



# SCOUTING FOR POST-ROMAN COINAGE AT CARNUNTUM - AN UNUSUAL METHOD OF NUMISMATIC RESEARCH

**Abstract:** As a contribution to the on-going discussion about Carnuntum's post-Roman period, the authors have conducted a private research among the many treasure hunters and coin collectors of the region. It turned out that the "clandestine" local finds of Byzantine coins (the prevailing currency in the area during the so-called dark centuries) outnumbered the officially reported finds, but were of the same order of magnitude. As a by-product, we discovered a small number of Ostrogothic and Carolingian coins, representing the widely neglected Germanic element of Carnuntum's find coins. Thus, our data collection helps to fill some of the gaps in the Carnuntum coin finds spectrum, which still exist for the time of approx. 400 - 1100 A.D. The results indicate once more the outstanding position of Carnuntum as a trading place - even during the dark centuries.

**Keywords:** *Carnuntum, Byzantine coins, Ostrogothic coins, dark centuries, private collections.*

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## 1. A GAP IN LOCAL HISTORY

**M**any modern cities and towns of the former Roman limes along Rhine and Danube have been built on the ruins of their ancient predecessors. Their development has been more or less a continuous process over the centuries. The history of Carnuntum, once the capital of Upper Pannonia, has been more complicated. During the Middle Ages, the ruins of the Roman city and the legionary camp crumbled and even the name of the former metropolis fell into oblivion. The small medieval villages of St. Petronilla and Altenburg which we find centuries later at this site, can hardly be considered to be direct successors of the glorious Colonia Septimia Aurelia Antoniniana Carnuntum. What happened during this gap of nearly half a millennium?

Historical research and archaeological evidence have brought numerous indications that this site always had been an attractive place for superregional trade.<sup>1</sup>

Although we have hardly any documentation or epigraphic evidence, there is general consensus today that there has been some kind of "continuity". Was it the continuity of settlement? Of population?

Surprisingly, there is very little numismatic argumentation in this dispute. One of the reasons may be the extreme scarcity of post-Roman coin finds - not only in Carnuntum but in the Danube region in general.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MITTERAUER 1967, 313-315.

<sup>2</sup> MUSTEAȚĂ 2008, 687.

For the *dark centuries*, we can only expect to find numismatic vestiges in the form of isolated pieces and extremely rare hoards of Byzantine coinage - hardly suitable for good statistical conclusions.

For example: In 1933, the Museum Carnuntinum took inventory of their stock of antique coins, including the rich private collection of Abensperg-Traun. On this occasion, Prof. Elmer spotted only half a dozen of Byzantine coins among the many thousands of Roman Imperial specimens.<sup>3</sup>

In 1966, Mitscha-Märheim published two copper coins (Justinus I. and Justinus II) as number 8 and 9 of "*coin finds which became known to science*". He expressed his forebodings that there may be many more - but "*inaccessible for numismatic research*". Nevertheless, this acknowledged historian and numismatist took the small number of find coins as an indication of "*continuous settlement at Carnuntum*".<sup>4</sup>

## 2. A NEW WAY OF NUMISMATIC RESEARCH: COIN-HUNTING BY DOOR-KNOCKING

Encouraged by Mitscha-Märheims remarks and as a contribution to the on-going *continuity*-dispute, a small group of amateur researchers, all members of the local museum (*Museumsverein Auxiliarkastell Petronell-Carnuntum*), decided to start an investigation among local private coin collectors, in order to supplement the officially known data about *dark ages* coin finds. The idea for starting such a recherche was obvious: In Carnuntum - or to be correct, in Petronell and Deutsch Altenburg - it has been a long tradition to collect and save Roman artefacts, found in the fields and gardens. Of course, this was not done out of scientific interest, but mostly for curiosity and admiration of the skilful work of the "*old heathens*". (If some crazy enthusiasts were ready to offer good money for such things - they were welcome to do so). These native collections had been started long before scholars of the Imperial Academy in Vienna had taken any notice of the "*Austrian Troja*" only a few miles away!

