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**NEW PLACES WITH A LARGE
CONCENTRATION OF COINS IN THE
VALLEY OF MIDDLE MESTA IN THE
6TH – 4TH CENTURIES BC**

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НОВИ МЕСТА С ГОЛЯМА
КОНЦЕНТРАЦИЯ НА МОНЕТИ В ДОЛИНАТА
НА СРЕДНА МЕСТА ПРЕЗ VI–IV В. ПР. ХР.

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New places with a large concentration of coins in the valley of Middle Mesta in the 6th – 4th centuries BC

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Нови места с голяма концентрация на монети в долината на Средна Места през VI-IV в. пр. Хр.

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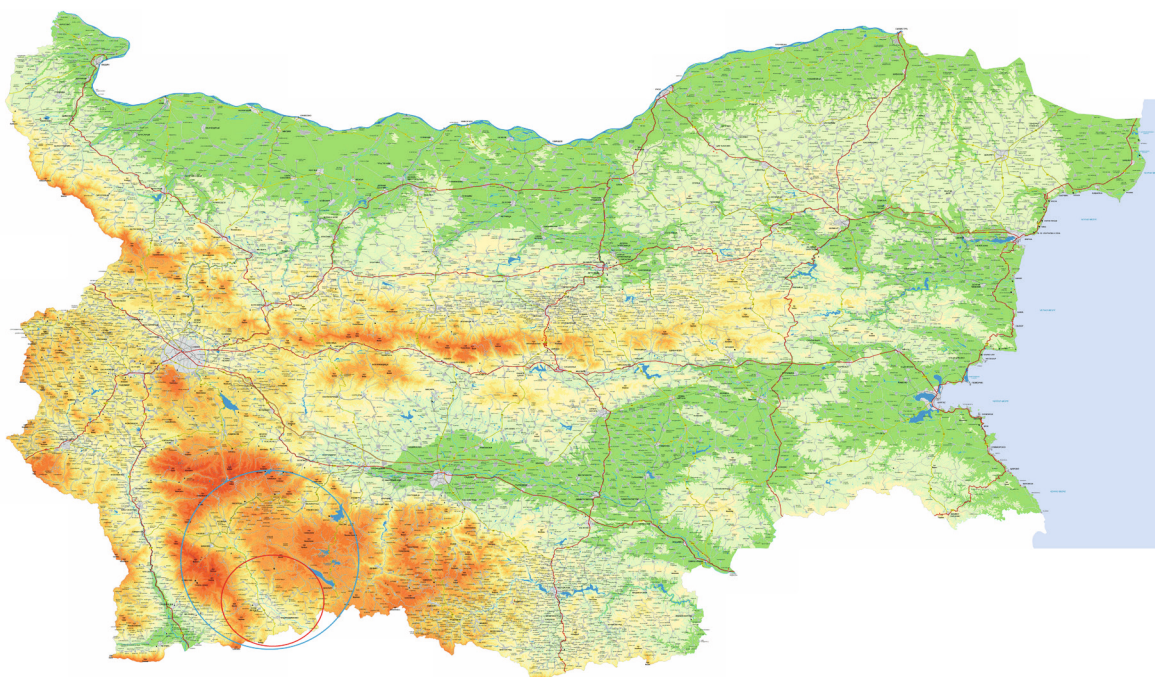
Abstract: The purpose of this report is to introduce new information about the coin circulation in the valley of the Middle Mesta River in the 6th–4th centuries BC. The main focus of the report is to disclose two new places with a large concentration of coins, hypothetically defined as markets, as well as to present some unpublished coins originating from the Middle Mesta region and their accurate compositional analysis of alloys (in %). The analysis was performed using a compact X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analyser (Olympus the Xpert, XP-6500-CC). This method of non-destructive assay identifies a wide range of alloys including precious metals. Its main purpose is to trace the amount of silver as well as the amount of other elements in the alloy and the quantitative ratio between them. Statistical analysis of the data in a unified database could reveal much of the missing information on the economic and technological aspects of ancient coin production, as well as on the origin of the raw material.

