berdugo Villena 2008).

In the anti-unitary interpretation, which I favour, Canon 48 is always assigned to the late group of the list. According to Jesus Suberbiola Martinez (1987:75–84), canons numbering from 37 to 52 belong to a *hispano-romano* council held around AD 365, while Josep Vilella Masana (2014:251, footnote 3) thinks that Canon 48 was edited at the end of the fifth century or during the sixth century. Its actual redaction would have received some additions compared to the original version. Vilella and Barreda (2002:554; see also Vilella 2013:614, 2014:231–2) recognised them, thanks to a careful philological study, in the final explanatory proposition 'so that the bishop' (*ne sacerdos. . .*) and in the second part of the canon, stating that the feet of the newly baptised are not to be washed by the priests or clerics. The canon title 'So that the clergy do not take anything from those who are to be baptised' (*de baptizatis ut clerus nihil accipiat*) should also be considered a late addition to the original text added by the compiler, like all titles of the canons (Vilella & Barreda 2002:567, 2006:301).

Whatever the true origin of the canon, it clearly states that those being baptised are no longer permitted to introduce coins (Lat. *nummi*) into the

baptismal font (the Latin word *conca* seems to mean a basin of small size; see Dölger 1932a:3–4). The purpose of the prohibition is to prevent people from thinking that baptism was a sacrament that was administered in return for money. The Spanish canon is the only cogent textual evidence of the practice of placing coins in the baptismal fonts. Some other early Christian texts (Righetti 1959:132; Vilella 2014:256–7) report on generic offerings (perhaps also of monetary nature) that must be submitted by those who wish to be baptised (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* 40, 25; AD 381) or of the payment of a tax to receive the first sacrament (Pope Gelasius I, *Ep.* 14, 5; AD 494). But these written sources do not give us a clear enough indication to understand how concretely the offerings or the coins were given; that is, were they placed in the baptismal font or not?

Archaeological and numismatic evidence of coins placed in baptismal fonts

The pseudo-Iliberritan canon allows us to assign a meaning to coin accumulations found in water systems used for the administration of baptism in the early Church. At the present time, I am aware of five archaeological sites yielding evidence of the practice: Tas-Silġ (Malta), San Giovanni alle Fonti in Milan (Italy), Uvarov basilica at Chersonesos (Crimean peninsula, Ukraine), Piacenza (northern Italy) and the Cathedral of Trier (Germany). These coin deposits expand the geographical extent of the ritual from Spain (where its spread is witnessed by Canon 48 of the pseudo-Iliberritan Council) to the areas of northern Italy and to the Black Sea, in a period between the late fifth century/early sixth century and the late sixth century/early seventh century (Perassi & Facchinetti 2005; Facchinetti 2008:45–51).

Tas-Silġ (Malta)

The most compelling evidence was discovered in the site of the multi-period Tas-Silġ sanctuary, on top of a hill overlooking the Marsaxlokk bay on the island of Malta. It was investigated by the 'Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta' starting in 1963.[2] Its millenary history goes back to the Maltese Late Neolithic (3000–2500 BC), when a megalithic temple complex was built. It gave way to a Phoenician, and then to a Punic, sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Astarte, later identified with Hera/Juno. In the early Byzantine Age (end of the fourth–beginning of the fifth century) the pagan temple was converted into a Christian place of worship. A basilica with a nave was constructed and a pool (1.94 x 1.94 m) served as a baptistery in the middle of the large lobe with a curved front in the megalithic temple, and remained for many centuries (Fig. 3.1).

