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The End of the Roman Provincial Coinage in Moesia Inferior in the Light of the Historical Reconstructions of the 3rd Century AD

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Abstract: Moesia Inferior was a border province strongly affected by the 3rd-century crisis, with an interesting evolution of the provincial monetary production and circulation during the period. The subject of the present research implies one complex question: what are the causes of the end of the local coin production here? During the period in question, a profound and complex change occurred in conjunction with the evolutions registered throughout the empire: from an area supplied through a dual monetary system (consisting of both imperial and provincial coinage) the area was integrated into the new economic framework based on the imperial mints. It could be stated that this process resulted from the combined action of various factors: the relationship between the local and central systems (the influence of the imperial reforms and transformations of the monetary system), external attacks, and the internal stage of development of the provinces. But how did all these factors combine and influence the cities of Moesia Inferior?

Keywords: 3rd-century crisis, Moesia Inferior, Dual monetary system, Imperial mints, Provincial mints.

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Introduction

The main question of the current research refers to the possible causes that could have led to the end of the Roman provincial coinage in Moesia Inferior. The subject is complex and implies numerous explanations, making it difficult to establish clear answers. As a result, this article would present in detail several preliminary explanations of this interesting phenomenon based on the information presently available.

The period under study begins with the accession of Septimius Severus to the Roman throne

(AD 193) and continues throughout the 3rd century AD. Important evolutions are observed from the starting point of our analysis, such as changes in the role of the army along with the increase in military expenditures, the debasement of the silver currency, numerous usurpations, and external attacks on the empire's frontiers. These aspects are considered of high relevance for the actual discussion that implies the presentation of several possible causes of the end of the Roman provincial coinage in Moesia Inferior (Corbier 2007, 333-336; Ando 2012, 1).

First, we will try to better determine the term 'crisis', for which many different definitions were presented by scholars (Grozdanova 2019, 20). The explanation that we consider to be the most suitable for our present analysis is that the so-called 3rd-century "crisis" was a period marked by deep, complex issues affecting most aspects of the Roman governance and of Roman life in general that didn't result in the fall of the state, but rather in its change and reconstruction in order to adapt to the new paradigm (Sergeyev 1999, 175; Grozdanova 2019, 20). This definition is important because it is linked with one possible cause for the end of the Roman provincial coinage in the whole empire, and not only in Moesia Inferior: the imperial reforms and their effects on the economic system.

The century under analysis ended with the creation of a new framework, whereby the old structure was replaced by a unitary system of coinage produced and controlled by a network of new imperial mints (Freeman et al. 2016, 248). Our objective is to analyse and better understand how these changes were determined or affected by political, military, and economic evolution, as the state was highly unstable during the 3rd century AD due to the rapid succession of rulers and usurpers, simultaneous attacks at the borders, and also to the evolving monetary crisis (Grozdanova 2019, 19–20).

The province under study has a long history under Roman influence on the region along the Danube. At the start of the Roman administration here (AD 15), the future Moesia Inferior was part of a bigger province called Moesia (Duch 2017, 30). Most probably during the reign of Claudius (Avram 1998, 307), the area between the Danube and the Black Sea, which included many cities that would receive the right to issue coins, was included in the province. It was Emperor Domitian who, in the context of his Dacian campaigns, decided to split Moesia into two provinces, Superior and Inferior (Matei-Popescu 2010, 25). Moesia Inferior's administrative borders continued to change: in AD 193, Markianopolis and Nikopolis ad Istrum were added to the province (Boteva 1996, 174). And finally, after the numerous and impactful events of the 3rd century AD, in AD 271 Dacia Ripensis was created in the territory of Oescus and the west of Moesia Inferior, while the eastern territory of Moesia Inferior was reorganised as the province Scythia Minor (Duch 2017, 32–33).

Regarding local mintages, the cities of this region started to produce their autonomous coinages long before the Roman rule.[1] The beginning of the Roman influence and administrative arrangement of the province of Moesia Inferior meant a new stage of activity for the cities' coinages as part of the Roman monetary system.

During this new epoch, the role of the imperial authority was one of the most important factors in determining the fate of the provincial coinage because the right to mint was given by the emperor to each of the cities (Bowman, Garnsey, Cameron 2007, 348; Weiss 2005, 57–58). For Odessus, the beginning of its coin production under Roman rule could be traced to the 1st century BC, during Augustus' reign (Varbanov 2005, 342). As far as Tomis is concerned, relatively recent studies put into light a different perspective on its Roman Provincial Coinage's beginning. Subsequently, the Tomitan coins which were dated during Augustus' reign (Regling 1910, no. 2576; RPC I, 1823A) are in fact later emissions of the city (Domitian, for the first, and Nero for the second) (Dima 2020, 368). As a result, the start of Tomis' coinage under the Roman rule is set for Tiberius' reign (AD 13-37) (Dima 2020, 375). In the 1st century AD, Histria began to mint under the emperor Claudius.[2] Antoninus Pius' reign was the starting point for the mint of Dionysopolis (Varbanov 2005, 80). Even if Nikopolis ad Istrum and Markianopolis were not part of Moesia Inferior when they started to mint

