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**CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE
PHENOMENON OF MONETARY SIGNS
THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE LATEST
ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NUMISMATIC
FINDINGS IN THE ISTRO-PONTIC AREA
(6TH CENTURY – FIRST HALF OF
THE 5TH CENTURY BC)**

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ПРИНОСИ КЪМ ФЕНОМЕНА НА ДОМОНЕТНИТЕ
ФОРМИ ПРЕЗ ПРИЗМАТА НА НАЙ-НОВИТЕ
АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИ И НУМИЗМАТИЧНИ
НАХОДКИ В ИСТРО-ПОНТИЙСКИЯ РЕГИОН
(VI – ПЪРВАТА ПОЛОВИНА НА V В. ПР. ХР.)

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Contributions on the phenomenon of monetary signs through the prism of the latest archaeological and numismatic findings in the Istro-Pontic area (6th century – first half of the 5th century BC)

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Приноси към феномена на домонетните форми през призмата на най-новите археологически и нумизматични находки в Истро-Понтийския регион (VI – първата половина на V в. пр. Хр.)

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Abstract: The latest archaeological and numismatic findings concerning the phenomenon of Western Pontic monetary signs in the continental Dobruja territory are briefly presented. The new information comes from the Histria and Tomis colonies, Histria's chora, Callatis' chora, and from the local autochthonous environments located outside the Greek chora. From Histria, among others, proof made of lead that has the shape of a West Pontic monetary sign and that eloquently indicates the casting of these items locally stands out. In Tomis, an inventory of a cremation burial that comprises five monetary signs and an autonomous Histrian coin of the "wheel" type that suggests their use as Charon's obol are noticeable. In the Histrian chora, the most recent findings come from the Enisala and Orgamé areas. The finding of a hoard consisting of monetary signs in Albești indicates the presence of a Milesian exchange point prior to the founding of the Dorian colony of Callatis. In the local environment, outside the chorae of Histria and Tomis, new findings of monetary signs are identified in seven archaeological points, mainly in the south-west of Dobruja. Also noteworthy is a partially-preserved hoard found in the southern part of Dobruja, near the village of Dumbrăveni, probably from a local open-air settlement, from which only several monetary signs have survived.

Keywords: Monetary signs, Histria, Dobruja, 6th century - first half of the 5th century BC.



The intensification of research in the last decade on the phenomenon of monetary signs and such findings in the West Pontic Dobruja area has created the premises for clarifying some long-standing issues, and for outlining new directions for the analysis, these include the beginning of the production of the monetary signs; their significance, role, and their way of dissemination within the *chora* and surrounding the environment of the local populations. In the following sections, I will present the most recent findings from Histria and Tomis as well as from the territory of economic influence of Callatis, with respect to those coming from the local environment (inside the *chora* and outside). All of them are relevant to the complex topic of the monetary signs (arrowheads/bay leaves/olive leaves or wheat grains). They come from both systematic and rescue archaeological excavations, and some from field surveys carried out using specialised devices and detection techniques. In addition, to shape the overall picture, finds from older archaeological excavations are discussed, which, for both subjective and objective reasons, have not yet been included in the scientific discourse.