Nearly half a century before archaeologists had started their first excavations at Carnuntum, you could read in a contemporary travel guide: *At Petronell castle one can see a famous silver bowl, made up from hundreds of Roman silver denarii!* And even today we can find Roman sculptures or altars fixed in the walls of many an old building ...

More numerous, however, are various small hoards of stray artefacts, kept in many houses: Rusty arrowheads, broken brooches or eroded coins - objects of no material value, but too unusual and too interesting to be discarded. These things are usually stored in old jugs or boxes, half-forgotten by their finders (or their heirs!). Of course, there are also fine collections of coins, mostly inherited and always cherished as a family treasure.

Due to this historical development, many of these collections are not in up-to-date conformance with modern regulations for antique finds - a fact that helped to attract illegal traders and to establish a so-called *black market*. This unpleasant situation nearly went out of control with the advent of cheap transistorized metal detectors - available for everybody. It took many years and several changes in

policy to regain legal control of the situation. Nevertheless, the well established - but very sensitive - flow of information from coin finders to the numismatic institutions had been permanently impaired! In different European countries, varying solutions for this problem have been found.<sup>5</sup>

However, immense damage and irretrievable losses of scientific information have occurred during this time. Therefore, our amateur initiative for saving unique numismatic data in Carnuntum was well timed.

Originally our project had been planned only as a contribution to the *continuity*-discussion - by hunting for hidden treasures in private possessions. But now our recherche got the character of a rescue operation. Registering and possibly photographing such "*clandestine*" collections or "*fresh-from-the-field*" finds might be the only way of documenting rare coins (and assuring their provenance!) before the *black market* might absorb them.



**Fig. 1.** The showpiece of our recherche: A solidus of Phocas, found in Carnuntum. During his reign, Pannonia was invaded by Avars and Slavs, probably the reason for the local rarity of his coins. Allegedly, a similar solidus had existed in a Carnuntum collection before, but it seems that it was lost during the chaotic times at the end of World War II.

In planning our project, it was clear that our interviews would have to be based on carefully built-up personal confidence. Our investigations would be strictly anonymous and free of any commercial interests. Obviously, more than door-knocking and note-taking was required! However, after careful preparation and patiently explaining our project, we found surprisingly good cooperation - in most cases. Still, the recherche was a time-consuming piece of hard work, of patience and of applied psychology. We certainly do not recommend it as a standard method of numismatic research.

But - in our specific case - it produced some remarkable results and certainly helped to save much immaterial value.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Data reliability

The circumstances of a coin find may be equally (or even more) important than the coin itself. Especially the provenance - preferably with details of the coin find - is essential for extracting a good deal from the wealth of information which is contained in every find coin! This applies both for the archaeologist and for the numismatist. However, experience shows, that it is not easy to get detailed, complete and reliable information about a find spot!<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> HORSNAES 2017, 502.

<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered, that "find-spot"-information is practically always second-hand information! Even in (old?) excavation reports the

<sup>3</sup> ELMER 1933, 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> MITSCHA-MÄRHEIM 1966, 273.

