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Petru Ureche
AN UNKNOWN COIN DIE OF AUGUSTUS (27 BC – 14 AD), FOUND NEAR OESCUS ON THE DANUBE

Abstract: The paper presents an unknown coin die, which is for obverse of denarii of Augustus. The coin die is said to have been found many years ago in the vicinity of the village of Gigen, district of Pleven – near the ancient Roman colony of Ulpia Oescus and is now kept in a private collection. Only the bronze plate is preserved, where in negative is featured a portrait of Augustus, turned to the left, and around the portrait image is disposed the legend: AVGSTVS DIVI F – mirrored. The coin type of the coin die is for denarii of Augustus struck in the mint at Lugdunum (today Lyon, France) between 15 and 11 BC. The new coin die presented is of the same type as one of the coin dies from the collection of the National Institute of Archaeology with Museum in Sofia. The collection of the same museum in Sofia stores another obverse coin die for denarii of Augustus of a type struck in the mint at Colonia Patricia (today Cordoba, Spain). All three obverse coin dies for denarii of Augustus are discussed in a general context, because their time of making is between 17 – 16 and 15 – 11 BC. All three obverse coin dies of Augustus are represented as dies of moving military camp mints.

Keywords: coin die, Augustus, military camp coinage, Oescus, Moesia.

ANCIENT COIN DIES ARE THE MOST INTERESTING OBJECTS DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE STRIKING OF COINS. THEY ARE QUITE RARE AND ARE THEREFORE EVEN MORE VALUABLE TO SCIENCE. FOR COMPARISON, TODAY ARE KNOWN HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF ANCIENT COINS, BUT IN MUSEUMS AND IN PRIVATE COLLECTIONS WORLDWIDE PROBABLY ARE KNOWN NO MORE THAN ABOUT 150 SUCH ANCIENT COIN DIES. THE RARITY OF THIS TYPE OF NUMISMATIC ITEMS IS DUE TO THEIR FUNCTIONS. PREPARATION OF COIN DIES WAS ENTRUSTED TO VERY SKILLFUL AND EXPERIENCED ENGRAVERS WHO WERE UNDER THE EXCLUSIVE CONTROL OF STATE AUTHORITIES. THE OFFICIAL AUTHORITIES HAVE TAKEN EXTREMELY STRICT SECURITY MEASURES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE NECESSARY COIN DIES UNTIL THEY WERE FIT FOR COIN PRODUCTION. TO AVOID UNOFFICIAL AND UNCONTROLLED BY THE AUTHORITIES COINAGE, COIN DIES FOR EACH ISSUE WERE USUALLY DESTROYED WHEN THEY WERE WORN OUT OF USE. THESE CIRCUMSTANCES ALSO EXPLAIN THE EXTREMELY RARE FINDING ANTIQUE DIES FOR COINS.

FOR EXAMPLE FROM BULGARIA FROM THE PRE-ROMAN TIMES AND FROM THE ROMAN PERIOD HITHERTO ARE KNOWN TOTALLY OF 10 COIN DIES – 6 IN MUSEUMS AND 4 IN PRIVATE COLLECTIONS, AMONG WHICH 3 ARE IN THE NUMISMATIC FUND OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY WITH MUSEUM IN SOFIA – 1 COIN DIE FOR IMITATIONS OF TETRADRACHMS OF THE TYPE OF PHILIP II1 AND TWO OVERSE COIN

1 DOBRUSKI 1897, 564; KUBITSCHEK 1925, 134, n. 1; PL. 13, FIG. A-1; VERMEULE 1954, 12, n. 6.
dies of Augustus, an obverse coin die for solids of emperor Jovian from the Museum of Archaeology in Plovdiv and a reverse coin die is kept now in the museum in Varna, which is for striking of early silver coins of small denomination of Apollonia Pontica. In addition, in private collections are known one positive matrix – actually a hub, for preparation of negative coin dies for Celtic type coins, a reverse coin die that is for denarii of Caesar and one reverse coin die for denarii of emperor Tiberius. Also a reverse coin die has been published for Roman Republican denarii from the second century BC from a private collection in Bulgaria, and an obverse coin die, also for Republican denarii of 91 BC, is kept in the National History Museum in Sofia.  

The study of coin dies always put a large number of problems related to coin production, as well as its centres or mints. In different historical periods of development of the ancient world there were different states and cities which had their own mint. Moreover, in the later periods of the Roman Empire the right to have their mint was given to many provincial cities.

