

## A Brief Note on Largesse

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Seeing that we are coming up to our first Coronation, we should be starting to seriously think about the ceremony and the customs we wish to have in our new Kingdom. One that we could look at is the issue of largesse. In the Lochac this is typically done in chocolate coin, although some groups have struck their own coin for this purpose (1). In the West Kingdom the Moneyers and Coiners Guild has operated for some time for the main purpose of producing coin for this purpose.

According to the Macquarie Dictionary, largesse is the “generous bestowal of gifts”. In the SCA it means the distribution of coins or goods to various groups. Typical examples would be processing Royalty either themselves, or through servants, casting coins to the populace as they enter Court or the same Royalty afterwards conferring mead upon a group of Guardsmen. Where does this practice come from? Is it something we have evolved ourselves, or does it have historical roots?

Rest assured, what we see in these examples is exactly historical practice. The giving of gifts in money or kind to the soldiers dates from tribal and pre-period times in most cultures. For example, the Romans (and later the Byzantines) formalised the institution under officials, called the *largitones*, who gave out their largesse (often called a *donative*) at appropriate times, such as the ascension or anniversary of an Emperor. This money was very distinct from the annual distribution of wages (called the *annonae*) and of allowances (*sitēresia*). A particular early example of largesse is that the loot gained from the sacking of pagan temples was used by Constantine to ensure the loyalty of the army during the period where Christianity was made the sole and official religion by broadcasting it widely. So institutionalised was the practice that there was a special name for the ‘day of an imperial largesse’ – the *dōreas basilikēs hēmera*. Liutprand of Cremona records the activity of one such occasion where the distribution took three days.

This distribution could be very sizeable. Tiberius II, in 578, gave 7,200 lb of gold, or 518,400 solidi, besides silver and silk. There was an inevitable trickle down effect as other persons than the Emperor started to hand out largesse. This prompted legislation to control the practice. “It shall not be permitted for a private individual to distribute a pure silk garment as largesse at any performance of the games. We also confirm by this law that, ordinary consuls excepted, absolutely no one else shall have the right of giving away a gift in gold, or a diptych in ivory. When public ceremonies are enacted, silver coin shall be used for gifts, and another material for diptychs. Nor is it permitted to expend a silver coin larger than that which is customarily formed when a pound of silver is divided into sixty pieces of coin. And We permit those who wish to give a smaller one to do so not only freely, but even honourably.” Emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius and Arcadius, Augusti, 25 July 384.

This law remained on the books (although sometimes largesse was banned) until it was superseded in 538. The new law said that “And so We better regulate the consular scattering of largesse to the people in these seven processions, just as the law of Marcian of Blessed Memory states (2). This law forbid entirely the exercise of munificence, but We amend it, acting at the suggestion of the individual who has the honour of holding the consulship. Now if the holder does not wish to scatter anything We do not compel him to do so, and if he wishes to restore the situation and honour the people with gifts of money We do not forbid him to do so. Nevertheless We command him not to scatter gold, whether small in form or – and more particularly – large, whether of medium size either struck or simply weighed, but to scatter silver only, just as We have commanded above. For to scatter gold is reserved for the

emperor, since it is to him alone that the summit of fortune has given the capacity to despise gold. Silver, which is considered most precious directly after gold, is a suitable largesse for other consuls. There fore We command them to scatter largesse in what are called *miliarēsia* and *mēla* and *kaukia* and *tetragōnia* and so on. For the smaller the objects that are scattered, the greater the number of recipients.” This law continued in use for some time.

Largesse continued through into our period in the only state wealthy enough to institutionalise it (and it seems that our SCA custom of casting coin derives from these Byzantine examples). However the coins used declined in value. A late thirteenth century example (after the stripping of wealth from the Empire by the treachery of the Fourth Crusade) talks of silver and copper *nomismata* being thrown to the populace during a Palm Sunday procession. It is also interesting to note (for our purposes) that largesse did not come from public funds, but from private ones. It does appear that it became institutionalised that, as well as the bounty to the populace, officers of the Emperor were given a separate largesse (or *donative*) upon a Coronation.

These concepts were transferred poorly to the barbarian West through ambassadors, mercenaries and merchants who visited the civilised Byzantine Empire. I cannot find any repeated examples in the West of the main form of largesse used in the SCA despite it being lauded as one of the prime virtues of a knight. In most Western cases largesse became a matter of donation or charity to individual recipients or to the Church. However this was not always the case. Although Marc Bloch cites examples that note that largesse was the “lady or queen in whose light all virtues shine”, he goes on to show how this became reduced to an almost potlatch mentality with many nobles (3). In a cited example in Limousin several knights competed in largesse. One had a plot of ground sown with silver coin. Another had meals cooked with wax candles and a third had thirty of his horses burnt alive.

This behaviour is not however universal, and was condemned by many. Machiavelli wrote: “So as a prince cannot practise the virtue of generosity in such a way that he is noted for it, except to his cost, he should be prudent nor mind being called a miser.” A middle path was however preferred. John of Salisbury, who was well thought of in our period, wrote in 1159 that “Although prodigality is palpably at fault, I think there should be no place for avarice ... If, however, one possesses wealth, there is nothing more glorious than the type of liberality which expresses itself in giving.” This is the attitude I believe that we should look towards in our rulers.

#### Notes

- (1) Ynys Fawr at least.
- (2) Marcian, in 452, forbade largesse and instead commanded that the customary distributions be paid into a fund to maintain the aqueducts.
- (3) ‘Potlach’ is a North-Western American Indian term that describes how wealth is used in a society of abundance to gain prestige through excessive gift giving and the destruction of valuable property.

#### Sources

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