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Two gold medallions of the Apostolo Zeno Collection in the British Museum*

Roberto Tomassoni

Abstract: The paper aims to reconstruct the purchase, sale and current location of some gold medallions acquired by the Venetian erudite and collector Apostolo Zeno. In particular, there were four specimens that Zeno sold to cardinal Alessandro Albani, which later became part of the Vatican collection. Two of these medallions were later bought by the Duke of Blacas and then passed into the collection of the British Museum, where they are currently kept.

Keywords: Apostolo Zeno (<http://viaf.org/viaf/14779941>; <http://d-nb.info/gnd/116980257>); Gold Medallions; Cardinal Alessandro Albani (<https://viaf.org/viaf/34465260>; <http://d-nb.info/gnd/119212064>); Louis, Duke of Blacas (<http://viaf.org/viaf/41979936>; <http://d-nb.info/gnd/1050400712>); British Museum.

Zusammenfassung: Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, den Verbleib einiger Goldmedaillons aus dem Besitz des venezianischen Gelehrten und Sammlers Apostolo Zeno zu rekonstruieren: Vier Exemplare, die Zeno an den Kardinal Alessandro Albani verkauft hatte, gelangten schließlich in die Vatikanischen Museen. Zwei dieser Medaillons wurden später von Louis, Duc de Blacas d'Aulps erworben und befinden sich heute im Münzkabinett des British Museum.

Schlagwörter: Apostolo Zeno; Gold-Medaillons; Kardinal Alessandro Albani; Louis, Duc de Blacas d'Aulps, British Museum.

On 12 September 1718 the Venetian erudite Apostolo Zeno (1668–1750) arrived in Vienna, at the court of the Emperor Charles VI of Habsburg (1711–1740) where he remained, more or less permanently, until 1731, and where he devoted himself, from 1722 with increasing assiduity and constancy, to the collection and the study of ancient coins. As a result, an extraordinary collection of over ten thousand pieces was achieved thanks to the considerable wealth provided by his service, as poet laureate, at the imperial court and to the network of relationships he built and maintained throughout his life.

Especially during the first years in Vienna, Zeno had the opportunity to purchase some gold medallions that soon, however, he decided to sell in order to realise a significant profit, as confirmed by a passage in the »Diario Zeniano«¹, dated on 31 July 1745: »Una volta solo d'aver venduto medaglie²: e furono quattro medaglioni d'oro, che diedi all'Albani per 170 zecchini: a me costavano 25 ongari«³. Albani

has to be identified with the Catholic cardinal Alessandro Albani (1692–1779), born in Urbino, collector of antiquities and art patron.

* This article mainly derives from my doctoral thesis: »La collezione numismatica di Apostolo Zeno«, a research project in collaboration between the Universities of Venezia Ca' Foscari, Udine and Trieste, and in cooperation agreement with the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster.

¹ The Diary was written by Marco Forcellini (1712–1793), the personal secretary and friend of Apostolo Zeno, and it contains some passages of the conversations the two entertained since 1745. The manuscript is kept in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Fondo Ashburnham 1502, and its content were published in 2012 edited by Corrado Viola with the title of »Diario Zeniano (Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ashb. 1502) Marco Forcellini«.

² Apostolo Zeno (and his numerous interlocutors), in all documentation examined, refers to ancient coins as »medals«. This use originated from the XIV century and in the XVIII century it was fully accepted. See Saccocci 2001, 58 and, for further details on this issue, Missere Fontana 1995 and Mc Crory 1999.

³ »Only once I had sold medals: they were four gold medallions, which I gave to Albani for 170 *zecchini*, and to me

Zeno came into possession of the four specimens in different times and circumstances. One of these medallions, minted during the reign of Gallienus (253–268 A.D.), was purchased between August and September 1723, when he was in Prague for the coronation of Charles VI as King of Bohemia, and he had the opportunity to acquire the precious specimen, as testified by what he wrote to his half-brother Andrea Cornaro on 14 September 1723: «I giorni passati comperai qui un altro bel medaglione d'oro di peso di quattro *ungheri*, con la testa di Gallieno da una parte, e dall'altra con un Ercole con clava, e pelle di lione, e la leggenda Virtus Gallieni Augusti»⁴. Zeno's mention to «un altro bel medaglione d'oro» is indirectly alluding to the first medallion, struck by Valens (364–378 A.D.), that the Count Lippe gave to him two years earlier in Vienna⁵.

