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Recent Numismatic Finds of Greek and Roman Period from Histria (Romania)

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Abstract: Starting with 2013, a new archaeological project, supported by the University of Bucharest, was implemented at Histria (Romania). The Acropolis Centre-South Sector, covering approximately 2000 square meters, is situated in the southern area of the city's acropolis. The authors present Greek, Roman, and Early Byzantine coins found during the excavations on this new sector. These finds reflect the monetary circulation on the Western Coast of the Black Sea, from the earliest wheel-type coins issued by the city, going through local issues dated to the 4th – 1st centuries BC (some of them countermarked), Roman coinage (including rarer issues, such as the Apollo on the omphalos type issued by Histria, or issues from Amphipolis for Augustus or Thessaloniki for Nero), and ending with the most recent, folles dated to the first decades of the 7th century AD, marking the end of the habitation of Histria.

Keywords: Histria, Greek coins, Roman coins.



In 2013, a team coordinated by the University of Bucharest (Romania) joined the other research groups conducting archaeological excavations at Istros/Histria, the Greek colony of Miletus situated on the western coast of the Black Sea. The new sector, named the Acropolis Centre-South Sector (ACS) due to its location in the ancient city (**Fig. 1**), brought to light structures which proved to be a 6th–7th-century AD *insula* (Bottez 2022, with the latest bibliography), conven-

tionally called Insula Ia (**Fig. 2**). The insula is composed of at least two residential buildings and is delimited to the north, east, and west by Street C, Street ST01, and Street ST02 respectively; to the south it is delimited by the Late Roman defensive wall (**Fig. 3**).

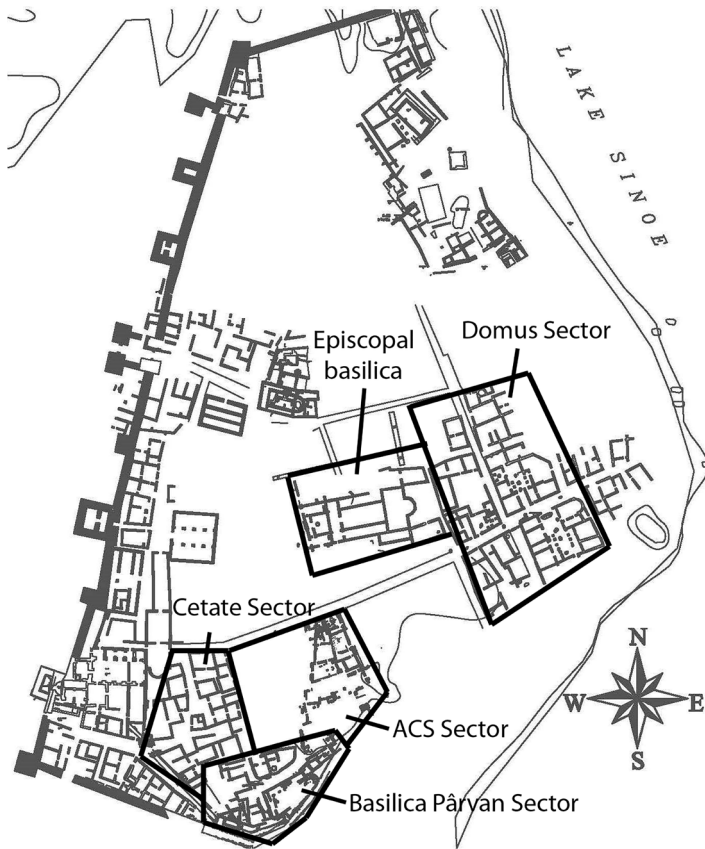


Fig. 1. Location of the Acropolis Centre-South Sector at Histria, Romania (after Bottez 2022, fig. 1).

Fig. 2. The 6th–7th-century AD insula from the Acropolis Centre-South Sector: view from above (V. Bottez).