[1] For the examples of the autonomous coinage of Histria, Tomis, and Callatis see Talmațchi 2011.
[2] See the collection of Histria from the RPC database (https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/search/browse?q=istrus).

under Roman rule (Antoninus Pius' and Commodus' reigns, respectively), their role in reconstructing the general picture of our topic is essential because during their peak and end of coin production, they were included in the province (Varbanov 2005, 110; Varbanov 2005, 201).

The provincial mints are characterised by interrupted production, an aspect that is influenced by the economic and political evolution of the city, but also by its relationship with the emperor (Weiss 2005, 57–58). For example, only Markianopolis and Nikopolis ad Istrum minted under the reign of Macrinus, and only Tomis produced coins under the rule of Maximinus Thrax (AD 235–238) (Bonchev 2017, 189). It is most probable that the right to mint was given to each city based strictly on their relationship with a respective emperor or his monetary policy in the region (Bottez, Talmațchi 2021, 491). It is not excluded that the right to mint could have been given to multiple local mints simultaneously, as was the case during Severus and Gordian III's rules (Pick 1898, 75; Dima 2018, 57). The starting point of the current analysis is represented by the Severan dynasty, during which several important evolutions could be distinguished in the monetary system.

During this specific time frame (AD 193–218), seven mints were active in Moesia Inferior (**Fig. 1**).[3] Beginning in AD 193, the army started to have an increasing role and therefore payment (Boteva 2010, 232; Boteva 1998, 77–80). This measure affected the economy of the whole empire and led to the devaluation of the denarius, but also to the peak of coin production in Moesia Inferior (Găzdac 2010, 104).

Both single coin finds and hoards will be important for the present analysis. The first category of numismatic material (single coin finds) is essential in the reconstruction of the economic situation of the studied cities because they reflect the denominations used at a certain point in their evolution and their frequency, but also the relationship between the imperial and provincial coinage at the local level. As far as the complexity of our study is concerned, the coin hoards are also an important source of data. They illustrate a bigger picture regarding the coin circulation in the province of Moesia Inferior, and also the possible turbulences linked to their burial or concealment. The role of coin hoards is reflected in the work of Ioannis Touratsoglou, who considers that this category of numismatic material could be associated with "the end of an epoch for a moneyed society" (Touratsoglou 2006, 163).

Fig. 1. Map of the active mints from Moesia Inferior between AD 193–244 (Created through the Roman Provincial Coinage platform by Ana-Maria Baltă and Valentin-Victor Bottez).

[3] Map created through the online platform RPC.

The evolution of the Roman provincial coinage in Moesia Inferior between the Severan dynasty and Diocletian (end of the 2nd – 3rd century AD)

The first possible context of the end of the Roman coinage in the province was determined by the relationship between the central and the local coinage in this specific period. Even if the measures taken by the central authorities were not affecting the local mints in the same manner as the imperial ones did, their effects were still noticeable in the provinces.

At the central level in this period, the high production of denarii (because of the increase in the soldiers' salaries) led to its powerful devaluation (from 70% fineness at the beginning of AD 195 to 40% at the end of the same year) (Metcalf 2012, 504). As a result, the necessary quantity of bronze used for the high production of denarii was significantly increased, an evolution that could be linked to the scarcity of bronze coinage in the whole Roman Empire (Găzdac 2010, 101).

In Moesia Inferior between AD 193–218, the level of imperial issues such as denarii (12%) and antoniniani (0.8%) is visibly lower than the one of local coinage (75.2%) (**Fig. 2**; Găzdac 2010, Table E3). A possible explanation could be the fact that the mints from Moesia Inferior could have played a role in the supply of bronze coinage in the region (Găzdac 2004, 72). Dilyana Boteva also offers a pertinent context for the powerful local production: the numerous imperial visits of the Severan emperors in the region (Boteva 1998, 252). The high level of provincial coinage could have also been determined by an imperial policy of establishing the mints from the region as the main suppliers of bronze coinage there (Găzdac 2004, 72; Dima 2018, 55–57). A powerful argument for this statement is that mints such as Dionysopolis, Callatis, and Tomis regained their right to mint during Severus' reign after they lost it for showing support for Pescennius Niger (Boteva 1998, 248).

