

# PROCEEDINGS

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**Communications**

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Wednesday, March 13, 1901.

Dr GLAISHER, President, in the Chair.

The election of the following was announced:

Mr EDWARD BROOME.

The Rev. JOHN VAVASSOR DURELL, M.A.

Mr WILLIAM MORTLOCK PALMER.

The Rev. W. G. SEARLE, M.A., made the following communication:

### ON A MEDAL OF JUSTINIAN I.

In the year 1751 there was found by some Turkish labourers, in the ruins of an old fort near Cæsarea of Cappadocia, a gold medallion of the celebrated emperor Justinian I. (527-565), the prince whose general was the renowned Belisarius, the conqueror of Africa and Italy.

It was purchased by Count Desalleurs, the ambassador of France at Constantinople, for the sum of 758 frs. (or £30), being of the estimated value of 540 frs. (or about £22). This medallion the Count forwarded to M. Rouillé, count de Jouy, minister and secretary of state of King Louis XV, to be presented to him. It was placed in his coin-cabinet, which then for many years had been kept in the Bibliothèque du Roi, in the building now known as the Bibliothèque Nationale.

In 1759 M. de Boze published an account of this splendid acquisition of the royal collection in the *Mém. de l'Acad. des Inscriptions*, Vol. xxvi., but without adding anything further to our knowledge.

This medallion, of almost unique character, being three inches in diameter and weighing half a Roman pound, or 36 of the ordinary gold coins or solidi, was justly considered one of the greatest ornaments of the Paris coin-room, and remained there in safety until and through the dangerous period of the Terror.

In that wild time men possessing more zeal than knowledge proposed to the National Convention to melt down the gold coins of the collection, but M. J. J. Barthélemy, the author of the *Travels of the Young Anacharsis*, then in his 77th year, who had for many years, indeed since 1745, been keeper of the coins, pleaded so earnestly with Gilbert Romme, one of the members of the Convention and president of the Committee of Public Instruction, who had been commissioned to make a report on this proposition, that the latter persuaded the Convention to abandon an act of such transcendent vandalism; and so the medallion of Justinian escaped the crucible for some years longer.

All through the Directorate, the Consulat, the Empire and the Restoration this unique medallion remained unharmed in its home in the Rue de Richelieu. It was there also when described by Mionnet in his well-known Catalogue of Roman coins. In that Catalogue the coins are priced, and this wonderful medallion was valued at £80, a sum very far below what it would have fetched if it ever could have been put up to auction.

At last, in 1831, its long existence came to an end.

In the night of the 5th to the 6th day of November the coin-room of the Bibliothèque Royale was broken into, and an immense booty was gathered together and carried off.

According to M. du Mersan the culprit was a certain Fossard, who had made his escape from the galleys. He had hidden himself in a dark corner in the library of printed books, and as there was only one door between the library and the coin-room, when all was quiet he made his way into the latter through a hole which he made in the door by means of a centrebit and hand-saw. Once there, he broke open a cupboard which contained the keys of the coin-cabinets, and so was master of the situation. Having the whole night before him, he lit a lantern and went systematically through the cabinets; he pulled out the drawers to inspect their contents, but did not take the trouble to push them back into their places, and they were found next morning in that condition. At last he came to the cabinet containing

the series of imperial Roman coins. This he emptied into his bags, adding to the coins whatever else he found of the same metal.

Having got his booty together towards the dawn, he made his escape by means of a rope from a window of the coin-room which looked into the Rue de Richelieu. A patrol of soldiers, which passed a few minutes afterwards, noticed the rope which Fossard had left hanging from the window; they roused the porter of the establishment, who gave the alarm—but it was too late.

It was a grievous loss, the most daring and dreadful blow that any criminal had ever dealt a historical museum. What was astounding was the cool way in which the authorities of the Bibliothèque at first behaved themselves. They sent to the newspapers notes, stating that they had lost the value of £4000 in gold, making no mention of the artistic loss, giving no description of the medals, and offering no reward for their recovery. A mere grocer of the Rue de St Denis would have shewn more energy if he had lost his dog. However, as public opinion began to speak out, the authorities improved their circular; then, on more careful investigation, they found that the intrinsic value of the lost objects was £20,000.

The intrinsic value of the plunder must surely be exaggerated, unless the *Revue des Deux Mondes* has got confused between the value of the antiquities and the value of the metal, as £20,000 worth of gold would at £4 an ounce weigh 400 lbs., a somewhat heavy weight for one man or even two men to carry off. A rough calculation of the weight of the booty would perhaps reduce it to the half.