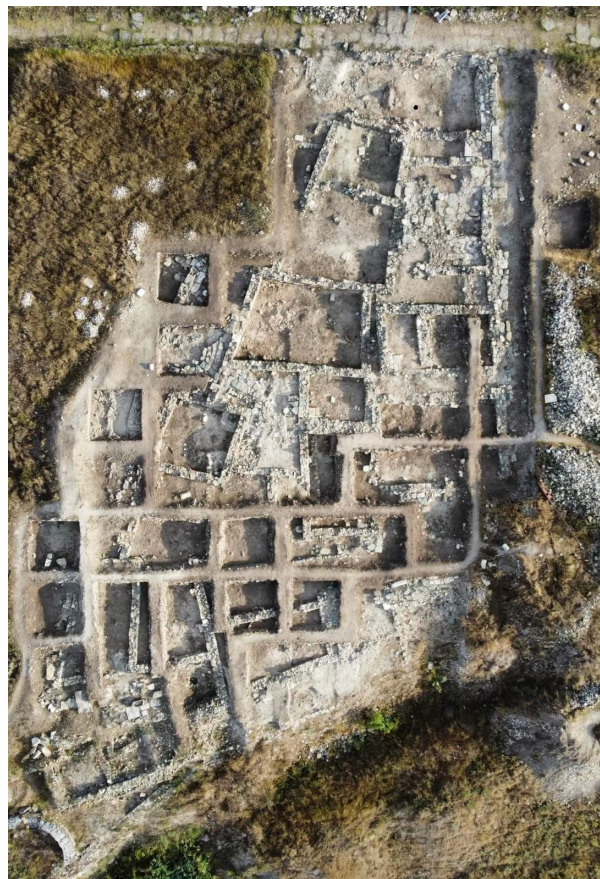




Fig. 3. The plan of the 6th–7th-century AD insula from the Acropolis Centre-South Sector (V. Bottez).

From a chronological point of view, three construction/functioning phases could be identified. The first is dated to the first half of the 6th century AD and could have been ended by the Kutrigur raid of 559 (Bottez et al. 2018, 321). The second phase was dated to the reign of Justin II and corresponds to a general period of rebuilding throughout the Late Roman city; inside the insula, this phase is marked by blocked entrances, new entrances opened by the dismantling of wall segments, *dolia* taken out of use (Bottez et al. 2018, 317), and new interior divisions of the space using mudbrick walls. The third phase was identified with certainty only in the southern part of the northern nucleus, in the space conventionally called NSp07b (Bottez 2022, 261), and it is the only 7th-century context to be clearly documented in Histria up to now.

As far as their functionality is concerned, the spaces conventionally called NSp06, NSp05 (then NSp05b during the second functioning phase of the insula), and SSp13 seem to have served as food storage facilities – maybe even *cauponae* – while NSp01, SSp11, and SSp14 were open spaces, maybe courtyards (Bottez 2022, 265).

The archaeological research on the ACS – conducted uninterrupted for more than a decade now – brought to light rich and varied numismatic material, consisting of more than 400 Greek, Roman, and Early Byzantine coins (Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 159–166; Țârlea et al. 2018, 197–209). The majority of the finds belong to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, corresponding to the last phases of inhabitation of the insula, but coins issued by Istros during the autonomous period – as well as issues of other Greek cities, Macedonia, and of Early Roman period – are also present in the archaeological record of the sector.

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the items identified until present, as the restoration and conservation of this category of finds is an ongoing process.

The earliest coins are local issues with the four-spoked wheel on the obverse and the legend ΙΣΤ on the reverse (**Fig. 4**), loosely dated to 450–350 BC (Poenaru Bordea 2001, 15). The archaeological excavations taking place at Istros/Histria starting in 1914 showed that this type of coin forms a well-represented category of the numismatic material found at the site (Preda, Nubar 1973, 32–37). Still, it should be mentioned that, from a chronological perspective, the earliest numismatic find from the city is a hekte made of electrum (1/6 stater), struck by Kyzikos during the 7th–6th centuries BC, marking the beginning of the Greek habitation in this area (Dimitriu 1957, 103; Vîlcu et al. 2006, 69). Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish a clear chronological context for this find beyond the fact that the archaeological material recovered from that area was dated to the 6th century BC. The presence at Istros of a coin issued by Kyzikos is not a fluke, as more recent research has brought to light another hekte issued during the first half of the 5th century BC. The numismatic material recovered so far from Istros/Histria indicates that among the oldest coins are also base metal issues from Olbia with Medusa on the obverse and the legend ΑΡΙΧ on the reverse, dated towards the middle of the 5th century BC. One of these coins was found during old excavations (Preda, Nubar 1973, 138), while the other two were found during a verification excavation in 2003 in the BTG Sector, in a layer showing traces of fire and containing ceramic shards, of which the most recent were dated to the middle of the 5th century BC (Domăneanu 2004, 159–160). Most probably, the Olbian issues with Medusa on the obverse were in circulation during the same timeframe as the local wheel-type issues.



Fig. 4. Istros, wheel type coin, c. 450–350 BC (A. Vîlcu).