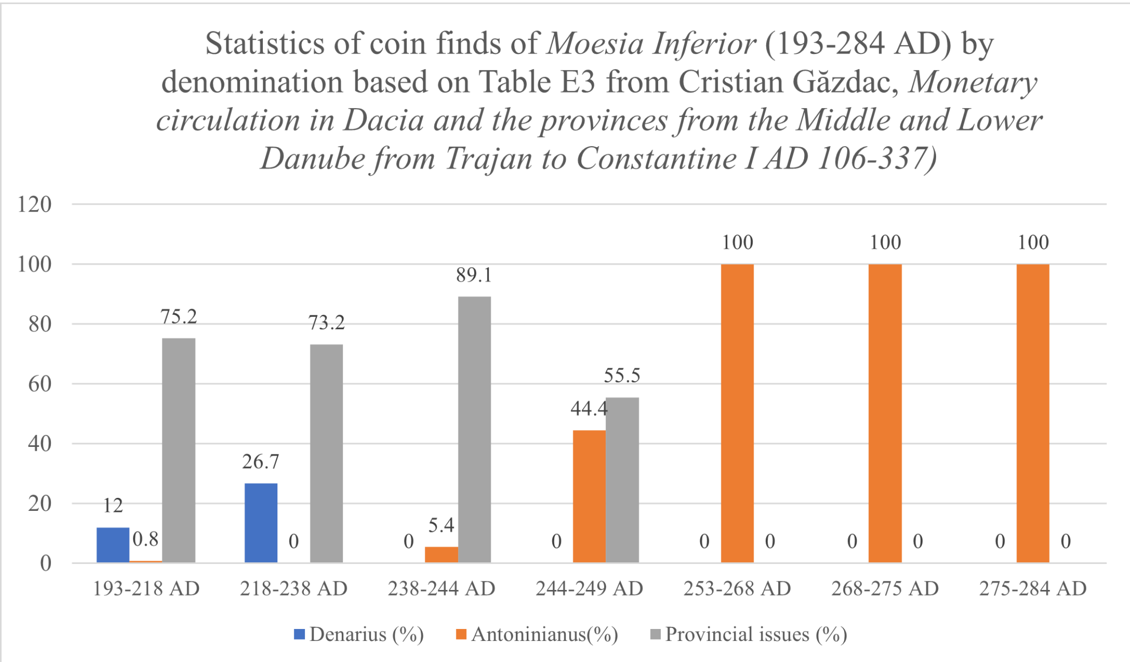

Fig. 2. Statistics of coin finds of Moesia Inferior (AD 193–284) by denomination, after Găzdac 2010, Table E3.

The next important moment in our study is the introduction of the antoninianus in AD 215. Under Macrinus (AD 217–218) and Elagabalus (AD 218–222), the two coins (denarius and antoninianus) existed very much simultaneously (Metcalf 2012, 504–514).

The prevalence of provincial issues is maintained both in central and local coinage during the next period (AD 218–238). In the mentioned statistics also used for the situation in AD 193–218, the relationship between the central and the provincial coinage is as follows: the central issues – 26.7%, the provincial – 73.2% (**Fig. 2**; Găzdac 2010, Table E3). Even if during Elagabalus' and Severus Alexander's reigns, the number of denarii and antoniniani present in the province increased, the provincial coinage remained predominant (**Fig. 2**; Găzdac 2010, 97).

If until AD 238 the situation remained relatively stable, the mentioned year was a turning point from an economic point of view (Touratsoglou 2006, 165). The antoninianus was reintroduced after a period of absence, and this moment marked the replacement of the denarius in the monetary circulation – an aspect also visible in Moesia Inferior (**Fig. 2**).

From AD 238, the antoninianus began to expand its presence (Touratsoglou 2006, 165). In Moesia Inferior, the reintroduction of this coin would take effect only later. Between AD 238–244, it would have been present at a lower percentage (5.4%) in comparison with the provincial coins that reached their peak during this period, with 89.1% of the coin site finds from the province[4] (**Fig. 2**). We could consider that the high level of local issues is due to the continuity of the local mints during Gordian III's reign (**Fig. 1**). Another reason for maintaining the same relationship between the imperial and local coinage (the prevalence of the provincial production) during this period could also be the following theory: during the stages of the imperial economy's decline, the local mints were at their peak (Dima 2018, 55–57). This could be verified by the fact that between AD 238–244, the central system underwent serious changes and challenges because of the shift from the dominance of denarii to the one of antoniniani (Metcalf 2012, 516–517).