The description of the Gallienus specimen allows to easily identify the medallion: on the obverse the head of the emperor laureate to the right and the legend IMP GALLIENVS AVG COS V; while on the reverse Hercules standing to the left with the lion's skin, a branch in the right hand, a club in the left and legend VIRT GALLIENI AVG⁶.

As already mentioned, four medallions were sold to cardinal Albani, but unfortunately we do not know the circumstances that led to the acquisition of the other two specimens. However, their description is provided by Zeno himself in a letter of 13 March 1728, addressed to the Somascan father Gianfrancesco Baldini (1677–1764) in Rome⁷. At this date Apostolo already intended to sell his medallions with the aim of obtaining the maximum profit. He was quite reluctant to sell portions of his numismatic collection, although minimal, and the statement «Una volta sola so d'aver venduto medaglie», leads to this conclusion, and suggests that it was a rather exceptional fact. Perhaps he considered the collection of gold medallions too expensive or too risky, fearing of running into counterfeits⁸, and he came to the decision, certainly thoughtful, to sell the

four specimens in his possession with the aim, certainly not secondary, to achieve a lucrative profit.

The following is the letter Zeno wrote to Baldini: «A pié di questa (lettera) troverà la descrizione dei quattro medaglioni d'oro ch'io tengo: dei quali però non sarò mai per privarmi per meno di 160. *ungheri*. Non se ne faccia maraviglia del prezzo, poiché pel solo Valente ho potuto averne 70. e gli ho ricusati, non vo-

they cost 25 *ongari* [= Hungarian ducats]: Viola 2012, 97. At the time of Zeno, the *ongaro* (or *ungaro*, *unghero*) weighed approximately 3.45 g with a gold content of 986/1000: cf. Martinori 1915, 354, under the heading «Ongaro di Kremnitz o di Kremnitz». This coin had about the same weight of the *zecchino* of Venice, and in 1745 (the year of this statement), the doge was Pietro Grimani (1741–1752) and his *zecchini* had a weight between 3,37 g and 3,50 g: cf. CNI VIII, 451, n° 53–54; Montenegro 2012, 592, n° 2644; finally, see a coin of Grimani auctioned by the Auction House Bertolami Fine Art (E-Auction 97, 27–28 March 2021, Lot 1420).

⁴ «The past few days I bought here another beautiful gold medallion, weighting four ungheri, with the head of Gallienus on one side, and on the other Hercules with the club and the lion skin, and the legend VIRTUS GALLIENI AVGVS-TI»: Lettere Zeno 1785, vol. III, Lett. 601, 382; cf. «Fontes Inediti Numismatae Antiquae» (from now on, «FINA»), ref. 6744: https://fina.oeaw.ac.at/wiki/index.php/Apostolo_Zeno_-_Andrea_Cornaro_-_1723-9-14 [transl. R. Tomassoni].

⁵ Lettere Zeno 1785, vol. III, Lett. 535, 226–227; cf. FINA, ref. 6793: https://fina.oeaw.ac.at/wiki/index.php/Apostolo_Zeno_-_Pier_Caterino_Zeno_-_1721-1-4; Viola 2012, 97, suggests that the Count Lippe could be Rudolf Ferdinand Count of Lippe-Biesterfeld (1678–1736); Tomassoni 2021, 113–115. The medallion will be described below in further detail.

⁶ Cf. RIC V, part I, 130, n° 5.

⁷ The friendship and the epistolary exchange between Zeno and Baldini intensified from 1723–1724, when Apostolo bought the collection of Roman imperial silver coins of the Somascan Father. Baldini's competence in the numismatic field is well known and it is enough to mention his updated edition of the work of Jean Foy Vaillant (1632–1706): «Numismata imperatorum Romanorum praestantiora a Iulio Caesare ad Postumum», in three volumes, published in Rome in 1743. For a complete analysis on these issues I refer to my doctoral thesis, Tomassoni 2021, in particular to chs. 2 (pp. 27–36), and 6.