It should be noted explicitly that most of the known today coin dies were found far from the official mints with some exceptions. Moreover, some of the coins present some deviations from the iconographic and stylistic canons of the official coinage centres. In this respect, such coin dies provide new guidelines for the study of the functions of another, different coinage and the conditions and circumstances under which it was carried out.

It will be presented a new and formerly unknown obverse coin die that is for striking of denarii of Augustus. The coin die has been found before many years in the vicinity of the village of Gigen, district of Pleven – near the ancient Roman colony Ulpia Oescus and is now kept in a private collection. Only the bronze plate of the coin die is preserved, on which there is a negative portrait of Augustus, turned to the left, around which is the legend: AVGVSTVS DIVI F – mirrored (Fig. 1a). Part of border of dots is visible. The diameter of the plate-die is 28 mm and its thickness is 2 mm. The coin die has a light green to dark patina in one part, with traces of corrosion on the surface. On its left side the coin die is damaged, as in the antiquity it was cut by a sharp chisel so that part of the plate is now missing and in one place it is cracked. In addition, some parts of the legend are pretty worn and damaged by its intensive use during the striking of coins. Traces of residual silver from the minting process can also be seen on its surface. On the reverse side of the bronze plate there is a round bulge by which the coin die was attached to an iron part, which is now missing, but the traces of rust are still visible (Fig. 1b). Obviously after maximal possible use of this coin die, finally it had been destroyed and thrown away. Thanks to two obverse dies also for denarii of Augustus, which are kept in the National Institute of Archaeology with Museum – Sofia, we can get an idea of how it looked the whole coin die, which was composed of two parts. The difference in these dies compared to the new coin die presented is that these convexities on the dies from the Museum in Sofia were made on the iron parts, while on the new die the prominence, or the bulge itself, was made on the plate and a bed was apparently made in the iron part – actually the iron case or sheath, now missing.

Among the previously known coin dies from the Roman period, the most numerous are those of Augustus. Two types of Roman coin dies are known – those that have been engraved in the official centres of coinage or elsewhere, and those that were made by an impression of an original coin on a highly heated bronze plate. As far as can be judged, the presented here coin die was prepared in the second way – by impression of a denarius onto the plate, as traces of the irregular flan of the coin used are clearly visible in the upper part over the border of dots (Fig. 1c). This can be explained by the need for striking coins far beyond official centres. The new coin die presented here is of the same type as one of the dies in the collection of NIAM-BAS in Sofia, and the coin type of this die is for denarii of Augustus struck in the mint at Lugdunum (today Lyon, France) in 15 BC or between 15

Fig. 1a and 1b. Obverse and reverse side of an unknown coin die of Augustus, found in the vicinity of Oescus (diametre: 28 mm; private collection; photo: the author).

Fig. 1c. Horizontally flipped positive image of the same coin die.

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1 KUBITSCHEK 1925, 134-135, n. 2 and n. 3; PL. 13, Fig. A-2 and A-3; VERMEULE 1954, 23, no. 21 and no. 22; GIARD 1976, 24, nos. 1-2; BOJKOVA 1984, 15-19; 16, 1-2 and 3-4; BOJKOVA 1992, 62-65; PAUNOV 2014, 29-30; Fig. 1 and Fig. 2.
3 LAZARENKO 2009.
4 DRAGANOV 2008, 36-41; 39 with Fig. 1. Recently republished: MANOV 2018, 247-248 and PL. 54, Fig. 5.
5 MANOV 2002, 1118-1121.
7 PAUNOV 2014, 32 with Fig. 10.
8 PENCHEV 2013; PAUNOV 2014, 32, Fig. 11.
9 BOJKOVA 1984, 15.
History of the Hellenistic and Roman periods is composed of a large number of distant wars and military campaigns of major military units, who often stayed at camp in different places far from their political centre for months and sometimes even years. Therefore, in exceptional circumstances, such as a war or a long distant military expedition, probably the central authority has given permission to the military units to organize a mobile, camp mint. In this military mint during camping in certain areas was carried out coinage in order to be paid the salaries of soldiers and officers, which could be a possible reason for such a military coinage. In this direction have been interpreted both coin dies for denarri of Augustus from NIAM – Sofia – as part of the stock of a mobile military mint15 and these ideas have already been accepted16. In fact with the new coin die presented here, which is for the obverse of denarri of Augustus, such coin dies found in Bulgaria are already three. The most interesting is that coin types of Augustus for which they are intended, are dated in a very short span of time – between 17 – 16 BC and 15 – 13/11 BC, and the three coin dies have their certainly fixed locations of finding. One of the dies from the collection of NIAM – Sofia (inv. no. 164) is also for denarri of Augustus of types struck in Lugdunum (today Lyon, France) and was found in the vicinity of the town of Vratsa, Bulgaria (Fig. 5a and 5b) at the end of the 19th century17. The other coin die from the fund of NIAM – Sofia (inv. no. 165), is for obverse types of denarri of Augustus struck in Colonia Patricia in Spain (today Cordoba) (Fig. 6a and 6b) and was found near the village of Dolna Dikanya, the area of Radomir, district of Pernik18.