Other local issues characteristic for the autonomous period of Istros and represented in the numismatic record of the Acropolis Centre-South Sector are base metal coins of the River God type (**Fig. 5**), Apollo type (**Figs. 6–7**), and Demeter type (**Fig. 8**) – all reflecting the use of the small

denomination coinage characteristic for everyday transactions of the 4th–2nd centuries BC (Preda, Nubar 1973, 37–45). An interesting phenomenon noticed in some cases is the countermarking of older bronze coins, a procedure allowing the prolongation of their use on the market (Preda, Nubar 1973, 45–47). In the last mentioned category, two Istrian coins found on the Acropolis Centre-South Sector are unusual in that the countermark covers the entire image found initially on the obverse, practically erasing it. The countermark illustrates the head of Hermes and covers the entire surface of the obverse, replacing the original deity – most probably Apollo (Fig. 9). The religious or political motivation in the background of this unusual countermarking method is difficult to determine for the moment (for the phenomenon of countermarking at Istros, see Preda, Nubar 1973, 45–47; Talmațchi 2011, 550–555). Still, taking into consideration the chronology of the original issue, the intervention seems to have taken place after the middle of the 3rd century BC. This dating is also suggested by the significant changes in the iconography of the gold coins issued by Istros during the second half of the 3rd century BC, when the transition from the Alexander the Great type staters to the Lysimachus type staters took place. The abandonment of the staters of the Alexander the Great type in favour of those of Lysimachus type took place in the wake of the war between Istros, Kallatis, and Byzantion, a local phase of the conflicts between the Seleucids and the Ptolemy dynasty which left a mark on the Hellenistic world during the 3rd century BC (Vîlcu, Petac 2012, 53–60; Vîlcu 2014, 93–104). The dominance of Byzantion and its allies in the Black Sea determined significant changes in the numismatic iconography used by the West-Pontic cities, the most illustrative being the case of the gold coinage. After the middle of the 3rd century BC, Kallatis ended its gold coins issuing, while Istros gave up the Alexander the Great type staters and adopted the iconography specific for the Lysimachus type staters in use at Byzantion. Tomis, a city developing substantially – especially after the middle of the 3rd century BC – circulated its first gold issues directly on the model of the Lysimachus type staters from Byzantion (Petac, Vîlcu 2015–2016, 499–507). The gold coins reflect more precisely the political relations, as they were used by the West-Pontic cities mainly to pay for protection from the part of local rulers or for the services of mercenaries. Not one gold stater has been found so far during the archaeological excavations in the city of Istros/Histria; additionally, the silver didrachms represent a rare occurrence in the city itself, with only three exemplars having been found until now (Preda, Nubar 1973, 19; Preda 1998, 57).



Fig. 5. Istros, River God type coin (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 6. Istros, Apollo type coin (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 7. Istros, Apollo type, countermarked on the obverse (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 8. Istros, Demeter type (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 9. Istros, with Hermes type countermark (A. Vîlcu).

From this perspective, the finds from the Acropolis Centre-South Sector respect the general trend, as all the coins issued by the city during the autonomous period found here are made of copper or copper alloys (Țârlea et al. 2018, 197–209). Absent so far are the silver issues of the city circulating in large numbers during the 5th–3rd centuries BC, as demonstrated by the treasures found in Romania, Republic of Moldova, and Bulgaria (Preda 1998, 54–60; Dima 2014; Vilcu, Nicolae 2016, 121–127).

Base metal coins issued during the reign of Phillip II (359–336 BC) with the head of Apollo looking to the right on the obverse (**Fig. 10**), as well as coins of the Alexander the Great type (336–323 BC), which are generally well documented at Istros (Preda, Nubar 1973, 51–52), were also found in the excavations from the Acropolis Centre-South Sector, reflecting the integration of the city into Macedonian political sphere.



Fig. 10. Macedonia, Philip II (after Vilcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.8).

Going further to the Roman period, the earliest coin found so far was issued by Amphipolis; the coin presents the bust of Augustus on the obverse and the image of Artemis Tauropolis on the reverse (**Fig. 11**). The next coin chronologically was issued by Thessaloniki for Emperor Nero (**Fig. 12**). Both these coins represent rarities and reflect the connections of Histria with the area of the former Macedonian kingdom at the end of the 1st century BC and during the next century.



Fig. 11. Amphipolis, Augustus (A. Vilcu).



Fig. 12. Thessalonica, Nero (A. Vilcu).

Only three coins of the batch analysed until now can be dated to the 2nd century AD, of which two local issues and an as issued by Lucius Aelius Caesar in 137 (**Fig. 13**). One remarkable local issue put into circulation during the Roman period by Histria is a pseudo-autonomous coin, with Apollo seated on the *omphalos* on the obverse and Dionysus standing, turning towards the left and accompanied by the legend ICTPIA-NQN, on the reverse (**Fig. 14**). This coin was found in association with various materials, including a bronze coin from Galerius Maximian Caesar of the CONCORDIA MILITVM type, issued by Heraklea during AD 295–296 (**Fig. 15**). The local issue with Apollo seated on the *omphalos* is a rare find, with only three other items known from older archaeological excavations at Histria (Vilcu, Țârlea 2016, 162). The XRF analysis of the metal composition of all the four coins belonging to this type recovered from Histria so far indicates that they were made of brass (Țârlea et al. 2018, Fig. 7, Tables 3 and 6). Regarding the dating of this monetary type, it was initially presumed that it was put into circulation by the city during the 1st century AD or at the beginning of the next century (Preda, Nubar 1973, 44), but recently – based on stylistic similarities (Beldianu 2014, 109–110) – a later interval was proposed, more specifically during the reign of Commodus (AD 180–192).



