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# **REVIEWS**

# **Sofia ANDREEVA**

> Design & layout: Petru Ureche

# NUMISMATICS

# THE ROMAN IMPERIAL HOARD POTAISSA III (ROMAN DACIA) OR... WHEN WE ALL MAKE BOTH PERFORMANCE AND MISTAKES! The peculiar coins

**Abstract:** The present paper is dealing with the possibility offered by a Roman imperial coin hoard to discover, on one hand, the constant feature of human nature to make mistakes during working activity, and on the other hand, the fact that any new hoard may come up with new coin types or variants.

The hoard Potaissa III (in Roman Dacia; nowadays, Turda, Romania) brought up various peculiar coins, that are discussed in detail here, that reveal: tricky monetary policy; engraving mistakes; engraver's skill; new coin types; new coin type variants and post-minting human behaviour upon the coin

**Keywords:** Roman imperial coin hoard, plated coin, coin-die striking errors, graffito on coin, new coin types and variants.

he discovery of a coin hoard is always a moment of both scientific and aesthetic euphoria. Furthermore, when such a monetary assembly is entirely recovered, including the container, and within an excellent archaeological context, then, for certain, we reach the academic Eden (sic!).

This is the case of the Roman Imperial hoard Potaissa  $\rm III^1$  which comprises 543 imperial denarii ranging from Nero (coins issued in AD 64-65) to Macrinus (AD 218).

# THE SITE

Following the strong menace coming from the populations at the northern and western borders of Roman Dacia (broadly, nowadays, Romania) during the Marcomanic wars, in AD 168-170, the 5th *Macedonica* legion was transferred from *Troesmis* (Lower Moesia, nowadays, Igliţa, Romania) to *Potaissa* (nowadays, Turda, Romania) (maps 1-2). As often occurred, the new garrison became the nucleus for the development of the future urban settlement.

Surpassed only by the complex settlement of Apulum (nowadays, Alba Iulia, Romania; with one colonia, one municipium and the castra of the  $13^{th}$  Gemina legion) and Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (nowadays, Sarmizegetusa,

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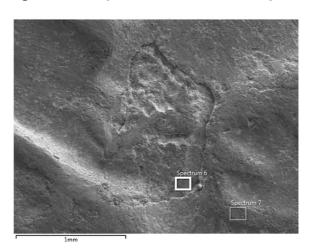
 $<sup>^1\,</sup>$  The hoard was conventionally named following two previous discovered Roman coin hoards at Turda (Roman Potaissa): Potaissa I found in 1932; Potaissa II found in 1981-1982 (GĂZDAC 2010, catalogue of hoards from Dacia; PÎSLARU 2009, 117-120).







Fig. 1. Denarius Septimius Severus. The minuscule spot with the missing silver foil reveals the copper core.



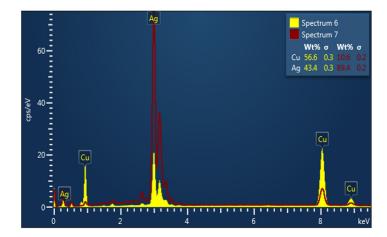


Fig. 2a-b. The results following the use of SEM and EDS methods.

Romania) in terms of living intensity, Potaissa held a leading position during the province existence<sup>2</sup>.

# THE FINDSPOT<sup>3</sup>

The hoard came to light on the  $12^{th}$  of November 2015, following mechanical excavation of a ditch for a future fence.

The findspot of the coin hoard lies at approximately 240 m north-westward the NW bastion of the legionary fortress, thus, presumably, within the location area of the civil habitation entity where soldier families, craftsmen and traders lived (the canabae legionis)4 (map 3).

The coins were placed in a ceramic vessel partially destroyed by the machine at the time of discovery. The rescue excavations that followed revealed that the container was, most likely, placed right beneath the floor of a Roman building, that may have served as a storage, shed or outhouse. Unfortunately, due to the limits of the terrain it was impossible to unveil the entire Roman construction.<sup>5</sup>

# THE PECULIAR COINS

The present paper is a sequence of the forthcoming monograph dedicated to this hoard. The aim is to present the constant features of the human nature, from the Antiquity to nowadays, when we all can make mistakes, besides, to point out, aspects such as monetary politics, new coin types etc.