In 1999 the baptismal font was cleaned and reinforced. During these works of maintenance, a coin assemblage was found in the mud between the bottom slab of the font and a cistern immediately below, carved into
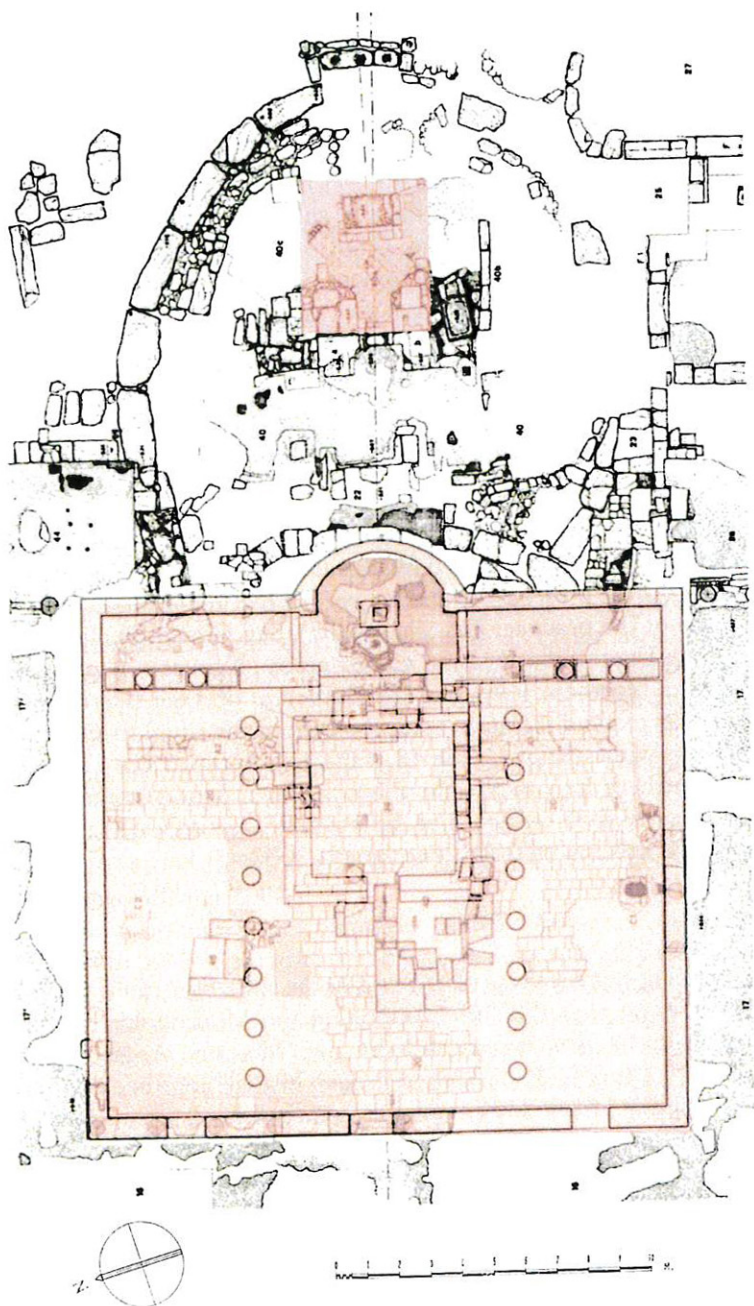
Figure 3.1 Tas-Silġ (Malta). Plan of the area occupied by the basilica (lower building, large pink area) and by the baptismal font (pink rectangle above this) (Archive of Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta, used with permission).

the rock and used as a containment tank. The deposit consists of 276 bronze coins, plus one Byzantine tremissis. Only 61 per cent of the bronze coins have been identified (Perassi 2005–6), because of wear through circulation and corrosion due to the nature of the soil where they have lain for centuries. A *follis* of Constantius II (AD 337–61) is the oldest piece. The late Roman legible coins are *folles* (4), Æ 3 (19) and especially Æ 4 (64) minted during the second half of the fourth and the fifth centuries. I could identify the issuing authorities of Constantius II, Constans, Julian, Valentinian II, Gratian (?), Arcadius, Valentinian III, Theodosius II, Marcian, Leo I, Libius Severus (?), Basiliscus and Marcus, Zeno. One *nummus* of the Herulian king Odovacar with the royal monogram and some 'Protovandalic' and/or Vandalic coins have also been found, issued between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century (two *nummi* with the letter/mark D in a wreath on the reverse, three pieces of four *nummi*, one *nummus* of Hilderic and a second of Gelimer). Byzantine coinage is attested by two *nummi* of Anastasius and one *nummus* of Justinian I. This is the latest bronze coin of the deposit, minted between AD 534 and 539. It is, therefore, almost contemporaneous with the Byzantine conquest of Malta by General Belisarius in 533/5. Illegible and almost-illegible pieces can be ascribed to the same chronological *facies* (second half of fourth/beginning of sixth), thanks to faint traces of their types and legends, and to their weights and diameters. At least forty imitation coins have been identified, and these are hard to date with any accuracy. The gold coin is a Byzantine tremissis of Constantine IV, minted in Syracuse (c. 670–674/81).