TABLE 1

TYPE	EMPEROR	MINT	PHOTO	REFERENCE
1 AE3	Arcadius	Ant		RIC X 247/71
1 Solidus	Theodosius II	Const		RIC X 243/31
1 Tremissis	Theodosius II	Const		RIC X 255/213
1 AE 4	Theodosius II	Cyc	*	RIC X 274/437
1 AE 4	Theodosius II	Const	*	RIC X 275/445
1 AE 4	Theodosius II	Her	*	RIC X 275/442
1 Solidus	Valentinianus III	Rav		RIC X 366/2018
1 AE 4	Valentinianus III	Rom		RIC X 378/2132
1 Solidus	Leo I	Const	*	RIC X 285/605
1 Solidus	Zeno	Const	*	RIC X 299/901
1 Solidus	Zeno	Rav	*	RIC X 445/3626
1 Follis	Anastasius I	Const	*	SEAR 38/19
1 Follis	Anastasius I	Const	*	SEAR 36/21
1 Follis	Anastasius I	Const	*	SEAR 38/19
7 Minimi	Anastasius I	Const/Ant		SEAR as 37/13
1 Follis	Justinus I	Const	*	SEAR 45/62
1 Follis	Justinus I	Const	*	SEAR 45/62
1 Follis	Justinus I	Ant	*	SEAR 50/100
1 Semifollis	Justinus I	Const	*	SEAR 46/69
1 Solidus	Justinianus I	Const	*	SEAR 57/139
1 Solidus	Justinianus I	Const		SEAR 57/140
1 Tremissis	Justinianus I	Const	*	SEAR 58/145
1 Tremissis	Justinianus I	Const	*	SEAR 58/145
1 120 Nummi	Justinianus I	Rav	*	SEAR 84/317
1 Follis	Justinianus I	Const	*	SEAR 61/164
1 Follis	Justinianus I	Const		SEAR 59/158
1 Follis	Justinianus I	Const	*	SEAR 61/164
1 Follis	Justinianus I	Nic	*	SEAR 66/201
1 Semifollis	Justinianus I	Thess		SEAR 63/174
1 Solidus	Justinus II	Const	*	SEAR 89/346
1 Follis	Justinus II	Cyc	*	SEAR 95/ 372
1 Follis	Justinus II	Nic	*	SEAR 94/369
1 Follis	Justinus II	Nic	*	SEAR 94/369
1 Semifollis	Justinus II	Thess	*	SEAR 93/366
1 5 Nummi	Justinus II	Thess		SEAR 92/363
1 Follis	Tiberius II	Ant	*	SEAR 110/448
1 Follis	Mauritius	Const	*	SEAR 118/494
1 Follis	Mauritius	Thess		SEAR 122/509
1 Solidus	Phocas	Const	*	SEAR 142/618
1 Follis	Heracleios	Const	*	SEAR 171/805
1 Follis	Heracleios	Const	*	SEAR 171/805
1 Follis	Heracleios	Const	*	SEAR 171/805
1 Semifollis	Constantinos V	Const	*	SEAR 296/157
1 Follis	Basileios I	Const	*	SEAR 327/1709
1 Follis	Basileios II ?		*	SEAR 376/1813
1 Follis	Basileios II ?		*	SEAR 376/1813
1 Follis	Romanos III?		*	SEAR 377/1823
1 Follis	Constantinos VII	Const	*	SEAR 338/1760
1 AE	Romanos IV	Const	*	SEAR as 366/1862(A)
1 Follis	Michael IV ?	Const	*	SEAR 377/1825
1 Follis	Nicephoros III ?		*	SEAR 380/1889
3 Skyphates	10th century			

**Abbreviations to TABLE 1:**

RIC X - Roman Imperial Coinage, Vol.10, J. P. C. Kent (London: Spink, 1984).

SEAR - David A. Sear, Byzantine Coins and their Values (London: Seaby, 1987).

The coin has been photographed

<b>Mints:</b>	Ant ...	Antiochia	Const ..	Constantinopolis	Cyc ...	Cycicus
	Her ...	Heraclea	Nic ...	Nicomedia	Rav ...	Ravenna
	Thess ..	Thessalonica				

numismatic find data are not in every case exact and complete. And a finder of a stray coin - even if he is cooperative and in good faith - is dependent on the powers of his recollection.

Finders are reluctant to disclose their hunting grounds - or simply cannot remember. With a much better

TABLE 2

TYPE	PHOTO	REMARKS
1 Follis	*	Theoderic ROMA INVICTA. Iupa in reverse
1 Imitation ?	*	Athalaric ? REX AEIOU, eagle in reverse
1 AE 4 Bronze	*	Migration period ?, monogram in reverse
2 AE 4 Bronze		Ostrogoths? (only written find-note existing)
2 Denar	*	Charlemagne, CAROLUS REX FR

degree of plausibility, a find coin can be traced to a more general origin, e. g. “Carnuntum”. Considering our original objectives (i.e. Carnuntum-continuity), it seemed wise to restrict our research to the required minimum parameter “Carnuntum”, in order not to overstrain the goodwill of our interviewees...

