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15

Peter Franz Mittag

Roman Medallions
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Roman Medallions

CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 4
1. Technical details .................................................................................................................. 5
2. Occasions and recipients .................................................................................................... 6
3. Selected Examples .............................................................................................................. 9
To sum up: ........................................................................................................................... 14
INTRODUCTION

Starting with C. Julius Caesar the Roman emperors not only minted coins but – at first only occasionally, since the second century AD more regularly – medallions as well. We do not know how the Romans called these special products of the imperial mint – but most of them obviously differ from normal coins by their technical features, and normally medallions are not found in the same contexts as coins. For that reason they must have served for other purposes than regular coinage. Modern numismatists disagree about the question when, why and for whom they were produced. Before focussing these questions it seems to be helpful to focus at first briefly on technical aspects. In a second step I would like to deal with the question why and when medallions where produced and who were the recipients. In the longer third part I would like to call your attention to some selected medallions that are typical for their time. There are hundreds of different types – and I beg your pardon that I have chosen only some of them.
1. TECHNICAL DETAILS

Medallions were more or less a Roman invention. For over 100 years they were minted only sporadically and it lasted another 50 years until all methods to produce them were developed.

The few examples from the time of Caesar were produced with the help of regular coin dies and very heavy flans. The flans must have been produced especially for these medallions.

During the reign of Augustus other – and more elaborate – methods were developed. Some gold medallions with a multiple weight of regular coins were minted and very heavy bronze medallions with or without elaborate rims.

While the gold medallions could have served as coins as well – this cannot have been the case with the bronze medallions. During the next decades only bronze medallions were minted, as this example from the reign of Nero illustrates.

At the end of the first century AD we find gold again and in addition some silver medallions weighing – like the gold medallions – multiples of regular coins and therefore normally are called *multipla*.

During the second century very few silver medallions and only at the end some gold medallions were produced. On the other hand besides a large series of bronze medallions a new kind was invented: bi-metallic medallions with a core of a different metal from the outer rim. But about 90% of all medallions of the second century were bronze medallions – sometimes with very elegant rims.

During the age of Commodus, who reigned from AD 180 to AD 192, the production of medallions reached its peek. Never before and after so many different medallions and so many medallions in total were minted.

During the third century gold and silver became more important, a development that continued during the fourth century. The weight of these gold and silver medallions again always has a fixed relationship to regular coinage. During the early 20th century some very large gold medallions have been found which unfortunately ended up in melting pots but had weights of about 530 and 750 grammes of gold.

After the reign of Theodosius I, who died in AD 395, the production of medallions significantly declined. Only sporadically some gold and even less silver medallions were produced afterwards until minting completely ended in the sixth century.

These technical developments can be explained by changing patterns concerning occasions and ways of distribution. This leads me directly to my second part.
2. OCCASIONS AND RECIPIENTS

Besides the metal and weight it is especially the design that reveals information concerning occasions and ways of distribution. Interestingly, the development of the design more or less mirrors the technical changes just mentioned.

During the first century many medallions were produced with regular coin dies and for that reason show the same design as the contemporary coins. This is valid as well for those medallions of that time that were minted with specially cut dies. In most cases there is no hint to special occasions at all. Only during the reign of Augustus some medallions can directly be connected to a historical event, the triumph that Tiberius celebrated in 7 B.C.

Starting at the end of the first century AD more and more dies were cut for medallions only and these dies generally differ from coin dies. Some of these new medallions directly refer to special events and might therefore be connected with them.

There seems to have been a tradition in the early second century to produce medallions especially for a distribution on New Year’s Day. The legends of the two medallions shown here must be read as annum novum faustum felicem. Interestingly it is a New Year’s wish of the Senate and the people of Rome to the emperor. It is conceivable that the emperor who minted these medallions might have used them as presents to members of the senate. But that is just a guess. Some numismatists believe that all medallions were distributed on the occasion of New Year’s Day. For example they point quite a large group of about 40 medallions that can be dated to the short period of December 10th to December 31st 192 while only two existent coins belong to that period. It seems that the medallions were produced just in time to serve as New Year’s presents. But the emperor died on New Year’s Eve and did not live to see New Year’s Day. Because of the fact that the medallions were found in different contexts (one coming from Asia minor) they seem to have been distributed and not destroyed — and that raises some questions. Why should someone distribute medallions in the name of a dead emperor directly after his assassination?