The bronze coin assemblage may be compared to some northern African hoards, which are equally heterogeneous, such as that of M'Sila (Algeria), buried in the first half of the sixth century (Deloum 1989:303–13). It was composed of 14,827 coins (Greek = 0.1 per cent; Roman Imperial = 96 per cent; Ostrogothic = 0.1 per cent; protovandalic = 2.5 per cent; Vandalic = 1.5 per cent; Byzantine = 0.1 per cent plus illegible specimens) hidden inside an amphora. The last are eight Byzantine *nummi*, including at least four of Justinian I. The Maltese deposit would have its numismatic coherence even if we assume the chronology of Constantine IV's tremissis (AD 670–4) as a *terminus post quem* for the simultaneous deposition of all the coins. Findings from peripheral and semi-peripheral Mediterranean areas allow us to understand that late Roman bronze coins could still circulate during the seventh century because of the weak supply of divisional money in the first Byzantine age. But, a hoard composed of just one gold coin against a large group of bronze coins would be exceptional.

The excavation was conducted with great precision, and the stratigraphy firstly allows us to exclude the possibility that the deposit was assembled to hoard the coins. They could, in fact, be reached only by removing the slab sealing them under the baptismal font. Moreover, no container was found that would have preserved the coins for reuse. As most of the coins were discovered in correspondence with the drain hole of the baptismal font

(Fig. 3.2), it seems logical to presume that they were initially placed in the basin and migrated into the underlying mud because of the periodic water outflows when the drain hole on the bottom of the basin was opened and the font was emptied.

In addition, the archaeological evidence enables us to establish that the deposit is composed of two parts, each with a distinct chronology. The 276 bronze coins were concentrated in a layer of silt and sand, about 11 cm thick, with at least six following phases of accumulation, corresponding to the six levels formed by the draining of the font (Bonetti 2005–6:209–11).

drain hole

bottom slab
of the baptismal font

Levels C, C1

Level D

Level E

Level F

Level G

Level H

Level I

Levels are shifted
to highlight
the distribution of coins

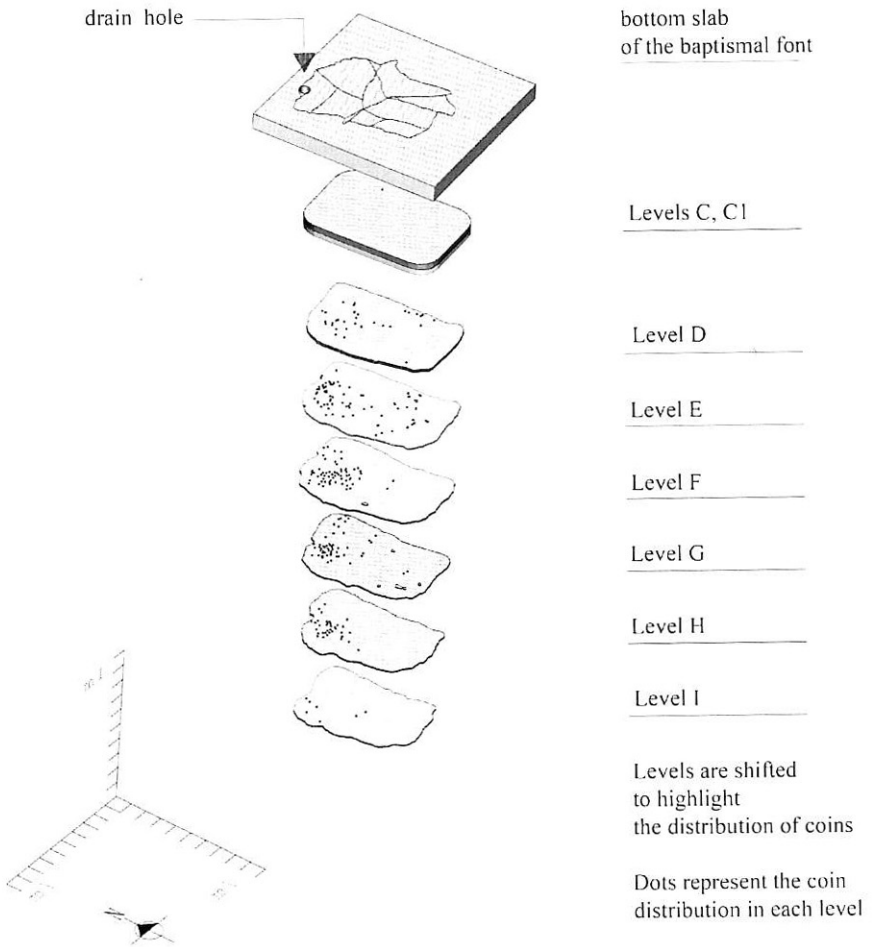Dots represent the coin
distribution in each level