Fortunately, for a reliable transfer of information there were some factors in our favour:

First of all, personal acquaintance (which had already helped to get access to “family-treasures”) naturally improved communication and increased the value of the information given.

An additional benefit came from the fact that in the 1980s and 1990s at Carnuntum neither collectors nor traders seemed to be highly interested in Byzantine (or Germanic) coins. Even the local museums treated these exotic coins only as an appendix to their rich Roman coinage. Traders even rejected the “unusual” (and often badly preserved) copper coins as “Carnuntum corpses”. Thus, there was no incentive for presenting imported or faked coins, which would have contaminated our research results.

Therefore, we claim the provenance of our coins in TABLE 1 to be unfiltered. Their origin has been traced in a straight forward manner from finder (or owner) to our file cards. It should be at least as reliable as the provenance of the majority of museum coins!

### 3.2. Find coins

TABLE 1 summarises the results of more than fifteen year’s anonymous investigation among dozens(!) of numismatically interested people: Collectors, traders (or just lucky owners of half-forgotten treasures) in Petronell-Carnuntum and Deutsch Altenburg. It lists all types of post-Roman coins (Byzantine and Germanic), kept in private collections or as single coins, of provenance Carnuntum and unpublished at the time of our investigation (about 1985 - 2000).

#### Remarks to TABLE 1:

- All Ostrogothic kings have honored the supremacy of the Byzantine Emperor. Gold and silver coins as well as the widely used AE-Minimi show his portrait and are usually treated as Byzantine coins (although they have been minted under Gothic rulers). An example for this is the quarter siliqua of Justinian I., our only silver coin on the list, which was minted in Italy under Ostrogothic

control.

- To make things even more complicated, a coin with the exergue mint mark “CONOB” (originally indicating the mint of Constantinopolis) may have been struck in Italy under Ostrogothic rule as well! Naturally, such fine-structure problems were beyond the frame of our recherche because they had no relevance for the main objectives of our investigation.
- Only copper coins - e.g. ROMA INVICTA of Theoderic the Great - are “genuine” Ostrogothic and are listed in TABLE 2. By following this usage, our tables underemphasise the Germanic component in Carnuntum’s post-Roman coinage.
- Some of the “better” coins from TABLE 1 have been acquired by Museum Carnuntinum soon after our survey and have found their way into numismatic publications<sup>7</sup>. In general, however, we could not trace the further fate of “our” coins.
- Therefore, a fair comparison between our *discoveries* and *officially known* material has to be made by using Carnuntum catalogues, published **not later** than the time of our recherche!<sup>8</sup>

