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Parallels in the City Coinages from the Western Part of the Roman Province of Thrace (2nd–3rd Centuries AD)*

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Abstract: The present study is related to four Roman provincial mints in Western Thrace and, more precisely, to certain specific coin types that these cities issued. For this purpose, several different analyses have been carried out, among them a comparative one. The duration of the mints themselves has been traced; an iconographic analysis has been carried out, as well as an examination of the coinage dies.

Keywords: Pautalia, Serdica, Philippopolis, Nicopolis ad Nestum, Nicaea.



The present study concentrates on four ancient cities in the western part of the province of Thrace – Serdica, Pautalia, Philippopolis, and Nicopolis ad Nestum. In the future, the study may be extended to other cities in the province.¹ The chronology of the coinage of the four cities has been traced in the present study and will be briefly presented. It is important to note that the mints did not strike continuously. The city of Nicaea in Bithynia will be frequently mentioned in this research, even though it is located in another province (**Fig. 1**).

Of the four cities, the earliest to mint was Philippopolis, from the time of Emperor Domitian. There was a noticeable increase of the coinage under Hadrian and especially under Antoninus Pius. In the time of Marcus Aurelius, the mint seems to have restricted its activity, but in the time of Commodus it was extremely active. The mint continued to function during the early Severan period, with activity attested in the 190s and towards the end of that decade. As Dilyana Boteva noted, the Philippopolis mint ceased its activity and became active again in 210 (Ботева 1997, 133). The coins of Philippopolis are also well attested in the time of Elagabalus, when the city also received the title of Neokoros.

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¹ Future studies might include Topeiros, Hadrianopolis, Augusta Traiana, etc. This work was supported by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science under the National Research Programme "Young scientists and postdoctoral students -2" approved by DCM 206 / 07.04.2022.

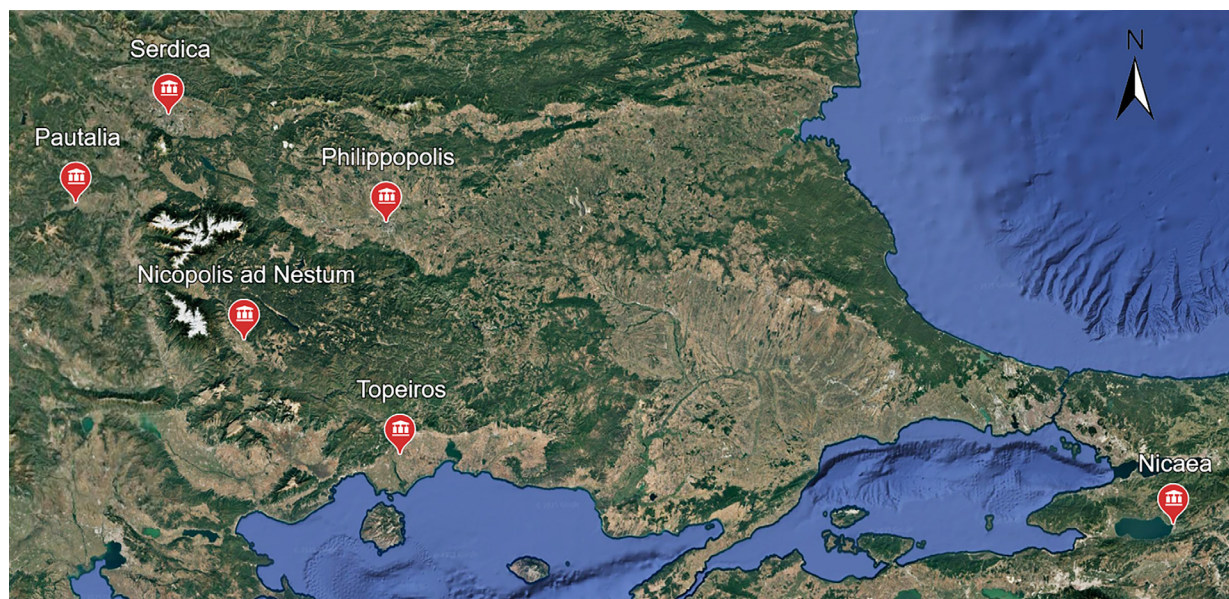


Fig. 1. Map of the mints discussed in the text, author N. Dimitrov.

The Pautalia mint was open in the time of Antoninus Pius and was exceptionally productive in the late reign of this emperor and during the joint rule of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. Pautalia was active in the time of Commodus and especially in the period of the early Severans. Many of the coinages in Thrace were barely active or even non-functional in the first decade of the 3rd century, but this was not the case in Pautalia – evidence of which can be seen in the coins of Geta as Caesar and also coins of Plautilla, wife of Caracalla. During Caracalla's sole rule, the mint ceased its activities.

