

A New Item of Roman Imperial Lead Seal from Portus Excavations (2015). Some Notes about Exploring the Process of Marble-Marking in Antiquity through a Contextual-Numismatic Approach (Pl. 1-5)

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RIASSUNTO / *ABSTRACT*

Si pubblica un sigillo in piombo per la bollatura del marmo proveniente da scavi a Porto (Palazzo Imperiale) e se ne inquadra la valenza con riferimento alla tipologia monetale di età romana imperiale, nel contesto delle attività di bollatura dei marmi pregiati e dello sviluppo del porto.

This article takes arises from extended research into lead artefacts in antiquity, particularly in respect of the class of coin-shaped tokens. The research aims to contextualize the new evidence from Portus excavations (Palazzo Imperiale), with the purpose of acquiring a better understanding of its chronological and institutional framework along with the development of the imperial harbour.

PAROLE CHIAVE / *KEYWORDS*

Portus Project, sigillo in piombo, bollatura del marmo, Porto (Fiumicino, Roma)

Portus Project, lead seal, marble-marking, Portus (Fiumicino, Roma)

This note takes arises from extended research into lead artefacts in antiquity, particularly in respect of the class of coin-shaped tokens¹.

There is extensive documentation about the way Roman private firms obtained, gathered and transformed lead ingots, mostly from Iberian mines. Information on commercial maritime routes has been increasing in recent year. However, the classification of these kind of lead artefacts requires a new critic, systematic approach.

This research aims to contextualize the new evidence from Portus excavations, with the purpose of acquiring a better understanding of their chronological and institutional framework, along with the development of the imperial harbour.

It consists of a lead seal, which was found in Portus (PTXI area) during the 2015 summer season of excavation, which forms part of the “*Portus Project*” directed by S. Keay (University of Southampton and British School at Rome)². The description of the seal is:

O. IMP[-]V[, Imperial bust, draped, to r.

R. blank (traces of a carved recess in negative are visible)

Pb, mm 34, entirely preserved; technique: lead cast (punched); Pl. 1-5

cf. Spagnoli 2002, p. 493, nn. 215-216 (Antoninus Pius); cf. RIC III, Pl XI, 242, 255 (Marcus Aurelius, Rome, sestertius); RIC IV.1, Pl. X, 6 (Septimius Severus, Rome, sestertius); RIC IV.2, Pl. VIII, 2 (Severus Alexander, Rome, sestertius)

The seal exhibits one-side type (obverse) with an imperial portrait on profile to r., as on the usual monetary iconography, and a circular monetary legend in capital letters. The other side (reverse) of the seal

¹ Cf. SPAGNOLI 2017a.

² Cf. www.portusproject.org. The lead seal comes from PXTI (2015), Area K, Room 3, Ctx 11422 (n.1478), Period 5 (IV-V c. AD); KEAY, SEBASTIANI 2017. I am exceedingly obliged to S. Keay and his research team at the University of Southampton and the British School at Rome for the permission to study these data. It has been a great honour, to have been working and studying about Portus archaeological deposits over the last ten last years in collaboration with the ‘Portus Project’ and under the SA of the time (by L. Paroli permission), and now in collaboration with the PA-Oant Director, M. Barbera, and with the Responsible of the Portus-Archaeological Area, R. Sebastiani.

is blank, but is well preserved. This secondary side also reveals the roundish draft shape of the carved recess, where the molten metal (lead) was poured in. This may suggest the seal were designed to be read on just the one side and may have been loosely-fitted into the item to facilitate its creation. The technological process justifies the thickness of the casted metal and its upper edges exceeding the borders of the cavity.

Unfortunately, there is no proof as to where it was originally placed. In early 2016, after the lead was restored, cleaning made it clear that a deep squared cut had been made on the metal surface in antiquity³ (cf. Pl.1, 4). This state of conservation matches with the history of the piece and perhaps it evidences an attempt to remove it from its original location. There was not any trace of marble to which it was originally attached.

Technically, we can observe that a kind of coin-punch marks the obverse side. The legend also reproduces that of a coin, such as a sestertius or an Imperial medallion (because of the large module, around mm 33+). It can thus be subjected to a numismatic analysis, although there is no evidence of a close connection with a minting procedure normal for coin, but only a suggestion of it (interpreting the ‘matrice’, or punch, in use for lead, as an anvil/hammer coin to mint moneyed metal).

Epigraphic analysis focused on the ductus of the M letter, with the peculiarity of its lateral oblique slashed legs (cf. the legend IMP). This testifies a model of writing (the epigraphic style of the Roman coinage) that was in use for a prolonged period of time, from the Julio-Claudian issues through to those of the third century AD. The same can be said about the visible imperial portrait-iconography. The visible rich drapery fitting the low part of the imperial bust that is visible is compatible with this period up to the early to mid-third century AD⁴, when Roman imperial coins widely exhibit a flatter relief and a bi-dimensional composition.

³ It was not visible on the surface of the lead, before its restoration, as it be seen from the photo taken at the upon its discovery.

⁴ Cf. RIC IV.2, p. 104, n. 410: Severus Alexander, Rome, 223 AD, sestertius (O. bust draped, cuirassed, to r.)

Close comparison with some examples of the collection of lead seals from Ostia and Portus, suggests that this piece belong to the late second to early third century AD period⁵. On this basis, it can be classified in functional terms as a lead stamp or seal for a stock of precious marble. This interpretation is largely accepted, but this is the first time that we have an example from a stratigraphic context.