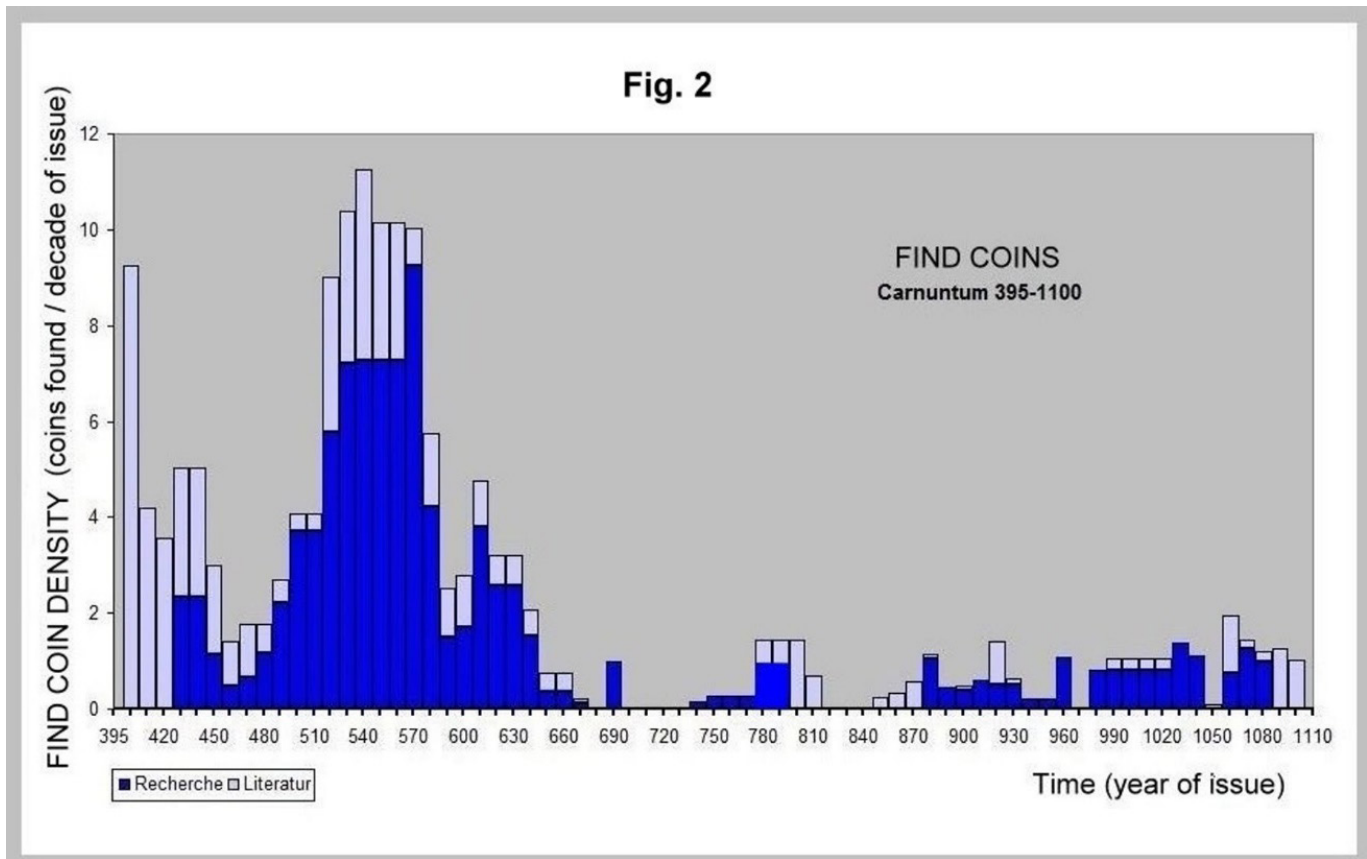
#### Remarks to TABLE 2:

- Originally our recherche had been focused exclusively on *Byzantine coins*, the only type of currency to be expected during the *dark ages* at Carnuntum - so we had been instructed by experts. Late in our recherche, however, we got hints from Carnuntum collectors to look out for *Germanic* finds as well. Our success (shown in TABLE 2) was rather limited.
- In fact, we could have done better! Because already much earlier, one of our “coin scouts” had picked up two Carolingian denarii – west of Carnuntum’s Amphitheater II ! Their publication has received a great deal of attention<sup>9</sup> and has triggered three more finds in the Petronell area. But our research had remained focussed on *Byzantines*!
- The results of our - finally - extended research are shown in TABLE 2. Caused by this belated widening of our hunting grounds, we had undoubtedly missed or overlooked coins which should actually show up in TABLE 2. As an example, one could mention the small

<sup>7</sup> WINTER 2006, 602.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. HAHN 1987, 453-463.

<sup>9</sup> KOCH 1979, 33. Both coins have been donated to the *Numismatic Cabinet of the Vienna Art Museum*.



