

Service-to-Service Authentication in a Microservice Deployment

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Declaration

I hereby declare and confirm that this thesis is entirely the result of my own original work. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been indicated as such and properly acknowledged. I further declare that this or similar work has not been submitted for credit elsewhere. This printed copy is identical to the submitted electronic version.

Hagenberg, January 31, 2022

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Abstract

This should be a 1-page (maximum) summary of your work in English.

Kurzfassung

An dieser Stelle steht eine Zusammenfassung der Arbeit, Umfang max. 1 Seite. ...

Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter 2

Microservice Architecture

This chapter introduces the microservice architecture concepts, which are necessary to understand why the later discussed approaches are needed. The principles used to design microservices lead to some characteristics, resulting in the motivations and challenges declared in this chapter. Furthermore some recommendations about the use cases of the microservice architecture are provided and the caused security consequences are declared.

2.1 Motivation

Companies like Netflix, Amazon, and Uber are front-runners for building software solutions using the microservice architecture [1]. The main idea is to split the business logic of an application into small autonomous services that work together. This means the programmers have to avoid the temptation of developing too large systems. This approach results in the following benefits [5]:

- Technology heterogeneity is achieved through the possibility to use different technology stacks for different services, depending on the needs of the services. It is even possible to use different data storage for the different microservices (e.g., graph database for users).
- Resilience is achieved since component failures can be isolated, so the rest of the system can carry on working by degrading the functionality of the system.
- Scaling is much more effective due to the possibility to scale only the parts of the system that really need scaling.
- The deployment is much more convenient because a single microservice can be deployed instead of deploying the whole application, even for small changes.
- The organizational alignment can be improved by assigning the work to small teams that work on smaller codebases, resulting in higher productivity.
- Composability is achieved, considering that the functionalities can be consumed in different ways for different purposes.
- Replaceability is optimized since rewriting a tiny service is much more manageable than replacing a few parts of a vast application.

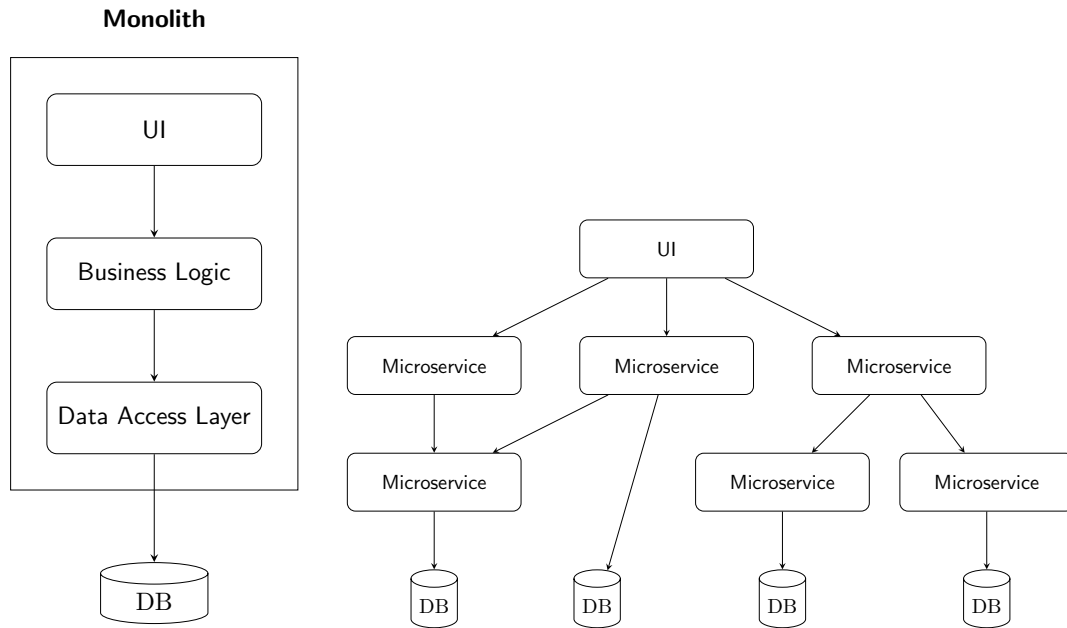


Figure 2.1: Example of monolithic architecture and a microservice architecture [2]

2.2 Comparison to the Monolithic Architecture

Figure 2.1 shows the architectural differences between monolithic and microservice applications. A monolithic application has a single unit containing the user interface layer (UI), the business logic layer, and the data access layer. Therefore it is much simpler to manage but brings the following downsides regarding the codebase [2]:

- New features and modifications of old features are harder to implement.
- Refactoring changes can reflect many parts of the software
- Code duplication raises since it is almost impossible to reuse existing code

The microservice architecture consists of multiple services focused on only one function of the business logic. Those services communicate with other services using remote calls (e.g., over HTTP), which causes higher latencies. Depending on the needs of the services, each service can have its own database, which can differ from the database system of the other services. It is also possible to share one database for multiple services, but this should be avoided to reduce coupling between the services.