The study piece by piece on all 543 has revealed a series of errors of different nature: mutual monetary politics; aesthetical errors; technical skill; knowledge on the designtype combination; fatigue vs negligence; post-minting habits (e.g. graffiti on coin) etc.

The same approach allowed us to identify new variants of coin types or even a new coin type.

The following categories of peculiar coins have been identified within the hoard Potaissa III:

# 1. A mutual monetary policy

As it has been already demonstrated, 6 mainly, starting with the Severan dynasty, the state seems to have regularly moved towards a tricky monetary policy issuing coins with a core of ordinary metal dressed in precious metal foil (mostly, silver, but gold, too). In most of the cases, the chance to identify such coins was simply the total or partial missing foil that covered the coin's core.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> cf. RUSSU 1955, 101; BĂRBULESCU 1994, 8; BĂRBULESCU 1987, 39-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> We express here our gratitude to our colleagues from the Turda History Museum, Costel Golfin, Dragoş Trif, Daniel Pleşa and Alina Călugăr for their self-abnegation during excavation and documentation at the place to make this hoard available for research.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> On recently highlighted structures nearby the hoard findspot: NEMETI et alii 2019a; NEMETI et alii 2019b; NEMETI et alii 2020; NEMETI et alii 2021; PÎSLARU/MATEI/BLAGA 2010 (forthcoming).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> ANDONE-ROTARU 2020, 8-9; MATEI 2021, 152; MATEI/MĂRINCEAN

<sup>2021, 14-19.</sup> 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> PETER 1990; KING 1996; GĂZDAC/ALFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2001.





Fig. 3. Plated denarius of Caracalla. The silver foil is heavily damaged on both sides of the coin.





Fig. 4. Cast denarius of Septimius Severus.

In the hoard Potaissa III, two such coins were identified as being plated, only because the silver foil has cracked and went partially missing. In one of the cases, there was only a microscopic spot where the foil is absent. The results following the use of SEM and EDS methods on the coin surface have clearly confirm the copper core (fig. 2a-b).7

a. Plated denarius, bearing the portrait of Septimius Severus (fig. 1).

Obverse: SEVERVS - PIVS AVG

Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right.

Reverse: P M TR P XVIII - COS III P P

Salus, draped, seated left, feeding out of patera in right

hand snake coiled in lap.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 236 (Rome?, AD 209)

This plated coin is an excellent starting point to ask ourselves whether the number of Roman plated coins - and, for certain, not only in the case of the present hoard - is much larger that we can imagine, but because the covering foil is still entirely preserved such coins may pass as genuine? Like the coin above, the aesthetic quality is very high.

Plated denarius, bearing the portrait of Caracalla (**fig. 3**).

Obverse: ANTONINVS PIVS - AVG BRIT

Head of Caracalla, laureate, right.

Reverse: [resti]TVTOR - VRBIS

Roma, helmeted, draped, seated left, holding Victory in extended right hand and spear in left hand; beside

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 228 (Rome?, AD 210-213)

2. Cast denarius bearing the portrait of Septimius Severus (fig. 4)

Obverse: L SEP[t sev pert] - AVG IMP VIII Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right.

Reverse: [profe]C-T-IO AVG

Septimius Severus, in military attire, on horse prancing right, holding spear in right hand.

Catalogue (prototype): RIC IV.1, 91 (Rome, AD 196-197)

The faded design indicates a cast coin.

Unlike plated ones, the Roman cast coins seem to have been products of local workshops more or less clandestine.8





Fig. 5a. Denarius of Commodus, hoard Potaissa III. Modius with six grain stalks.





Fig. 5b. Denarius of Commodus. Modius with seven grain stalks9.