**Fig. 2:** The graph shows the local numismatic situation at the time of our recherche. This “snapshot” compares the time distribution of the results of our initiative (dark bars) with coins already documented in the contemporary literature of that time (transparent bars).

bronze coins of the migration period – with a monogram in the reverse - coins which usually go among collectors for “worthless late Romans”.<sup>10</sup>

- A mysterious (fake?) coin was found south of the legionary camp of Carnuntum.<sup>11</sup> It is probably an imitation of an (ATH)ALRICU(S) REX coin. It has been included in TABLE 2 because even if it is just an imitation, there must have been an Ostrogothic original or prototype.
- In retrospect, it is regrettable, that we have missed digging deeper into this part of the numismatic *ager Carnuntinus* from the very beginning of our investigation. Because there are more indications, that the relatively neglected Germanic element is a kind of missing link, for filling the “gap” between Roman period and Middle Ages in Carnuntum...

### 3.3. Histogram

Statistically, the two data sets of Fig. 2 could be considered as two “independent samples” (taken from the total “population” of Carnuntum’s find coins) and could be subjected to hard-core statistical mathematics. This, however, is beyond the scope of our project.

The histogram has been drawn according to the method described in the literature, i.e. each coin covers the same area<sup>12</sup>. This method of display illustrates, how our

recherche helped to fill – at least partially - the *gap in history* on Carnuntum’s time axis.

Even if the accuracy or completeness of the diagram may be questioned, it is nevertheless the first attempt of a rough numerical comparison of “published vs. clandestine find coins” for Carnuntum.

At first glance, one can see that this ratio is not too far from unity. It is certainly better than a pessimistic expert’s guess of 1962 (... “only an infinitely small fraction comes to the knowledge of science”!<sup>13</sup>

Coins from the *dark centuries* are scarce indeed – but not only because bad collectors are hiding them!

### 3.4. Geographical distribution

The impressive quantity of Carnuntum finds in Fig. 3 is admittedly biased: The number of coins for Carnuntum (known from the literature) has almost been doubled (!) by our recherche, whereas the number of “clandestines” from other locations – naturally – remains unknown. However, even doubling those rare findings would not change the general picture of Carnuntum as an outstanding financial center or leading trading place during the *dark ages*.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS - FACTS AND SPECULATIONS