A possible explanation could be a distribution not on New Year’s Day but during the saturnalia of 192, a popular festival starting on December 17th. Sueton relates that Augustus used to give away old coins to his friends on the occasion of the saturnalia and it is possible that other emperors used medallions as such presents. Another possibility is a distribution in occasion of the reception of the tribunician power on December 10th 192. In addition the annum novum faustum
felicem medallions could have been issued for the celebration of the regnal New Year’s Day as well. Most medallions do not refer to the New Year’s Day in any way and some of them were definitely not produced between December 10th and December 31st but much earlier in the year. Some of them can be connected with other events like the emperor’s adventus, his return to Rome, like this medallion from the year 106/107, celebrating Trajan’s victorious return to Rome after the first Dacian war.

There are more examples of medallions that were not distributed on New Year’s Day. As we have just seen, some medallions of Augustus can be directly connected with military success and/or triumphs. On the other end of our timespan many medallions from the fourth century very probably were distributed as accession gifts, during jubilees, victory festivities or other occasions. In both cases New Year’s Day is of no importance at all. In my opinion it seems to be very unlikely that all medallions that have been produced between these two poles should have served as New Year’s gifts. There must have been several occasions for distributing medallions with changes and developments.

Concerning the question of recipients there was a development as well. The early medallions – as I have just mentioned – show the same depictions as regular coins and could be understood by nearly everyone. The same is valid for the medallions of the later third and the fourth century. Nearly all silver medallions of the second half of the third century and a great part of the contemporary bronze medallions show the personifications of the three departments of the imperial mint and therefore are highly unspecific. They were produced in the imperial mint – that’s it.

On the other hand the period between the early second and the second half of the third century is characterized by medallions that quite often bear very elaborate reverses. Especially during the reign of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, that is the period from AD 117 to 161, a large group of medallions shows scenes that are very difficult to interpret. These artistic bronze medallions required another audience than the first medallions and the later multipla with simple scenes. In the last case the value in gold and silver was the most important aspect while in the case of the bronze medallions not the economic value was important but the fact that it was a gift by the emperor. Here the direct relationship and the communication between emperor and addressee via the medallions was the essential aspect. Only well-educated persons were able to understand these medallions. For that reason close friends and probably members of the higher civil and military administration might have been the recipients. Interestingly there is a match between the increasing numbers of bronze medallions during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and
Commodus (AD 161-192) and the decrease of complexity. Most of these medallions seem to have found a broader audience.

To sum up: The development of design and metal obviously goes hand in hand with changes concerning occasions and recipients. At the beginning and the end the messages are simple and especially at the end the economic value is of increasing importance. During the second century on the other hand, when primarily bronze medallions were produced, there is a trend to complex reverses that are probably reflecting changes concerning the group of recipients. Only close friends and other educated persons were able to understand the messages the medallions bore.

Let me try to exemplify these developments with the help of some selected examples in my third part.
3. SELECTED EXAMPLES

We have seen some medallions from the last century BC and the first century AD. I would just like to add one more here because of the circumstances of its discovery.

One medallion from the reign of Domitian was found in Bonn sewn into a soldier’s shoe. Unfortunately it is unknown how this quite elaborate medallion found its way to a soldier in Bonn. But the fact that it was well hidden in the shoe might show that his owner was proud of this little treasure. It shows a temple with ten columns in the front and two surrounding walls.

Let me turn directly to the second century. In some cases the bronze medallions of that period reflect very personal aspects of emperors. The most sensitive sphere was the emperor’s health. Regular coins from the period of the adoptive emperors and the Antonines only once show Aesculapius, the god of healing. In contrast there are several medallions that depict Aesculapius or his associate Salus, and they all seem to refer to the emperor’s bad health.

Especially Hadrian was heavily sick several times – but these calamities comprehensibly left no traces on the regular coins, but only on his medallions, which – as I have argued – were given to close friends who knew about the emperor’s health.

Other personal and political aspects are hidden behind mythological scenes even though it is often not easy to find out which story these scenes want to tell. But that is part of the game.

To give an example: Antoninus Pius reused several dies of his predecessor Hadrian – in most cases depictions that might be interpreted as hints to succession regulation.

One of these dies shows Apollo and Bacchus riding in a biga drawn by a panther and a goat on which Eros sits. The medallions were produced during the last years of Hadrian’s reign when he secured his succession by adoption and during the first year of Antoninus’ reign when he tried everything to refer to Hadrian as his adoptive father and to his own adopted son Marcus Aurelius who should guarantee stability into the next generation. For that reason these medallions sometimes are directly connected to the succession. The only question left is which god represents which emperor.

A similar line of interpretation seems to be valid for three medallions showing Aeneas. The earlier medallions show Aeneas carrying his father Anchises and the Lavinian sow. The carrying of the father is a hint to Aeneas’ pietas. Antoninus
Pius is said to have helped his stepfather and therefore was adopted by Hadrian and he received the epithet pius soon after he succeeded to the throne. So there is a double link between Hadrian and Antoninus Pius.