1. Histria and Tomis

The systematic archaeological research carried out so far in the area of Histria has not yield any relevant results that attest to the continuous presence of monetary signs from the category of those identified over time as arrowheads, bay leaves, olive leaves, or wheat grains in the western area of the Black Sea. This state of art is a result of 100 years archaeological excavations, which is a convincing argument to understanding the purpose for which they were cast and also the geographical and economical ways these signs took to the destination point (the *chora* and beyond, in the open and fortified centres of the autochthonous populations). From Histria, findings of monetary signs coming from the western plateau of the fortress (nine pieces) are known, from the level specific to the Archaic period (Preda 1998, 31), albeit without a record of their total number (Preda, Nubar 1973, 17, nos. 1–8, 11). Unfortunately, they did not receive the attention they deserved, being only reported among other findings. In other cases, they were mixed in the large mass of military arrow heads, having been seen only as deviations from the known “classical” models, closest to variations of the general shape. To the nine pieces another 16 monetary signs were added, discovered during the field investigations in the 1990s in the western district of Plateau X, (Talmațchi 2001, 121–122, nr. 1–10, 12, 13, 14, 19; Talmațchi 2002–2003, 371, nr. 128–129). An accidental find of a monetary sign originating probably from the area of the tumular necropolis is to be added as well (Talmațchi 2002–2003, 371, nr. 130). In the archaeological contexts belonging to other historical eras, such as the Roman and the early Byzantine periods, I identified four pieces from the Thermae sector (Suceveanu et al. 1982, 149, nr. 1–4) and one from the large Episcopal Basilica (Talmațchi, Băjenaru 2009, 187, nr. 3, Fig. 1). Although they appear in archaeological contexts, they have been recorded in secondary positions, in ancient levels from much later periods than the era in which they were cast and used. This fact does not mean that they were used in the Hellenistic period or in the Roman and Roman-Byzantine periods.

In the last decade, another 14 pieces have been added to the number. They were found during the archaeological research led in 2016 in the area of the northern district called Constanța/Metaxa and from the excavations carried out during the 1960s–1970s in the sector of the civil district located on Plateau X.

During the archaeological research conducted in the Constanța/Metaxa sector, five monetary signs were uncovered, including one with a four-spoked wheel symbol, one with a fish symbol, and one assigned to the Kerkinitis colony. The monetary signs produced at Kerkinitis appear in the shape of stylised, double-faceted arrow heads with their tip being perfectly triangular. In the Istro-Pontic territory, nine similar pieces are known so far, coming from two findings, both in the composition of some hoards (Talmațchi 2002–2003, 370–371, nos. 107–127; Talmațchi, Andreescu 2009, 42, nos. 1–8). The fourth piece from Constanța/Metaxa sector is actually made of lead. The lead sample for making monetary signs is moulded; on one of the sides there are two lateral edges and a protruding central one, and it presents two prominent lateral edges and a slightly pronounced central rib; the other side is completely smooth. In my opinion, this specimen is unique among the known archaeological and numismatic finds. It is exceptional for the devel-

opment of the topic of monetary signs' presence in the west and north-west of Pontos Euxinos. The accompanying details proves the existence of a preliminary stage in the design of the shape and of the depicted/accepted details in relation to these signs, and in the general framework of the casted monetary signs intended to have an exchange role. The find from Histria, in the Archaic area of the acropolis, indicates the possibility of its production in local made patterns. It should also be seen as clear evidence of the production here of the monetary signs from the category referred to as arrowheads, laurels, and olive or wheat grains. Obviously, Histria seems to join other West Pontic Greek colonies as a place of origin for monetary signs with an exchange role produced by casting. For example, it is worth mentioning Apollonia Pontica, in connection with the discovery at Atia (Bulgaria), where a mould used for their production was uncovered (Balabanov 1982, 40).

The role of a stage prior to the production of the finished monetary sign was fundamental for finding an incipient shape and for the realisation of a visual and physical/concrete project, based on the intentions and plans of Histria's inhabitants. On this occasion, the lead sample was eventually validated by a first interested group, who then chose the metal (a common alloy such as bronze), the shape, and, when appropriate, some details of the "decor". It is clear that we are not dealing with a piece which was in "circulation". Rather, it is an experimental piece, made from a particular perspective and with a particular use. But these pieces and most likely other similar pieces were the basis of the initial technological process of general and mass casting production of the monetary signs. Considering the chosen shape and its use as a verification standard for the monetary signs intended directly for trade, I consider that its experimental realisation belongs to the last decades of the first half of the 6th century BC.

The nine pieces found on Plateau X are added to those already known as coming from the same defined area. Plateau X is located outside the fortress towards the west, where archaeological research revealed an intense habitation starting with the 6th century BC, as well as a craft district with deep economic and commercial valances (Preda 1961, 11).

Along with these recent findings, a total of 45 isolated monetary signs are to be listed as found during the systematic archaeological research in Histria (fortress/plateau/necropolis), of which 34 come from the settlement on the western plateau, five from the north district area (Constanța/Metaxa), four from the outside the fortress *thermae*, and one from the area of the large Episcopal Basilica.