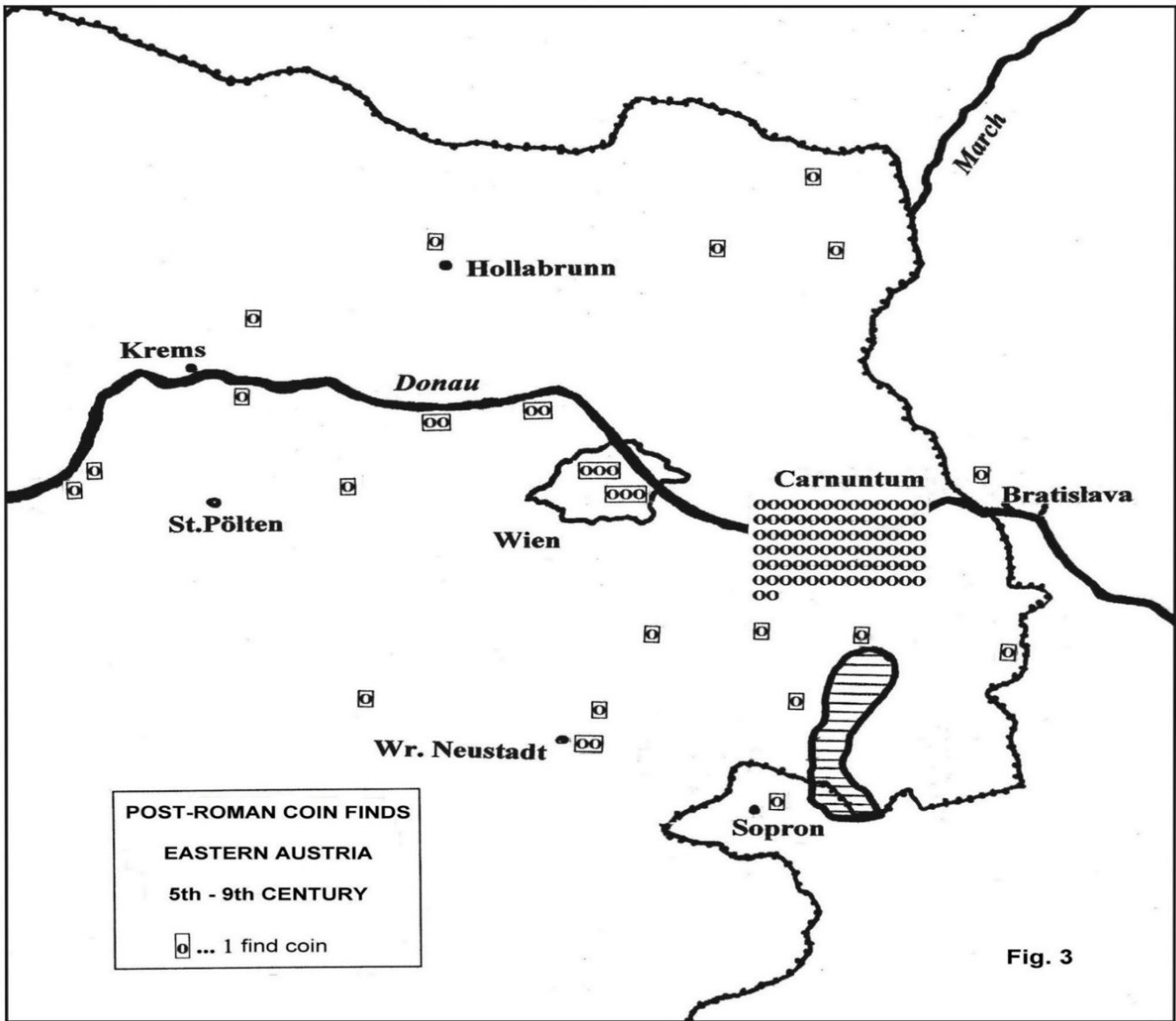
As we have seen, Carnuntum is **relatively** rich in stray coin finds from the post-Roman period. This is seemingly in contradiction to the fact, that we have hardly any tangible traces of settlement from the Avar time at Carnuntum. However, it may well be possible, that existing

<sup>10</sup> These types are even omitted in a collector’s handbook (BRUCK 1961, XX), because “they are not found in our region” (i.e. Eastern Austria).

<sup>11</sup> LERNER/NEDELIK 2013, 21.

<sup>12</sup> VONDROVEC 2005, 181.

<sup>13</sup> MITSCHA-MÄRHEIM 1962, 216.



**Fig. 3:** In analogy to the numismatic *time-distribution* (Fig. 2) this diagram shows the *spatial* or geographic dispersion of “dark age”-find coins in Eastern Austria from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Roman infrastructure has been used or adapted by the new inhabitants.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, we should bear in mind, that Carnuntum is a geologically and hydrologically unstable site: The southern riverside of the Danube – the preferred area for landing stages and trade stores – has been subject to steady erosion and landslides! In the course of centuries, the river has moved far inland (in some places even hundreds of meters!), washing away all possible traces of human activities ...

Obviously, the overwhelming numismatic evidence of Carnuntum being a prominent trade center all the time during the *dark ages* can no longer be light-heartedly dismissed.

But we can derive even more information from our survey:

Our histogram (Fig. 2) is of similar shape as the “official” find coin distribution for Carnuntum – a maximum at the time of Justinian I. and an almost complete void

during the years 650 to 750. The reason for the maximum of coins struck by (or for?) Justinian I. which are found in Carnuntum is unknown. Together with the Ostrogothic coin finds, however, it may be taken as an indication of strong Germanic presence in Carnuntum. The “void” period seems to mark the time of decline of the Avaric predominance. Although the sample size is very small, it supports the theory, that there were no longer gold coin tributes to the Avars after their decisive defeat of 626.<sup>16</sup>

The ratio of “clandestine” coins to “literature” coins seems to be of the same order of magnitude – as indicated in Fig. 2.