and 13 – 11 BC15 as on the obverse of these coins the head of Augustus is bare and has no laurel wreath. The different issues of the mint at Lugdunum are with different reverses, but all coins are labeled with IMP X, XI or XII (figs. 2, 3, 4)16. It is believed that the bimetallic coin dies made of bronze and iron parts were intended for protection of cracking of blows by a hammer in the process of striking coins19.

Finding Roman coin dies far away from the official centres of coinage has caused numerous discussions and there are opinions mainly in the older literature on the topic that they were used by ancient forgers18. Of course such assumptions do not exhaust the possible interpretations. Rather, for such coin dies should be sought other solutions.

16 MANOV 2002, 1119; PAUNOV 2014, 34.
17 GIARD 1976, no. 1361; SUTHERLAND 1984, 162a; BOJKOVA 1984, 15, no. 2; 16, Fig. 3-4; In fact, in both publications of Bojkova – BOJKOVA 1984 and BOJKOVA 1992 – both coin dies are with just the opposite representations regarding their places of finding – this of the type of denarii struck at Lugdunum (NIAM-BAS, inv. no. 164) is said to be found near Vratsa. See the comments in PAUNOV 2014, 30 with footnote 7 – about the confused place of finding of the two coin dies from the fund of NIAM-BAS. In fact, the coin die of the type of denarii, struck at Lugdunum – exactly with the legend AVGSTVS – is placed with an image and text as found near the modern town of Vratsa – in the book dedicated to the history of Vratsa, published in 1976: see NIKOLOV/MASHOV 1976, 64 – the image there. This fact proves the recent order of places of finding both coin dies from NIAM-BAS, revised by PAUNOV 2014, but noticed still by KUBITSCHKE 1925, 134-135, n. 2 and n. 3, PL. 13, Fig. A-2 and A-3; and VERMEULE 1954, 23.
18 BOJKOVA 1984, 17 with ref.
19 PAUNOV 2014, 32-34 with lit.
Studies

An interesting fact is that the new coin die presented here is similarly damaged by a sharp chisel as one of the dies from the collection of NIAM – Sofia, but the damage is in the left field. Apparently, some of the coin dies, after being struck corresponding quantity of coins, have been destroyed in this way, which demonstrates a certain control by some (military?) authority. The fact that all the three obverse coin dies for denarii of Augustus are arranged as a time of preparation in a very limited time span – between 17/16 BC and 15/13 – 11 BC, is hardly accidental. This requires the presentation of a joint interpretation with regard to their places of finding and using.

What was the role of already three dies for denarii of Augustus found in the Bulgarian lands and what events could be connected with them? In the older literature such dies have been identified as used by forgers23, or other authors thought that because of their slightly different style sensed in the portrait of Augustus and in more irregular letters of legend were probably used for imitative coinage24.

But it was indicated that in order to carry out an imitative coinage, issued coins had to have considerable popularity among the local population25. Review of the composition of the coin finds from the Bulgarian lands in which there are denarii of Augustus, however, found that the majority of the coins are Roman Republican denarii and the presence of denarii of Augustus in these findings is quite modest – represented sometimes only with few coins26 and these facts show that the coins of Augustus among the local population were not so popular to be imitated27.

As evidence of an imitative coinage is considered the collective find of 14 coin dies for imitations of Roman Republican denarii, found at Tiliška, near Sibiu in Romania, which yet C. Preda previously linked with the activities of the famous ruler of Dacia – Burebista, who had undertook some reforms in the coinage28. But the case for the three dies from Bulgaria obviously is not the same. It must be found another solution. It is noteworthy that their places of finding outline as if a road most likely connected with the movement of troops, which should be in the south – north direction. To find a solution for the appearance of these three dies of Augustus – one – south of the Haemus and two – north of the Haemus, we should see what the historical situation on the Balkans had been at the time of government of the first Roman emperor Augustus and even before him.