Archaeological research from Histria conducted in the area conventionally named "The Temple (T)" has led in the last half decade to the discovery of several votive deposits dated in the Late Archaic period. They also had in their structure battle arrowheads whose sharp points were cut and, in some cases, whose sleeves were filled with lead (Talmațchi 2017, 52–54). From a stratigraphic point of view, this find sequence provided information that the "Scythian type" cast arrowheads used initially for a military purpose (later modified as signs by cutting off the sharp head and filling the peduncle with lead) are first used by the Histria community in the sacred area. These are extremely important for the research of the monetary signs in Histria and generally for the west of the Pontos Euxinos. In this context, it might be possible that this category (and only this category) may have had a religious function. Such pieces come from the Scythian and Getic environments. However, their emergence (adapted by removing any blunt or violent elements in their details) inside of a sacred area of great significance to the colonising Greek Ionian population in an early period shed a special light on the importance and the nature of the relations with the local populations in the context of the intangible religious ensemble from the end 7th century and the beginning of the 6th century.

In comparison to the situation in Histria, the colony of Tomis, which for a long time had the role of emporium (as a commercial establishment of Ionic origin in the sphere of Histrian influence), has almost 100 isolated monetary signs and three hoards containing over 200 pieces coming from the archaeological and accidental finds. Therefore, the finds from Tomis are almost five times greater than those known from Histria. This can be explained by its status as an emporium in contrast to Histria's as a polis, which implies the existence of an exchange space or of a redistribution centre for different goods brought for exchange, such as those brought by Histria.

Tomis later became a polis, but only after the middle of the 3rd century BC (Avram, Poenaru-Bordea 2001, 570).

In Tomis, isolated pieces published so far have been found during the systematic excavations, and to these we can add others which were found by chance on the occasion of some urban public works. The 54 monetary signs from 1971–1974 were found in the “Cathedral Park” point, in levels IX, X, XI, and XII, which belong to the 6th and 5th centuries BC (Scorpan 1980, 25). To these are added others that were recovered either as a result of archaeological excavations or as a result of accidental findings (Ocheșeanu, Dicu 1983, 441, nos. 1–2; Talmațchi, Clianțe 2006–2007, 13, no. 1; etc.). Some of them appear in clear contexts dating from the 6th–5th centuries BC (first quarter), sometimes in huts and sometimes in secondary positions in levels with mixed ancient materials. This does not mean they remained and were used in the Hellenistic or in the Roman periods. Finally, as an expression of its emporium status, Tomis is the only large-scale colonial centre on the west coast of Pontos Euxinos where hoards of monetary signs have been found so far. Three hoards of monetary signs comprising a total number of 210 pieces were listed (Aricescu 1975, 21, n. 14; Talmațchi 2003, 32–40; Custurea, Dima, Talmațchi, Velter 2007, 11–35; Talmațchi 2010a, 82, no. 4.III).

Archaeological research carried out in the Tomitan Peninsula has resulted in the emergence of many relevant findings for the understanding of the history of the Greco-Roman city located on the banks of the Pontos Euxinos. Among these investigations, some led to the discovery of monetary signs. To these should be added a very important and still unpublished unique burial find from 1968, located about 2 km in a straight line from the Tomitan Peninsula.

Research in the Tomitan Peninsula has led to the discovery of 26 new monetary signs. Of these, two monetary signs have the letter A stamped on them; another three show a schematic representation of the branches of a fir tree or a tree with needle-like leaves; and a piece with a completely smooth surface, which is seemingly an unnatural production condition, can be associated with the vast majority of the known monetary signs.