An assessment of thousands of Carnuntum coins, surveyed both in literature and in our recherche, suggests a proportion (in orders of magnitude):

**Roman Imperial Coins : Byzantine Coins : Ostrogothic Coins = 10.000 : 10 : 1**

<sup>14</sup> Non-Carnuntum data are from HAHN 1987, 453-463.  
<sup>15</sup> WINTER 2006, 600.

<sup>16</sup> WINTER 2006, 599, 606.

The Germanic element in Carnuntum is, of course, not only represented by our coins of TABLE 2, but by a large number of non-numismatic artefacts. Many of these are finds from the *Burgfeld* (the area around the former Roman legionary camp, where three of our find coins of TABLE 2 come from!). In various excavation reports we find Germanic ceramics, burials, fibulae, broken reflex-bows, etc. of Gothic or Langobardic origin from this area.

Another indication (which seemingly has been overlooked so far): Ostrogoths are also called *Greutungen* or *Gruthungi*. Now combine this name with the Germanic Old Saxon suffix *-ithi* (i.e. “the place of” ...) <sup>17</sup> to get “*Grutungs-ithi*” - meaning the “*region of the Ostrogoths*”!

This comes very close to the mysterious “*Grunzwiti-Gau*”. This is linguistically a tautology, but it is obviously the name for a “*Gau*” (land, district) which is mentioned in several *dark ages* - documents (originals from AD 777 and AD 888). Generations of scholars have tried to locate this place - somewhere in eastern Lower Austria - by deriving it from geographic terms. <sup>18</sup>. But: Does it not come rather from the people’s name “*Gruthungi*”? Was the commercial center Carnuntum and the surrounding region even more important than is suggested by the abundance of coin finds? And are “*our*” Germanic stray coins more than pure coincidence?

## 5. EPILOGUE

In retrospect, Odhin Lerner’s initiative has been both successful and at the same time extremely ill-fated. It had started as a one-man-hobby in the late 1970s, at a time when the term *coin collecting* had just altered its character completely. With the advent of cheap and handy metal detectors, the hobby of *coin hunting* had changed from an innocuous excentricity to a kind of folklore - with a strong commercial component. In the ensuing conflict between the “*authorities responsible for the protection of the country’s historical heritage*” and the swarms of *illegal treasure hunters*, Odhin has played the role of a good Samaritan on the battlefield. Together with a small group of friends, he kept trying to save as many of the precious find coins as possible, for scientific evaluation - or to be more precise, he saved at least the archaeological information contained in a coin’s provenance. For criticism and scepticism, he had a stubborn counter-argument: “*If I don’t do the job, this information will be lost forever!*”

However, Odhin did not live to see his work finished. By 2006 he had begun to write a draft manuscript, when he fell seriously ill. He died half a year later, optimistic up to the last moment - much too early ... Our *Dark Centuries*-group had lost the driving force and soon fell apart.

But this was not the end of the tragedy: A catastrophic gas explosion severely damaged Odhin’s former home. His son was badly hurt and practically all of Odhin’s notes and photo negatives were destroyed. (Fig. 1 is one of the few exceptions). The ultimate end?

In memoriam of my friend I have tried to reconstruct as much of his work as I could. As his assistant, I had fortunately copied a (complete?) set of his file cards and

some of his notes and pictures. With assistance from Odhin’s friends and from the local *Museum Auxiliarkastell Petronell-Carnuntum*, it was possible to produce a little brochure for museum visitors: *Coins from Carnuntum’s dark centuries*. <sup>19</sup>

Encouraged by positive feedback from the little booklet, I have now decided to make Odhin Lerner’s findings accessible to a wider range of people who may be interested in Carnuntum’s post-Roman history.

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<sup>17</sup> UDOLPH 1991, 85-146.

<sup>18</sup> VANCSA 1900, 527. LECHNER 1958, 309.

<sup>19</sup> LERNER/NEDELIK 2013, 5-24.

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