A circular, embossed metal tesserae, likely a coin or seal, featuring a central figure and surrounding text. The figure appears to be a seated deity or figure, possibly Isis, with a headdress. The text around the figure is partially legible, including "ISIS" and "MAGN".

Constantine the Great's  
pagan **Festival of Isis** tesserae  
reconsidered

Lars Ramskold

Taormina 2015

## The Festival of Isis

- Annual Roman religious festival, from Caligula.
- In honour of the Egyptian goddess Isis.
- Called *Navigium Isidis* = the ship of Isis.
- Held on March 5, opening of sailing season.
- Emphasis shifted to public vows for the well-being of both the Urbs and the state = the emperor.
- Last emperor on tesserae Valentinian II (375-392)
- Festival finally banned in 391/2, but survived until 6th century.



# The Festival of Isis

## Isis - from Egypt to Rome



# Year 306: first issue of *Festival of Isis tesserae*

Diocletianus



Maximianus



Galerius



Constantius I



Struck after  
abdication 305

25 mm

Augusti 305

Died 306



## Events 306 - 313

**306** summer – Constantius I dies

**306** July 25 – his son Constantine proclaimed emperor

**306** Oct 28 - Maxentius proclaimed emperor, seat in Rome

**307 - 312** New Year – **no** *Festival of Isis tesserae*

**312** Oct 28 – Constantine defeats Maxentius, takes Rome

**313** New Year – Constantine issues *Festival of Isis tesserae*

# Dating Constantine's tesserae:

## 1) Assembling material:

### Sources:

- **Alföldi's thesis** "A Festival of Isis in Rome" 1937
- c. 3.000 coin **auction catalogues**
- **Private coin collections** in Europe and USA
- **Public coin collections** in:
  - Belgrade, Berlin, Bologna, Brussels, Budapest, Cambridge, Jerusalem, London, Lyon, Madrid, Milan, München, New York, Oxford, Paris, St Petersburg, Stockholm, Wien, Zagreb.
- **Additional material** provided by others, in particular prof. L. Bricault, Toulouse.
- In total **123 tesserae** from Constantine's reign. Of these **5** cannot be studied (unavailable and no photos).

## Dating Constantine's tesserae:

### 2) Die study:

Finding **every** die link  
of  
obverses and reverses  
of  
the 118 tesserae

## Dating Constantine's tesserae:

### 3) Metrology, size, iconography:

**Metrology and size:** Gathering weights and sizes for the tesserae and comparing with Constantine's coinage.

**Iconography:** Comparing engraving style of obverse busts of tesserae with Constantine's coinage.

**Comparative material:** A digital database of 2.800 coins from the Mint of Rome struck during the reign of Constantine I (306-337).