The mint of Serdica opened for the first time during the joint rule of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. In the last years of the 160s, the mint stopped producing coins and started again in the reign of the early Severans – by the mid-190s. During the end of the 2nd century, the mint probably ceased activity until the death of Septimius Severus in the February of 211. The mint of Serdica was active during the joint rule of Caracalla and Geta and especially more active during the sole reign of the elder brother. Probably after 214/215, the work of the mint ceased. It reopened under the emperor Gallienus, and already during his reign the mint changed its status from provincial to state, thus minting coins until the early 4th century.

Nicopolis ad Nestum has the most transient coinage. Its minting activity first took place in the reign of Emperor Commodus, probably in the first half of the 180s – in very limited numbers. The mint struck coins again after the death of Septimius Severus for Julia Domna, Caracalla, and Geta. Thus, the mint struck coins in 211, and in the same year or early 212 ceased its activities.

Due to the very limited coinage of Nicopolis ad Nestum, there are few examples of specific reverse types with which parallels can be made with the other three cities. One of the specific types of coins documented in each of the coinages under examination, as well as in other Thracian cities, has a reverse image depicting a female figure leaning on a torch or, in some cases, perhaps a sceptre around which is entwined a serpent (**Figs. 2–5**). In almost all cases, this figure is identified as Demeter, and in most reverse images, the cista mystica represented in front of her is also visible. In the historiography, the problem of defining the figure exists precisely in Nicopolis ad Nestum, where Holger Komnick describes the woman as Hygieia (Komnick 2003, № 46), Ivan Varbanov as Hera (Varbanov 2005, 365, № 4319), and other authors as Demeter (e.g., Мушмов 1912, № 4055; Христова 2003, 124, № 6). The difference in Nicopolis ad Nestum is the lack of cista mystica. In a valuable parallel study of the coinages of Pautalia and Philippopolis, by Ulrike Peter and Lily Grozdanova, it is clarified that Demeter with the serpent around the torch occurs in the coinages of Philippopolis, Pautalia, Serdica, Hadrianopolis, Augusta Traiana, Traianopolis, and Topeiros, as well as in Tomis and Nicopolis ad Istrum (Peter, Grozdanova 2021, 495). In each of these mints a cista mystica or fruit basket is depicted in front of Demeter.



Fig. 2. Nicopolis ad Nestum. Caracalla, AD 211/212, 30 mm, NAIM-BAS, inventory № 3228, Photo courtesy of NAIM, digital processing by N. Dimitrov.



Fig. 3. Philippopolis. Septimius Severus, AD 210/211, 29 mm, NAIM-BAS, inventory № 3497, Photo courtesy of NAIM, digital processing by N. Dimitrov.



Fig. 4. Pautalia. Caracalla, AD 211/212–214/215, 30 mm, NAIM-BAS, inventory № 8535, Photo courtesy of NAIM, digital processing by N. Dimitrov.



Fig. 5. Serdica. Caracalla, AD 211/212–214/215, 30 mm, Solidus Numismatik, auction 91, lot № 165, <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=8871010>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

In this case, the coins of several other cities – Anchialos, Mesambria, and Nicomedia – can be examined, where similar images are found. The coin of Nicomedia is minted for Elagabalus and is very similar to the other examples with Demeter and the torch with the serpent and the cista mystica (RPC VI, 3356 – temporary). At the same time, the case is different for Anchialos (RPC VI, 628 – temporary) and Mesambria (RPC VII-2, № 1234): there, we can still speak of Demeter and not of Hygieia, but the cista mystica is missing. Unfortunately, it cannot be definitively determined that the figure on the coins of Nicopolis ad Nestum is Demeter, but more evidence certainly exists for this statement. In the case that the goddess is Hygieia or Hera, it seems to be a peculiar case only for Nicopolis ad Nestum. Regarding the chronology of the coins with Demeter and the serpent of the four cities studied, the earliest examples of this type are from Pautalia, minted for Septimius Severus and Julia Domna.²

The following examined reverse type represents Athena on a throne and in front of her a tree with a serpent entwined around it. This type is known in the coinage of Serdica (**Fig. 6**), Pautalia (**Fig. 7**), and Philippopolis (**Fig. 8**). Similar coins were also minted in the cities of Topeiros, Marcianopolis, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Callatis, and others. The characteristic feature is that in all of these mints, the type was struck at the earliest at the beginning of the 3rd century. Possibly the reverse type was brought to Thrace from Asia Minor, where similar images are found on coins from the time of Antonines in the city of Nicaea (RPC IV.1, 5970 – temporary). Coins with Athena on a throne are known in Pautalia from the time of the Antonines (Ruzicka 1933, № 51, 101, 207; Varbanov 2005, № 4424), but it was not until Septimius Severus and his sons that the tree with the serpent appeared on the reverse dies. In Serdica and Philippopolis, these coins were minted a few years later.