The next medallions depict Aeneas leading his son Ascanius to Latium and this scene might be linked with the elevation of Marcus Aurelius to the caesarship during the same year. In both cases Aeneas seems to represent the emperor and this is underlined by another medallion. Aeneas is sacrificing on an altar. On better preserved examples his face looks like that of the emperor. The same reverse was used for medallions in the name of Marcus Aurelius as caesar. Interestingly the reverse not only depicts Antoninus Pius but besides him his son Ascanius as well. Aeneas and his son Ascanius on the medallions of Antoninus Pius and his adoptive son Marcus Aurelius; that seems to allow us to draw lines between the imperial and the mythological family.

Later medallions of Antoninus Pius show an elaborate wedding scene between Bacchus and Ariadne, which may reflect the wedding between Marcus Aurelius and Faustina II, the emperor’s daughter.

Sometimes the scenes are singular and it is not even possible to tell who is depicted at all.

Let me present you one example of the same period. On the right side there is clearly Hercules sitting, setting his left hand on his club. The identification of the person on the left side of the table and the person at Hercules’ side is a matter of dispute. The same is true for the large object in the background. The most probable interpretation is the initial banquet at the ara maxima in Rome, an altar that was dedicated to Hercules with annual festivities including banquets. The two persons in question could be Potitius and Pinarius who are connected to this banquet in Roman tradition. But even if this interpretation is correct: What was the occasion to produce these medallions? Mostly they are interpreted as part of a series of medallions that refer to Roman history. But is that all? I must admit, that I do not have a convincing answer to this question. Maybe we can discuss this aspect later.

Some of the contemporary bronze medallions are much easier to interpret. Often mythological scenes more or less directly point to military events.

An easy to decipher example is Jupiter victor standing in a quadriga and hurling his thunderbolt against a giant who is kneeling in front of the quadriga. Obviously it refers to a victory against a barbarous enemy. But as easy at it seems at first it isn’t in this case because there is no record of a victory of Antoninus Pius during the years 156/7 when this medallion was minted. But this fact should not be
overestimated since we are pretty badly informed about the wars Antoninus waged.

On a similar medallion of Septimius Severus from the year AD 207, exactly 50 years later, Jupiter victor fights against two enemies and the emperor is depicted on the obverse in an extraordinary military fashion, holding his eagle tipped sword with his left hand. With this obverse the connection between the victorious emperor and Jupiter victor is emphasized. A similar revers was used for contemporary coins (denarii) – one of the early examples where regular coins and medallions again share the same design.

After the death of Antoninus Pius in AD 161 medallions tend to depict more and more scenes that reflect the emperor’s official side, private aspects disappear nearly entirely. But one private aspect with high significance for the empire’s stability is celebrated several times: the large number of children Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the younger had. The reverse of Medallions in the name of Lucilla, one of Marcus Aurelius’ daugthers, shows Venus with a couple of playing Amores, a unique and somehow funny scene that seems to refer to the large group of children the emperor had at that time.

Not least because of the military needs of that time military scenes got more important. But normally the bronze medallions with reference to military actions still differ from regular coins. A recently auctioned medallion shows Marcus Aurelius and his adoptive brother Lucius Verus in an idealized meeting. While Lucius Verus, who stands on the right side, was waging wars against the Parthians on the Eastern border of the Roman Empire Marcus Aurelius, who is standing left, stayed in Rome and cared for the civil administration. He wears the civil toga, while Lucius Verus is wearing a traveling dress and is accompanied by soldiers. He hands over a Victory standing on a globe and holding a trophy to Marcus Aurelius. The Concordia between the two emperors and the divided responsibility for different demands of the empire are condensed on this reverse in a complex manner unknown to contemporary coinage.

During the reign of Septimius Severus (AB 193-211) we find an interesting phenomenon. In AD 207 two series of aurei in the name of Septimius Severus’ children Caracalla and Geta were produced that obviously copy medallions from the time of Antoninus Pius. Claire Rowan recently connected these two aurei with the building of a temple for Hercules and Bacchus in Rome by Septimius Severus. Both gods stood in high esteem of the emperor and they quite often can be found on regular contemporary coins. But this fact alone cannot explain the unusual copy of medallions that were produced two generations ago. There must have been further reasons. Probably the emperor’s attempt to construct a direct link to the
dynasty of the Antonines might have played a role. But even then the coins’ recipients needed very special knowledge to realise this connection.

While the medallions’ reverses increasingly tend to get less complex in the third century, the obverses get more elaborate — a development that can be observed on regular coins as well. I just want to illustrate this with the help of some examples. There is a clear trend towards martial and victorious poses. And at least in the reign of Probus (AD 276-282), the emperor is accompanied by the undefeated and invincible sun-god.