Keywords: Coin circulation, Middle Mesta regions, XRF analysis, Trading Routes, Market Places



The most important feature of the South-Western Thrace is its localisation in a dense network of roads and many intertwining corridors of cultural and trade relations. This fact characterizes the extremely advantageous geographical position of the Republic of Bulgaria on the Balkan Peninsula (**Map 1**).

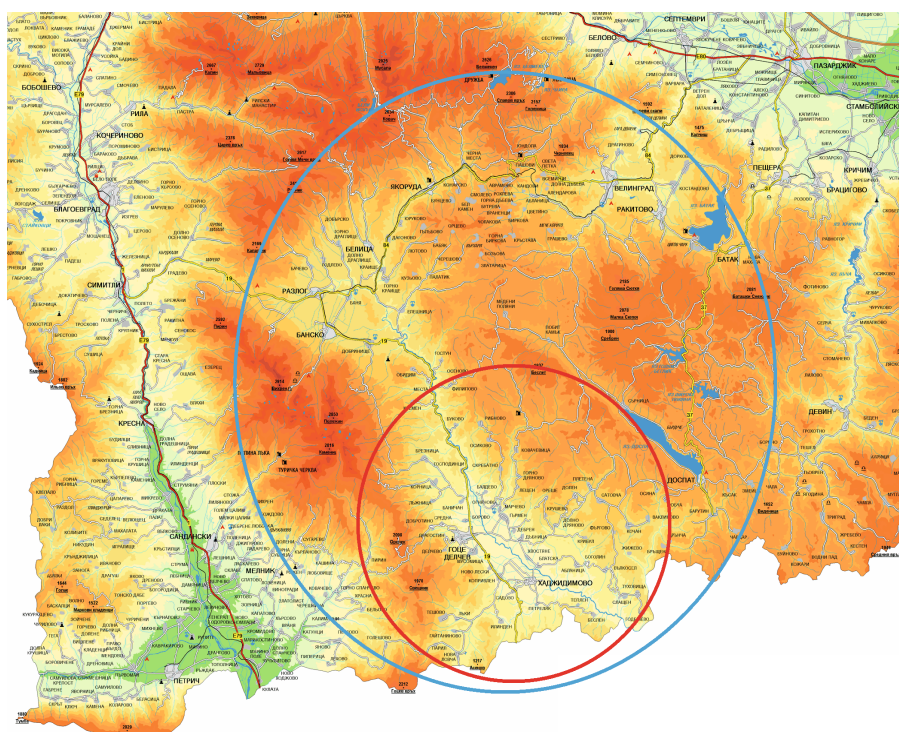
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Map 1. Republic of Bulgaria.

Nowadays, like in antiquity and subsequent historical periods, the movement of people and goods along the north-south main axis is active throughout the year (Grigorova-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 361). In the 6th – 4th centuries BC, a specific area was formed in South-Western Thrace. It encompasses the space from the island of Thasos and the territory between the valleys of the Struma and the Mesta Rivers up north in the Sredna Gora Mountains. There, the population shared common economic and political interests (Grigorova-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 362).

The region of the Middle and Upper Mesta River is sparsely attested by the preserved ancient written sources, mainly due to its relative isolation (Гефов 1961, 214–225). The territory of the Middle Mesta River is a closed valley, difficult to access from the north, east, and west. It covers approximately the Gotse Delchev field with the border ridges surrounding it to the south (**Map 2**).



Map 2. South-Western Bulgaria, the valley of Middle Mesta River.

One of the most disputed elements of the settlement systems in Thrace in the second half of the first millennium BC is the road network. It is known that during this time no permanent road constructions existed, as these were first built after its annexation by the Roman Empire. For this reason, the suggestions of exact routes and individual segments of routes are in most cases too speculative. Imported objects and coin finds show connections and contacts of the Thracian settlements with the rest of the world, but they can only serve as points of reference on alleged routes.