The cremation burial, that was investigated in 1968, had in its inventory five monetary signs from the category of those specially cast for an exchange purpose, and a Histrian coin of the “wheel with spokes” type. The latter, by size and characteristics, is part of the second series of these issues (Talmațchi 2017, 396). Given that no other archaeological remains from the inventory have been preserved, it can be generally dated to the first half of the 5th century BC. The first great significance of this “rediscovery” is the presence of such a tomb from the 5th century in Tomis area, or more precisely in its surroundings. Up to this point, the Tomitan necropolises have not been helpful in constructing a possible chronology of the settlement of Tomis, since published archaeological research has not identified any tombs that predate the 4th century BC (Bucovață 1967, 7, 9–22). The 12-century long history of the Greek colony and of the Roman and Roman-Byzantine city necessitated the creation and expansion of several large necropolises outside the enclosure wall (which were “mobile”, depending on the prosperity or non-prosperity of the times, serious military events, diseases, and local demography) for the Greek, Roman, and Roman-Byzantine periods. Secondly, I highlight their significance as payment in a funerary context for crossing the River Styx in the world of the dead, with the monetary signs being associated with the bronze Histrian coin of “wheel” type. The presence of the monetary signs was charged with this eschatological message, which is closely related to the tradition of “Charon’s obol” and the way of looking at life after death. Among the isolated findings of monetary signs here and in other geographical areas, this practice of their deposition in the funerary inventory during the Archaic Greek era with the role of “Charon’s obol” successfully replaces the actual coinage (Zagajlo 1982, 22).

The association found in a closed complex is new archaeological evidence of the current significance of the monetary signs in the Greek and Greek-indigenous communities of the late 6th century and early 5th century BC. Until now, the finding of monetary signs in association with other local coins or from other geographical areas in a closed “secured” complex is unknown, at least west of the Pontos Euxinos. There were other types of archaeological landmarks in this respect, with the find-spots of monetary signs/“wheel” coins having been in the commercial ex-

change points inside the chora (Avram 1996, 243–244) and in the economical-commercial district (Sector X) of Histria (Preda, Nubar 1973, 90–103; Talmațchi 2002, 17–28).

Through recent investigations, approximately 100 pieces have been discovered as isolated finds in Tomis (adding to the five already found in the funerary deposit).

2. Histrian Chora

The monetary signs (arrowheads/bay leaves/olive leaves or wheat grains) appear both as isolated findings and in hoards, especially in rural areas and in the influence area of the colonies within the Greek-indigenous settlements (Poenaru-Bordea 2001, 9–10). The existence of an organised territory in Histria is scientifically accepted no later than the middle of the 6th century BC (Avram 1996, 244; Avram 2006, 59–63). From inside the territory of influence, some settlements are known that had become commercial centres under the direct influence of the city (Irimia 1980, 67) and also belonged to a space of religious, ideological, and cultural interference (Buzoianu 2001, 304). Among the novel finds from the Histrian chora, three notable monetary signs from Enisala and two more probably found in the chora of Orgamé are worth mentioning (Fig. 1) (Isvoranu 2018, 232–233, nos. 1–5). These new signs correspond to one of the most important areas in the west of the Pontos Euxinos with concentrations of such findings. For that matter, some of the findings originally assigned to the Histrian chora were reassigned to the colony of Orgamé and its territory.

Orgamé seems to have played an important role in the economic exchanges in the northern part of Dobruja. The colony had “forms of urban habitation” since the first part of the 6th century BC (Mănucu-Adameșteanu 2001, 211–218), holding the polis status (Mărgineanu-Cârstoiu, Mănucu-Adameșteanu 2006, 115).