The situation in Moesia Inferior became even more difficult when the raids of the Transdanubian tribes began a new intensive stage in AD 238 – the year of the first Gothic invasion in the eastern part of the province (Touratsoglou 2006, 137–138). These events affected multiple centres of monetary production, and the mints of the studied province were in the same situation (Dima 2018, 57). The powerful effect of these events could be observed in the evolution of the number of active mints. Between AD 193–244, there were seven active mints in the province, and the coin production was also relatively stable. The year 244 marked the point from which we can identify only three active mints: Tomis, Callatis, and Markianopolis (**Fig. 3**).[5]

Fig. 3. Map of the active mints from Moesia Inferior between AD 244–249 (Created through the Roman Provincial Coinage platform by Ana-Maria Baltă and Valentin-Victor Bottez).

[4] The coin site finds are mentioned and explained by Cristian Găzdac in Table E3 - Aggregate site finds by denominations from Moesia Inferior.
[5] Map created through the online platform RPC.

It is after AD 249, when the raids in the Danube region became even more intensive, that the most important destruction of Histria in the period occurred – most probably during the invasion led by King Cniva, which also lead to the battles at Nikopolis ad Istrum and Abrittus (Isvoranu 2015, 59). In the 3rd volume of the "Histria" series, it is also mentioned that the years 249–253 (the period of the lowest level of monetary circulation in the region) could be correlated with the most critical periods for the Roman administration on the Danube frontier. During these years, the numerous attacks led to the sieges of Markianopolis, Novae, and Nikopolis ad Istrum, some of Moesia Inferior's most important cities (Touratsoglou 2006, 140). The attack on Markianopolis could also have significantly contributed to the end of its minting activity (Preda, Nubar 1973, 68).

The high number of coin hoards attested in Moesia Inferior during the invasions of the Transdanubian tribes during Gordian III's, Philip the Arab's, and Trajan Decius' reigns reveal the problematic context of the provinces under study – the violent raids of the Carpi (AD 245/246–247) and also the powerful invasion of the Goths and Carpi (AD 250/251) (Touratsoglou 2006, 154–155) (120 out of 181 total coin hoards that end between AD 193 and 284 – **Fig. 4**, **Fig. 6**).[6]

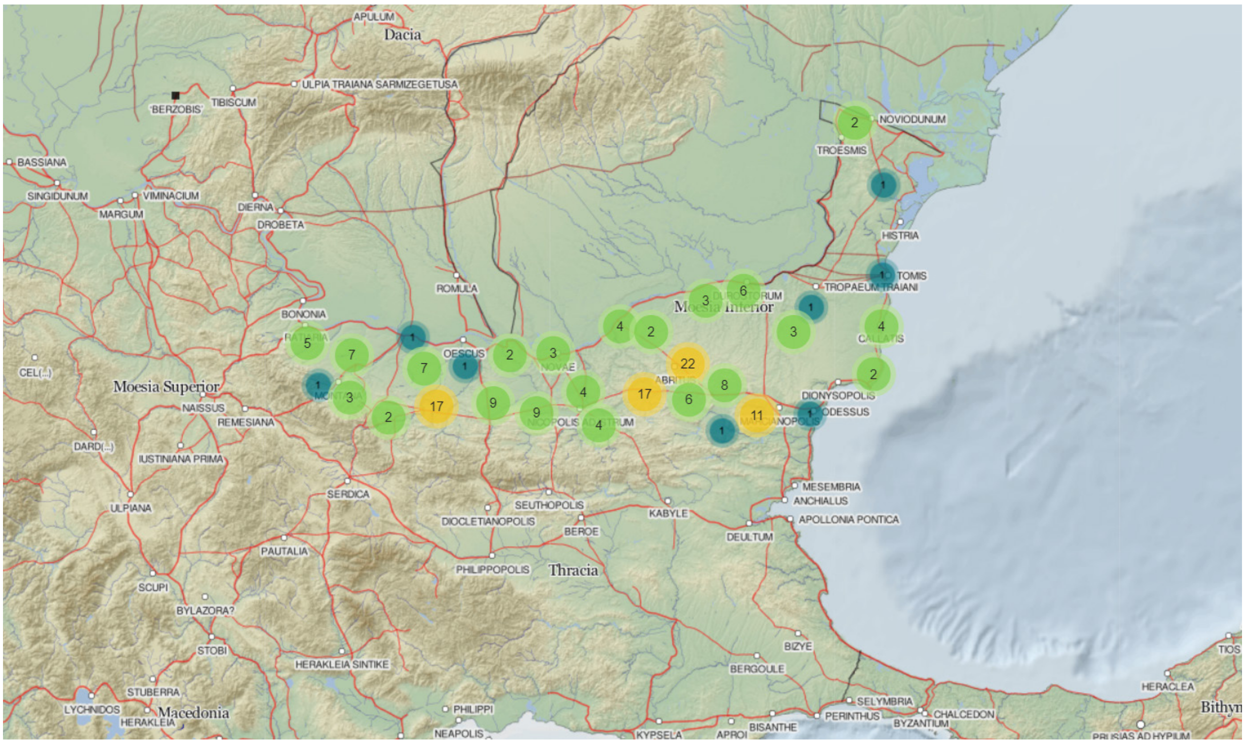

Fig. 4. Map of the coin hoards ending between AD 193 and 284 from Moesia Inferior (Created through the Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire platform by Ana-Maria Baltă and Valentin-Victor Bottez).

