



The Lyon Medallion

Illustration 1: Plomb from Lyon – photograph of the lead mould preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Lyon.



[1]

[Illustration 2: Medallion from Lyon according to a drawing made by Encina and published in de La Saussaye, "Lettre à M. A.".](#) [2]



[3]

The Lyon Medallion

Denomination: Lead proof of the reverse of a medallion

Date: 297 CE

Material: lead

Mint: Lyon? Trier?

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):

Cabinet des Médailles, Paris

Name of Ruler: represented: Diocletian (?); Maximian

Obverse (Image and Inscription): -

Reverse (Image and Inscription):

For the description of the scene see the commentary.

Inscription on the upper half: *saeculi felicitas*, "felicity of the age"

Inscription on the lower half: *Mogontiacum; Castel; Fl(uvius) Renus*

A line divides the two scenes.

Border of dots.

Diameter (mm): 70.00mm

Commentary:

First publication in: Louis de La Saussaye, "Lettre à M. A. De Longpérier sur un monument numismatique inédit, du règne des empereurs Dioclétien et Maximien," in *Revue numismatique. Nouvelle Série* 7 (1862), p. 426-431.

Publication of reference: Bastien, Pierre, "Le médaillon de plomb de Lyon," in *Numismatique romaine*, Suppl. 18; (Wetteren: *Éditions Numismatique romaine*, 1989).

The piece presented here, commonly known under the name of the "Plomb from Lyon," was found in 1862 during



some excavations made in the Saône, near Lyon. In 1870 it was sent to the Cabinet des Médailles de Paris. However, as a consequence of chemical reactions due to contact with the air, its condition deteriorated quickly. Fortunately, before it was sent to Paris a lead mould of the piece was made and preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Lyon (illustration 2).

The piece found in the Saône corresponds in fact to a lead proof of the reverse of a gold medallion. Numismatic proofs were useful in order to appreciate the progress and quality of the engraving of the die. According to Robert Turcan, this lead proof of the medallion may have been produced in Lyon, a hypothesis rejected by Pierre Bastien, who highlights the fact that a systematic association of the place of discovery of numismatic items with the nearest mint is uncertain. In a different perspective, we will see that the latter scholar has thus argued that this medallion could have been produced in the mint of Trier (see Turcan, “Empreinte en plomb,” p. 194-195; Bastien, “Le médaillon de plomb,” p. 4-5). It is also important to recall that Roman medallions were produced in order to commemorate exceptional events. However, as we do not have any real medallion bearing on the reverse the image represented on this proof, we cannot answer the question of whether this type of medallion was actually produced and distributed.

In the upper half of the medallion, on the left, two Roman soldiers, each bearing one helmet, one shield, and a spear can be seen. In addition, two laureate emperors whose heads are adorned with halos are represented. They are wearing tunics covered by a *paludamentum*. The identity of these emperors has been debated and is of course connected to the issue of the dating of the coin (see later). One of them is represented while distributing something, probably money, to a man who has one knee bent. It is important to note that the drawing made by Encina in 1862 of the medallion is erroneous on various points (see illustration 2). First, it represents this kneeling character sitting on the ground. Second, on the original lead proof of the medallion as on the lead mould made of it, it seems that the two seated emperors bear something round on their knees, which must be a purse (see Bastien, “Le médaillon de plomb,” p. 6). The scene represented is thus a scene of imperial *largitio* (largesse). Behind the kneeling man, an helmeted woman wearing a tunic appears. She probably represents Rome (for this argument, see Turcan, “Empreinte en plomb,” p. 185-186, who differs between a representation of Rome or of Virtus; Bastien, “Le médaillon de plomb,” p. 15-16). She plays an intermediary role in the *largitio* between the emperors and the group of men, women, and children gathering on the right side. Rome especially introduces a woman to the emperor, probably so that she receives money from him. At the right side of this woman a man with children seems to move towards the right, probably after having also received a donation from the emperor.

In the lower half of the medallion, the scene represented follows the one depicted on the upper half. From left to right, a child, a man, and a woman both holding saddlebags on their shoulders are represented. The procession ends with a man bearing some kind of sack (note that the drawing of Encina erroneously represents these various bags as some kind of wings). On each side of the scene two fortified cities are represented in order to symbolize their place of departure and arrival. They thus depart from Castel, that is probably [Castellum Mattiacorum](#) [4], or Kastel, a place where Drusus built a fort on the right side of the Rhine river, and they go towards [Mogontiacum](#) [5], modern Mainz, located on the other side of the Rhine. This scene thus symbolises their crossing of the boundary zone between barbarian lands and Roman territory.