 $<sup>^{7}\,</sup>$  We used the JSM-7800F scanning electron microscope that allows analysis of the morphological structure of nanomaterial at a magnification range up to 1.000.000x and a resolution from under 1nm to 3nm, http://www.jeolusa. com/PRODUCTS/ElectronOptics/ScanningElectronMicroscopes (SEM)/FESEM/JSM7800F/tabid/869/Default.aspx. We are grateful to Assoc. Prof. Lucian Barbu-Tudoran, Faculty of Biology and Geology Cluj-Napoca, for his help.

KING 1996; ALFÖLDI 1971.

 $<sup>\</sup>underline{https://www.acsearch.info/search.html?id=2560550}$ (accessed on







Fig. 6. Denarius Publius Septimius Geta. The 'tear' on Geta's eye.

# 3. Engraving errors

a. Missing details/new variants

Denarius of Commodus (fig. 5a).

Obverse: M COMMODVS - ANTON AVG PIVS

Head of Commodus, laureate, right.

PMTRPVIIII - IMPVII COS IIII PP

Modius with six grain stalks.

Catalogue: cf. RIC III, 94a (but seven grain stalks)

The catalogued coin type states a modius with seven grain stalks (fig. 5b), while the coin from the hoard, illustrated here (fig. 5a) clearly depicts six stalks. An engraving error or a new variant?





Fig. 7. Denarius Julia Domna. 'D' letter Plasarea greșită a liniei de exergă și a coloanei a dus la plasarea literei "D" peste sceptru.

# 4. Engraving mistake followed by redesign.

Denarius of Caracalla for Julia Domna (fig. 7)

Obverse: IVLIA PIA - FELIX AVG

Bust of Julia Domna, hair elaborately waved in ridges and turned

up low at the back, draped, right.

Reverse: MATRI - DEVM

Cybele, towered, draped, standing front, head left, holding drum in right hand and sceptre in left hand, resting left arm on column; at feet, left, lion.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 382 (Rome, AD 211-217)

Following the exergue line and the column being misplaced, thus, the letter 'D' from DEVM was placed over the sceptre's head.

# 5. Striking error.

Denarius of Commodus (fig. 8).

Obverse: NOBILIT AVG [m comm an]T P - FEL AVG

Head of Commodus, laureate, right.

NOBILIT AVG P M TR P XI [imp viii cos v p p] FEL AVG BR

Nobilitas, draped, standing right, holding sceptre in right hand and statuette of Minerva in extended left hand.

Catalogue: RIC III, 139 (Rome, AD 185)

A double struck coin due to coin-die

# **b.** Deformation of the coin design

Denarius of Septimius Severus for P. Septimius Geta (as Caesar) (**fig. 6**).

Obverse: P SEPT GETA - CAES PONT Bust of Geta, bare-headed, draped, right.

Reverse: PRI-NC I-VVENT-VTIS

Geta, in military attire, standing left, holding branch in right hand and spear in left hand; behind, trophy.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 18 (Rome, AD 200-202)

Due to an engraving mistake, one can notice a 'tear' on Geta's eye.



Fig. 8. Denarius Commodus. A part of the obverse inscription - FEL AVG BR - is visible on the reverse, while a part of the reverse inscription is noticeable on the obverse - NOBILIT AVG.



Fig. 9. Denar Commodus. Double striking.



Fig. 10. Denarius Caracalla (Caesar). Coin-die sliding.

misplacing. Part of the obverse inscription is also visible on the reverse - FEL AVG BR, while part of the reverse inscription can be seen on the obverse - NOBILIT AVG.

**6. Double striking** following the misplacing of the coin-die on the coin blank

Denarius of Commodus (fig. 9)

Obverse: L AEL AVREL CO-MM AVG P FEL

Head of Commodus, laureate, right.

Reverse: P M TR P XVII IMP VIII COS VII P P

Pietas, veiled, draped, seated left, extending right hand to child and

holding transverse sceptre in left hand; in field, star.

Catalogue: RIC III, 236 (Rome, AD 192)

### Coin-die sliding during striking

Denarius of Septimius Severus for Caracalla (as Caesar) (fig. 10)

M AVR ANTO-NINVS CAES

Bust of Caracalla, bare-headed, draped, cuirassed, right.