Even after the conquest of Macedonia by Rome and especially after Macedonia becoming a Roman province in 148 BC, the Roman authorities there had a lot of problems with closer and more distant tribes, and especially with the Scordisci, who together with other tribes often invaded Macedonia, which events being well presented by some ancient authors29. Roman authorities then undertook subsequent punitive military expeditions with the aim of restraining the invaders, which may explain the so wide spread of Roman Republican denarii still in the 2nd century BC and the first half of the first century BC in the lands of today Bulgaria, though and some commercial contacts should not be excluded30. A significant number of these coins have acted mostly in the lands north of the Haemus Mountains in today’s northwestern Bulgaria, where the majority of single finds and many coin hoards comprised of Roman Republican denarii were found, likely arrived mainly by Roman armies and merchants, but also probably taken as booty by the local tribes in the battles against the Roman troops.

After the battle of Actium in 31 BC, the policy of Augustus was closely linked to the conquest of the Balkan lands to the Danube, in order to ensure the northern border of the Empire, being placed on the natural barrier of the great European river. Indeed, the first Roman troops reached the river Danube at the mouth of the river Timok (the ancient Timacus) even during the campaigns of Gaius Scribonius Curio in 75 – 73 BC against the Dardani and Moesi31. But a permanent control of the lands between the Haemus and the Danube was taken place for the first time since the Macedonian provincial governor Marcus Licinius Crassus had undertook his two consecutive campaigns – in 29 and 28 BC, when he defeated some of the Thracian tribes both sides of the Haemus Mountains and to the Danube. He also defeated the invading south of the Danube tribes of the Bastarnae, as and their leader Deldo had been murdered (Cass. Dio 51.23.2 sqq.). Crassus thus imposed his power by force of arms in these lands in the Balkans and paved the way for their later accession to the Roman Empire32. Recently, it was suggested that an echo of these events is probably another coin die for reverse of Caesar’s denarii of the well-known “elephant type” (Fig. 7a and 7b), which was found in the vicinity of the modern town of Montana – the ancient Castra Montanensium, as possibly during these campaigns of Crassus in 29 – 28 BC took place a camp coinage in the lands to the north of the Haemus Mountains, having been used dies for striking of probably quite popular among the Roman soldiers Caesar’s denarii of that type33 (Fig. 8).

The two previously known coin dies for denarii of Augustus, found respectively – one – south of the Haemus, and the other – north of the Haemus (Stara Planina), were related to the events of 16 BC, reported by Cassius Dio

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23 VERMEULE 1954, 23; PAUNOV 2014, 32-34 with ref.
24 GIARD 1976, 24-25.
26 PAUNOV/PROKOPOV 2002.
27 BOJKOVA 1984, 18.
30 PAUNOV/PROKOPOV 2002, passim.
31 GEROV 1949, 4.
32 GEROV 1949, 171.
33 MANOV 2002, 1119-1120.
and significant troops have been sent to punish the invaders, as the discovery of a coin die of Augustus at Dolna Dikanya, district of Pernik — close to the lands of the Denteletae and near the road Pautalia – Serdica, could not be just a coincidence, and another coin die found near the present day town of Vratsa is in fact exactly to the route of the ancient road from Serdica to Oescus. The presented here new coin die for denarii of Augustus, found near Oescus, appears to confirm these observations about movement of Roman troops in this direction. Furthermore, the locations of finding the three dies of Augustus outline exactly the well-known later Roman road Stobi – Scupi – Pautalia – Serdica – Oescus, as they are clear evidence of the direction of movement of the Roman army from south to north to the lands of present-day northwestern Bulgaria – later lands in the provinces of Moesia Superior and Moesia Inferior.

In addition to a possible movement of Roman troops from the province of Macedonia to the north of the Haemus Mountains and to the Danube, in that time — since 16 BC — most likely in 14/13 BC, thanks to the information of the ancient author Florus (Flor. 2.28-29) we know that Augustus had sent as his commander Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus – probably in 14 BC, when he was consul, who possibly passed through Pannonia to meet the attacks of the Dacians and Sarmatians from the northern side of the Danube, and some authors suggest that in these attacks were also involved and other tribes – Getae and Bastarnae. As evidence of this situation is the report of Tacitus (Tac. Ann. 4.44) that Lentulus received triumphal decorations for his victories over the Getae (i.e. Dacians). There is evidence also that the command of the Roman armies on the Balkans in operations for the conquest of Pannonia had been entrusted to the future emperor Tiberius after his Alpine campaign in 15 BC, when he established an alliance with the Scordisci around Sirmium.

Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus managed to cope successfully with the raids of the Dacians who had the habit when the river had been frozen, to cross south of the river by order of their ruler Cotiso, as the ancient author Florus (Flor. 2.28) reported, and they devastated the neighbouring lands south of the Danube. By the majority of scholars is perceived that this Cotiso, mentioned as king of the Dacians, is actually the same person well-known by his golden coins – Koson. If this laconic message of Florus reflects the fact that this Cotiso or Koson still ruled the Dacians in 14/13 BC, because the report is explicitly linked to the campaign of Lentulus against the Dacians, then the reign of Koson can be placed between 44/43 BC and in the years around 14/13 BC, or even a little later, as this information have not been sufficiently considered. If so, then the Dacian raids could have been led by Koson himself.

Moreover, the announcement of Florus is clear that after the victories of Lentulus over the Dacians, Dacia was
not subdued, but only stillled by the Roman commander who set garrisons and erected fortresses on the southern bank of the Danube. Thus practically with the campaigns of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus sent by Augustus had begun the construction of the Danube limes and it is believed that even still in 15 BC the lands of today northwestern Bulgaria between Timok (Timacus) and Iskar (Oescus) rivers been included by the Romans in a military prefecture with garrisons left there. The main points of support or seats of those military garrisons were then the same, known and later, as their locations were determined by the peculiarities of the Danube riverbank – at the mouths of the right feeders of the Danube, which gave an open access and to the Haemus Mountains and to the lands south of the Haemus.

It is believed that in these events together with Lentulus was involved and Lucius Tarius Rufus, who was governor of the province of Macedonia between 18 and 16 BC, and possibly several years later – perhaps the same Lucius mentioned by Cassius Dio (Cass. Dio 54.20.3), who fought against the Sarmatians. Probably for these campaigns in the Balkans have been sent and Roman troops from Spain and Gallia, and to those soldiers the denarii of Augustus struck in both Roman provinces were well known. There are also other opinions about dating the campaign of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus against the Dacians and Sarmatians (Sarmatae) and it is considered that this happened probably in 10 BC.

Most likely the presented here new coin die for denarii of Augustus, found near the later Roman colony Oescus south of the Danube, which is just opposite to the Dacian settlement Sucidava on the northern shore of the great river, is an echo of those events – the campaigns of troops sent from Rome not only against the tribes on the southern side of the river, to which also troops from Macedonia joined the army of Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus, but against the invasions and from the north too – mostly of the Dacians and Sarmatians. Perhaps precisely these military forces have been given the right of striking coins in a mobile military camp mint – on the site of the future colony Oescus. Also important is the possible source of silver used for striking coins in marching conditions or in military camps. Hardly the Roman troops were able to extract silver from the local natural resources immediately during their early penetration into these hostile lands, as considered by some authors. Most likely for this purpose were first used silver ingots that troops were carrying with them instead of large amounts of ready-minted coins – probably for security reasons – not to fall into the hands of enemies. It should not be excluded also the possibility and for use of silver obtained as booty captured from the local population during the Roman military campaigns. Moreover, all necessary tools for carrying out striking of coins in marching conditions had been provided during the establishment of a camp. According to me, it should be also assumed another, quite plausible reason –

Not surprisingly, a little later – probably from 6 – 9 AD, Oescus was the camp of Legio V Macedonica. The establishment of Roman troops in this area – between the rivers Timok (Timacus) and Iskar (Oescus) to the Danube, preceded the later establishment of the province of Moesia. As can be seen from another coin die for reverse of denarii of the Roman emperor Tiberius (14 – 37 AD), which was also found in the vicinity of the ancient Oescus (Fig. 9a and 9b), the tradition to be given the right for military camp coinage far from official centres had been continued even in the reign of this emperor, as the coin die is engraved and shows no difference in style of the respective reverse of denarii of the emperor Tiberius of the same type (Fig. 10a and 10b).
Roman coin production. On the map presented here can be seen the possible routes of different Roman troops involved in the events commented above (Fig. 11).

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ABBREVIATIONS

NIAM-BAS
National Institute of Archaeology with Museum – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

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