The findspot area is the 'Palazzo Imperiale' at Portus. It came from the stratigraphic deposit investigated in Room 3 (Area K, Ctx 11422; n.1478)⁶. The archaeological layer dates the phase of the occupation of this part of site to the late-antique period (Period 5, IV-V c. AD). So, this is the *terminus*, which accords well with the chronology based on intrinsic features of the seal.

Scholars ascribe the huge imperial building to an official *praesidium* of a Roman public official, such as the *Praefectus* of the harbour⁷. It was a three-floor construction enriched by tiled *sectilia* and precious marble veneers imported from overseas (mostly from the eastern Provinces and African quarries). Many marble blocks of this kind were unloaded in the Trajanic canal for subsequent transportation to the *statio marmorum* in Rome (Marmorata). Several *semi-worked* marble blocks from the deep canal are on display at Ostia, exhibiting regular traces of a deserved recess for a lead mark or an entire lead seal⁸. In a few cases, the marble blocks had a double marking: an inscription represented the starting point, probably with a declaration of the name of the administrator of the quarry, while there was also an empty round recess for a lead seal⁹.

⁵ Cf. SPAGNOLI 2002, with previous bibliography (these materials are partially quoted in the catalogue of the exhibitions *Made in Roma*, see MILELLA, PASTOR, UNGARO (eds.) 2016); see also PENSABENE 2012; PENSABENE 2014, pp. 49-50.

⁶ This archaeological complex is currently under study by S. Keay and the 'Portus Project' research team; cf. KEAY 2011; KEAY 2012a; KEAY 2012b; KEAY, SEBASTIANI 2017.

⁷ Cf. the *Praefectus classis Misenensis*, at Misenum from Augustan age (Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris*, IV, 32.1) up to Valerianus and Gallienus reign (cf. *CIL* VIII, 21000).

⁸ A wide selection of high quality Parian, White, Chianum or Portasanta, Alabastro, Numidian, Giallo Antico, etc., marble is documented at Portus, cf. SPAGNOLI 2002, p. 496; BRUNO 2002, p. 492, n. 209; PENSABENE 2012. The study of marble fragments from the PTXI is ongoing by E. Gasperini.

⁹ BRUNO 2002, p. 492, n. 209.

The numismatic approach to lead seals reveals formal features, questioning an institutional administrative system of control, as it would seem. As far as this seal is concerned, we might explore not only the imperial titulature and portrait, but also the complex meaning of the 'signing'. Lead seals could express the *ratio* due to the Emperor from a selected variety of rare high quality marbles. There is no clear evidence as to whether this was an official or private initiative and, furthermore, if a local officer was operating at Portus¹⁰.

It is well known that the Ostian collection of such lead objects derived from the imperial trade, but almost none of those items can have a precise provenance and only a few lead-seals are to be found *in situ* on the marble blocks¹¹. Therefore, the ongoing stratigraphic study of the *Palazzo Imperiale* at Portus confirms this point to us. It provides important evidence of the site-specific destination. The sumptuous residence could have been the residence of the Emperor. Moreover, there is no evidence of similar items coming from Imperial city harbour of Puteoli, where we might have expected at least similar examples¹². It should be noted that Portus acquires an increasing role from the mid/late 2nd century AD onwards, especially under the Severans, as can be demonstrated by several reliably identified warehouses for the storage of supplies and many other kinds of archaeological evidence.

Despite the risks inherent in attempting to link archaeological evidence to specific historical events, this seems likely although we do not know the nature of the other supplies sealed in this way. The best-known collection from the *Urbs* is a group of several thousand of Roman imperial lead *tesserae* and seals, catalogued by Rostovtseff (1903;1905). It provides us only an approximation of the assessment of these phenomena. Then, we can statistically calculate that they represent only a tiny percentage of the original amount of the Roman production

¹⁰ Cf. SPAGNOLI 2017a; SPAGNOLI 2017b, with a study about lead *tesserae* from Ostia.

¹¹ There are at least 20 items in the Ostian Antiquarium, very similar in their appearance, dated from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius (SPAGNOLI 2002, nn. 1-20).

¹² The present study is part of a research project on the collection of such coin-shaped leads (*tesserae*, tokens, seals, and other similar ancient objects) in the Medagliere of the MANN.

in the whole of the empire. Modern scholars have been publishing such archaeological materials: these would need to be integrated with the old material in the hope of increasing our understanding of their role in Roman life.

Despite its cost, marble was highly sought after for its quality. In this way the lead seal, which were really for imperial purposes, have to be seen as a quality guarantee (also metrology). Goods of this kind

reached Rome through Portus. It appears to have occurred from the second to the third centuries, when the lead seal came to be regarded as special imperial trademarks rather than customs labels among the marble merchants. In this perspective, the new evidence from *Palazzo Imperiale* testifies how the activities were regulated in an imperial building and so far, it underlines the exclusive quality of the enterprises involved, probably in the early III c. AD.

PLATE: 1-5: lead seal from PTXI: before and after the restoration(1:1, Foto by the Author)



1 (O. before the restoration)



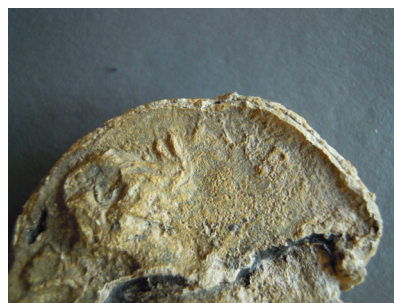
2 (R. before the restoration)



3 (thickness)



4 (O. after the restoration)



5 1:1,5 (O. legend: IMP[])

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