⁸ The counterfeiting was an issue much felt by Zeno and in general by collectors of his time, see Tomassoni 2021, ch. 5. The question of false coins and their authors was already known and discussed in the 16th century, see Missere Fontana 2013.



lendone meno di cento⁹. In addition to the already mentioned specimens of Valens and Gallienus, Zeno reported the description of the other two medallions:

- I. IMP GALLIENVS AVG COS. V. *Gallieni caput galeatam.*
VIRT GALLIENI AVG. *Hercules nudus, dextrorsum stans, dextra oleae ramum, sinistra clavam erectam, leoninis spoliis in laevum brachium rejectis. Pesa quattro ungheri* [»weighs four ungheri«].
- II. FL VAL CONSTANTIVS NOB CAES. *Caput Constantinii Chlorigi radiatum.*
PRINCIPI IVVENTVTIS. *Constantius laureatus, habituque militari ornatus, sinistrorsum stans, d. spiculum transversum gestat, s. globum. In imo PROM. Pesa quattro ungheri* [»weighs four ungheri«]¹⁰.
- III. D N VALENS MAX. AVGVSTVS. *Caput Valentis cum diademate ex lapillis & margaritis, cum paludamento ad pectus gemmata fibula revincto, dextram expansam altollens, s. victoriam tenet, quae s. ramum gerit, d. vero laureolam porrigit Imperatori.*
D N VALENS VICTOR SEMPER AVG. *Imperator nimbo ornatus, cum paludamento ad pectus, a fronte stans, super currum a sex equis tractum, dextra expansa & elata, s. globum tenet. Hinc & inde volitant duae victoriae lauream illi porrigentes. In ima parte plures, ut videntur, monetarum acervi, & litterae R M. Pesa dieci ungheri e mezzo in circa* [»weighs about ten ungheri and half«]. *Sopra questo medaglione il P. Paoli ha stampata un'erudita dissertazione* [regarding this medallion, P. Paoli wrote an erudite dissertation]¹¹.
- IV. ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. *Victoria dextrorsum stans, d. lauream, s. sceptrum: pro pedibus, vas utrinque ansatum. Pesa cinque ungheri* [»weighs five ungheri«]¹².

The letter to Baldini provides a last important information: »Tutti i suddetti medaglioni d'oro purissimo sono d'indubitata antichità, e d'intera conservazione. In quello di Gallieno v'è un buco sopra la testa; e questo è il solo difetto che v'abbia«¹³.

The exact date of the sale of the medallions to Albani is unknown but in 1738 the collection of the medallions of the Cardinal, including the four specimens sold by Zeno, passed to the Vatican collection¹⁴ and the transaction, therefore, must have occurred before that year.

Between 1739 and 1744 a work was published, in two volumes, edited by Rodolfo Venuti (1705–1763)¹⁵: »Antiqua numismata maximi moduli Aurea, Argentea, Aerea, ex Museo Alexandri S.R.E. Card. Albani in Vaticanam Bibliothecam a Clemente XII Pont Opt Max translata ()«, in which he described many of the medallions of the former Albani collection, and among them, the four specimens which had belonged to Zeno. In the first volume, published in 1739, the double stater of Alexander the Great is indicated (see note 12, and **fig. 1**) with a weight of 16.767 g¹⁶, lighter than the one reported

⁹ »At the foot of this (letter) you will find the description of the four gold medallions that I have: of which, however, I will never be deprived for less than 160. ungheri. Do not be surprised by the price, since only for Valens I could have 70. and I declined, not wanting less than one hundred«: Lettere Zeno 1785, vol. IV, Lett. 736, 238; cf. FINA, ref. 6654: https://fina.oeaw.ac.at/wiki/index.php/Apostolo_Zeno_-_Gian_Francesco_Baldini_-_1728-3-13 [transl. R. Tomassoni].

¹⁰ Cohen 1888, vol. VII, 79, n° 227.