SEVERI AVG PII FIL

Lituus, axe, jug, simpulum, and sprinkler.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 4 (Rome, AD 196).

# 8. Low quality design due to the minuscule area, but, no barbarous type

Denarius of Septimius Severus (fig. 11) SEVERVS AVG - PART MAX

Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right.

FVNDATO-R - PACIS

Septimius Severus, veiled, togate, standing left, holding branch in extended right hand and roll in left hand.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 160 (Rome, AD 200-201)

The engraver's skill went down when it came to the emperor's face on the reverse. Most likely, the lilliputian design of the emperor's standing Fig., required an extreme skill of the engraver.

# 9. Post-minting intervention

Denarius of P. Helvius Pertinax (fig. 12)

IMP CAES P HELV PERTIN AVG

Head of Pertinax, laureate, right.

LAETITIA TEM-POR COS II

Laetitia, draped, standing left, holding wreath in right hand and sceptre in left hand.

Catalogue: RIC IV.1, 4 (Rome, AD 193)

One can easily notice a graffito letter 'A' on the reverse.

The presence of a graffito on Roman coins is not a unique aspect. It has been already demonstrated the







Fig. 11. Denarius Septimius Severus. On the reverse, a 'mutant' face of the emperor!



Fig. 12. Denarius Pertinax. A letter 'A' graffito on the reverse.

presence of graffiti on Republican as well as early Imperial issues up to the  $4^{th}$  century AD.  $^{10}$ 

As it has been mentioned: "Le graffito este un pratique graphique minimale que l'on rencontre dans toutes les sociétés, de l'antiquité à nos jours...'. 11

However, at the moment, this denarius from the hoard Potaissa III is the only one known coin with grafitto discovered in Dacia. For certain, there may be other similar cases in Dacia, as well as throughout the Roman Empire, but the size of graffiti, the period of circulation that may worn out the graffiti, and the scholars paying attention to such details, may not offer a real image of this habit.12

The individually marking coins in the Roman Empire is considered, so far, to have three main purposes: ownership, money change and votive reasons.<sup>13</sup> As it has been demonstrated, the graffiti on coins for votive offerings may have certain messages (e.g. Sepiena, Diovis/stipe, MI/ NE(R)/VA),14 beside being found in certain environments (e.g. temples, springs, graves).

In the cases of money changers or ownership, the known cases indicate the presence of one or more letters.

Regarding the coin presented here, the graffito, the archaeological environment, the fact that the coin was still worth hoarding, clearly indicate that we are not facing a case of votive offering.

However, it is difficult to suggest whether the graffito "A" is a symbol of a money changer or the owner.

Still, an important aspect is the state of preservation of this graffito on the coin. While the coin design elements (the representations and the inscriptions) indicate some worn out signs, the

good state of the graffito's preservation indicate that it has been scratched quite sometime after the minting date of the

While the practice of graffiti on coins has been considered 'a phenomenon confined to Levant', 15 recent

analyses, the present coin including, may suggest a much wider area of this human habit.16

# 10. Hybrid type.

Denarius of Marcus Aurelius (fig. 13)

Obverse: IMP M ANTONINVS - AVG TR P XXV

Head of Marcus Aurelius, laureate, right.

Reverse: COS - III

Roma, helmeted, draped, seated left on cuirass, left foot on helmet, holding Victory on extended right hand and vertical spear in left

Catalogue: RIC III, 228 (for obverse); RIC III, 233 (for reverse) (Rome, AD 170-171)

A hybrid coin has a mis-matched obverse and reverse according to the official catalogues. A 'normal' reverse should have depicted Jupiter seated left instead of goddess Rome.

In the case of such a good quality hybrid type, close design and chronology of the coin it is always a question whether it is an engraver mistake or a new coin type?



Fig. 13. Denarius Marcus Aurelius, hybrid type.

# 11. New variants of the coin types

**a.** Denarius of Septimius Severus (**fig. 14a**)

SEVERVS - PIVS AVG

Head of Septimius Severus, laureate, right.