Figure 3.2 Tas-Silġ (Malta). Exploded axonometric of the seven levels (from top to bottom) of coin accumulation in the baptismal font (drawing: A. Ruggieri, Archive of Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta, used with permission).

Archaeologists named them from letter D (the highest level) to letter I (the lowest one). The bronze coins, therefore, were deposited within a short lapse of time, chronologically included between the second half of the fifth century (or early sixth?) and AD 534–9. The *terminus post quem* of the oldest level (level I) is established by seven AE 4 of Marcian (AD 450–7) and by another coin with a doubtful imperial monogram (Leo I?: AD 457–74; Zeno?: AD 476–91), but the weight and the diameter of an illegible Æ 4 could extend it to the beginning of the sixth century (Perassi 2005–6:230). The *tpq* of the most recent level (level D) is established by the *nummus* of Justinian I (AD 534–9). Two other levels were identified above level D: the two together were about 10.5 cm thick. In level C only the seventh century tremissis was found, whereas there were no coins in level C1. Therefore, the gold coin was thrown into the font 150 years after the last bronze coin of Justinian's age.

Chersonesos, Milan, Piacenza and Trier

In total 22 bronze coins were discovered during excavations held in 1901 at Chersonesos in the area of the baptistery of the so-called Uvarov basilica complex (its name arises from Count A. S. Uvarov, who excavated it in 1853), constructed in the late fifth–early sixth centuries. They 'appeared [. . .] together with water' near the end of the drain of roof tiles linking the drain hole of the round font with the channel laid under the floor that conveyed the water to a pit outside the building (Kostsyushko-Valyuzhinich 1901). Valentinian I (364–75) and Tiberius Maurice (582–602) are the only issuing authorities mentioned by the report of the investigations. Their coins are the earliest and the latest pieces making up the little group of money.

In the early 1960s, a considerable coin deposit was found in the perimetric pipe and in the drain of the octagonal font of the San Giovanni alle Fonti Baptistery in Milan (Fig. 3.3). It was built during the episcopate of Saint Ambrose (AD 374–97). A coin of Valens retrieved in the layers of fill preceding the building of the baptistery is the most indicative evidence for dating it to the third quarter of the fourth century (Neri et al. 2014:197). Later, the basin and its hydraulic system were completely rebuilt; this probably occurred when Laurence I was bishop (AD 489–510/12; see Neri et al. 2014). As reported by Ermanno Arslan (1997a:63), the deposit was composed of 222 coins dated from the mid fourth century to the end of the sixth century. Only 18 bronze coins have been published to date in addition to a silver counterfeit fraction of siliqua struck by Lombards at the end of the sixth century (Arslan 1997b); more recently, Grazia Facchinetti (2008:53, footnote 83) has also noted another unpublished silver coin. At present, the numismatic data and the archaeological context are being investigated by the two scholars mentioned above.

While the archaeological contexts from Malta and Milan demonstrate a clear link between coin finds and the sacrament of baptism, the association

Figure 3.3 Font of the Baptistery of San Giovanni alle Fonti in Milan (photograph: F. Doglioni, Archive of Dipartiment of History, Archaeology and History of Art of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart of Milan, used with permission).

is somewhat less certain for the coins found in Piacenza and Trier. Almost 60 small bronze coins measuring about 8 mm were discovered in 1857 in the initial section of a channel in the baptistery of the first town, but the details about the discovery are not adequate to allow us to understand whether the channel was effectively connected to the leaden pipe inserted in the multi-lobed font. Also, the function of the channel is doubtful, because it is not clear if it was used for carrying water to the font or for removing the water. Moreover, the coins are now unavailable (Facchinetti 2008:45).