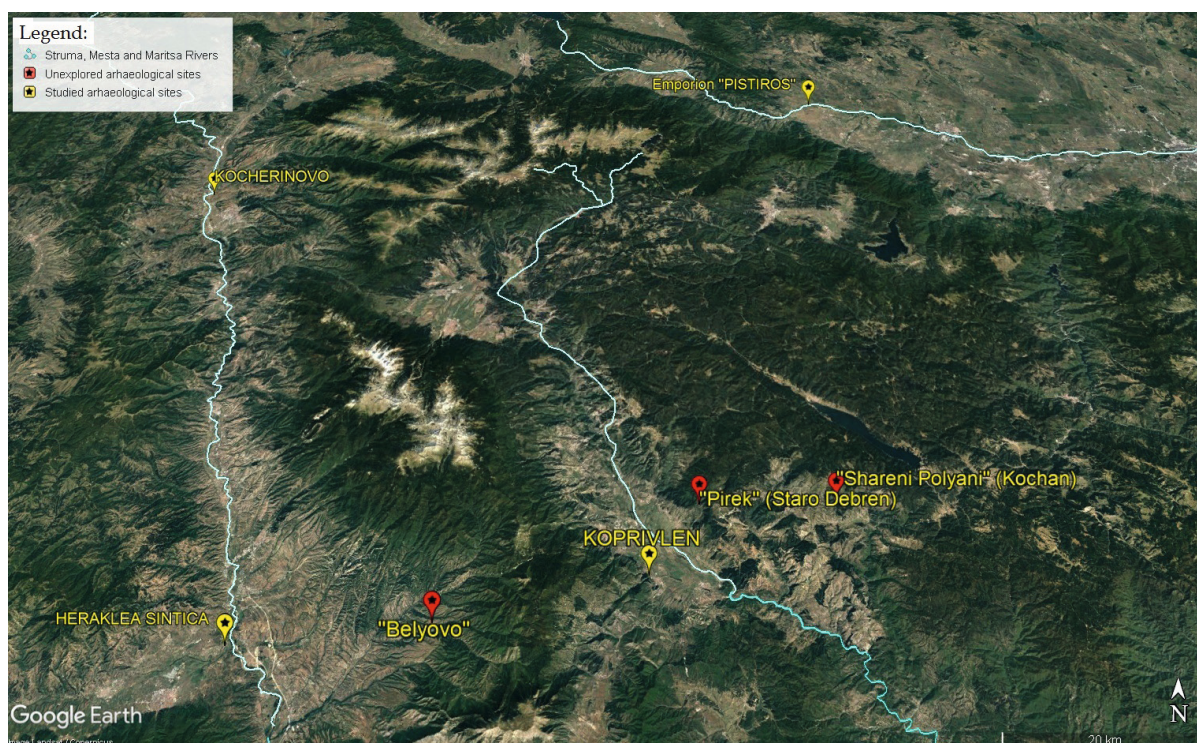
The territory of the Middle Mesta River and Western Rhodope Mountains is cut by a dense network of road arteries (Panayotov 1976, 106–114; Домарадски, Георгиева, Кулов 1976, 15–20; Георгиева 1976, 21–26). Their diversity is defined from the specific geographical character of the studied area which has formed three main types of roads: 1) The main ones in the valleys of large rivers such as Struma and Mesta; 2) Seasonal ones in the high mountains; 3) Secondary routes serving as the connection between settlements, fortresses, mines, and places of worship (Спиридонов 1982, 50–65; Спиридонов, 1991, 95).

The research enriches our knowledge about the settlement structure from the pre-Roman period and about the road arteries existing through the Rhodope Mountains in the direction of the Aegean coast (Спиридонов 1992, 7–32; Домарадски 1995, 37–39; Кисъов, Маджаров 2001, 5–10).

The road through the Western Rhodope Mountains, connecting the Gotse Delchev field with the valley of the Maritsa River in the Pazardzhik and Plovdiv regions, was of the greatest importance for trade (Delev, Popov 2005, 103–107). The pre-Roman roads through the Rhodopes aimed to make the most direct connection between the large trade centres on the Aegean coast and the trade and craft centres (emporia) established in the interior of Thrace (Bozkova 2000, 79 sq.). Such are the trade complexes near the village of Koprivlen, Gotse Delchev region, the emporion Pistiros near the village of Vetren, municipality of Septemvri, the settlement complex from the 5th–4th centuries BC near Krastevich, Hissarya municipality, and the settlement near Vasil Levski, Karlovo region (Маджаров 2009, 257). These are the main directions in which the traffic of goods from the interior of pre-Roman Thrace to the Aegean coast and vice versa was carried out.