Before analysing precisely some elements of the scene depicted on the proof of this medallion, it is important to recall some general points on the use of the notions of frontiers and migrations in a Roman context. Yves Modéran has rightly recalled that in general the notion of “immigration” of foreigners inside the Roman Empire is difficult to apply to the reality of the Roman world, principally because it is primarily based on the prerequisite that the Roman Empire had well-defined frontiers. This last point is actually debatable, first because Roman power itself constantly repeated the fiction that the Roman Empire had no frontiers and that it was universal. Second, even in the zones which were in contact with foreign peoples, Rome always tried to entertain close relations with the numerous principalities which were located in these buffer zones, also called the “third zone,” to establish in these areas a kind of protectorate. Finally, it is a well-known fact that in Roman official ideology all the allies and friends of Rome, even if they evolved in territory which was not located inside the Empire, were considered as being part of the Empire. These three elements show how blurred and complex the notion of frontiers was, as well as the delimitation between the Roman provinces and the foreign territories throughout the empire (Modéran, “L'établissement,” p. 340-341). As a consequence, during the whole imperial period up to the fourth century CE, many texts dealing with the arrivals and settlements of barbarian populations inside Roman provinces only insist on the ideas of displacement and transfer, and rarely on the “geopolitical” and even practical aspects of this action. However, Yves Modéran has noticed that during the fourth century CE the idea of crossing through a frontier zone or entering inside another territory appears much more frequently, and in particular Rome's. This evolution may be symbolised by the appearance of the term *Romania*, which proves that the contemporaries openly referred to a bounded Roman Empire much more realistic and concrete than the usual and official reference to the *imperium romanum sine fine* (Modéran, “L'établissement,” p. 342-344). These general remarks are important to have in



mind when one looks at this medallion which represents the transfer of a group of people, who, we will see, can be identified with barbarians, from outside to inside the Roman Empire, the border being here symbolised by the Rhine. If the scenes depicted do not give details about whether there existed procedures of control before their entrance inside the Empire, the scene depicted on the upper half and which precedes the crossing of the Rhine may be exceptional. In fact, if the new incomers are actually Germans it would be the sole representation of a scene depicting imperial largess made to barbarians, and in this case perhaps in the perspective of their future settlement inside the Roman provinces. In addition, the probable representation of Roma being the intermediary between the emperors and the barbarian immigrants can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the inclusion of the barbarians into the *Romanitas*.

Regarding the interpretation of the scenes represented on this lead proof, one of the most debated points is certainly that of the identity of the two emperors represented. At the time of the discovery of the piece, Louis de La Saussaye suggested that the two emperors were Diocletian (left) and Maximian (right) (de La Saussaye, "Lettre à M. A. De Longpérier," p. 428-430). However, scholars have suggested other identifications, such as Constantius I (left) and Maximian (right), or even Valentinian I and Gratian, although this last interpretation is improbable (see the argumentation in Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 7-9). As stated by Pierre Bastien, by comparing the emperor on the right with portrayals depicted on coins, the likeness with Maximian seems obvious (see Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 7). The final question is whether the second emperor on the left is Diocletian or Constantius I. The problem with the identification with Diocletian is that Diocletian never went to the Rhine region, so he would be represented here to symbolise the *concordia* between the two *principes*. Among the arguments brought to add credit to the hypothesis that it is Diocletian who is represented scholars have also argued that it would have been inappropriate to represent the Augustus (Maximian) and his Caesar (Constantius I) on an equal footing (in that perspective, Seston, *Dioclétien*, p. 73, n. 2; Turcan, "Empreinte en plomb," p. 188). For this reason, Robert Turcan considers that the medallion must have been produced before the first Tetrarchy, that is, between Maximian's proclamation as Augustus in 286 and 292 CE. This argument based principally on the idea that Constantius I should have been represented smaller than Maximian is challenged by Pierre Bastien, who recalls that the sculpted groups of the Vatican Library or of the piazza San Marco at Venice show tetrarchs presented on a relatively equal footing. For Pierre Bastien, the hypothesis that it is Diocletian who is represented is confirmed by the fact that in many coins produced before and during the first Tetrarchy and representing on the obverse or the reverse various emperors, the highest one in the official hierarchy is often represented on the left side. For him, this thus confirms the fact that the emperor represented on the left side of the medallion may be the senior one, that is Diocletian (see Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 10-12; against the hypothesis that it is Constantius I, p. 14-15).