For Moesia Inferior, the peak of coin hoards ending with these specific reigns is during the same period as the end of the Roman provincial coinage (**Fig. 6**). Out of 181, only 39 contained provincial coinage (**Fig. 5**)[7], indicating that it disappeared from coin circulation. As mentioned, this process seems to also be influenced by the high devaluation of the silver coinage – see **Fig. 7** (Touratsoglou 2006, 166; Estiot 2012, 541–543). The role of the coin hoards in reflecting this type of turbulence and the end of a period is presented by scholars as follows: '[Hoard evidence] indicates the end of an epoch. This referred to a moneyed society in decline at all levels, obeying the rules of supply and demand' (Touratsoglou 2006, 163).

[6] Data provided through the online platform CHRE (Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire).
[7] Data provided through the online platform CHRE (Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire).

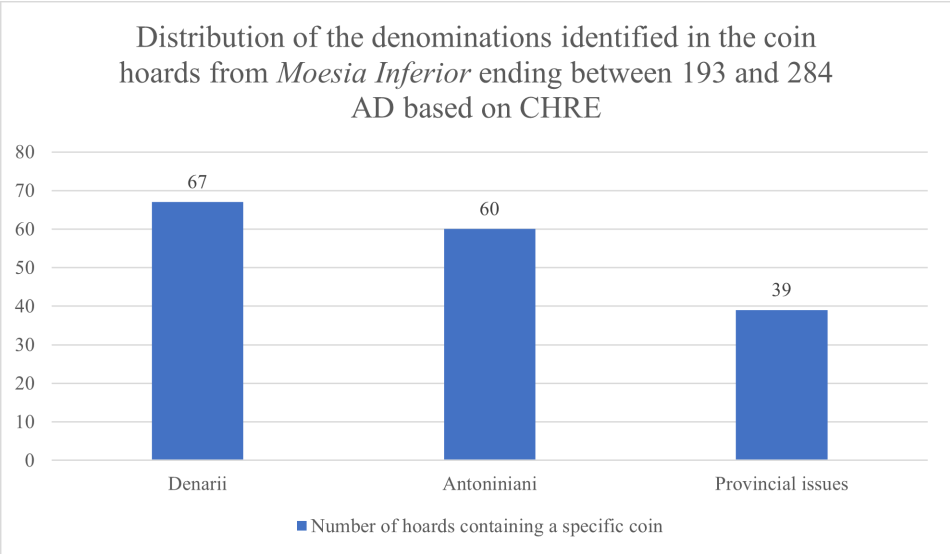

Fig. 5. Distribution of the denominations identified in the coin hoards from Moesia Inferior ending between AD 193 and 284 based on the data generated through CHRE – Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire.

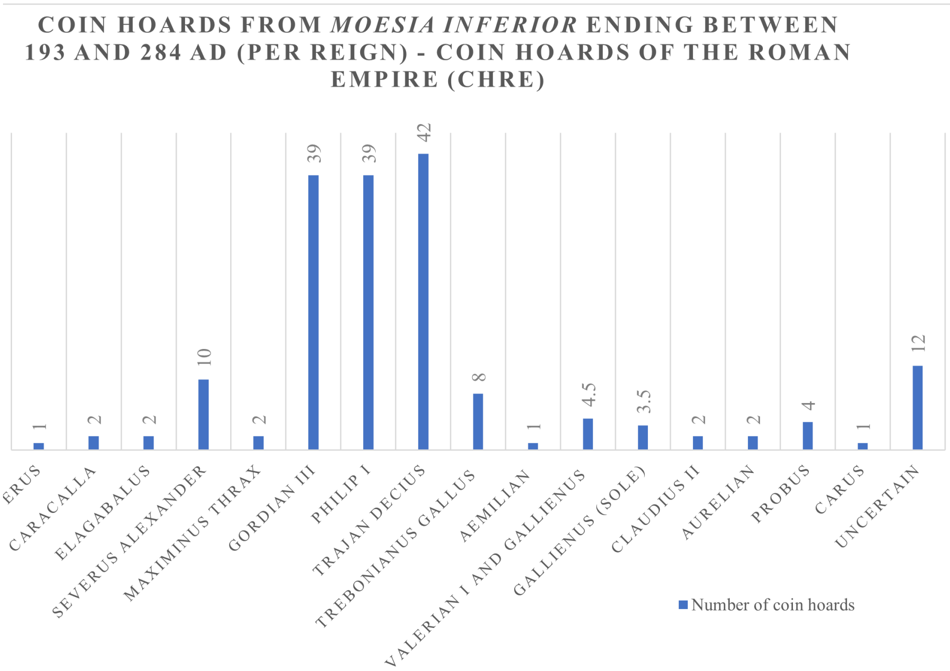

Fig. 6. Coin hoards from Moesia Inferior ending between AD 193 and 284 (per reign) based on the data generated through CHRE – Coin Hoards of the Roman Empire.