3. Chora of Callatis

Archaeological and numismatic findings, especially from the last decade, have provided information on the discovery of the same monetary signs in the area of economic and political influence of the Doric colony of Callatis. Western Pontic monetary signs and Histrian coins of the “wheel with spokes” type were found in Albești (Constanța County) at the site called “Hagieni Forest” (“Pădurea Hagieni”) or “in the forest” (“La pădure”). This site is located about 3.5 km to the north-east, in a straight line from the Doric fortification and on the south-eastern border of the current town. Such a fortification played a strategic, defensive, and regulatory role in the agricultural space and within the trade routes that crossed the chora and went to and from Callatis. It could stop a tribal attack and had a military garrison of Scythian origin financially supported by the polis (Avram 1991, 29). A total of 27 signs belonging to both known chronological and typological groups are known, and one can see the structure of a hoard that was not fully recovered (Talmațchi 2009, 86–87, nos. 25–39; Talmațchi 2018, 82–84, nos. 1–19). In order to complete the picture of the monetary signs found in the area, it should be mentioned that a monetary sign was found in the area of Cotu Văii (Albești commune, Constanța County), about 5 km in a straight line from the village of Albești (Fig. 1; Talmațchi, Băjenaru 2009, 187, no. 4). The finding of eight Histrian coins of the “wheel with spokes” type should also be noted. The grouping of these finds suggests the presence of some Histrian-Milesian elements in the local environment prior to the foundation of the Callatian colony and the construction of the Greek-indigenous fortification at Albești. This fact can be interpreted as the establishment of an early Histrian commercial exchange point in this locale. There is evidence for the existence of a direct connection on water from the Black Sea and the respective area in the existing natural valleys, which seemed to have been navigable during the 6th and 5th centuries BC (Talmațchi 2018, 93–94).

4. Local Environment

The isolated emergence of a Western Pontic monetary sign (or two or three) in different settlements particular to the local population of Dobruja, outside the *chora* of Histria and Tomis,

was not common in the finding practice of such pieces. Gradually, they began to be known in the findings, with hoards of monetary signs comprising hundreds of pieces in this type of settlement having been revealed. In the last decade, given some re-evaluations of older finds, recent publication, donations coming from collections, and some judicial reviews of batches discovered occasionally with metal detectors, a lot of information of interest for this general topic has been gathered. Special attention was paid to the discussions around the significance and the role played in the local environment. In other words, their presence in the local environment of Dobruja is no longer an insignificant part of the monetary signs' findings repertoire.

Isolated findings of monetary signs were discovered in some archaeological contexts, mainly in the south-west of Dobruja (see Fig. 1: Adamclisi, Canlia, Dumbrăveni, Izvoarele), where the Getic component betrays its presence through the numerous open or fortified settlements listed. In the southern part of Dobruja, a partially preserved hoard was found in Dumbrăveni (Dumbrăveni commune, Constanța County), from which only nine monetary signs survived. It is very likely that it comes from a local open-air settlement.

The presence of monetary signs, as well as of early Greek luxury pottery, correlates with the earliest stages of the respective Getic settlements. For the Istro-Pontic territory, the Danube represented the main route of economic and commercial communication in the pre-Roman period, both for the Getae and for the representatives of the West Pontic colonies.

Based on the findings, there was an intense human and material circulation. In the settlements of the local population located outside the *chora*, it can be observed that the higher the number of archaeological findings of Greek luxury products, the greater is the chance of finding monetary signs. The Western Pontic monetary signs within the category of those produced by casting for exchange purposes were for the Greek population in the local environment real "vehicles" that accompanied the luxury objects to obtain local goods in return. The findings of dozens of pieces (for example between 30 and 200 specimens) in the settlement of Izvoarele (located 97 km away from Histria in straight line) and Floriile (located 92 km away from Histria in straight line, see Fig. 1) express best this idea (Talmațchi 2008, 9; Talmațchi 2010b, 387–398). Their presence is obviously related to the importance and relevance of the settlements in the local world. We still do not know the whole story due to the lack of archaeological research in these fortified settlements, with its documentation being unequal and objectively selective from the perspective of the findings. However, we cannot ignore that the settlements from Floriile with the Adâncata I and II points and Izvoarele offered numerous and varied early Greek artefacts, some of them considered luxurious (Irimia 2007, 151–152, 169, 173–182). The settlements at Floriile (through the Adâncata I–II points) seem to correspond to an important centre of military and religious power, with economic, cultural, and political values (Irimia 2004–2005, 320–346). The variety and richness of the archaeological material discovered in the Izvoarele area indicates an important economic centre with close trade connections with the Greek communities from the west of the Pontos Euxinos (directly or as intermediaries for products from other parts of the Greek world) and one of a clear political and military importance (Irimia 2010, 101).