Aside from this debate about the identity of the two emperors represented, scholars have also debated a lot about the nature of the event represented on the two parts of the medallion. In their argumentation they frequently associate the scenes here depicted with narratives of the military operations led by Maximian or Constantius I in Germany in the last decades of the third century. They have also often put the depicted scenes in relation to the panegyric addressed to Constantius and pronounced at Trier on the 1st March 297 CE, especially the passages dealing with the policy of settlements in Gaul of various barbarian peoples and *Laeti* inside the Empire led by Maximian and Constantius Chlorus (see [Latin Panegyric IV \(8\).21.1](#) [6]). Considering all the interpretations of the scenes depicted on the medallions which have been proposed (the various interpretations are listed in Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 13), we can see that the majority of scholars have proposed to associate them with one of Maximian's campaigns in Germany between 286 and 288 CE. However, even among these scholars there is no consensus about the identity of the peoples entering the Empire. According to some scholars they are not barbarians but Roman colonists who have been obliged to run away because of barbarian raids in their lands, or Roman soldiers made prisoners, who would then have been allowed to settle back into the Empire (on the idea that they were colonists, see Froehner, *Les médaillons*, p. 259; on the idea that they were Roman soldiers made prisoners, see Turcan, "Empreinte en plomb," p. 190-191). This reading could thus be put in relation to the passage of Constantius's panegyric in which it is stated that under Maximian *Laetus postliminio restitutus*, "the *Laetus*, [had been] restored in its [previous] frontiers," with the *Laeti* probably referring here to Romans who had been made captive by Germans and brought outside the Empire, and who after the recapture of some lands by Roman troops, were allowed to settle back inside the Empire (on this passage, see [Latin Panegyric IV \(8\).21.1](#) [6]). Among the other arguments brought by Robert Turcan to justify his interpretation there is the assessment that the people represented do not have German clothes. He adds that the presence of the personified Roma playing the role of mediator between the emperor and the individuals receiving the donation could only be possible in the framework of grants made to Romans, especially to Roman soldiers (Turcan, "Empreinte en plomb," p. 190-192). Following Robert Turcan's interpretation the medallion would thus commemorate the fact that in 286 or 287 CE, after victorious campaigns led by Maximian in Germany, numerous Romans who had been made prisoners by the



Germans in the past were freed and allowed by the emperor to re-settle inside the Empire.

However, a large majority of scholars believe that the group of peoples represented crossing the Rhine and receiving donations from the emperors were not Romans, but barbarians receiving money from Rome in order to settle themselves inside the Empire (this is the explanation retained in Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 20). Some reservation can actually be expressed concerning the hypothesis that the transferred and granted peoples were Roman soldiers. The first obvious objection to the idea that they were Roman soldiers is that there are not only men in this group but many women and children. Second, one small detail represented in the scene of the lower half of the medallion, that of the woman looking back towards Germany as if she already misses her native land, might prove that the people represented were Germans. Third, contrary to Robert Turcan's argument according to which the legend *saeculi felicitas*, "the felicity of the age," would not have been appropriate if this medallion celebrated the settlement of barbarians in the Empire, Pierre Bastien has recalled that it was a "formule 'passe-partout'," and that in the constitution of Honorius of 399 CE regulating the use of laetic lands, the emperor prohibited anyone who wanted to enjoy *Romana felicitas* from occupying these lands unduly (see Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 20-21).

It is difficult, therefore, to identify these barbarians, and it depends upon whether one interprets this medallion as commemorating a victory in particular or the imperial policy led towards some barbarian groups in general.

Concerning specific imperial victories, several have been mentioned: the victorious campaign of Maximian in Germany in 287-288 CE (see the listing in Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 13), Constantius I's victory over the Franks on the Scheldt delta in 296 CE (Alföldi, "Zum Lyoner Bleimedallion," p. 67-68), or even Maximian's campaign through Alamannia in 287 CE, a campaign that would have been followed by the settlement of a large number of Alamanni on the west bank of the Rhine (see Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 364-367). One relevant argument brought by John F. Drinkwater is that the city of Mainz was one usual base of Roman operations in Alamannia, but not for expeditions against the Franks, which took place in the Lower Rhine (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 364). Drinkwater even considers that Maximian may have not immediately commemorated this victorious expedition, but may have felt obliged to do so when in 297 CE Constantius I had his brilliant success in Britain (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 366). John F. Drinkwater is certainly the scholar who has presented one of the most convincing connections of the scene depicted on the medallion with the historical context.