² The dating is established based on the portraits on the obverse dies.



Fig. 6. Serdica. Caracalla, AD 211/212–214/215, 30 mm, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18245890. Photographs by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke (Lübke und Wiedemann), <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18245890>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 7. Pautalia. Geta, AD 209–211, 29 mm, Solidus Numismatik, auction 37, lot № 60, <https://pro.coinarchives.com/a/lot-viewer.php?LotID=1424300&AucID=2913&Lot=60>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 8. Philippopolis. Septimius Severus, AD 210/211, 29 mm, Nomosag, obolos 3, lot № 326, <https://www.nomosag.com/obolos-3/326>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

Another specific reverse type, with parallels in Philippopolis (**Fig. 9**) and Serdica (**Fig. 10**), represents Heracles reclining on a lion. This type is not found in Pautalia and Nicopolis ad Nestum, but from Thrace it is also known in Augusta Traiana, Hadrianopolis (Юркова 1987, 193, № 446), and the Roman colony of Deultum (Драганов 2006, 305, № 774). In Thrace the earliest coins of this type can be associated with the rule of Septimius Severus and his sons. Earlier parallels of the reverse type again come from Nicaea, minted with an obverse image of Faustina the Younger (RIC IV.1, 5530 – temporary). A similar reverse type is also found in other cities of Asia Minor, but mostly from the period after the early Severans. It can be assumed that this reverse type also came to Thrace from the city of Nicaea. Here it can be mentioned that the cult of Heracles was popular in Serdica, and this iconographic type is found on marble stone blocks that were probably part of an ancient temple.³

Another specific reverse type with Heracles familiar in Thrace is related to the childhood years of the hero, fighting the serpents sent by Hera. The coin type is attested in Thrace from Pautalia (**Fig. 11**), Serdica (**Fig. 12**) and others.⁴ The Pautalian coins were struck several years earlier than those of Serdica. The iconographic type is also known from coins of the pre-Roman period, but

³ During excavations of a late antique building in Serdica, fragments of large marble reliefs were found that can be linked to Dionysiac thiasos, but also to Heracles – perhaps in his role as symposiast – reclined on a lion. It is highly probable that the reliefs in question originate from the temple of Heracles/Heracles and Dionysus excavated by Stancheva and Fakov (Станчева, Фърков 1977) or from another cult building from Serdica. Probably after the destruction of the temple, the marble blocks were reused in the construction of a late antique building. Unfortunately, the reliefs in question have not yet been published. Many thanks to my colleagues from RHM-Sofia for the information.

⁴ Such a coin type is also minted in the city of Traianopolis in the time of the sole rule of Caracalla, 211/212–217 <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=3300852>.

in this case, again, there is an exact parallel with the city of Nicaea in Bithynia (RPC IV.1, 17279 – temporary). Nicaean coins with infant Heracles were minted for Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.



Fig. 9. Philippopolis. Caracalla, AD 210–211/212, 28 mm, Nomosag, obolos 16, lot № 510, <https://www.nomosag.com/obolos-16/510>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 10. Serdica, Caracalla, AD 211, Dr. Busso Peus Nachf., Frankfurt, auction 366, year 2000, Lot № 424, (photo by Lübke & Wiedemann KG, Leonberg), <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=71950>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 11. Pautalia, Geta, AD 198–201, 20 mm, Roma Numismatics Limited, E-sale 56, Lot № 577, <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=5902969>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 12. Serdica, Caracalla, AD 211/212–214/215, 17 mm, Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 354, Lot 323, <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=287855>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

As far as specific coin types are concerned, reference should be made to the Pautalian coins with Asclepius on a winged serpent (**Fig. 13**). The studied coin types supplement the research of Dr. Lily Grozdanova, who proves a connection between the city of Nicaea and Pautalia by registering a specific coin type with Asclepius on a winged serpent⁵ (Grozdanova 2018, 190). Apart from the connection of Nicaea with Pautalia, there was one between Nicaea and Serdica, and the existence of epigraphic monuments supports this argument since Nicaean tombstones originate from the necropolis of Serdica (IGBulg. IV, 1955–1958).



Fig. 13. Pautalia, Caracalla, AD 198–205, 30 mm, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18243774. Photographs by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke (Lübke und Wiedemann) <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18243774>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

⁵ Such relations are also commented in my unpublished Ph.D. thesis “Religious Life in Pautalia and Serdica in the Roman Period (Comparative Analysis)”, defended at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in 2022.