The local context had an important role in establishing the fate of the mints from Moesia Inferior, but the events that were affecting the whole Roman Empire (the economic crisis, the unstable character of the imperial institution, etc.) also had an essential influence. For example, the fast devaluation of the antoninianus (**Fig. 7**) strongly affected the provincial issues in the entire empire (Estiot 2012, 544).

As is visible in **Fig. 7**, after AD 250 the devaluation reached new peaks, and the silver denomination (antoninianus) had an increasingly low level of precious metal content (AD 253 – 35 % silver, AD 260 – 15 % silver, AD 268 – 2.5 % silver) (**Fig. 7**; Estiot 2012, 544). This evolution is also visible in Moesia Inferior (**Fig. 2**). Here, in AD 244–249, the antoninianus represented 44.4% of the coin finds considered by Cristian Găzdac in his work. In the same time gap, the provincial issues were present in 55.5% of cases. This is a serious decrease considering that in the previous stage (AD 238–244), during Gordian III's reign, the provincial coinage had a level of 89.1% (Găzdac 2010, Table E3). The debased coin was circulating in bigger amounts in the empire, and, more importantly, it became impossible to establish a relatively stable relationship between the silver currency and the bronze issues. This resulted in the production of bronze coins becoming uneconomical when the silver currency contained less precious metal, causing difficulties in the establishment of a stable ratio between the two denominations. This directly affected the production of bronze coinage in the whole empire, until its production stopped for a period in all its regions and provinces (Eliot 2012, 543).

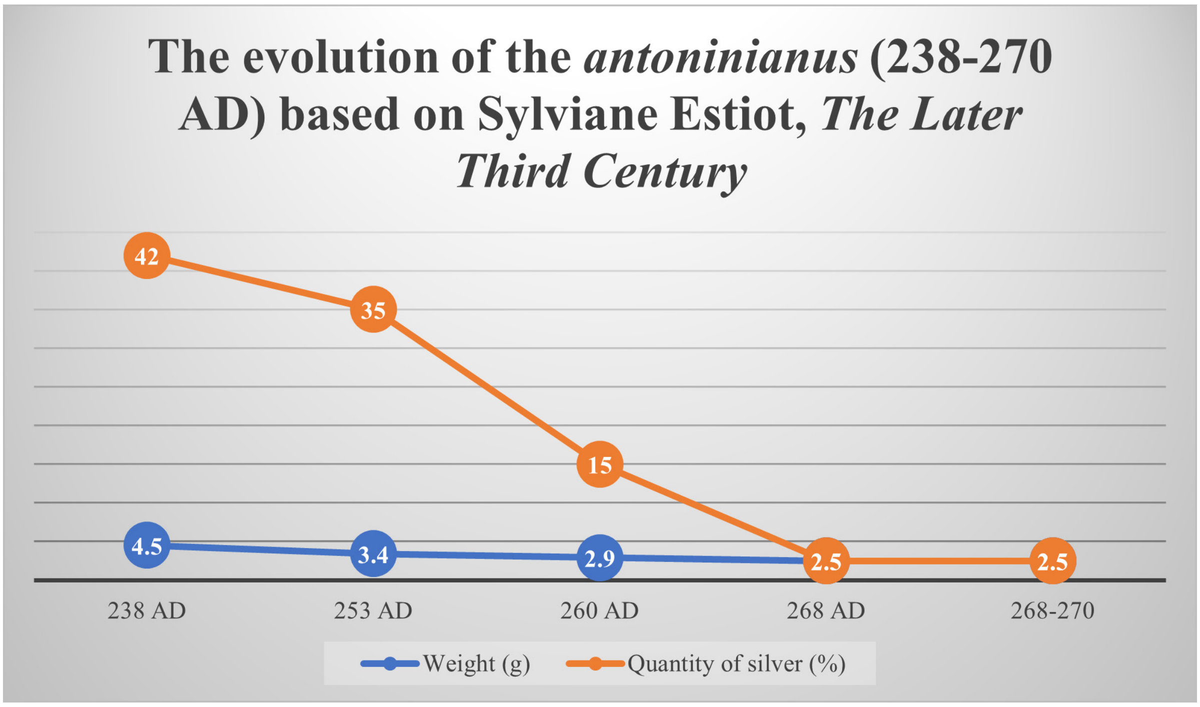

Fig. 7. The evolution of the antoninianus (AD 238–270), after Estiot 2012.