A group of 182 coins issued between the second half of the third century and the end of the fourth century were also unearthed in a channel running near the baptistery of the Trier Cathedral, but their origin from its baptismal font cannot be ascertained, or as noted by Weber, '*ob auch das große Baptisterium an den Kanal angeschlossen war, lässt sich nicht nachweisen*' (2006:224).

Why were coins placed in baptismal fonts?

Most scholars involved in the study of clergy in Late Antiquity (Reichert 1990:162–3; Hübner 2005:176–7; Dockter 2013:95–6; Vilella 2013:591) suggest that the pseudo-Iliberritan Canon 48 is an expression of a strong anti-simoniacal preoccupation about the administration of baptism, with a reference to the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus urges the Apostles to

heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons, warning them: 'Freely you have received, freely give' (Matthew 10:8; see Vilella 2013:614, 2014:256). Contrary to this current opinion, Alfred W. W. Dale suggested that the offering made by the catechumen when admitted to the baptismal rite was 'a testimony, perhaps, that he consecrated not only himself but his wealth to the service of the Master whom he vowed to obey' (1882:301). However, in my opinion, lexical, archaeological and numismatic considerations seem to indicate that coins were not placed in the fonts to buy and sell the baptismal grace.

Firstly, the text of the canon designates as *nummi* the coins put into the baptismal fonts. The word *nummus* can have an absolutely broad meaning in late Latin, that is to say 'money in the physical sense', but as Filippo Carlà argues (2007:175–89) it can also assume a more limited sense, referring to any bronze denominations. As a matter of fact, almost all of the coins found in baptismal fonts are bronze coins, except the Byzantine tremissis from the font of Tas-Silġ and one (or two) silver pieces from that in Milan. In theory, we cannot exclude the possibility that some other gold or silver coins placed in the water by the catechumens were recovered because of their greater value, but certainly the size of coins did not play a role in their absence. The largest bronze coin found in the Maltese deposit measures 16 mm, but the drain hole of the font is 5.5 cm wide, and it would have therefore allowed the passage of the contemporary gold coins: the solidus had a 20/21 mm diameter and the tremissis was even smaller. This preferential use of bronze coins during the administration of baptism has an analogy with other Roman ritual practices, such as foundation deposits, offerings to the gods of water and depositions in burials.

Secondly, the canon does not say that the custom is intended to pay the bishop. It says that the usage could seem (*uidere* in Latin) to indicate that the bishop puts on sale what he has received for free. The misunderstanding of the actual purpose of the gesture could perhaps confirm the late and interpolative nature of the sentence '*ne sacerdos . . .*' with respect to the original text of the canon, ruling for the prohibition of a custom for which the compiler was no longer able to understand the intended reason. More-over, neophytes would have much more suitably placed any remuneration in the hands of the bishop, rather than thrown coins into the baptismal font.

Added to this, all the bronze coin deposits discovered in water systems used for the administration of baptism are rather insignificant, both in terms of the number of pieces in reference to their period of use, and in their economic value. As far as the first question is concerned, various possibilities can be imagined. Remember that the pseudo-Iliberritan Canon 48 speaks of a popular custom, not of a duty: therefore, some of the baptised may not have placed any coins in the font (but some others, on the other hand, could have given more than one). We cannot exclude the possibility that every coin found refers to the whole baptismal ceremony and not to the single man or woman baptised. Moreover, the coins found by the archaeologists

may be only those that were not retrieved in ancient times. As you can see, it is easy to get lost in the field of hypotheses.