2.3 Design Principles

It is hard to define principles, which will apply to all microservice architectures, but according to Newman, most of them will adhere to the following principles [5]:

Modelled around business concepts: The functionalities are structured around the business contexts instead of the technical concepts.

Adopting culture of automation: The microservice deployments embrace the culture of automation by using automated tests, continuous delivery, automated servers, and much more automation tools.

Hiding implementation details: The microservices hide as many implementation details as possible to avoid coupling. Especially the databases of the services should be hidden and can be accessed by other services using APIs.

Decentralising all The things: All approaches that could centralize business logic are avoided to keep associated data and logic within the service boundaries.

Independently deployed: The microservices should provide the possibility to deploy them without having to deploy any other service. Therefore the autonomy of the teams can be increased, and new features can be released faster.

Isolates failures: The microservices have to deal with misbehaving parts of the system and keep on providing as much functionality as possible, to prevent cascading failure.

Highly observable: It is not sufficient to observe a single service's behavior and status. Instead, the functioning of the whole system has to be monitored.

2.4 Challenges

There are some benefits of using the microservice architecture. It also introduces a set of challenges, which could argue to avoid the microservice architecture in some cases. According to Kalske et al. [2] the microservice architecture brings the following technical challenges with it:

- The declaration of the service boundaries is very hard [2], especially if the developers do not know the domain that well [5].
- The services should not become too fine-grained to prevent performance overhead. Otherwise, if they are not decomposed enough, changes to one service can affect multiple services.
- Continuous Delivery and Continuous Integration are necessary to manage the services and validate their functionality.
- The integration of the services into other services can become very hard due to the requirement to be available for all used technologies.
- Good logging mechanisms have to be used to recognize failures of microservices as soon as possible.
- Fault tolerance mechanisms have to be implemented to react to situations in which needed services do not respond.

The microservice architecture is gaining popularity, even if it produces so many challenges, showing how crucial its advantages are.

2.5 Usage Situation

According to Newman [5] it is better to start with a monolithic application if the architect does not fully understand the domain and has problems declaring the boundaries

for the services. In such cases, it is better to spend some time learning what the system does first and then break things down to microservices when the system is stable. Furthermore, Newman recommends eliminating legacy monitoring systems before splitting the application into more and more microservices. Otherwise, it could get very messy to stay in knowledge about the system's status.

Fowler [9] recommends considering microservices only when a system gets too complex to manage as a monolith. His essence is keeping the system simple enough to avoid the need of microservices since the microservice architecture can slow down the development considerably. The correlation between the development productivity and the complexity of a system comparing the microservice architecture with a monolithic architecture is shown in figure 2.2.

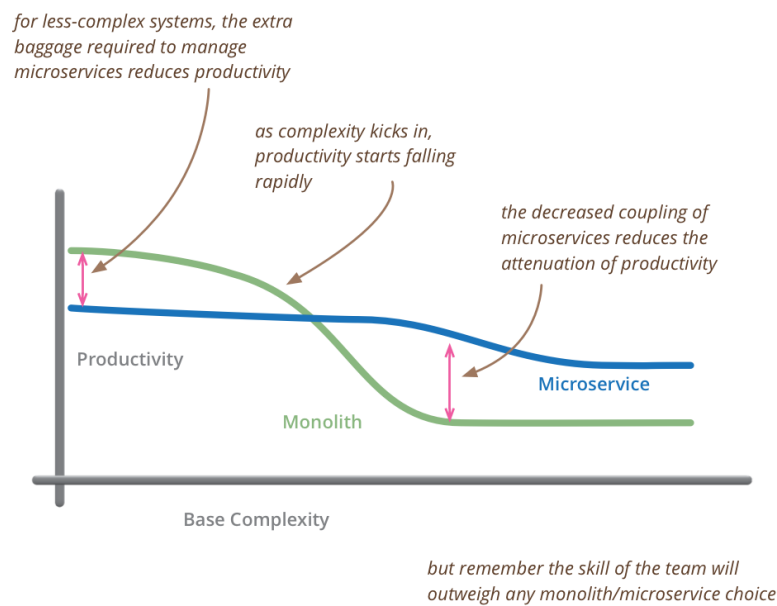


Figure 2.2: Correlation between base complexity and productivity in a microservice architecture compared to a monolithic architecture [9]

2.6 Security Consequences

The migration to the microservice architecture brings many consequences regarding the security of a deployment. Especially the network communications among the services introduce a set of vulnerabilities. Confidentiality, integrity, and availability have to be assured. The need for authentication mechanisms is a common issue of network security, but the migration from language-level calls to remote calls causes the need for authentication between microservices. Therefore, the authentication mechanisms discussed in this thesis are a consequence of the microservice architecture and can be neglected with a monolithic architecture.