The reforms of Gallienus, Aurelian, and Diocletian could be seen as essential steps in the shift towards the unitary monetary system. First, Gallienus enacted significant changes. Mints in the proximity of the army started to be used intensively to produce imperial issues of debased antoniniani. Relevant examples are Trier, Mediolanum, Siscia, and Cyzicus. But this was not the only decision. The mint of Rome also underwent multiple changes: the number of officinae was increased from six to twelve (Corbier 2007, 349). The new framework could be distinguished in the statistics of coin finds from Moesia Inferior as between 253–268, the mint of Rome dominated the local monetary circulation (62.5%), followed by the new mints from Mediolanum and Siscia (both with 12.5%) (**Fig. 8**; Găzdac 2010, Table P5).

After AD 253, the territory of the empire seemed to be flooded by the debased central coinage struck in multiple mints (Găzdac, Alföldy-Găzdac 2008, 144). Another important aspect could be the fact that the mass production of debased antoniniani might have led to the cessation of imperial bronze coins and of provincial bronze coins (Bowman et al. 2007, 348).

The shift towards a unified system would continue and became even more clear with the introduction of new reforms. One of them was implemented by Aurelianus. When he came to power, the situation was critical. At the mint of Rome, he punished the workers of the central mint, who were responsible for actively worsening the process of debasement of the coinage. They were sent to Serdika – the minting centre in one of the new Dacia provinces (one of the provinces created after abandoning the old province north of the Danube). After their punishment, the reform of Aurelian was introduced in AD 274, and its main scope was to reintroduce the trimetallic system from the time of Caracalla. This marked the appearance of the aurelianus with a weight of

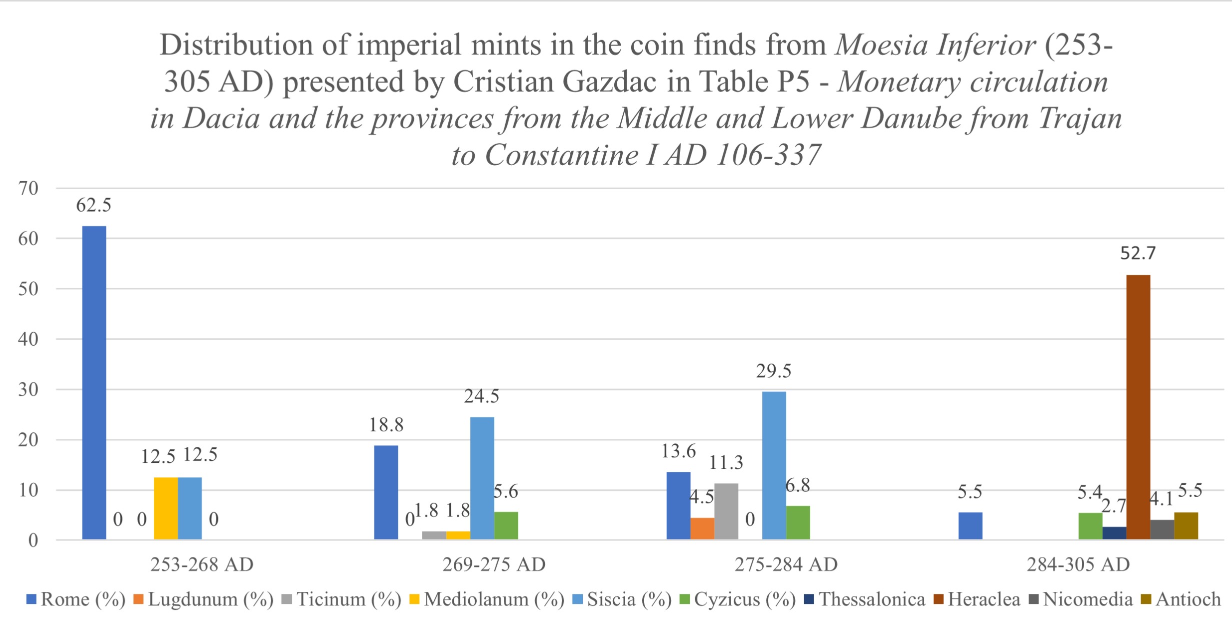

Fig. 8. Distribution of imperial mints in the coin finds from Moesia Inferior (AD 253–305), after Găzdac 2010, Table P5.

4.03 g. The other element of the system was the laureate denarius. The aureus was also stabilised at its level from the period of Caracalla (Estiot 2012, 546).