¹¹ Cf. RIC IX, 122, n° 25. The dissertation of Father Sebastiano Paoli (or Pauli, 1684–1751) was published in 1722 under the title »De Nummo Aureo Valentis Imp«. For more information on this kind of medallion, see Vondrovec 2010.

¹² Lettere Zeno 1785, vol. IV, Lett. 736, 239–240. The last medallion mentioned is clearly a double stater of Alexander the Great, cf. Price 1991, vol. I, 107, n° 167.

¹³ »All the mentioned medallions are of pure gold and undoubtedly antique, and well-preserved. In Gallienus' one there is a hole over the head; and this is the only defect«. [transl. R. Tomassoni].

¹⁴ Le Grelle 1965, p. XVIII.

¹⁵ Indeed, Venuti reached a remarkable reputation thanks to the editions of the numismatic catalogues of Albani's, Mattei's and Odescalchi's collections. In 1734 he also became auditor in Rome of cardinal Albani and the curator of his antiquarian collection. In 1744 Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758) appointed Venuti as apostolic antiquary and apostolic commissioner over all »archaeological excavations«: see Cristofani 1983, 49.

¹⁶ Venuti 1739, vol. I, 1 and pl. 1. Following the text: »Ex Auro. Pond. Den. XIV. Gr. IX.«: the weight is therefore 14 deniers and 9 grains. If we consider that 1 ounce = 24 deniers,



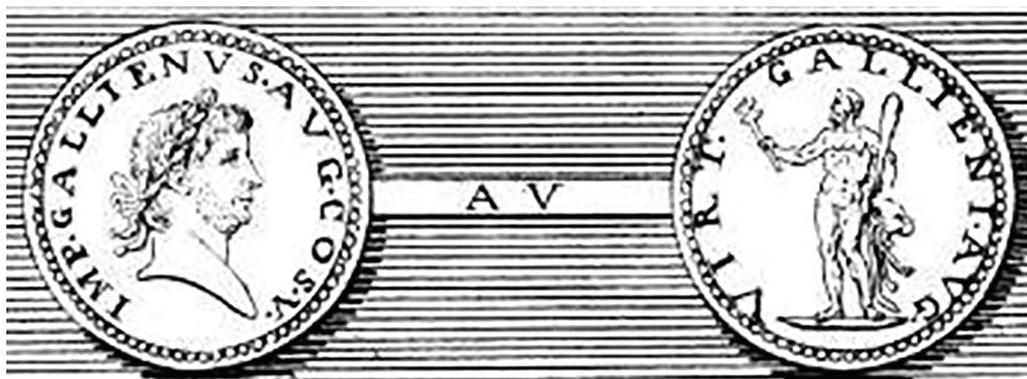


Fig. 3: Medallion AV, Gallienus (253–268 A.D.) (Venuti 1744, 47 and pl. 83)



Fig. 4: Medallion AV, Gallienus (253–268 A.D.) (Madden 1868, 13 and pl. I, n° 5)



Fig. 5: Medallion AV, 13.980 g, 28 mm, Gallienus (253–268 A.D.)
British Museum ([Museum number 1867,0101.821](https://www.britishmuseum.org/objects/18670101821))

We can affirm with reasonable certainty that two of the four medallions belonged to Apostolo Zeno are now kept in the British Museum, both coming from the Louis de Blacas d'Aulps collection, which was entirely purchased by the Museum in 1867. The first medallion is the Gallienus one ([Museum number 1867,0101.821](https://www.britishmuseum.org/objects/18670101821), with a weight of 13.980 g, **fig. 5**), declared to

be owned, in the information entry of the Museum, by the Duke of Blacas²². The aristocrat is mentioned as the owner of the specimen also

²² In this entry there were no references to Apostolo Zeno or cardinal Albani; these were recently added following the hypothesis of this article, formulated previously in my doctoral thesis.



