

# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA

ANTIQUÉ NUMISMATIC WORKSHOP  
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

2018



ACTA NUMISMATICA HUNGARICA  
SUPPLEMENTUM I

# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA

## I

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD BY THE  
ANTIQUÉ NUMISMATIC WORKSHOP

ON THE 10TH SEPTEMBER 2018 AT THE HUNGARIAN NUMISMATIC  
SOCIETY BUDAPEST, HUNGARY



BUDAPEST 2019

# NUMISMATICA PANNONICA I

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Available online at <http://acta.numizmatika.org>

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Cover design: Gábor Vácz

ISBN 978-615-81521-0-5

Budapest 2019

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# The Great Man on the Chair: Evidence for the Interpretation of a Late Roman Lead Seal

Tamás SZABADVÁRY

*In 2017 a lead seal was donated to the Hungarian National Museum (MNM-ÉT 2017.5.1) carrying a peculiar depiction. It shows a clothed figure on the left seated on a chair facing right, raising right (?) hand, with four clothed male (?) figures in front of him standing closely to the left, facing the seated figure. This gesture is reminiscent the well-known „eloquent” type (eloquens, logios [λόγιος]) that has a long iconographic tradition. The scene is what the numismatic literature calls a crowd scene, the transformation of its different variants (adlocutio, congiarium) can be traced to the late Roman era. This is also the time, when the Early Christian iconography adapts it, but without proper attributes, it is difficult to decide whether or not this is to be regarded as a religious scene (Dominus legem dat). Some of the few analogous seals show the name of Christ, therefore a connection with Christianity is perhaps more plausible. There are also some Pannonian finds to support this reading like the figural bronze casket fittings from Császár and Csucsá or the dagger scabbard from Pölöske. In the case of the lead seal in question, a Christian interpretation is possible, although this can not be stated with certainty.*

The Coins Collection of the Hungarian National Museum (hereafter HNM CC) was donated a lead seal with a peculiar image in the spring of 2017. The artefact appeared in an online auction, thus its exact findspot and circumstances are unknown. It was supposedly found in the Balaton Uplands, most probably in the vicinity of the Bakony Mountains. Wherever it may have been found, we can state with certainty that it belongs to the remains of the material culture of Roman Pannonia.

*HNM-CC 2017.5.1. – Lead Seal. One-sided, elliptical body, an oval field lowered in a slightly irregular frame. The rear side is of an elongated half-spherical shape, and the small, oval hole pierces the body in a 5/6 – 11/12 h line. The image depicts a clothed figure on the left seated on a chair facing right, raising right (?) hand, with four clothed male (?) figures in front of him standing closely to the left, facing towards the sitting figure. (Fig. 1–2)*

Diam. = 1,85 x 1,7 cm

H = 1,05 cm

Diam.<sub>field</sub> = 1,7 x 1,65 cm

Weight = 9,17 g.



*Fig. 1 Late Roman lead seal with „crowd scene” in the Coins Collection of Hungarian National Museum (HNM CC Inv. Nr. 2017.5.1. Photo: Judit Kardos).*

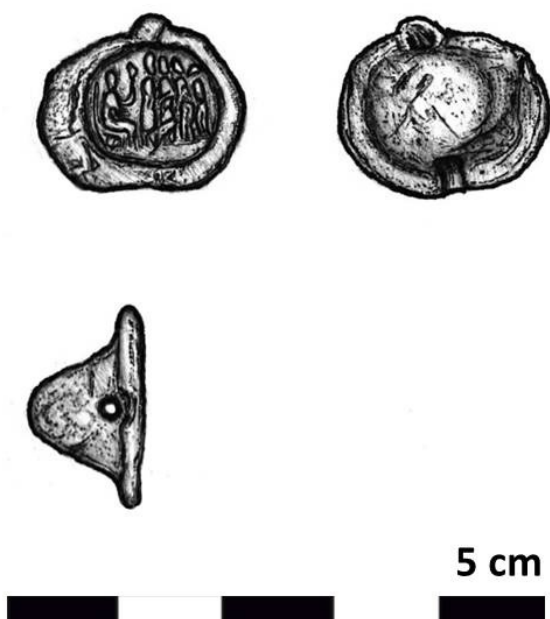


Fig. 2 Late Roman lead seal with „crowd scene” in the Coins Collection of Hungarian National Museum (HNM CC Inv. Nr. 2017.5.1. Drawing by the author).