## Dating Constantine's tesserae:

### 4) Time constraints:

Rome Mint closed: 323, 324, 327, 328, ?329

#### REGNAL YEARS:

Constantine I: 306-337

Crispus: 317-326

Constantine caesar: 317-337

Constantius caesar: 324-337

Licinius I: 308-324

Licinius caesar: 317-324

#### LEGENDS:

CRISPVS NOBIL CAES: 316?-317

CONSTANTINVS IVN NOB CAES: 316?-317

FL VAL CONSTANTIVS NOB C: 324-330

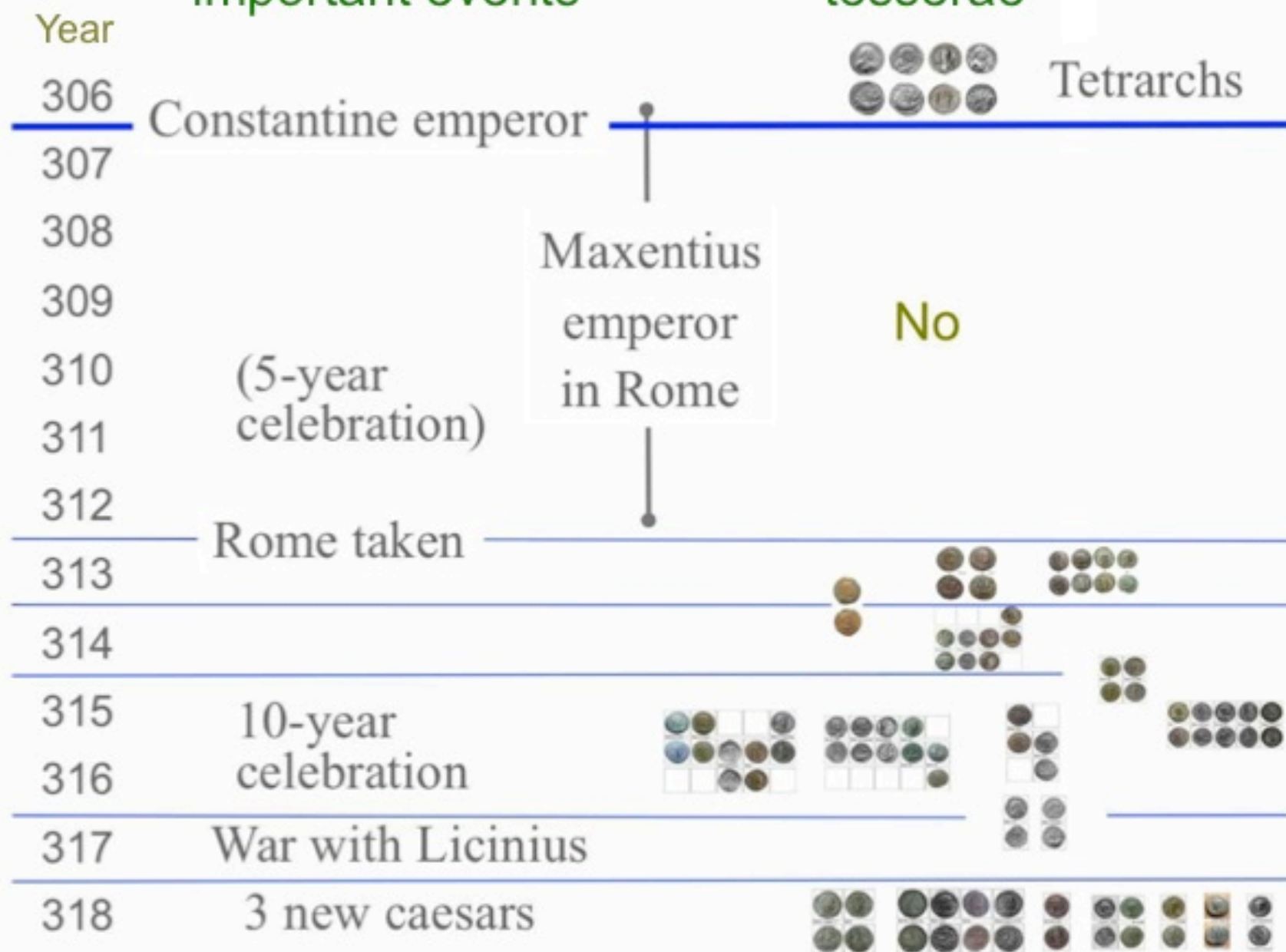
FL IVL CONSTANTIVS NOB C: 330-337

LICINIUS P F AVG: 312-316, 317-321

LICINIVS IVN NOB CAES: 317 (-318?)

## Constantine's reign: important events

## Festival of Isis tesserae



Year	Constantine's regnal anniversaries	Tesserae
319		No
320	15-year celebration	
321		
322		
Mint closed 323		No
324		
325	20-year celebration	
326		
Mint closed 327		
328		No
329		
330	25-year celebration	
331		
332		
333		
334		
335	30-year celebration	No
336		
337		



313

First issue, after Oct 312 defeat of Maxentius  
*Festival of Isis tesserae*

"Half follis"  
Ø 15 mm



Tesserae  
made to fit with  
the regular  
coinage

"Follis"  
Ø 22 mm



Oct 312 - 313  
pre-reform coinage



312-313  
RIC VI 357



312-313  
RIC VI 294a

"Follis" – 2 known specimens  
Obv + rev die match



||



Vienna



||



Paris

"Half follis" – 4 known specimens  
Obv + rev die match



Berlin



||



Berlin



||



Paris



||



Madrid



## The reverses: the messages



*Isis Pelagia* holding sail on ship



*Neptune* with foot on prow, holding trident and dolphin, opposite *Isis*, holding sistrum and situla.