Fig. 13. Lucius Aelius Caesar, AD 137 (A. Vilcu).



Fig. 14. Istros, Apollo on *omphalos* type (after Vilcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.13).



Fig. 15. Galerius Maximian Caesar, CONCORDIA MILITVM type, AD 295/296 (after Vilcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.14).

The finds representing the 3rd century AD include coins issued by neighbouring Greek cities, as is the case of a tetrassarion from Tomis (**Fig. 16**) issued for Gordian III (AD 238–244), also made of brass (Țârlea et al. 2018, Fig. 7, Table 6). For the period between the middle of the 3rd century and the tetrarchy, the numismatic material is scarce, being represented by two coins issued during the reign of Probus (AD 276–282; **Fig. 17**).



Fig. 16. Tomis, tetrassarion, Gordian III, AD 238–244, (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 17. Probus, AD 276–282, SALVS AVG type (A. Vîlcu).

The time of the tetrarchy and the first part of the 4th century AD are well represented by 32 items issued for Diocletian, Maximianus, Galerius, Licinius I (**Fig. 18**), Constantine the Great (**Fig. 19**), Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius II. Among the rarer issues is a base metal coin with the legend CONSTANTINIANA DAFNE on the reverse, issued by Constantine I at Constantinople in AD 328/329 (**Fig. 20**); it is the only one of this kind found so far at Histria (Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 163).



Fig. 18. Licinius I, IOVI CONSERVATORI type, AD 313/315 (after Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.15).



Fig. 19. Constantine the Great, PROVIDENTIAE AVGG type, AD 324/325 (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 20. Constantine the Great, CONSTANTINIANA DAFNE type, AD 328/329 (after Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.2).

The numismatic material dated to the second half of the 4th century and the 5th century AD identified so far consists of bronze coins issued by Valens (four coins), Arcadius (one coin), Marcian (one coin), and Zeno (one coin). The research from this sector of the city confirms the rarity of the coinage dated to the second half of the 5th century at Histria, with only three coins from Marcian having been published (**Fig. 21**).



Fig. 21. Marcian, AD 450–457, with monogram on reverse (A. Vîlcu).

The latest coins found in the Acropolis Centre-South Sector are Early Byzantine base metal coins issued after the reform of Anastasius from 498 and used during the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century (19 items identified until present). The coinage is in general represented by folles (M) and half folles (K), but also by a small number of items with a smaller denomination,

such as 10 nummia (I) and five nummia (€), used in everyday transactions. The finds from this sector show so far a feeble presence of coins from Anastasius I, Justin I, and the first part of the reign of Justinian I (**Fig. 22**).



Fig. 22. Justinian I, follis, Antiochia, AD 554/555 (after Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 163.19).

Starting with the middle of the 6th century, the Byzantine monetary production is well represented, with the majority of the finds being folles and half folles issued by Justin II (**Fig. 23**), to which a smaller number of folles from Tiberius II Constantine and Mauricius (**Fig. 24**) can be added.



Fig. 23. Justin II, follis, Nicomedia, AD 577/578 (A. Vîlcu).



Fig. 24. Mauricius, follis, Antiochia, AD 593/594 A. Vîlcu).

One follis dated to 607/608 and a half follis from 603–610 – both issued for Phocas (**Figs. 25–26**) – come to join the latest coins from the beginning of the 7th century AD known from Histria until now.



Fig. 25. Phocas, 20 nummia, Constantinople, AD 603/610 (after Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 164.22).



Fig. 26. Phocas, follis, Constantinople, AD 607/608 (A. Vîlcu).

Previous archaeological excavations on other sectors from Histria brought to light 14 folles and half folles from Phocas, as well as a gold solidus of 22 siliquae from 609–610 (Vîlcu et al. 2006, 163). The end of the monetary circulation at Histria took place at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Heraclius, as indicated by the latest issued items found during excavations in the 1950s: a follis from 613 and another from 613/614. The continuation of the habitation on the outskirts of the city is attested by a half follis issued by Heraclius in 613/614 and found in the area of the Sinoe township, and by a gold solidus issued by Constantine IV during 674–681 found in the village of Istria – the only find of this type known so far for the entire region of Dobrudja (Vîlcu et al. 2006, 169; Vîlcu, Țârlea 2016, 161–162).

The numismatic evidence presented in this article, even in a preliminary manner, allows glimpses into the rich and effervescent social, economical, and political life of the Greek city of Istros/Histria during its existence.

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