The numismatic material found in the Middle Mesta area is important for the overall study of the ancient roads through the Rhodope and Pirin Mountains. It is a proof of the intensive trade contacts of the Thracian communities with the Aegean Sea through the Rhodope massif (Grigorova-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 361).

Coins of different origin and composition have been published, outlining the traffic along the roads through the Rhodope Mountains and the valley of the Mesta River (Прокопов 1991, 69–77; Prokopov 1997, 369–377; Прокопов 1998, 357–360; Ivanov 2011, 35–51; Kourempanas 2010, 47–52). The future archaeological study of the markets is extremely important. Throughout the registered numismatic material, some conclusions can be made about the scope and origin of the coin circulation and the dimensions of the economic potential of certain communities and cities. In South-Western Bulgaria, in addition to the studied archaeological site near Koprivlen, a probable market near the village of Belyovo, Sandanski region is also known (**Map 3**). It has not been excavated, but its location and the discovery of hundreds of coins originating from the site speak of the possibility that it was a large market located at a key point connecting the Mesta River valley with the Struma River valley (Prokopov 2015, 232–240).



Map 3. The valley of the Struma and Mesta Rivers.

There is information about two further sites from the Western Rhodope Mountains – near the villages of Staro Debren and of Kochan, which can be assumed to be marketplaces. From a topographical point of view, both sites are located in the first mountain belts in quite extensive, relatively flat places. Both sites are situated close to a small river running at the foot of the hill, but the most important is that they are located near major roads connecting the valley of the Mesta River with the central and northern part of the Rhodope Mountains. At both sites there are remains of paved old roads nearby, as well as preserved stone bridges over nearby rivers.

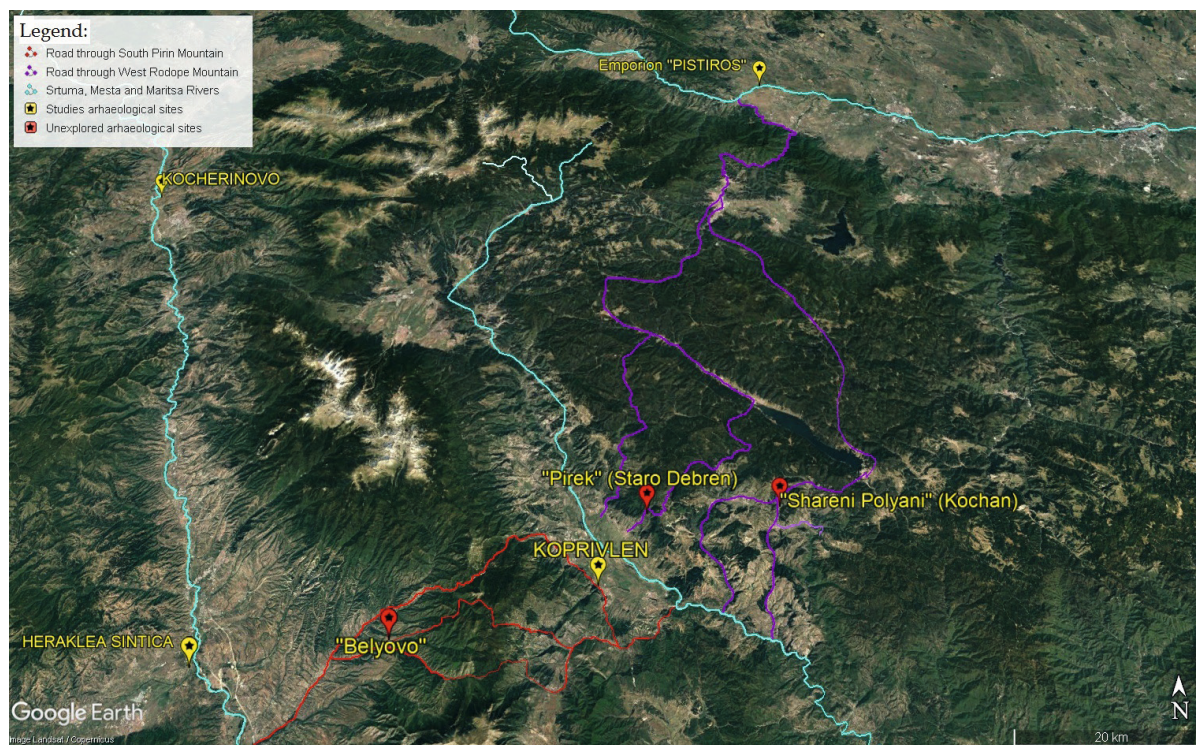
A specific feature of these sites is that there are practically no cultural layers or a insignificantly thin ones. Remains of housing constructions are also absent, and if there were any, they were very few and chaotically arranged without preliminary planning. Another characteristic feature is the presence of isolated burials while no large areas with a concentration of burials (like necropoleis) were attested. Pottery, however, is found in abundance. Apart from the interpretation of these remains as permanent city markets or emporia, like Koprivlen in the region of the Middle Mesta River, there are other possibilities to define them as periodic rural markets. Although it remains theoretical and not based on substantial evidence, the functioning of such markets is highly possible.