313

Constantine uses the iconography of the  
tetrarchs from 306



313



306



NY  
314

## First post-reform tesserae

2/3 of one  
"follis"



||

||

||



||

Budapest

Private

Turin



Private

Reverse:  
*Anubis holding sistrum and sail*



## Closest dies



314  
RIC19T-private



314  
RIC19AQ-Munich



314  
RIC19S-eBay-sbc-coins



313  
314

# Unique tessera of pre-reform follis size.

V-O-[TA] PVBLI-CA

Size indicates  
313, but style  
similar to 314  
post-reform  
coinage



=



Budapest

BNF, Paris



Post-reform  
"follis"

313  
RIC10Q-private

315  
317

## From 315 – tesserae in three sizes

### Size 1

18 - 19  
mm



Constantine  
and Licinius

### Size 2

15 - 16  
mm



### Size 3

13.5 –  
14.5  
mm





315  
317

Size 1: 18-19mm

Closest dies



II



315  
RIC33S LR2703



316-317  
RIC57S LR1135



CNG 63-1537



Alföldi 19:19 Rome

315  
316

## Size 2: 15-16mm

5 examples with reverse die match.

1 Licinius

4 Constantine

Closest dies



||



||



315-316

RIC40S LR559



Madrid



Madrid



316

RIC49Q LR3514



315  
316

Extremely  
high quality of  
engraving



315  
317

## Size 2: 15-16mm

1 specimen of each type

Closest die



||



||



316  
RIC46S eBay



Copenhagen



Vatican



314  
316

# Size 3: 13.5-14.5mm

Two groups, each die-matched

5 examples

2 examples

Closest dies



||



Vienna



||



Vienna



314  
RIC19P LR330



314-315  
RIC27P LR2356



314  
RIC19T-winsteincoins



317  
RIC78T LR568



315  
316

# Size 3: 13.5-14.5mm

Group of 5 examples with reverse die match.