Regarding the value of the deposits, we redirect our research into less dangerous ground. Let us consider the case of Tas-Silġ. A very rough calculation allows us to estimate how low it was. According to an average weight of 0.5/0.6 g for the *nummus* minted in the late fifth or beginning of the sixth century (scholars like Morrisson 1996:190–1 and Asolati 2012: 155 argue for an average weight of 0.52 g for the Justinian *nummi* struck before AD 538 and of 0.40/0.71 g for the Protovandalic/royal *nummi*), the total weight of the 276 pieces (= 209.75 g) puts their value at 419.5/349.5 *nummi*. Scholars have speculated about the equivalence between the *nummus* and the gold *solidus* on the basis of prices reported by the *Tablettes Albertini*, a set of legal documents written on cedar wood, found in 1928 near ancient Capsa (Algeria), and studied for the first time by Eugène Albertini. Only some are dated, and these refer to the last three years of King Gunthamund (AD 493–6). Cècile Morrisson (2003:70–1) argues that the solidus would have been equivalent to 11,200 *nummi* (rounded up to 12,000), whereas Philip Grierson (1959:78) calculated a correspondence of 14,700 *nummi* (rounded down to 14,400). In turn, Michele Asolati (2012:153–6) has deduced from legal and textual documents that the solidus had a maximum equivalence of 7,200 *nummi*. According to these different calculations, the whole Maltese deposit should represent a value of about one-thirtieth or one-twentieth of a solidus.

As reported by the *tablettes* again, the amount of money placed in the baptismal font would have allowed an individual to buy just an olive tree at the price of 16 *follis*, corresponding to 128 or 288 or 672 *nummi* depending on which calculation is used. In fact, scholars do not agree on the nature or value of the *follis* mentioned by the *tablettes*: it could be a coin of account or a real coin, equivalent to 8 (Morrisson 2001:152), 42 (Grierson 1959:75) or 18 *nummi* (Asolati 2012:159; see also Carlà 2007:167–70). One would need 400 *folles* (= 3,200 or 7,200 or 16,800 *nummi*) to buy a mantle called *maphorion* and 150 *folles* (= 1,200 or 2,700 or 6,300 *nummi*) for a pair of shoes.

In light of these considerations, then, I believe that *nummi* were not used during the administration of the first Christian sacrament to buy the gift of the divine grace. We know that coins can perform functions other than those of their primary and fundamental economic power, as also witnessed by rituals well alive in the early centuries of Christianity, when pagan beliefs and customs persisted (MacMullen 1997). Also, some pseudo-Iliberritan canons propose very stiff sentences for individuals, and even priests, who continued to engage in pagan practices (Vilella Masana 2005; Martinez Gázquez 2013:233–8; Vilella 2013: 614–16), such as going to the *Capitolium* or to other temples to sacrifice to the idols, watch the pagans offer their sacrifices (Canons 1–2; 59), preside at public games (Canon 3) or allow their own slaves to keep idols in their houses (Canon 41).

The meaning behind placing coins in baptismal fonts: some suggestions

I would like to suggest four alternatives to the purely economic explanation for the ancient Christian custom of placing coins in baptismal fonts. Based on my research into some Roman practices that used coins for their symbolic/votive value (Perassi 1999, 2011a, 2011b, forthcoming), I wish to try to stir up the waters, reading the usage of placing *nummi in conca* through a 'numismatic eye'.

Coins as offerings?

A natural parallel between the practice of placing *nummi* in the water of the baptismal fonts and the usage (still attested in early Christianity) of throwing coins into thermal or mineral waters, natural springs, artificial fountains and basins considered to be healing has been drawn by Dölger (1932a:24) and, more recently, Facchinetti (2004:282–5, 2008:40–3; Perassi & Facchinetti 2005). The offering would be a kind of *ex-voto*, in consequence of the improved physical health thanks to the power of the waters and of the god. During the rite of the baptism, the coins would have represented a similar *ex-voto* offered for the healing of the soul from sin, obtained through the first sacrament (Facchinetti 2008:57). According to the pagan view, the healing properties of waters were due to the presence in them of divine forces, whereas from the Christian perspective it is the power of the Holy Spirit that makes salvific the immersion in the baptismal water. This hypothesis could also receive confirmation from Christian rituals practised at sanctified *stagna* in the late Roman world, attested from Britain to Asia Minor, and even more from the conversion of some sacred pagan springs to a Christian baptistery (Barnish 2001).

Coins for the strengthening of a pact?