Periodic rural markets are typical for agricultural economies, such as that in Thrace (Венедиков 1981, 56, 62ff.). In addition, periodic markets may have different characteristics and functions: on one hand, they might have served as markets of local importance, organized close to small and medium-sized settlements and facilitating the flow of rural products from the hinterland to the larger settlements; On the other hand, there are interregional markets organized at longer intervals and at a great distance from urban centres, specializing in high-value goods and imports (Tzochet 2015, 418). The huge number of coins (over 10,000 pieces) originating from the locality Cheprashlako near the town of Kocherinovo (Blagoevgrad region) suggests the existence of an emporium of interregional character, which served the contacts between Pautalia and Heraclea Sintica during the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Кацарова 2005, 204–205) (Map 3).

Archaeological identification of these markets remains a challenge, as they are unlikely to leave traces of significant structures. Due to the cyclical nature of their functioning, it is more likely that the possible buildings would have been of light construction, which would not leave lasting traces. Instead, concentrations of buried deposits derived from short-term habitation, trade, and consumption should be sought, which generally cover significant periods of time. In Thrace, areas with such

characteristics are often excavated but are usually interpreted as “pit sanctuaries” (Tzochev 2015, 419).

The characteristics of the proposed two new hypothetical markets near the village of Kochan in the locality Shareni Polyani and in the locality Pirek in the territory of the village of Staro Debren are quite similar (**Map 4**).



Map 4. Hypothetical markets and road arteries in the Western Rhodopes

In addition to the many scattered single coin finds, the collective ones were found in pits at shallow depths. The reason for their definition here as “marketplaces” is based on the collected field information during the work on my doctoral study. By surveying and recording the informal conversations with local historians, it came out that a huge number of coins have been found in these places for many years. The lack of systematic archaeological research left such sites out of scientific analysis and interpretation.

The first site is located north-west from the abandoned village of Staro Debren (Garmen Municipality) in the locality “Pirek”. Near the site are the remains of an old road and a vaulted bridge (Иванов 1996, 114). The site is situated on a large terrace, directly above the left bank of the Varbitsa River. During the surveys of Domaradzki’s team within the Mesta Expedition, the site was registered and defined as a settlement from antiquity. No trench excavations or further research has been carried out on the site (Домарадски и кол. 1999, 88).