5. Conclusions

At the end of this brief presentation of the latest archaeological and numismatic findings that concern the world of monetary signs in the category of so-called arrowheads/laurel leaves/olive leaves or wheat grains in the Istro-Pontic territory, please allow me to specify and nuance some specific aspects of this considered field.

The analysis of the monetary signs in the context of archaeological findings (presence, contexts, symbolism, role, etc.) may not always succeed in solving the problem of their numismatic research, but it manages to validate some older or more recent solutions. On the other hand, these West Pontic monetary signs are not a unique lot from a typological and chronological point of view and should not be analysed in this way. The explanation of the form and the connection with the economic products of the area may not always respect the "standard model" approach in the studies of the monetary world.

The monetary signs belonging in the category of specially cast pieces for the purpose of exchange are a creation of the Greek environment specific to the entire western and north-western area of the Pontos Euxinos, produced from an economic interest with obvious commercial benefits. They belong to an early stage of the relations developed between the Greeks and Getae, probably the main majority actors present in Dobruja in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, though not the only ones.

The monetary signs are part of the goods category that had a strong influence coming from the Greek to the local world. Beyond the culture, beliefs, and ideology of the natives, the eventual imposition of those in the category of objects specifically cast for commercial use in the exchange relations on the western and north-western coast of the Black Sea and the deep interior of the continent is a phenomenon specific to the area. As can be seen in the archaeological research context, new evidence and information accumulate with each passing decade. Furthermore, the association of archaeological sources with numismatic ones (sometimes with documentary ones as well) is beneficial and methodologically correct with the aim of obtaining all relevant information which may give rise to meaningful considerations and conclusions. As has often been stated, an important form of the zonal trade at that time was between settlers and indigenous people (Tsetsckhladze 1998, 51–52). The commerce could be done both with the settlers' own products and with foreign products as intermediaries (Bounegru 1983, 59). There is an obvious presence in some local sites of various Greek artefacts such as monetary signs, silver and bronze coins, terracotta statuettes representing Greek deities, and many vessels etc. Clearly, they did not have the same meanings in the autochthonous world as those known in Greek society. However, although not always directly, the presence of an early Greek influence has been observed based on archaeological findings, which brought important changes in the social, political, and economic structure of the indigenous people.

For the Greek environment, finding proof of the lead "monetary sign" in Histria stands out as a test to check for a solution adopted for the exchange with the autochthonous peoples. The artefact comes to archaeologically illustrate the casting of the Western Pontic monetary signs in Histria. The amount of signs depended on the private (and later maybe even public) interest in direct connection to emerging needs. At the same time, I do not believe that there was ever a "control" of a Greek city over all the cast monetary signs or use in the *chora* or outside it, as it probably happened with the autonomous and colonial coinage.

Additionally, the only funerary deposit containing associated monetary signs and coins (in this case a Histrian coin of the "wheel" type) found near Tomis brings new evidence for the identification of these pieces with the exchange element and the commercial standard. As can be seen, the monetary signs cast for a commercial purpose serve as a payment for the transport of the soul of the deceased in the afterlife, and from my point of view their monetary meaning in this context is unquestionable. Also very important for the significance and chronology, none of the signs belong to the category of those made from military or hunting arrowheads adapted by cutting the sharp head and (from case to case) by filling the sleeve with lead. This tomb, the earliest so far in the Tomis area, provides from a funerary point of view in the colony area clear evidence of the archaeological attestation of the period of the late 6th century and early 5th century BC. It is also true that the tomb is located almost 2 km from the central area of the Tomitan Peninsula. But small habitation cores at the specified moment should not be sought only in the south-eastern half of the Tomitan Peninsula. It is possible that along the sea coast (where the Gates 3–6 of the modern harbour from the edge of the current city of Constanța are located) small anchorage, trade, and housing points exist, while in their vicinity small early burial areas might have developed (see in this sense the constant situation found with the settlements near the Archaic Histria in the bay area).