Besides the new structure of the monetary system, the network of mints was changed compared to the earlier structures (Estiot 2012, 546). Even from Aurelianus' period, we could observe the growing importance of the imperial mints that were producing the reformed coinage (eight mints – Lyon, Rome, Ticinum, Siscia, Serdika, Cyzicus, Antioch, and Tripolis with 39 officinae) (Bowman et al. 2007, 349). The local configuration of the coin finds from Moesia Inferior shows the powerful influence of the new reforms (**Fig. 8**; Găzdac 2010, Table P5). Between 260 and 275, the new mints are present in the statistics with relatively high levels: Siscia (24.5%), Cyzicus (5.6%), Mediolanum (1.8%), and Ticinum (1.8%) (**Fig. 8**).

The new framework would continue to develop even further with the introduction of Diocletian's reforms that would mark the end of the Roman provincial coinage in the whole empire. The components of the new imperial monetary framework were the argenteus (80% silver), the nummus (with the universal type GENIO POPULI ROMANI and 4% silver), the neo-aurelianus, neo-denarius, and denarius communis (Estiot 2012, 548).

The reform is also reflected through the creation of new mints such as Trier, Aquileia, Carthage, Heraclea, Nicomedia, and Thessalonica (Bowman, Garnsey, Cameron 2007, 181). Even regarding the current reform, the strong relationship between the central level and the local one could be reflected by the presence of the newly established mints in the coin circulation of Moesia Inferior. As far as this aspect is concerned, between AD 284–305, the imperial mints are present as follows: Rome (5.5%), Cyzicus (5.4%), Thessalonica (2.7%), Heraclea (52.7%), Nicomedia (4.1%) and Antioch (5.5%) (**Fig. 8**; Găzdac 2010, Table P5). As visible in the previously mentioned statistics, with Diocletian's reign the shift towards a unified monetary system ended by compressing several essential mints that were producing the imperial standards.

Conclusions

Considering the presented facts, at this point we can mention several possible causes and contexts for the studied phenomenon. In the first place, the relationship between the central and local coinage was of high relevance for the end of the Roman provincial coinage. The periods when the central monetary system was suffering important changes and evolutions are the time frames when the supply of this type of coinage was lacking in the provinces. As a consequence, Moesia Inferior had the role of being the main supplier for its territory (Dima 2018, 55–57). The context became even more difficult when the silver currency – the antoninianus – had a powerful and fast devaluation (Estiot 2012, 543–544). After 240, the space of Moesia Inferior started to be flooded with the new imperial coin (Van Heesch 2016, 246).

The serious consequences of the new evolutions illustrated the necessity of reforms. During Gallienus' reign began the construction of a new monetary system: new mints that were producing debased coinage and more officinae in Rome (Bowman, Garnsey, Cameron 2007, 158–161). Because of this action, the imperial coins were flooding the space of the whole empire, and the provincial coinage gradually decreased in its production. It could be stated that the end of the Roman provincial coinage in Moesia Inferior was part of a bigger process at the scale of the entire Roman Empire (Touratsoglou 2006, 163–167).

As far as the military dimension is concerned, the raids of the 3rd century AD strongly affected both provinces under discussion. For Moesia Inferior, a crucial moment from a military point of view was in AD 238, when the first Gothic invasion took place. That moment is also illustrated by the high number of coin hoards ending with issues of Gordian III (**Fig. 6**). After 238, the barbarian attacks became more frequent and affected the province even more through the devastation of numerous cities such as Histria and Nikopolis ad Istrum. In these cases, the effects of the attacks could have provoked an earlier end of the local coinage (Preda, Nubar 1973, 68; Isvoranu 2015, 59).

In conclusion, we can state that the end of the Roman provincial coinage in Moesia Inferior was caused by multiple factors (economic, political, and military). This indicates that the raids of the 3rd century AD played an important role, but it was not the only cause for the end of this type of Roman coinage. The process of shifting from a dual monetary system to a unified framework could be considered necessary, and this character was reflected by the numerous difficulties from the studied period. The impossibility of establishing a stable exchange relationship between the imperial silver currency and the bronze one could be mentioned as a possible economic factor for the end of the Roman provincial coinage for the regions under study.

Besides the economic reason, the military and political contexts also contributed to the studied phenomenon. In Moesia Inferior's case, it could be considered that the invasions provoked a faster end of the local minting, but this was not the only cause. The gradual decrease in provincial production was also because of the debasement of the central currency and the gradual expansion of this respective coinage. For this province, the end of the local coinage could be reflected by the high number of coin hoards ending with the issues of Gordian III, Philip the Arab, and Trajan Decius (AD 238–251) because they could signify the end of a respective chapter and the decline of this economic society (Touratsoglou 2006, 163).

Of course, the presented facts are some preliminary possible contexts of the studied phenomena. They will be refined through further research with new data and other possible explanations.

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