Early silver coins, mostly of a small denomination with traces of long-term use and often perforated, have been discovered on the site. Larger denominations are represented mostly by staters and drachmas from the type “Silenus and Nymph.” Coins of almost every Macedonian kings have been present, mostly coins from Philip II onwards. Roman republican denarii were registered, as well as Roman imperial and provincial coins. Most common are the bronze coins of the late Roman period, as well as single coins from the early Byzantine period. From a geographical point of view, the site at Staro Debren falls within the area of Nicopolis ad Nestum (only 3–4 km away), which explains the characteristics of the predominant coin circulation. Probably, the most intensive period of market functioning coincided with the prosperity of the Roman city Nicopolis ad Nestum. One of the main road routes running to the North-East is connected probably with the site: after crossing the Mesta River, the

route runs between the villages of Debren and Dabnitsa. In 2020, an archaeological study of a fortification in the locality St. Archangel commenced. This site is lying in the hills above the village of Dabnitsa and is neighbouring the hill of Pireka. During the investigations, traces of occupation over a period of nearly 6000 years has been registered: from the Early Chalcolithic to the Late Middle Ages. The new data from the archaeological study will help to clarify the function of the Pirek site as a hypothetical market.

The second site is located in the lands of the village of Kochan (Satovcha Municipality). The main reason for defining it as a possible marketplace is the coin finds: the single finds are discovered scattered over the entire area of the site and exceed tens of thousands. The site occupies a large flat area located on the ridge of a hill called Sharen Polyani. To its west, the terrain is steep and descends into a deep ravine, and to the north and east it is surrounded by higher prominent hills. In the northwestern part of the site is located a spring, which is a kind of cult place. Several collective and numerous single coin finds were found around it. One of the collective finds contained about 500 trihemibols of Thasos and was found near the spring, scattered in a diameter of ca. 10-12 meters. The coins show traces of very long use, and most of them were pierced with traces of burning. There is another coin find containing an unknown number of "Alexander" type tetradrachms, again in the perimeter of the spring. The area around the spring is located on a slope with many rocks. According to local people, small ceramic vessels and various metal objects placed in cavities under the rocks were found frequently. Some finds have been discovered beneath the rocks, being washed and accumulated there by heavy rainfalls.

Thousands of single coins from all periods have been found in the area of the site. The most common are silver, small denominations from the types "Kneeling satyr/incuse square" and "Satyr with kantharos/ΘΑΣΙΩΝ around an amphora". There is information about several single finds of trihemibols of the same type but with the inscription of Saratokos. The bigger denominations of the early coins are predominantly silver staters and drachms of the type "Silenus and nymph". The other very common types are the "Kneeling goat on the right/incuse square" type and Eion's coins with a goose, depicted in different variants/incuse square. Several other collective finds were found in the area of the Sharen Polyani, usually deposited in pits. Unlike Pirek where the main coin material belongs to the Roman and late Roman period, here the early coins from the end of the 6th to the 3rd centuries BC predominate.

According to the research of ore mining in the Western Rhodopes and the attested key centres, the site at Kochan belongs to such a centre formed around the villages Osina, Tsrancha, Kochan, and Satovcha, which existed from the Late Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age (Домарадски et al. 1999, 12). The closely located sanctuaries at Tsrancha and Osina, as well as the large necropoleis at Kochan, Satovcha, and Lyubcha should have belonged to this centre and confirm its functioning at a local level (Цветкова 2002, 48). Such a centre definitely would have required the presence of a large market, which might have been the one at Sharen Polyani.

Due to its natural geographic features, the valley of the Mesta River is considered to be one of the most isolated areas in South-Western Thrace. The archaeological excavations at Koprivlen show, however, active economic relations with the Aegean coast during the Early Archaic to the Late Hellenistic period (Прокопов 2002, 249). The reason for this can be both the ancient trading route connecting the Aegean coast (through the Western Rhodope Mountains) with the Upper Thracian Plain, and the active ancient ore mining in the larger area around Koprivlen.

It is almost certain that the economic life along the Struma and the Mesta Rivers included the exploitation of ore and non-ore minerals. The transfer of money and commodities, in the form of readymade luxurious products (including wine and olive oil), was running from south to north, while in the opposite direction the exchange included mostly raw materials (metals, corn, and stock) and specific services – most probably a supply of mercenaries and workforce for mining and extractive works (Grigorova-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 361).