The iconography of the sealing is not common, and there are very few analogies in the literary sources. The raised hand of the sitting figure most probably portrays the well-known „eloquent” gesture (*eloquens*, *logios* [λόγιος]), although the small size was apparently not suitable to depict the extended index and ring-finger, which could explain the globular shape of the hand (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> It is also significant that the seated figure is approximately the same height as the standing ones. The latter, probably male figures are hardly discernible at first, and are seemingly wearing „civilian” garments, i.e. the distinctive elements of military equipment (helmets, shields, spears etc.) are missing. There is no symbol or inscription in the surrounding area.

The Early Roman precursors and transition of the composition are well traceable: in a wider sense it is considered amongst the so-called „crowd scenes”. Analogies are found in both large and small sculpture, in the *acclamatio*, *adlocutio*, and *congiarium* scenes. The central figure (typically the Emperor) is depicted standing or – more frequently – seated (on a *sella curulis* or *sella castrensis*), regularly on a podium, his gestures matching the theme of the imagery. In a military setting we usually see a high-rank officer standing behind the Emperor,<sup>2</sup> whose character and function is visibly overshadowed by the main figure. One of the terminological characteristics of the crowd scenes<sup>3</sup> is a composition comprised of more than three or four anthropomorphic figures (men, allegories, or gods), among which there is necessarily one, who – for the sake of depicting horizontal depth in two dimensions or because of some overlapping attribute (e.g. a *signifer*’s standard) – can only partly be seen.<sup>4</sup>

Crowd scenes underwent significant changes in the Late Roman age (the compositions mentioned above are not traceable in numismatics-related finds), which is in close connection with the radical transformation of the Emperor’s public image. The ideal of the ‘*princeps*’ in the previous era gave way to a more godlike portrayal, who was seen isolated from his subjects, in the midst of a closed and increasingly bureaucratic court.<sup>5</sup> The depictions of the figures got closer and closer to full frontality, as can clearly be seen on the *audientia* and *oratio*

1 The gesture is prevalent in the case of more Late Roman artefacts. Good examples can be found among the so called gold glass objects e. g.: Howells 2015, 114–131, Pl. 97, 102, 107.

2 Cf. Trajan’s *sestertii*: RIC II 655–658 (with varying number of soldiers).

3 WOLFRAM THILL 2014, 90–91.

4 On Galba’s *adlocutio* scene: RIC I 462–465.; other examples: Wolfram Thill 2014, 91.

5 A general summary on the function of the *sacrum cubiculum* and other direct imperial units of administration see DELMAIRE 1995, 49–160.

scenes<sup>6</sup> (cf. the *oratio* panel of Constantine's Arch). The composition with the Emperor's *audientia* affected the then evolving Roman Christian iconography, as can be seen in the remarkable similarities of the '*Dominus legem dat*' scenes.

Solving the problem of the imagery on our lead seal is not a simple task, since beside the main composition there is no other sign or depiction to carry any information. The literary sources also list very few analogies from the already published material: in the latest work of J. Spier and G. Borsema there are four pieces, which are all presented from their Christian aspect.<sup>7</sup> All of them are one-sided seals, and in the composition the "central" figure in the chair is significantly larger than the three standing ones in front of him. On two of them, both in excellent condition, we can see the standing figures wearing longer clothes, their faces clean shaven, as they are holding (or folding) their arms in front of themselves.<sup>8</sup>

According to some interpretations Christ is represented in these image teaching his Apostles, while holding a scroll in his hand. Since it is difficult to determine the aim of the emission of these (Late) Roman seals, it is also hard to interpret their iconography. The ones that are considered 'Imperial' seals are those which bear certain characteristics (such as a headdress or an inscription), picturing or mentioning the Emperor or members of the Imperial family.<sup>9</sup> In the case of full-figure scenes, it is difficult to decide if they belong to this group because of the limited surface available on these small seals (e.g. *dextrarum iunctio, exercitatio*).<sup>10</sup>