So spoke the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (14 Nov. 1831, Vol. iv.) soon after the robbery; it then went off into hysterical invectives against the keepers of the collections, especially Raoul Rochette, and finished the article by suggesting that the nation should offer the thief £40,000 on condition of the restoration of the coins; and, if he did so, that it should appoint *him* keeper of the coins, since he who knows how the medals could be taken would certainly know how to keep them in safety.

Now Fossard had a brother who was a working jeweller; with him he at once deposited the bags of coins, of which a great portion were immediately melted down in the hope that so the evidence of the stolen articles would disappear.

The next day all the newspapers announced the sacrilegious crime, and the receiver, dreading discovery, passed the following night with his son in conveying away the bags with the coins; he hid them in the river Seine by one of the piers of the bridge de la Tournelle. The burglar was, however, arrested shortly afterwards, as was also the receiver, who confessed his share in the deed and pointed out the place where the stolen articles that remained intact were hidden. These were then recovered and returned to the coin-room.

Fossard the burglar was condemned to the hulks for life, and his accomplices received proportional sentences.

So far M. du Mersan, one of the officials, in his history of the coin-room, writing before 1838. M. Babelon, however, though referring to him, mentions more than one thief being engaged in the plunder of the coins, but without giving any of the details mentioned by M. du Mersan.

The sentences, according to the *Moniteur* of 17 Jan. 1833, were:

Etienne Fossard	40	years,
Drouilhot	20	„
Fossard père	10	„

two others being acquitted. Fossard père was probably the working jeweller spoken of by du Mersan as the burglar's brother, and Drouilhot the assistant burglar.

The booty was considerable every way, even enormous. According to M. E. Babelon and the *Revue des Deux Mondes* there were carried off:

Roman gold medallions	...	...	...	95
Other gold coins	...	...	...	3192
Gold medals of the Kings of France	...	...	c.	700
„ „ „ Popes	...	...	...	65
Other gold coins	...	...	...	30
Greek gold coins	...	...	...	60

Other articles that were carried off were:

The patera of Rennes, a beautiful gold plate 6 inches in diameter, with a bas relief of Hercules and Bacchus in the centre, and 16 gold coins of the period A.D. 150-220 mounted in artistic frames round the edge.

The gold cup of Chosroes, the Sassanidan king of Persia.

The jewels of the tomb of Childeric I., king of the Franks, who reigned 458-482, before the arrival of Hengist and Horsa in Britain, discovered in 1653, consisting of arms, fibulæ, a great number of small gold ornaments formerly attached to the king's mantle, which Napoleon I. called bees, replacing therefore on his imperial robe the Capetian fleur-de-lis with actual bees; the king's seal, &c.,

and other priceless objects in gold.

The cameos having no metal value, the robber did not meddle with them. The patera of Rennes was recovered, and some other articles.

When the plunder was recovered, it was found that most of the gold jewels of Childeric's tomb and more than 2000 gold coins had been melted down. Of the coins many were unique, others not recorded or of an archæological and artistic importance quite exceptional. This would leave 2000 coins and medals as having been recovered according to the statement of M. Babelon, the head of the Paris coin-cabinet, in his paper in the *Mém. de la Soc. Nationale des Antiquaires de France* of 1898, but M. Maurice Prou, also in the coin-room, says: "They only recovered the gold articles which were *not* coins." Surely *both* these gentlemen cannot be right.

The two medallions which M. Babelon in his paper most regrets are one huge medallion of Justinian and some fairly large ones, a gold medallion of Domitian and two similar medallions of Commodus. These latter were the more interesting because Roman gold medallions did not become

comparatively common till the reign of Caracalla. He comforted himself, however, with respect to the Domitian and the Justinian, with the knowledge that engravings, though incorrect ones, of these two coins existed, of the latter in Mionnet, of the former by M. de Boze.

This paper of M. Babelon recalled to the memory of M. Grueber, of the British Museum coin-room, that a number of sulphur moulds of the rarest coins of the French cabinet had been sent over to the Museum before 1831. He looked at the collection, and was pleased to find that it included the moulds of the great Justinian medallion. He wrote to M. Babelon, whose delight may be imagined. Sulphur casts were sent to Paris, and soon the French coin-room possessed once more practically, thanks to the galvanoplastic art, its long lost medallion in all its historic interest.