In a different perspective, Pierre Bastien has refused to associate this medallion with a specific military campaign or event. For him, this medallion would have commemorated in general the imperial policy of the settlement of some German peoples inside the Gallic provinces as that of the repopulation of Gaul which occurred over a number of years. Although his reading can be contested, the arguments he quotes to date the medallion are convincing. The first one is related to the fact that after 286 CE gold coins, and in particular multiples of gold, were struck at Rome or Ticinum, and not at Lyon – a state of fact which would discredit the hypothesis according to which this medallion was produced at Lyon. The situation changed in 294 CE with the opening of the mint of Trier in which many gold coins or multiples of gold were produced from then on. By then, it has to be noticed that an important quantity of gold coins had been produced at Trier in 297 CE. The second argument is related to the fact that in the panegyric of Constantius I, pronounced in March 297 CE at Trier, it is the global policy of settling barbarian peoples inside the empire led by Diocletian, Maximian, and Constantius which is praised. The third argument brought by Pierre Bastien is that there are striking similarities with the ten *aurei*, commonly known under the name of the [Arras medallion](#) [7], commemorating Constantius's submission of Britain (such as the representation of a half-kneeling barbarian, but also the way of representing the roof of the tower). All these elements actually suggest that the proof of this gold medallion might have been produced in 297 CE to generally commemorate the restoration of peace in Gaul (see Bastien, "Le médaillon de plomb," p. 24-25, 38).

One last point can be added to offer further interpretation of the scene. Agreeing with Pierre Bastien's analysis of the medallion, Yves Modéran has suggested that the scene of distribution of money by the emperors gives further information about the status of the barbarians here represented. This scholar rightly remarks that they are not depicted as captives. In fact, in the panegyric of Constantius I of 297 CE (IV(8).9.1-4) the orator narrates that under the porticoes of some cities of north-eastern Gaul sat "captive bands of barbarians," made up of old and young men or women. These barbarians were Frankish war captives, as Constantius had just defeated them in the Rhine-Scheldt delta. In the upper half of the plomb from Lyon, the Germans receiving donation from the emperor are not represented as war captives. Thus, they should not be interpreted as being of the same status than the war prisoners waiting to be dispatched in some rural Gallic proprietaries to serve as the labour force described in the panegyric. Yves Modéran has also recalled that the way the *largitio* scene is depicted gives the impression that the personality of each of these individuals is taken into consideration by the emperors. For this scholar, this situation may correspond to the condition of barbarians who received lands individually after having been collectively transplanted inside the Empire. This point has thus led him to the conclusion that the Germans represented on the



Plomb from Lyon could be of a similar status to the Frank *receptus in leges*, “admitted in [our] laws,” depicted in the panegyric of Constantius I (on this debate see [Latin Panegyric IV \(8\).21.1](#) [6]).

Whether we do or do not accept the parallel made by Yves Modéran between this lead proof of a gold medallion and this extract of the panegyric of 297 CE, it seems that his remark about the fact that the condition of the barbarians depicted on the medallion seems much more favourable than that of war prisoners later entrusted to Gallic landowners is totally relevant. As we saw previously, John F. Drinkwater’s hypothesis that in the late 280s, after his rapid and victorious campaign through Alamannia, Maximian settled an important number of Alamanni by agreement on the left bank of the Rhine is also quite convincing. One important message conveyed by this medallion must have thus been to praise imperial generosity, and to show that this generosity was a successful strategy as it went with the pacification of the nearby barbarian peoples. Finally, this idea of imperial generosity bringing peace to the barbarians is also directly connected to another major theme of imperial propaganda which may also be present in this medallion, that of the civilising role of the imperial power. Actually, Diocletian and Maximian appear here “not as conquerors but as civilizers of barbarians,” an aspect which is highlighted in the panegyric of Constantius I composed in 297 CE, and which is also reused later by Symmachus, when in 370 CE he celebrated Valentinian for his previous campaign in Alamannia, and recalled how the emperor had succeeded to submit the Alamanni to peace and to bring to them Roman civilisation (see *Latin Panegyric IV (8).9.3-4*; [Symmachus. Speeches II.12-14](#) [8]; on this aspect and the connection between the sources see Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 366).

Keywords in the original language:

- [saeculum](#) [9]
- [felicitas](#) [10]
- [Mogontiacum](#) [11]
- [Castel](#) [12]
- [Renus](#) [13]

Thematic keywords:

- [Diocletian](#) [14]
- [Maximian](#) [15]
- [Constantius I](#) [16]
- [barbarians](#) [17]
- [Rome \(personification\)](#) [18]
- [peregrine](#) [19]
- [settlement](#) [20]
- [migration](#) [21]
- [frontier](#) [22]
- [Rhine](#) [23]
- [tenant farmer](#) [24]
- [imperial generosity](#) [25]
- [Roman integration](#) [26]

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Other sources connected with this document: Numismatic item

[Arras Medallion \[7\]](#)

Arras Medallion

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Text

[Symmachus, Speeches II.12-14 \[8\]](#)

The benefits of Roman conquest and occupation

- [Read more about Symmachus, Speeches II.12-14 \[8\]](#)



Text

[Latin Panegyric IV\(8\).21.1 \[6\]](#)

About the revival of Gallic campaigns thanks to *Laeti* and barbarian ploughmen

- [Read more about Latin Panegyric IV\(8\).21.1 \[6\]](#)

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