

## Special exhibit

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### Medallions from the late Roman Empire

The term medallion is normally used to denote minted coin-like tokens not intended for general circulation. They may deviate from circulating coins in a variety of ways, such as in size, weight, appearance or motif. The selection of late antique coins shown here is just a small cross-section from the wide range of Roman medallions.

The large gold coins could be used to effect payments since they weighed several times as much as the standard gold coin (a 4.5g solidus); however, such mundane usage tended to be rare. These coins were bestowed by the emperor primarily as honorary gifts. Recipients sometimes attached “eyes” to them so that they could wear these coins openly as symbols of the honour accorded to them. Such beautiful specimens have been found outside the boundaries of the former Roman Empire. They are thought to have been a means of maintaining good neighbourly relations with the leaders of bordering “barbarian peoples”; in short, Rome was paying for good behaviour, and the golden tribute was paid to some extent in this form. The largest specimen known so far from the Constantine era, an 18 solidii coin weighing



approximately 81g, was struck as a double to the large Constantine-era coin shown here. Later on, specimens of up to 72 solidi weighing over 320g were struck.



3 solidi of Valens, 367-375 AD (13.43 g)



Solidus of Constantine I, 306-337 AD

Unlike the situation with regard to gold coins, controversy still reigns concerning the function of some silver and copper tokens as media of payment. What one person calls a coin and then a

“Miliarensē”



Constantine I, 306-337 AD

or “Quinarius”



Probus, 276-282 AD

another person would call a small medallion. The reason for this uncertainty is that it is often not possible to assign such tokens specifically to the contemporary coin system. In other words, the image and/or the weight differ so slightly from those of normal circulating coins that both interpretations could be accurate. The major copper and bronze medallions of the fourth century AD are a different matter: the differences between the commemorative versions and everyday small change are so great that doubt about the original use of the former as gifts is virtually impossible.



Diocletian, 284-305 AD



Maximianus, 286-308 AD

The last specimen – a *contorniate* – comes into a completely different category altogether.



Manufactured in the fourth century AD, it was a New Year's gift from the Roman Senate to the city's population and intended to bring good fortune. The obverse bears a portrait of Alexander the Great, whereas the reverse shows a theme from mythology: Scylla, a monster who, together with Charybdis, controlled a strait, attacks

Odysseus's ship as the latter is returning home. In addition, there are a variety of additional motifs. The term *contorniate* is derived from the Italian word *contorno* (rim) and denotes the deep furrow on the edge of the coin.

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#### Recommended reading

Heinrich Dressel, *Die römischen Medaillone des Münzkabinetts der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*. Dublin/Zürich 1973.  
Jocelyn M C Toynbee, *Roman Medaillons*. Reprint, New York 1986.  
Pierre Bastien, *Monnaie et donativa au bas-empire*. Wetteren 1988.  
Andreas and Elisabeth Alföldi, *Die Kontorniat-Medaillons*. Berlin 1990.