Different, less generic, levels of interpretation are provided when we consider some aspects of early Christian baptismal liturgy in which, as Enrico Mazza has pointed out, 'the rites are not yet fixed with the same precision as in the fifth century and are still linked to the phenomenon of liturgical *creativity*' (2008:208).

Despite the differences between the various rituals, at least until the end of the fourth century (Ferguson 2009), the baptismal ceremony included the formulation of an oath, or of a solemn pact (*renuntia Diabolo*), stipulated before God by the candidate, that commits the individual for his or her whole life long. Satan is renounced, all his angels, all his works, all his worship, all its vanity and his secular perversion, to be freed from the ancient evils and receive the promised spiritual gifts (Mazza 2010:128–9; the oath formula is handed down by Theodore of Mopsuestia, who died in AD 428).

Hence the word *sacramentum*, i.e. oath, to name the baptism as a rite '*qui lie le baptisé à l'obligation de faire le bien*' (Mazza 2010:124). The offering of coins to healing waters was an expression of the consolidation of a pact between the recovered worshipper and the healing deity (Desnier 1987: 226–7; Facchinetti 2004:282). *Nummi* placed in the baptismal fonts could have played an analogous affirmative function of that compelling promise between the baptised and God. The exact significance of the gesture would be lost when the administration of the baptism took the form of a commitment to Christ and a profession of faith.

Coins as amulets?

In the Roman period, as in every time, coins could be used as amulets. As a matter of fact, coins have features that can inspire those who handle them as a medium of exchange to 'perceive' them as objects with potential for some kind of magical benefit, like the amulets specially manufactured with this purpose (Perassi 2011a). In addition to their universal symbol of material prosperity and their round shape recalling the protective symbol of the circle, subjects (such as gods or personifications) and legends (such as IVNO CONSERVATRIX or IVPPITER CVSTOS) on Roman coins could be easily adapted to afford protection of some kind. Moreover, in the Roman world amulets were manufactured with bronze (as well as with stones), because it was believed to have the power of driving away evil spirits, and Romans were well acquainted with the healing properties of metals, as Pliny the Elder attests (*Nat. Hist.* XXIV, 100).

I suggest that the pierced Roman coins discovered in archaeological contexts bear witness to the possible amuletic capacity of the coins (Perassi 2011b). They were drilled to be hung around the neck or the wrist as modest pendants, but also as protective objects. Furthermore, four Roman coins are known that were clearly reworked to be transformed into real amulets: a denarius of Augustus from Verulamium, another – now lost – of Hadrian from Antaradus, a dupondius of Antoninus Pius kept in the collection of the Münzkabinett of Basel (Fig. 3.4), and a *follis* of Maximinian only known from a drawing. Their subjects and legends were partially or completely obliterated and their flans were re-engraved with images and/or inscriptions of prophylactic or magical meaning. Two were also drilled so that they could be worn (Perassi 2011b:237–46).

Mazza has recently highlighted 'the elements of the baptismal rites (from the end of the fourth century), that are closely related to classical culture' (2008:211): these include the exorcism, which is of considerable importance. Descriptions of rituals preceding the immersion into the water of those being baptised relate, in fact, to fasting practices, supplications, prayers, laying on of hands and genuflections. All were aimed towards the purification of the spirit and its deliverance from demons. The water itself was also blessed to ward off the evil forces that could have penetrated it (see Dölger 1909:160–7

Figure 3.4 Dupondius of Antoninus Pius (AD 140–45) reworked on the reverse
with the image of triple Hecate: two arms hold daggers, two whips and
two torches; a snake below her; stars and crescents around. Actual coin
size 2.84 cm Ø (photograph: A. Seiler, Historisches Museum Basel, inv.
1918.5054, used with permission).

and the more recent studies of Sorensen 2002:11; Mazza 2008; Jensen
2011:134–6, 2012:31–2). In conclusion, coins would have been introduced
into the baptismal fonts as a kind of amulet.

A rite of passage?