P·M·TR P XI·COS III P P

Fortuna, draped, seated left on low seat, holding rudder set on globe in right hand and cornucopiae in left hand.

Catalogue: cf. RIC IV.1, 189B

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> KEMMERS/SCHOLZ 2017, 124-128.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> ELAYI/LEMAIRE 1998, 15, apud GITLER/PONTING 2003, 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> For a similar opinion: KEMMERS/SCHOLZ 2017, 126.

<sup>13</sup> KEMMERS/SCHOLZ 2017, 126-128.

<sup>14</sup> KEMMERS/SCHOLZ 2017, 126.

<sup>15</sup> GITLER/PONTING 2003, 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> KEMMERS/SCHOLZ 2017, 126-128.



Fig. 14a-b. Denarii Septimius Severus. The new variant: missing wheel under the chair (14a) hoard Potaissa III; the established typed: wheel under the chair (14b).



Fig. 15. Denarius Geta (as Caesar). On the obverse, the bust depiction clearly indicates the presence of the cuirass (the pteryges on the shoulder) beside draping.



Fig. 16. Denarius Antoninus Pius. Roman Imperial Coins does not have it, and is uncertain in the BMCRE.

One can notice the missing wheel under the chair, as in the established coin type (fig. 14b).

b) Denarius of Septimius Severus for P. Septimius Geta (as Caesar) (fig. 14a)

Obverse: P SEPT GETA - CAES PONT

Bust of Geta, bare-headed, draped and cuirassed, right.

Reverse: PRIN-C-IV-VENT-VTIS

Geta, in military attire, standing left, holding branch in right hand and spear in left hand; behind, trophy.

Catalogue: cf. RIC IV.1, 18 (Rome, AD 200-202).

The pteryges of the cuirass are clearly visible on the Geta's shoulder on the reverse, although the RIC mentions only draped bust for this coin type.

# 12). New/confirmed coin type

Denarius of Antoninus Pius (fig. 16) ANTONINVS AVG PI-VS P P TR P XIIII Head of Antoninus Pius, laureate, right. COS - IIII

Tranquilitas, draped, standing right, resting right hand on rudder set on ground and holding two corn-ears downwards in left.

Catalogue: RIC III, non habet; BMCRE IV, p. 104, no. \* (Rome, AD 150-151)

This coin type is not included in the RIC III, while the BMCRE is placing it under questionable type as the coin of this type known, at the time, was coming from the hoard of Reka Devnia.<sup>17</sup>

# **CONCLUSIONS**

The detailed analysis of a large Roman Imperial coin hoard of 543 denarii beside composition, archaeological context, historical aspects, may also reveal the variety of human behaviour. The analysed coins revealed that individuals, no matter the time and place, are tributary to human nature, making deliberately mistakes (e.g. plated coins); mistakes caused by negligence or skill (e.g. striking errors). On the other hand, the same analysis piece by piece may reveal to us new coin variants or types, and the post-minting human behaviour regarding the coin (e.g. the graffito).