Learning this history, I begged M. Grueber to let the Fitzwilliam Museum have a replica, and to the kindness of the authorities of the coin-room we owe it that I have the pleasure of exhibiting it to-day to our Society. Mr Ready, who is employed by the British Museum for such purposes, made the electrotype reproduction of the medallion.

The real medallion weighed, (as I have said) 36 solidi, or half a Roman pound. It was not the biggest of these elephantine coins. The Frankish King Chilperic, who began to reign in the year 561 and died 584, shewed to Gregory, the bishop of Tours, who mentions the fact, some similar ones weighing 72 solidi or a pound of gold, and in the Imperial cabinet at Vienna there are medallions of Constantius II. and of Valens weighing 40, 48, 56, and even 90 solidi. The coins in the possession of King Chilperic were struck by order of the Emperor Tiberius Constantius (578-582) and bore, according to the bishop's account, on the obverse the inscription: *Tiberii Constantini perpetui augusti* round his head, and on the reverse a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses, with the inscription *Gloria romanorum*. It must, however, be stated that no such type now is found even on coins of the ordinary size of Tiberius Constantius, and that the

inscription on the reverse is not found after Justinian I, who died in 565.

Other large medallions there are of the later emperors in the great collection, but they consist of smaller coins let into very wide and decorated frames of gold. There are very large gold coins found among the Oriental series.

The medallion, which was struck about 1350 years ago, but bears no mark of date, has unfortunately no matter of historical interest to tell us. The obverse represents the emperor nearly full face, helmeted, in armour, wearing a military cloak and holding a javelin in his right hand; the inscription is D. N. Justinianus P. P. Aug. On the reverse he is represented in full military habit and holding a spear, as riding from left to right, preceded by a winged Victory holding a trophy, a star being in the field of the coin; the inscription is *Salus et gloria romanorum*. (This inscription is not apparently found on any other coins. *Gloria Romanorum* is frequently found, but *Salus Romanorum* is only found on silver coins of Eugenius, who usurped the purple.) In the exergue, or the part of the face of the coin cut off by the ground-line, on which the emperor is marching, the word CONOB is seen. This word is commonly found on the solidus (a gold coin) from the time of the emperor Valentinianus I. (364-375), implying (as is commonly stated) that the coin was struck at Constantinople, and further that 72 of them weighed a pound, OB being the Greek numerals for 72. Similar words are found for other mints: TROB (Trèves), ANTOB (Antioch), SIROB (Sirmium), AQOB (Aquileia), MDOB (Mediolanum), TESOB (Thessalonica), and, what is most interesting to us, AVGOB (London, on a coin of Magnus Maximus). But that OB signifies 72 is disputed in the new edition of Cohen's great Catalogue of Roman coins; the letters certainly occur on silver coins, though not frequently; on at least one bronze coin of Justinian and his uncle Justin of the year 527; besides this the word CONOB occurs not only on the solidus, but also very frequently on the half and on the third of the solidus, when the formula OB = 72 is manifestly incorrect.

In some cases also on coins of the later Western empire we find, in conjunction with CONOB in the field of the coins, RM for Rome, RV for Ravenna, AR for Arles, MD for Mediolanum (Milan); this seems to shew that not even can the CON be considered as the mint-mark of Constantinople.

It would seem, then, that the presence of the word CONOB on a medallion of this weight does not cast any doubt on the genuineness of it.

I mentioned the seal-ring of King Childeric as having been carried off with the coins. It was melted up, and the only traces remaining of it were a mutilated plaster impression and some incorrect engravings, till in 1857 one of the assistants in the Paris coin-room (M. Dauban) found a sealing-wax impression of it fastened into a MS. of a life of Ste-Geneviève in the Library of Ste-Geneviève. This impression was very well made, and is in perfect preservation; it had been made 200 years before by Père du Molinet, the author of the above life. Thus this wax impression and the moulds of the British Museum fortunately restored to students the true appearance of the two interesting monuments of antiquity, the seal of the Frankish King Childeric, and the medallion of the Roman Emperor Justinian.

Dr JAMES made the following communications :

#### ON THE SCULPTURES ON THE SOUTH PORTAL OF THE ABBEY CHURCH AT MALMESBURY.

The south portal of Malmesbury Abbey Church is a very famous monument of Ancient English sculpture. Over and over again has it been engraved, and a good deal has been written about the interpretation of the reliefs with which it is covered. I venture to come forward with a fresh interpretation of some of these subjects; and of course I do not doubt that mine is the only one possible. I am at any rate quite certain that my predecessors are wrong in several cases.

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