1 Licinius

4 Constantine

Closest dies



Copenhagen



||



316  
RIC46T LR5289



317  
RIC78T LR415



Parma



Berlin



317-318  
RIC97Q LR5043



318  
RIC136P LR3270



# March 317: three caesars officially recognized

But: Crispus & Constantine probably caesars already Oct 316

## Size 1

18 - 19  
mm



CRISPVS  
NOBIL  
CAES

## Size 2

15 - 16  
mm



CRISPVS NOBIL CAES

## Size 3

13.5 –  
14.5  
mm

CONSTANTINVS  
IVN NOB CAES



VOTA PVBLICA

CONSTANTINVS IVN NOB C



PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS PRINCIPIA IVVENTVTIS

LICINVS  
IVN NOB  
CAES



318

Size 1: 18-19mm, and  
Size 2: 15-16mm

4 die-matched  
specimens

Two die-matched specimens



||

||



Oxford

Berlin

Closest die



317-318  
RIC97S LR2232  
Post-war = Festival  
must be 318

CRISPVS NOBIL CAES  
= 317-318

Size 2:  
unique



Paris



|| NAC78-  
1199





## Size 3: first Constantine and Licinus caesars

## Closest dies

317  
RIC84S LR2989CONSTANTINVS  
IVN NOB CAES317  
RIC79AT LR3719CONSTANTINVS  
IVN NOB C

Madrid

Alföldi 1-12 Rome

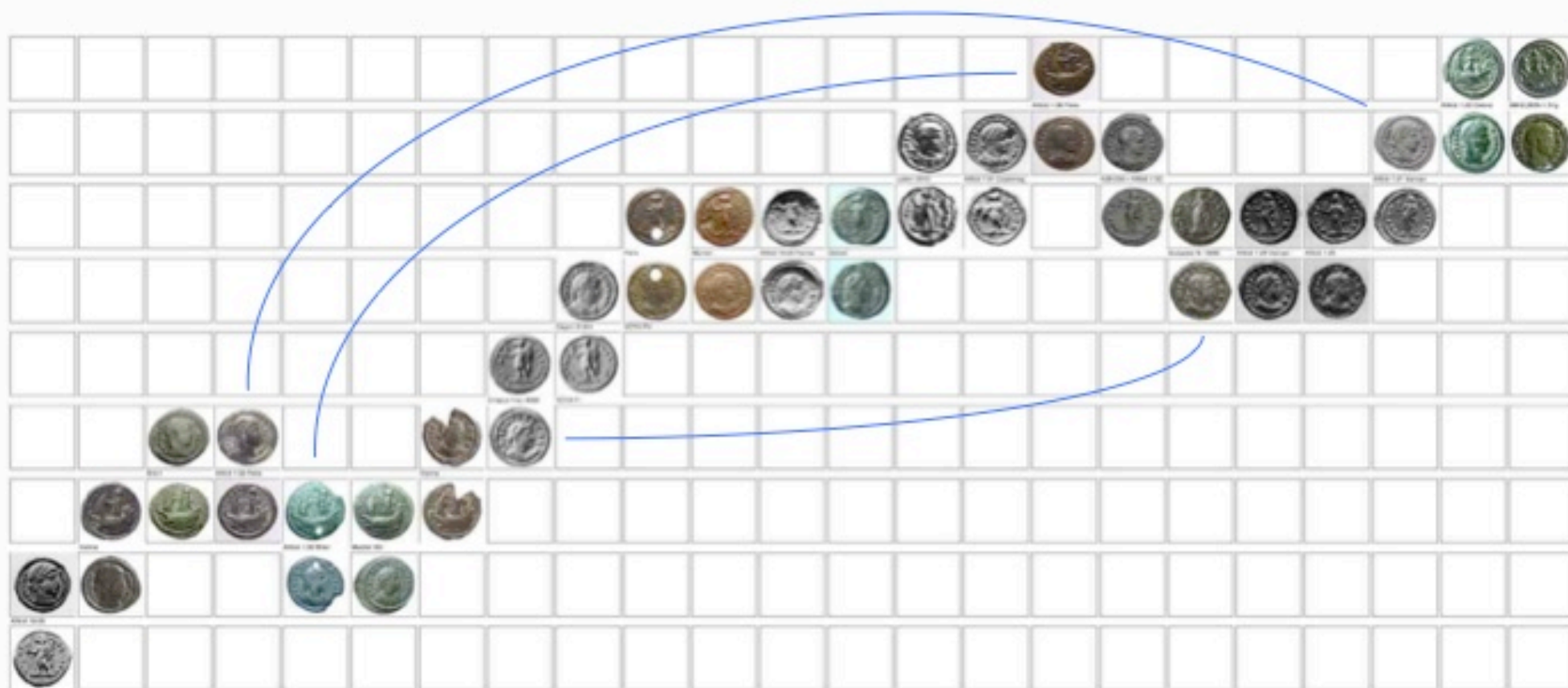
NAC15-481

Madrid

Wien

319  
321

## 319-321: massive output - Size 3 only



Group 1: 23 die linked specimens



319  
321

# 319 – 321: Group 1 – die links

CI O1

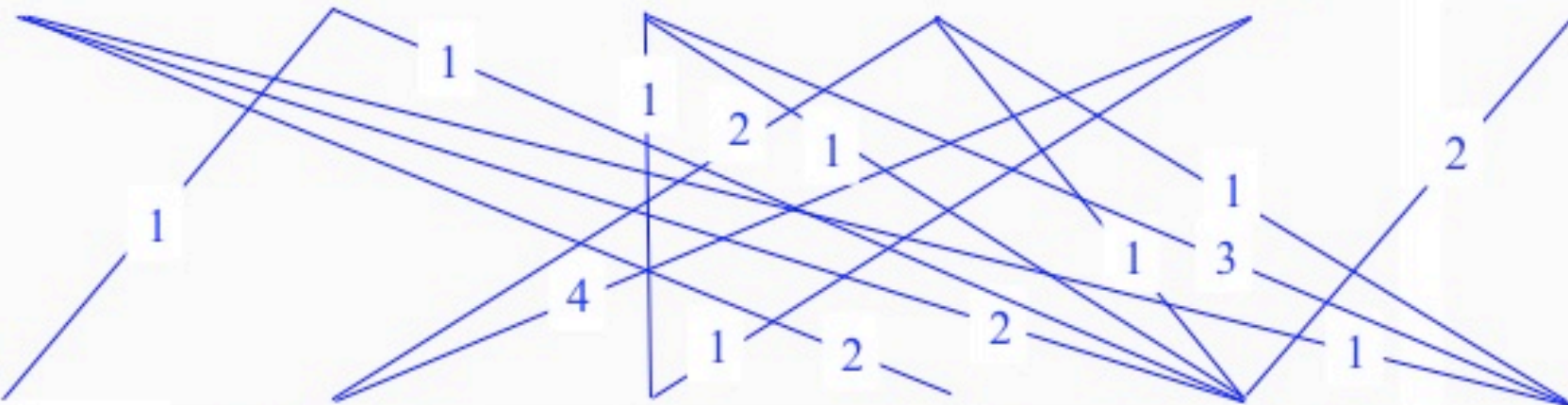
CI O2

CR O1

CII O1

CII O2

CII O3



R1

R2

R3

R4

R5

R6



319  
321

## 319 – 321: Group 1 – closest dies



Oxford



Paris



Budapest



München



321  
RIC237P LR2906



321  
RIC240S LR1233



320-21  
RIC229AT München



320-21  
RIC229T Paris

Closest dies are in VOT/XX issues of 320-321.  
Crispus-dies closer than Constantine-dies.



319  
321

# 319 – 321: Groups 2-5



Group 2



Group 3



Group 4



Group 5

319  
321

# 319 – 321: die links in Groups 2-5

PRINCIPI IVVENT

VICTORIA CAESS

VOTA PVBLICA

VOTA PVBLICA



||

||

||

||



Group 2

Group 3



319  
321

## 319 – 321: Group 2 - 5 reverses

Short legend PRINCIPI IVVENT



Group 2



Group 3



Group 4



Group 5

325  
326

# 325 – 326: die link chain

Crispus and Constantius.  
Can only be  
New Year  
325 or 326.



Group 1



325  
326

# Possibly 325 – 326

Likely from  
same issue

FL VAL CONSTANTIVS  
324 - 330.



||

||