But there is also a trend back to more civil depictions in his reign. Several medallions show the emperor wearing the traditional triumphal robe that during the centuries had turned into a consular robe, which was worn by the emperor at the beginning of the New Year if he took over the traditional consulship.

Besides this civil trend, the military obverses continue until the middle of the fourth century. Although the reverses tend to get standardised and less complex since about AD 200, there are still exceptions afterwards. We just saw some examples from the time of Diocletian and Constantius II. Let me add some medallions from the third century with reference to buildings and events in Rome.

In some cases there is a bird’s eye view: on the Colosseum and on the temple of Jupiter ultor. Severus Alexander renovated the Colosseum and magnificent games were celebrated there by one of his successors, Gordian III.

Another medallion shows the emperor Gordian III sacrificing in front of a round temple with a statue of Mars. The inscription on the temple reads ΝΕΙΚΗ ΟΠΔΟΦΟΡΟϹ. It is very unusual that we find a Greek legend on Roman medallions — and the second word is otherwise unknown. Once again I have no convincing interpretation to offer.

A little bit easier but still unusual is a scene from the circus maximus in Rome. In the background on the right side the emperor is standing in a chariot drawn by six horses like a triumphator crowned by victory standing at his side. On the left side there are three persons with palm branches as signs of victory. In front of these two groups two quadrigae are riding to the left and in front of the circus’ spina there is a group of people running, boxing, wrestling and holding shields. The best explanation is a combination of a triumph and games celebrated on that occasion. The medallion dates to the year AD 243/4 shortly after the conquest of the Parthian capital Ktesiphon. Although the emperor still was with his troops in Mesopotamia, this medallion might have antedated the expected festivities on his return.

The celebration of the 1000-year-anniversary of Rome’s foundation was one of the most important events during the reign of his successor Philippus Arabs (AD
The circus games that took place on the occasion of these festivities are depicted on medallions. On the obverse we have the complete imperial family: Philippus Arabs, his wife Otacilia and his son Philippus.

During the troubled third century any of the dozens of short living emperors tried to establish a dynasty. Most of them failed – like Trebonianus Gallus and his son Volusianus who reigned from AD 251 to AD 253. The reverse of this medallion shows a temple of Iuno martialis, an otherwise unknown warlike Iuno who perfectly fits the warlike times.

One reaction to the disturbances of the third century was on the one hand the creation of the tetrarchy, a joint rule of four emperors, by Diocletian at the end of the third century and on the other hand the emperor’s increasing deification. The court rituals were refined, the emperor became more and more a supernatural being separated from the world with a special relationship to the heavens. At first the old gods like Jupiter, Hercules and Sol constituted the heavenly point of reference, since the time of Constantine the Christian god became more prominent and at least victorious. The two developments – separation from daily life and close relationship to the gods – is reflected in a series of medallions.

The emperors appear in an idealised way, sometimes oversized, sometimes wearing a nimbus and/or crowned by the hand of god. None of these features is realistic. The emperors very often are depicted en face and accompanied by legends that celebrate eternal victory, everlasting joy or a new golden age. These medallions totally differ from the bronze medallions of the second century.

Their production dates and production locations as well as find contexts make it very plausible that they were used as presents to high ranking officers of the Roman army.

This army consisted increasingly of non-Roman soldiers led by their barbaric leaders who became prominent recipients of precious gold medallions. These medallions became a kind of military decoration and were copied by those barbarians who did not receive them from the emperor themselves:

Not only the gold medallions tended to become heavier, also the silver medallions of the fourth century sometimes are exceptionally heavy:

One of the last silver medallions was minted by Priscus Attalus during the siege of Rome by Alarich in 409. The legend on the reverse reads: INVICTA ROMA AETERNA, undefeated eternal Rome. One year later Rome was sacked by Alarich.
TO SUM UP:

It lasted nearly 150 years to develop all technical features of Roman medallions. Most of the early medallions were produced with the help of regular coin dies. For that reason in most cases it is not possible to reveal the occasions for their production and their recipients. The medallions of the second century seem to have been intended as gifts for a wide range of persons (from close personal friends to important members of the military and civil administration) at different occasions (sāturnalīa, adventus, New Year, etc.). During the third century the focus seems to have been turned to the army and occasions that normally led to special payments to this group (accession, anniversaries, victories, etc.). This change of occasions and recipients not only is reflected in the motives for the medallions but in technical developments as well. Heavy gold and silver medallions become more prominent, the reverses are easier to understand. The last gold medallions seem to have served as prestigious presents for barbarian kings like the Merovingian king Chilperich, who received the last recorded but not preserved gold medallion from the emperor Tiberius II at about 580 AD. The Eastern Roman Empire started its downswing at that time, things changed again and medallions were no longer of any use.