Chapter 3

Technologies and Tools

This chapter describes the technologies and tools, which are necessary for the implementation of the later discussed authentication mechanisms.

3.1 X509.Certificate

X.509 certificates assure the users of a public key that the associated person or system owns the private key by binding public keys to subjects. Certificate authorities sign certificates and each communication partner who trusts the CA trusts the certificates signed by it. The most significant advantage of certificates is that they can be exchanged using untrusted communication channels because the signatures are not valid anymore when the contents of a certificate are changed. Therefore manipulations can be detected, and manipulated certificates can be declined [10].

3.1.1 Trust Path

When the client of a service wants to consume a service, which is hosted on a server, it has to obtain the server's certificate. If the client does not know the public key of the CA who signed the server's certificate, he has to obtain it. Obtaining the public key often results in chains because the client may have to work his way up until he reaches a CA he trusts. Such chains are also called certification paths. The way in which the clients can retrieve the CA certificates can be configured by the CA.

3.1.2 Fields

Depending on the version, a certificate can include more or less information. The information is always stored inside the `tbsCertificate`, `signatureAlgorithm`, and `signatureValue` fields and can be expanded using extensions.

TbsCertificate

The `TBSCertificate` contains the data of the certificate, including the following information:

- Subject of the certificate

- Issuer of the certificate
- public key of the subject
- Validity period
- Additional information

SignatureAlgorithm

The signatureAlgorithm field stores the information, which cryptographic algorithm was used to sign the certificate. Algorithms are declared by their identifier, the “OBJECT IDENTIFIER.” The most commonly used algorithms are the RSA¹ algorithm and the Digital Signature Algorithm (DSA) [10].

SignatureValue

The signatureValue field contains the value of the digital signature. It is obtained by signing the content of the tbsCertificate, using the algorithm specified in the signatureAlgorithm field. The signature is used to verify the validity of the information embedded in the tbsCertificate field.

3.2 JSON Web Token

A JSON Web Token (JWT) is a container, which can carry authentication and authorization assertions and further information in a cryptographically safe manner. An authentication assertion can be anything, which authenticates the user. Usually, usernames or e-mail addresses are used to identify a user uniquely. An authorization assertion can be any information about the access permissions of a user. For example, a JWT can include the information, whether the user is an admin or an unprivileged user [1].

3.2.1 Structure

A JWT is decomposed into the header, the payload, and the signature. The three parts are concatenated and separated by a dot [8]. A valid JWT could look like the JWT shown in figure 3.1.

Header. **Payload.** **Signature**

```
eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJzdWIiOiIxMjM0NTY3ODkiLCJpYXQiOiE1MTYyMzkwMjIsInVzZXJuYWI1IjoieWmVuamFtaW4uZWxsbWVyeiwiZW1haWwiOiJiZW5qYW1pbi5lbGxtZXJhZWVob28uY29tIiwiaWF0IjoiYWRtaW4iOmZhbHNlfQ.0ksqN71oloNvq3IrY7w72uoTgPz9Gpn08p-KSbFulY0
```

Figure 3.1: Sample JSON Web Token

¹Rivest Shamir Adleman

Header

The header contains the metadata related to the JWT, which is usually the type of the token and the signature algorithm. The specification defines that only HS256² and none algorithm must be implemented by conforming JWT implementation. It is recommended to additionally implement the algorithms RS256 and ES256³ [8, 11]. The base64 encoded header is the first part of the JWT.

Payload

The payload is a set of registered and custom claims. A claim is a piece of information about an entity. The JWT specification defines registered claims, which are not mandatory for all cases but should provide a good starting point for a set of useful claims to ensure interoperability. Custom claims can be defined by the software architects, on their own, depending on their needs. The custom claims registered in the IANA registry are called public claims, and those not registered in the IANA registry are called private claims [8, 11]. The base64 encoded payload is the second part of the JWT.

Signature

The chosen signature algorithm signs the base64 encoded header, the base64 encoded payload, and a secret. The signature provides integrity for the message, and if it was signed with a private key, it provides authentication [8]. The base64 encoded signature is the third part of the JWT.

3.3 Transport Layer Security

The Transport Layer Security (TLS) Protocol provides authentication, integrity, and confidentiality for the communication between two parties. It consists of two layers, the handshake protocol, and the record protocol [6].

3.3.1 mTLS

TLS itself is also called one-way TLS because it helps the client to identify the server, but not the server to identify the client. Therefore mutual TLS (mTLS) was introduced to provide authentication in both directions. The client and the server must own a private/public key pair, so it is more suited for the communication between two systems and not between users and servers [1].