The following few coin types in this study are related to Pautalia and Philippopolis and demonstrate the similarity between the two coinages and the exchange of ideas in the choice of reverse dies. As already mentioned, a comparative analysis for Pautalia and Philippopolis has been carried out by Ulrike Peter and Lily Grozdanova (Peter, Grozdanova 2021), who point out remarkable similarities between the coins depicting Hermes. One iconographic type rarely seen in the empire is that of Hermes and the infant Dionysus, a representation of the famous statue of Praxiteles (**Fig. 14**). Such a coin type is known in Thrace only from Anchialos, Philippopolis, and Pautalia. The numismatist Leon Ruzicka mentioned in the 1930s that similar statues of Hermes with the infant Dionysus probably existed in these cities (Ruzicka 1933, 516; Peter, Grozdanova 2021, 500). A further parallel in the coinage of the two cities can be seen in a coin type with Hermes in reverse view (**Fig. 15**). The image shows Hermes facing to the right, with the view from the back, the mantle descending from the left shoulder, and with the right hand the god holds a purse (Peter, Grozdanova 2021, 500). Both these cities began issuing the coin type during the rule of Commodus, and it is hard to tell which was earlier. Other specific depictions of Hermes – those with the god riding a ram – are typical of Thrace and occur not only on coins but also in stone reliefs. Comparing the coins from Pautalia (**Fig. 16**) and Philippopolis (**Fig. 17**), it is clear that the Pautalia coins were minted several years earlier, with an obverse image of Geta as Caesar with the prenomen Lucius, while in the Philippopolis coins, Geta is already Augustus. The historiography suggests that the iconography of Hermes on a ram is specific to Thrace and that its origin may be local Thracian (Драганов 2019, 13), but this idea should be treated with caution, since depictions on red-figure pottery of the god riding a ram are known from Classical Greece.



Fig. 14. Pautalia, Caracalla, AD 202–204, 29 mm, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18243760. Photographs by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke (Lübke und Wiedemann) <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18243760>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 15. Pautalia, Commodus, AD 187–192, 17 mm, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18243652. Photographs by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke (Lübke und Wiedemann) <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18243652>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 16. Pautalia, Geta, AD 198–201, 19 mm, Berlin, Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen, 18244479. Photographs by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke (Lübke und Wiedemann) <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18244479>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 17. Philippopolis, Geta, AD 210–211, 19 mm, Nomosag, obolos 28, lot № 436, <https://www.nomosag.com/obolos-28/436>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

The last studied example are coins bearing the region's riches. The analysis of the obverse dies allows us to assume that the coin type in Philippopolis appeared several years later (**Fig. 18**). In the case of Philippopolis, the river god Hebros and few genii performing a particular activity are represented (Колев 1968, 95; Peter, Grozdanova 2021, 491–506; Varbanov 2019, 81, № XIII.55.1). More clarity in the iconography is provided by the Pautalian coins, of which several different reverse dies with similar iconography are known (Ruzicka 1933, № 473, 634; Колев 1968, 100, обр. 5; Varbanov 2005, № 4922, 5174; Grigorova-Gencheva 2011, 709–711, Figs. 1–2) – few with the river god, and some with a female figure (**Fig. 19**). Some of the Pautalian coins with the region's riches are certainly earlier than the Philippopolis ones. This proves that the coinage of Pautalia influenced that of Philippopolis through the popularisation of the specific reverse type, which led to its later issue in the city of Hebros. The female figure on the Pautalia coins can be assumed to personify a natural characteristic, incorporating in its essence a number of qualities of the Pautalian region, from which the population draws its wealth (gold, silver, wheat, grapes). These natural riches seem to have substantially strengthened the economy of Pautalia. Even in Antonine times and especially under the early Severi Pautalia flourished as an urban centre, competing with the metropolis of Philippopolis and even in some cases coming ahead of it as far as coinage was concerned.



Fig. 18. Philippopolis, Septimius Severus, AD 210–211, 28 mm, Nomosag, obolos 1, lot 340 - <https://www.nomosag.com/obolos-1/340>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)



Fig. 19. Pautalia, Caracalla, AD 205–211, 30 mm, Solidus Numismatik, auction 37, Lot 59, <https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=5545713>. (downloaded: 19.02.2024)

The comparative analysis of the specific coin types from Thrace proves a certain relationship between the individual cities. The obverse and reverse dies have been studied in detail, on the basis of which the chronology of the coinage can be traced (so far there is no evidence of die sharing from these cities). The study needs to be extended in the future, but at the moment the influence of coinages from Asia Minor on those in Thrace can be clearly outlined and more precisely the relationship between the city of Nicaea and some Thracian cities, especially Pautalia and Serdica.

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