With its numerous manufacturing centres, coin ateliers (mints), ports, trade centres, and its developed road network, the south aimed to economically penetrate the territories to the north, rich in raw materials. It could be assumed that, unlike the Greek world that organised coinage within the polis, the Thracians minted coins in the vicinity of the mining area (Grigoro-va-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 360). We still have no proof of this hypothesis, but the unquestionable underlying element of the relations between Thasos and Thracian territories was the variety of gold and silver mines in the discussed region. Ancient sources repeatedly mention mining as one of the main occupations of the population of the mountainous regions of South-Western Thrace. According to O. Picard, coins are the biggest testament to the large volume and importance of economic activities associated with mining operations. This slow and complex process is interconnected with coinage circulation that was self-sustaining in the mining area. (Picard 2007a, 464–467; Picard 2007b, 113).

Chemical analyses of the metal composition of the coins and the creation of a rich database will help to make reliable statistics to clarify questions about the authenticity and origin of the silver.

Such an approach is presented here with several coin finds originating from the region of the Middle Mesta River. The studied coins belong to a collective find from the region of Gotse Delchev (the so-called “Gotse Delchev-2019” hoard), and other seven single coins (cf. Coin Catalogue, **Fig. 1-13**). X-ray fluorescence analysis has been performed on these unpublished coins, revealing an exceptional purity of the silver.

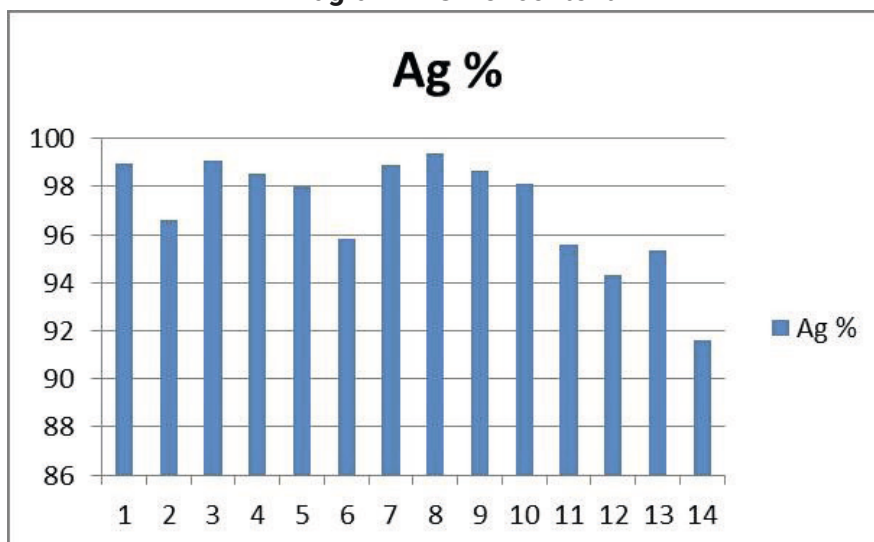
A similar study was conducted in 2007 on six coins of the Thasian type “Satyr with kantharos/ΘΑΣΙΩΝ around an amphora” from the collection of the State Historical Museum (SHM), Moscow (Peshekhonov 2016, 29). The data confirm that the silver content was very high.

The results from the metal analysis are close to the data received from the studied coins of the SHM-Moscow. The silver content is extremely high, over 94% with different variations up to 99.39%. The other attested elements are Cu, Fe, Pb, Au, Bi, and Ga (see **Table 1** and **Diagram 1**).

Table 1. Alloy Analysis of 14 coins: Single Coins (№1-7), Coin Hoard (№ 8-13) and Coin Core (№ 14)

№ of coin and weight	Ag %	Cu %	Fe %	Au %	Pb %	Ga %	Bi %
1 (1.28g)	98.98	0.09	-	-	0.61	0.11	0.211
2 (1.09g)	96.63	0.06	2.64	0.56	0.113	-	-
3 (0.79g)	99.05	0.41	-	0.25	0.107	-	0.180
4 (0.73g)	98.51	0.07	0.54	0.39	0.490	-	-
5 (0.78g)	97.97	0.08	1.56	-	0.390	-	-
6 (0.63g)	95.81	3.80	-	0.21	0.850	-	-
7 (0.77g)	98.90	0.08	0.57	0.46	-	-	-
8 (0.81g)	99.39	0.36	-	-	0.069	-	0.178
9 (0.62g)	98.63	0.85	-	0.44	0.082	-	-
10 (0.75g)	98.11	1.13	-	0.28	-	-	0.480
11 (0.58g)	95.57	3.28	-	0.45	0.253	-	0.440
12 (0.62g)	94.30	3.91	-	0.22	1.400	0.17	-
13 (0.59g)	95.37	3.57	-	0.40	0.095	-	0.560
14 (3.71g) (coin blank)	91.63	6.01	1.81	0.42	0.130	-	-

Diagram 1. Silver content.