²HMAC SHA-256

³Elliptic Curve Digital Signature Algorithm (ECDSA) with 256-bit key

3.3.2 Handshake Protocol

The handshake protocol is responsible for negotiating a cipher suite and for the authentication using X.509 certificates. The cipher suite declares the key exchange algorithm, the signature algorithm, the symmetric encryption algorithm, including the mode of the encryption algorithm and the hashing algorithm [4, 6]. The handshake varies on the key exchange method, but it can be separated into the following steps [3]:

1. The server and the client exchange Hello messages
2. The server sends its certificate to the client
3. The client sends a pre-master secret to the server and if mTLS is used, the client sends his certificate to the server
4. The client and the server finish the handshake, using the independently computed master secret

3.3.3 Record Protocol

The record protocol provides a secure channel for the communication between the parties. This is done by using the algorithms declared in the cipher suite. Confidentiality is assured, using symmetric encryption, and integrity is provided by Message Authentication Codes (MAC) [3, 4].

3.4 OpenSSL

OpenSSL is an open-source library that provides implementations of the state-of-the-art cryptographic algorithms, including the TLS protocols. It is fully cross-platform and can either be used within programs or by its CLI. It is crucial to use libraries like OpenSSL for cryptographic operations because most developers are not fully aware of all dangers, resulting in vulnerabilities caused by faulty implementations [7]. OpenSSL will be used to create and sign keys and certificates in chapter ??.

3.4.1 OpenSSL file formats

Files with the following extensions are created and used in chapter ?. The file extensions are not exclusive to the OpenSSL library, and these are only the extensions that are later used. There are many more available extensions, which are not discussed in this thesis [7, 12]:

pem: A Privacy Enhanced Mail file is a base64 encoded text file, which can be used as a container for a private key, or one to many certificates.

crt: A pem file containing certificates can use the crt extension instead of the pem extension.

key: A pem file containing a private key can use the key extension instead of the pem extension.

csr: A csr file contains a certificate signing request intended to be signed by a certificate authority.

pfx: A pfx file is a container that can include certificates and a private key together in a binary file.

Chapter 4

Related Work

Chapter 5

Authentication Mechanisms

This chapter explains the concepts and mechanisms of the discussed authentication mechanisms. Only the mTLS and the JWT approach are discussed, since the TTN approach is deprecated and should not be used anymore [1]. Furthermore this chapter clarifies the advantages and disadvantages of the discussed mechanisms.

5.1 Authentication based on mTLS

Mutual TLS is the most popular option for the service-to-service authentication of microservice deployments [1]. Securing the communication with TLS already provides integrity, confidentiality and furthermore authenticates the server to the client. Since basic TLS does not provide authentication from the client to the server, it is not sufficient for the service-to-service security. Therefore mutual TLS is used, which provides an efficient and straightforward approach to authenticate the client to the server.

5.1.1 General

The authentication using mTLS requires a PKI, same as the authentication using basic TLS. It is possible to use the already existing PKI of the internet, but this would make the key management much harder and would bring no advantages. Therefore it is good practise to use a self-hosted PKI to have a root of trust within the network [1]. The setup of a microservice deployment using mTLS is shown in figure 5.1.

When mTLS is used, both the server and the client must provide a valid certificate to create a communication channel. The issuer of the presented certificates must be trusted by all communicating parties [1]. If one communication partner does not have a valid certificate which is signed by a trusted issuer, the communication is neglected. Therefore each service needs a private key, a public key and a signed certificate, which binds the public key to the subject of the certificate, which is the service. The certificates of the communication partners are exchanged during the TLS handshake. The server presents his certificate to the client after he receives the hello message of the client. And the client presents his certificate to the server, together with the pre-master secret [3].

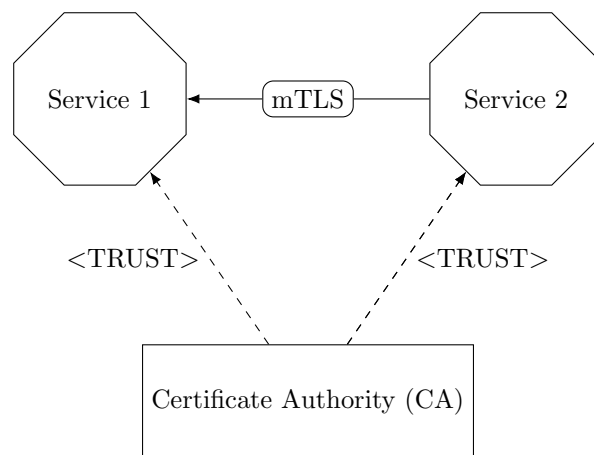


Figure 5.1: Setup using mTLS for the service-to-service authentication [1]

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