Although they were not actual coins, the signs synthetically reflected the structural changes in the economy and society of the Greek centres on the Black Sea coast and their relatively immediate surroundings. Subsequently, from the second half of the 6th century BC and for the indigenous society located at a considerable distance from the casting place and from the safe circulation on land, they represent from a chronological, typological, and functional point of view

a special chapter of the general numismatics specific to the Greek world of the 6th–5th centuries BC, notably of the western basin of the Pontos Euxinos and with exceptional manifestations in relation with the current theories of pre-monetary and monetary mechanisms. They disappeared from use when the local (including zonal) political, social, and commercial conditions no longer corresponded to these types of relationships based on this specific standard.

Furthermore, there are certainly problems to be analysed, completed, and nuanced, with the desired clarification of the various aspects characteristic to the phenomenon of Western Pontic monetary signs still far from being solved. But this research on monetary signs remains a personal desideratum and a particularly generous topic due to its scientific complexity.

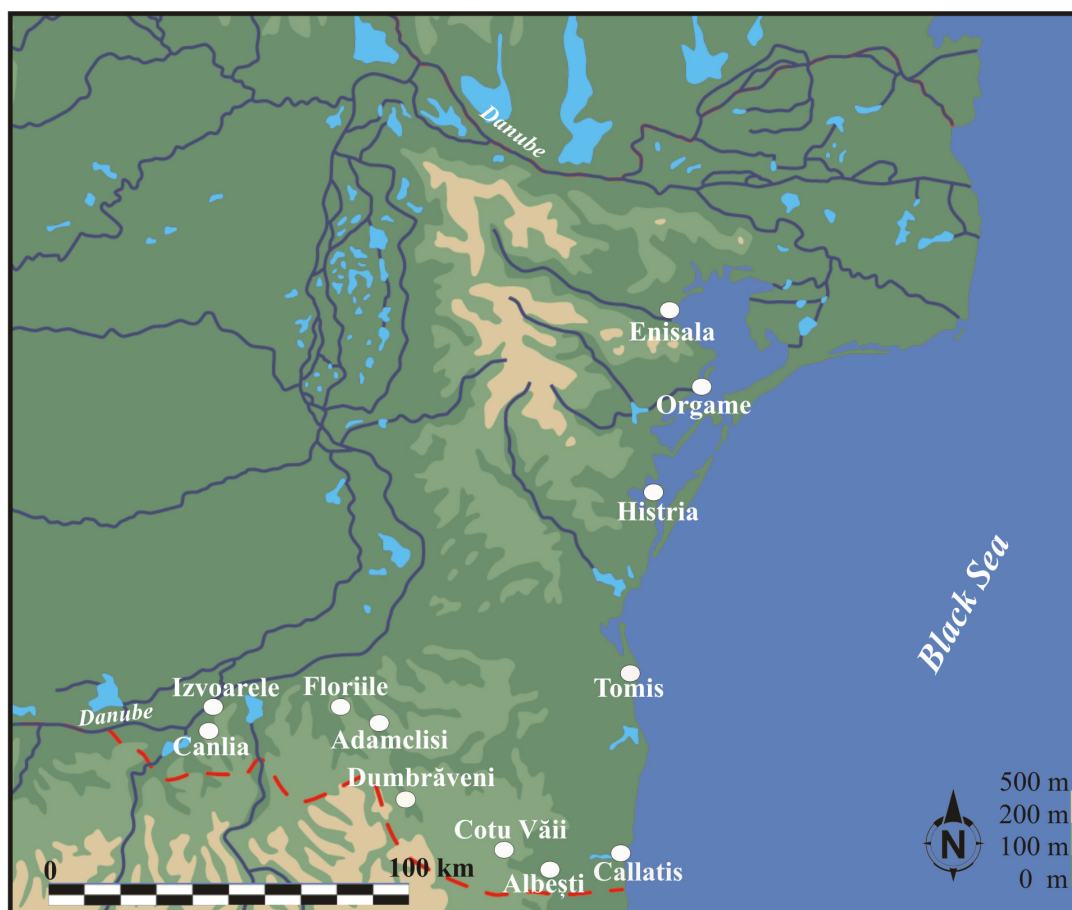


Fig. 1. Map with administrative locations of new discoveries of Western Pontic monetary signs in Dobruja.

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