According to an anthropological approach, baptism may be seen as a ritual
of initiation. The metaphorical language of this special class of rituals often
uses the symbolism of death and rebirth, as Mircea Eliade (1975) has
observed (see also Klostergaard Petersen 2011:25–30). In particular, the
purpose of the baptismal ritual is to represent the passage from death in sin
to life in God's grace. The theological thought of early Christianity attests
to the comparison between the baptismal font and tomb (see *Rom* 6:3–7),
and Saint Ambrose explicitly describes the former as looking like a coffin
(Jensen 2012:161–2). So, the *nummi* placed in the baptismal fonts could be
compared with the ritual of depositing coins in graves, undertaken in various
ways, and which scholars have grouped under the category of 'death-coin'.
The practice is still attested in the fourth century, and appears to have
continued during the following two centuries, even if less common.

   This interpretation may be relevant to the case of ritual performed at Tas-
Silġ, because of the quadrangular shape of its baptismal font (Bonetti 2005–
6:213) (Fig. 3.5), which has the appearance of a tomb in which the cate-
chumen, as R. M. Jensen states, 'underwent a symbolic death to the old life
and self' (2005:139). This transition was symbolically made evident also from

Figure 3.5 Tas-Silġ (Malta). General view of the baptistery area, seen from the
north: on the left, the baptismal font (photograph: F. Airoldi, Archive
of Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta, used with permission).

the path followed by the catechumens, who entered the font by a series of steps
placed inside of the short sides of the basin and exited it by stepping up and out,
when the rite was ended. The number of steps may even have sometimes had
symbolic implications, as explained by Isidore of Seville (Jensen 2011:229).

A marginal note: was there significance to the type and material of coins chosen for the ritual?

Contrary to what we can observe in other rituals, the baptismal use of
coins does not seem to select money according to its types or legends, as the
deposit from Tas-Silġ (the only completely recorded deposit available for
study) attests. Only the cross in wreath effectively struck on a lot of *nummi*
could be seen as a symbol of the new faith embraced by the baptised, but
subjects such as imperial monograms or figures of Victory or Constantinople
– equally numerous – would be completely mute in this regard.

As noted above, Roman ritual practices involved bronze coins as a rule.
Therefore, the discovery of gold and silver denominations in the baptismal
fonts of Tas-Silġ and Milan require a different explanation. As we have seen,
the Byzantine tremissis was thrown into the first font about a century and a
half after the almost 300 bronze coins. The choice of a gold coin was atypical,
and may have marked the occasion of a religious ceremony connected with

the life of the font rather than with the administration of baptism: perhaps its re-dedication or de-consecration (Perassi & Facchinetti 2005; Facchinetti 2008:52). Alternatively, we can imagine a sporadic revival of the custom of placing *nummi in conca* on the occasion of the baptism of some Maltese notable, who wished to recall an ancient practice and in the meantime draw attention to his or her high social status with the deposition of a more precious coin. With regard to the silver coins discovered in the font of San Giovanni in Milan, the available published material is simply too meagre to explain or suggest any reasons for this deposition.

Conclusion

I have shown that the explanation for the ritual of placing coins in baptismal fonts given by pseudo-Iliberritan Canon 48 is not confirmed by the archaeological and numismatic evidence. I have therefore suggested some alternatives for the interpretation of the custom based on the similarity and parallels between this and other Roman ritual/votive coin practices: the offering of coins in sacred waters as a kind of *ex-voto* or as an expression of the consolidation of a pact between the worshipper and the deity; the deposition of coins in graves; and the use of coins as amulets.

However, a fully satisfactory explanation is still lacking, and we remain in the realm of hypotheses. It is hoped that scholars of the early Christian baptismal ritual will wish to consider my numismatic suggestions with a broader approach and a wider selection of textual sources than those presented here, also considering the different functions and meanings of the baptismal ritual during the first Christian centuries.

Notes

1   I have altered his translation to read bishop instead of priest, according to Vilella and Barreda (2002:556; Vilella 2014:231).

2   Excavations were carried out yearly between 1963 and 1970 at three sites on the Maltese archipelago: the sanctuary of Astarte-Hera in Tas-Silġ, the San Pawl Milqi villa and the sanctuary site of Ras-il-Wardija in Gozo. The lack of funding brought the excavations to an end. A new course of investigations resumed in 1995 only in Tas-Silġ and San Pawl Milqi. At present, the Italian archaeological mission is made up by research units from the Catholic University of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Salento (Lecce) and the University of Foggia.

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