||

||

||



Group 2

Group 3



325  
326

# Closest comparisons: 325 - 326



Group 3



Group 2



Group 1





329  
330

# 329 or 330: – penultimate issue

Busts facing left.



ANS-1944.100.84976

Aiföldi 1-11 Vosper

Bologna36

Stenberg15-726



Aiföldi 1:42 Budapest

Madrid



BM-1860.0326.146

Rosette-diadem = 327 or later

Rome Mint closed 327, 328

FL VAL CONSTANTIVS 324 - 330.

329  
330

Constantine's last obverse. Rosette diadem.  
Pre – GLORIA coinage



Vosper



329-330  
RIC322P CGB



329  
RIC281S Aufhäuser



329-330  
RIC322P LR1217



330  
RIC327P LR436



330-331  
RIC335P LR1558



329  
330

329 or 330: – obverses



+



329  
RIC284Q Munich



329-30  
RIC324Q LR3042

329  
330

329 or 330: – reverses



Isis on ship



Anubis w. sistrum



Anubis w. branch



330  
331

## 330 or 331: Constantine's last issue



FL **IVL** CONSTANTIVS  
Introduced 329-330.

Busts facing right.

330  
331

## Closest dies

## Firmly dated to first GLORIA issue



Paris

CONSTANTINVS



330

RIC328S LR455



330

RIC328S LR2014



Madrid

CONSTANTIVS



330

RIC337T LR4176



330

RIC329T RomanLode



Vienna



BM



330

RIC336T LR4731



330  
331

# VOTA VICENNALIOR[vm]



R1

Madrid



R2

Paris

VIC-ENNALIOR

330  
331

## OTHER REVERSES



Anubis



Isis Pelagia



Isis

Victoria





## CONCLUSIONS

- **Constantine** re-introduced *Festival of Isis* tesseræ immediately after defeating Maxentius and taking Rome.
- Constantine issued tesseræ annually 313 – 318. Post-318 tesseræ may be restricted to Constantine's five-year celebrations 320-321, 325-326, and 330-331
- Constantine issued imperial issues only, in the name of himself and other members of the imperial houses.
- Early issues were produced in three sizes compatible with the regular coinage. All were struck in bronze, not brass.
- All tesseræ were produced at the imperial mint of Rome, with dies cut by the regular die-cutters.

## CONCLUSIONS

*These tesserae were part of **Constantine's** official propaganda.*

*They were issued for the 5 March Festival of Isis, but the written messages propagate the emperor Constantine and his family.*

*They were **not** an attempt by pagans in Rome to promote traditional religion.*



Thank you