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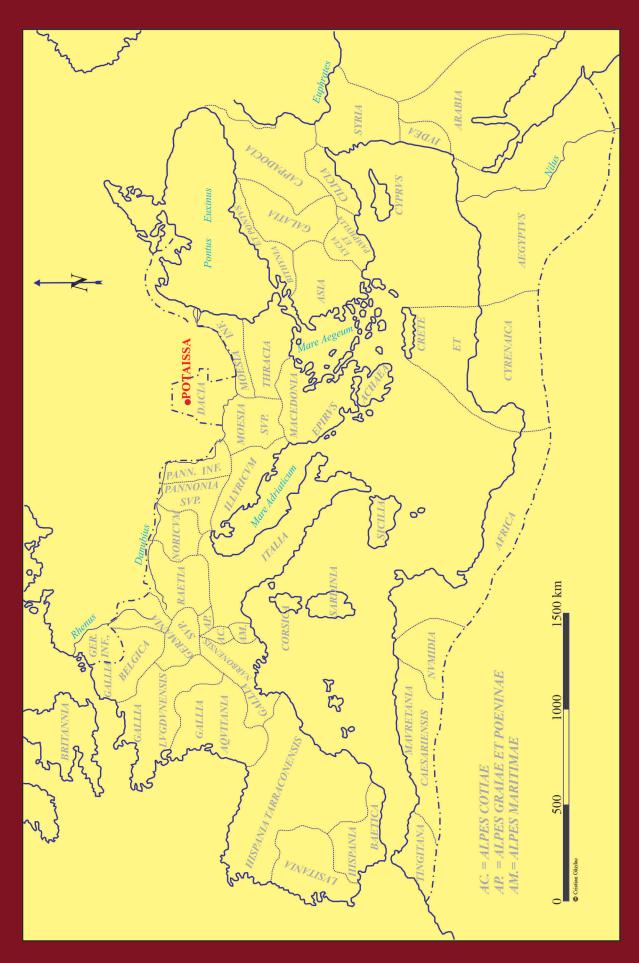
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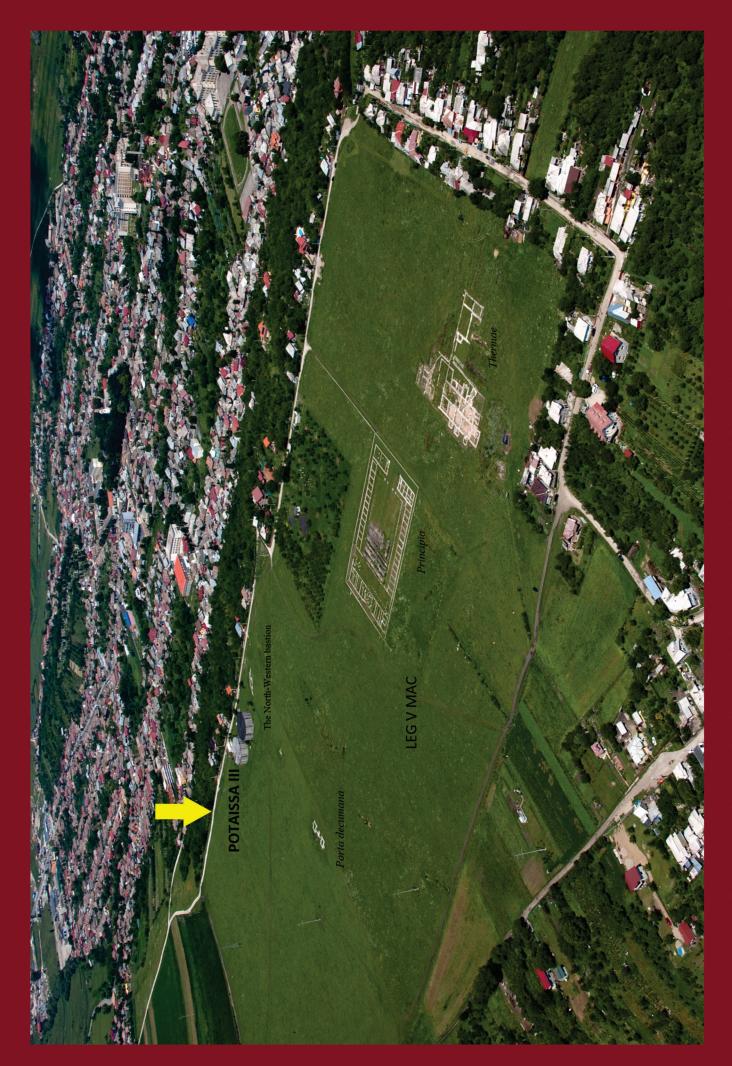
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Map 1. The Roman Empire, mid-2nd century AD, pointing the location of POTAISSA

Map 2. Roman Dacia, pointing the location of POTAISSA.



Map 3. The legionary fortress of the 5th Macedonica Legion, pointing the hoard findspot (after ANDONE-ROTARU 2020, 19, pl. 3).