The hypothesis of Thomas Figueira that the Thracians minted coins to compensate for the closing down of the Thasos coin atelier after 463 BC or in the mid- 5th century is acceptable (Figueira 1998, 28). According to the hypothesis of Ilya Prokopov and Valya Grigorova-Gencheva, Thasos type coins were also minted earlier in Thracian lands, parallel to the work of the mints on the island. Observations on numerous unpublished coin finds gives them ground to assume that all coin ateliers in South-Western Thrace issued official coins, probably as a kind of a federal coinage, and not as imitations (Grigorova-Gencheva, Prokopov 2017, 360). The data about the many discoveries of silver coin flans from the Middle Mesta region and the three different denominations presented here (**Fig. 14–16**) are the main supporting arguments for the hypothesis expressed by Prokopov and Grigorova. Future archaeological studies and analyses of the silver used for coinage will probably enable us to identify the location of mines in modern Bulgarian lands and the source of the valuable raw material.

CATALOGUE OF COINS¹

THASOS and THASIAN PERAIA (Middle Mesta)

ca. 525-463 BC

Obv. Satyr running, right.

Rev. Quadripartite incuse square.

1. AR Hemitetarte, 10/10 mm; 1.21 g.

2. AR Hemitetarte, 11/11 mm; 1.09 g.

3. AR Hemihekte, 11/9 mm; 0.79 g; pierced.

4. AR Hemihekte, 9/9 mm; 0.73 g.

Le Rider, Thasiennes 4; SNG Cop. Macedonia Pl.5, 191-194 (Lete).

EION

ca. 460-400 BC

Obv. Goose standing right, head left; lizard above, H to right.

Rev. Quadripartite incuse square.

¹ All coins are from a private collection.

5. AR Trichemiobol, 10/11 mm; 0.78 g; pierced.

SNG ANS 272-291; SNG Cop. Macedonia Pl.5, 173- 181.

THASOS

ca. 404-340 BC

Obv. Satyr kneeling left, holding kantharos.

Rev. ΘΑΣ-ΙΩΝ, amphora.

6. AR Trichemiobol, 10.5/10 mm; 0.63 g; pierced.

SNG Cop. Thrace, Pl.20, 1029-1030; LeRider, Thasos 27; Klein 112.

7. AR Trichemiobol, 10/10 mm; 0.77 g; pierced.

SNG Cop. Thrace, Pl.20, 1029-1030; LeRider, Thasos 27; HGC 6, 351.

Coin hoard, region of Gotse Delchev - 2019 (Middle Mesta)

Obv. Satyr kneeling left/right, holding kantharos.

Rev. ΘΑΣ-ΙΩΝ, amphora.

8. AR Trichemiobol, 10/10 mm; 0.81 g; 10h; pierced.

9. AR Trichemiobol, 11/10 mm; 0.62 g; 9h; pierced, fragmented.

10. AR Trichemiobol, 10/10 mm; 0.75 g; 7h; fragmented.

11. AR Trichemiobol, 12/11 mm; 0.58 g; 9h; pierced, fragmented.

12. AR Trichemiobol, 10/10 mm; 0.62 g; 4h; pierced.

13. AR Trichemiobol, 11/11 mm; 0.59 g; 7h; pierced.

Silver coin blank (Middle Mesta)

14. AR Silver core/coin blank, 11.5/12 mm; 3.71 g.

15. AR Silver core/coin blank, 7.5/8 mm; 1.48 g.

16. AR Silver core/coin blank, 6/6 mm; 0.56 g.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

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