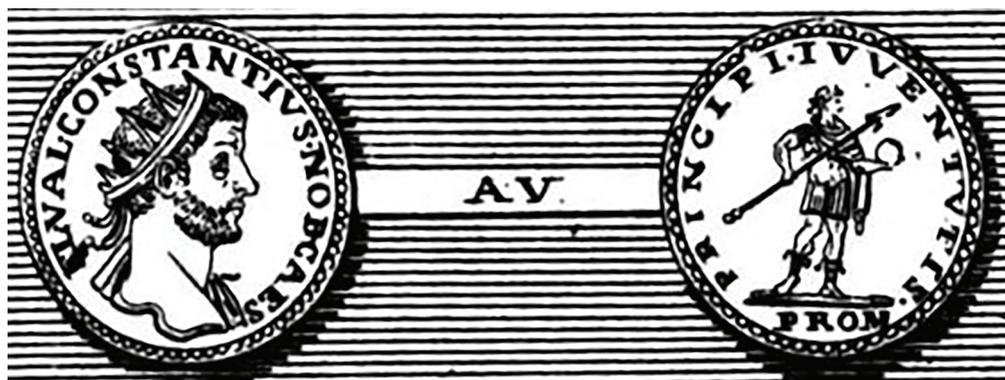


Fig. 6: Medallion AV, Constantius Chlorus (293–306 A.D.) (Venuti 1744, 103 and pl. 111)



Fig. 7: Medallion AV, 12.830 g, 25 mm, Costantius Chlorus (293–306 A.D.)
British Museum ([Museum number 1867, 0101.879](#))

in the fourth volume of the first edition of Henry Cohen's work, «Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'Empire Romain», published in 1860²³. In 1868 Frederic W. Madden (1839–1904) writing for the Numismatic Chronicle about the gold coins of the Blacas Collection acquired the previous year by the British Museum, reported exactly this Gallienus medallion (**fig. 4**)²⁴. The Duke's name appears also in Francesco Gnechi's work on the Roman medallions, published in 1912, in which the author reports the Gallienus medallion and, among the known pieces, a specimen preserved in London with the following words: «già Blacas anticamente Vaticano, m. 28, gr. 14.000»²⁵. It is obviously the medallion kept in the British Museum with the identification number mentioned above, and it is more than plausible to conclude that it is the same specimen belonged to cardinal Albani, and before to Apostolo

Zeno, even more so if we consider the provenance of the Vatican collection. Lastly, to corroborate the hypothesis there is also another important clue represented by the hole placed over the head of Gallienus, a detail also reported by Zeno in his letter to Baldini («un buco sopra la testa», see above).

Thanks to the publication of Gnechi we can trace also the location of the Costantius Chlorus medallion. In the concerning form the author wrote: «Londra (già Blacas anticamente Vat. Alb.) m. 25, g. 12,975»²⁶. Therefore, this

²³ Cohen 1860, 353, n° 22.

²⁴ Madden 1868, 13 and pl. IV, n° 5.

²⁵ «formerly Blacas, anciently Vatican, mm 28, 14.000 g»: Gnechi 1912, vol. I, 7–8, n° 16 [transl. R. Tomassoni].

²⁶ «London (formerly Blacas Vat. Alb.) 25 mm, 12,975 g»: Gnechi 1912, 13, n° 3 [transl. R. Tomassoni].

specimen followed the same path of the previous one to reach the collection of the British Museum, where it is still kept ([Museum number 1867, 0101.879](#), with a weight of 12.830 g, **fig. 7**)²⁷.

The research of the specimens that belonged to the numismatic collection of Apostolo Zeno is partly the subject of my doctoral thesis, and represents a fascinating evolving path that it can never really say to be concluded. Nevertheless, every coin found, and returned, to its collector's history helps to keep alive the interest for a collector and a collection that do not really deserve to be forgotten.

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²⁷ Also this specimen is described in the first edition of the work of Henry Cohen (see above), in the fifth volume, as belonging to the collection of the Duke of Blacas: Cohen 1861, 553, n° 6; the medallion is reported as well in the already mentioned publication of Madden 1868, 28, n° 300 and pl. V, n° 10.



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Fig. 1: Venuti 1739; figs. 2–3 and 6: Venuti 1744; fig. 4: Madden 1868; figs. 5 and 7: © British Museum. All figures are not to scale.