Christian-related seals also raise the question of why these specific images were chosen for these artefacts. There are certain scenes from the Old and New Testament that are popular in both large and small sculpture, and are also represented on lead seals. Further examples exist of well-liked scenes, such as the binding of Isaac, Daniel in the lions' den, the Good Shepherd; in contrast to the relatively scarcely used scenes from the Jonas-cycle.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to note that popular funerary scenes, such as the raising of Lazarus or Moses striking the rock are almost completely absent.<sup>12</sup>

There is slim chance to determine exactly why these quite stereotypical scenes were represented on such a specific group of objects as the lead seals. According to the codified laws dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD which granted tax benefits to clergymen, we could assume the participation of the *clerici* in commerce based on material evidence, however there are only a few seals of known provenance.<sup>13</sup> Analogies of the seal described here can be found in the Late Roman archaeological material of Pannonia. The figural bronze casket fittings found in

6 NECHAEVA 2014, 25–34.

7 SPIER 2007, 190, Cat. S9, Fig. S9.; BORSEMA forth., Cat. 13a–c.

8 BORSEMA forth., Cat. 13a.

9 Here we could mention those that depict or reference Imperial institutions or other adherent domain: PROHÁSZKA 2002, 77–78.; STILL 1995, 54–68.

10 Cf. LEUKEL 1995, 208, Cat. N274–277, Tab. N14 / N274–277.

11 For the depictions of Jonas see: BORSEMA forth.; WINTER-ASAMER 1999, 123–124, Nr. 8, Tab. 16/8.

12 H.-J. Leukel mentions a sealing with 'VIVAS IN DEO' inscription from Trier, on which the imagery is still a question. In my opinion, it is most probably Moses striking the rock: LEUKEL 1995, 95, Cat. 362, Tab. 28/362. Other possible Christian scene: LEUKEL 2002, 74, Cat. 140, Fig. 140. There is also an unusual, rectangular lead slab in a Hungarian private collection, which also depicts the miracle. For the imagery of Moses striking the rock represented in small sculpture and art see R. Gottschalk's volume of Late Roman bronze rings from Cologne: GÖTTSCHALK 2015, 154–158, Fig. 84, 86–88.

13 A sealing is known from Ancient Cornacum (Sotin, Vukovarsko-srijemska žup., Croatia) with the image of the Prophet Daniel, found in the excavations of the Church of Mary the Helper of Christians: ILKIĆ 2006, 68, 74, Cat. 16. There is a piece in a Hungarian private collection that might be linked to the emission in a certain region or town: SZABADVÁRY 2018, Fig. 32/B. The so-called Barbatio type, which has more than one exemplars from Pannonia: MRÁV-VIDA-SZABADVÁRY forth. On the tax benefits given to the Church by the Roman State see: SÁRY 2009, 84–85.

a woman's grave (Grave Nr. 1901/1) in Császár (Komárom-Esztergom county, Hungary)<sup>14</sup> at the feet of the deceased, has a panel in which we find a similar scene (Fig. 3) raised on three steps, framed in a medallion. The central figure is sitting on a chair on the left, raising his right hand in an oratorical gesture, his left hand is not clearly visible. Seven male figures are standing in front of him, three of whom we can only vaguely see, and one might be a child given his relatively small size. There is an eighth man standing behind the central figure in a close, almost intimate position. In his new interpretation, L. Nagy lists the previous attempts of academic research to make sense of the scene, giving a detailed description of each solution. He mentions the Emperor's *audientia* and the Teaching Christ as possible interpretations, implying that there is not enough evidence to solve it. We have another casket fitting from the Csucsá-dűlő area of Bakonya (Baranya county, Hungary) (Fig. 4), which also has a medallion-framed composition similar to the Emperor's audience (without a Christogram, and without a figure standing behind the central one), although an inscription, 'DOMINVS' is visible in the exergue.<sup>15</sup> However, there are several Christian or Biblical scenes belonging to the same fitting:

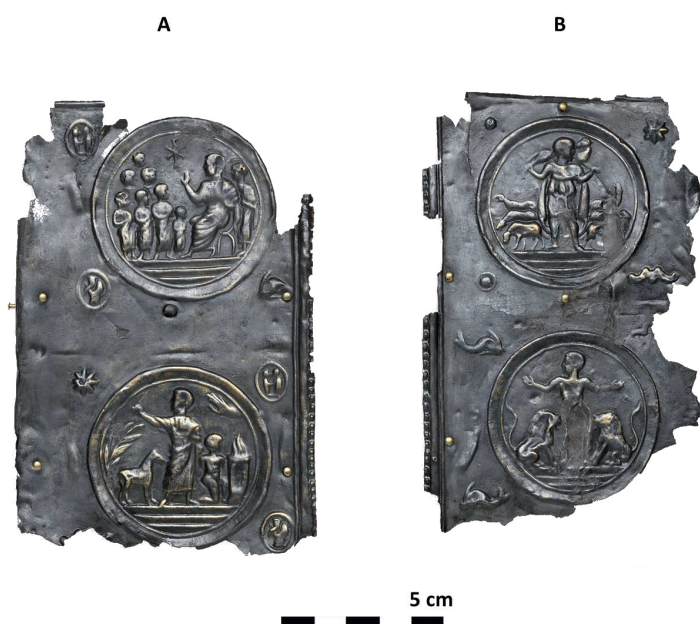


Fig. 3 Bronze casket mount with Early Christian scenes from Császár Grave Nr. 1901/1 (HNM DA 20/1902.2. Photo: Judit Kardos).



Fig. 4. Fragment of a bronze casket mount with Early Christian scenes from Bakonya-Csucsá-dűlő (After Visy 2015, Fig. 3).



Fig. 5. Brass mount of a dagger (or knife [?]) scabbard with „oath scene” (Museum of Sopron, Inv. Nr. 55.111.1., 55.148.1. After TAKÁCS-TÓTH-VIDA 2016, Cat. III/40).

14 Now in the HNM Department of Archaeology, Roman Collection (Inv. Nr. 20/1902.20.). On the find circumstances and other grave goods: MAHLER 1902, 24–28.

15 A full-scale iconographical analysis of the object is still lacking. See: FAZEKAS et al. 2010, 38.; VISY 2015, 421, Fig. 3.



on the left, a frontal image of Christ seated (a fragmented section, with part of an inscription due to the breakage: '[HOS]ANNA') and a clothed figure; while on the right the Binding of Isaac (inscription in the exergue: 'ABRAHAN') is visible. It is quite intriguing to think about the possible interpretations of the *dominus* inscriptions. What is the exact context of it? Does it represent the imperial power or does it combine the figures of the emperor and Christ? We cannot exclude either possibilities with certainty. The last, and also interesting example is a piece in a brass mount of a dagger (or knife) scabbard from Pölöske (Zala County, Hungary), found in 1887. It depicts a scene (*Fig. 5*), framed by a medallion-shape string of beads, in which a figure sitting on a throne standing on the baseline, without a podium, raising his hand in oath (?), without headdress, while three smaller male figures stand in front of him on the left, also with their right hands raised. On the other side of the scabbard the inscription 'VTERE / FELIC / ITER' (*utere feliciter*) is visible. Previous research interpreted the scene as the Teaching Christ, which is questionable given this object's function and possible context of use.<sup>16</sup>

The few Late Roman analogies suggest that the lead seal published here has an imagery that is the product of a complex progression of which Christian relations represent only one aspect. In its contemporary 4<sup>th</sup> century, the depictions most probably had several different, equally valid (and even overlapping) meanings, the basic concept of which might conventionally be the same. In our opinion, the Pölöske scabbard is a fine example of this phenomenon, given the similarity of the imagery, and at the same time a radically different function.

Therefore, while restating our remark that the exact interpretation and classification of these small and thus simplified images are problematic (although in the time of their making, there must not have been any doubt about their connotations), we cannot undoubtedly state that our object belongs to the archaeological material of Early Christianity.

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<sup>16</sup> Summary: NAGY 2012, 73–74. Its Christian connotations were mentioned recently in TAKÁCS–TÓTH–VIDA 2016, 212, Cat. III.40.

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