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# A FORGOTTEN HOARD OF ANTONINIANII FROM PIŁA (POLAND): LARGE VOLUME, LITTLE VALUE

**Abstract:** The article analyzes a hoard of antoninianii found in the neighborhood of Piła (Wielkopolskie province in Poland). The hoard counted more than 5000 coins, mainly of Gallienus and Claudius II, plus an inscribed bronze plaque. The hoard is one of a kind owing to its volume, chronological structure, provenance of the coins, the presence of hybrids and imitations, and the inscribed plaque in particular. The collection, weighing 15 kg, of severely debased coinage of practically just two Roman emperors was valued at no more than a few contemporary aurei. Its presence on the banks of the Noteć River in Polish Pomerania suggests a fairly unusual story behind it. Hoards of antoninianii are fairly rare in the second half of the 3rd century AD, because the coin was too debased to be hoarded or deposited. Finding 5000 in one hoard is quite exceptional. There is no record of the vessel in which the coins had been hidden. The reasons for the hoard appearing in Pomerania must have been political: contacts between the Romans and the Barbarians in the 3rd century could have taken on the form of one-time tributes, annual tributes and the so-called *annua munera*, ransoming captives, soldiers' pay (*stipendia*) or gifts.

**Keywords:** *antoninianus*, *Gallienus*, *Claudius II*, *annua munera*, *Roman-Barbarian contacts*

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The antoninianus hoard from Piła (Piła district, Wielkopolskie province, Poland) was first reported in the literature in 1921,<sup>1</sup> but it was discovered in 1905. It was studied again in 2006 and published in a very limited edition.<sup>2</sup> The present discussion of this exceptional find is intended as a means of introducing the data on the hoard into the international discourse.

The Piła hoard contained more than 5000 coins from the third quarter of the 3rd century AD. The precise number

<sup>1</sup> WEFELS 1921, 145–150.

<sup>2</sup> CIOŁEK 2007, 245–251.

of coins is not known apart from the fact that there were more than the 4665 pieces that were recorded and identified, more likely at least 5000. The ones that are missing were lost.

The hoard, like many other precious archaeological and numismatic finds from before World War II, disappeared and it is not known what happened to it. However, a rather thorough study was made of it shortly after its discovery, and the coins were identified with a fair amount of professionalism using numismatic catalogs from the period. This enabled re-identification using the RIC corpus.<sup>3</sup>

The coin issues represented in the hoard were for the most part from the third quarter of the 3rd century AD, when the debasement of the silver coin had reached a point at which they were practically “bronzes”. The metrology of this denomination was in the process of rapid change from the rule of Gordian III (238–244), the weight of the coins being reduced and likewise the silver content in the alloy from which the coins were cast. Changes in the monetary system were a consequence of the developing crisis of the Roman state, exacerbated by the outside threat of barbarian tribes and inner general collapse<sup>4</sup>. The depreciation of the silver coin was the most extreme in the reign of Gallienus (253–268), the silver content dropping to symbolic levels. At the beginning of this emperor’s reign, the content oscillated around 10%; by the end it had dropped to no more than 3%. The coin was in fact a bronze coin masquerading as a silver denomination, making bronze denominations worthless<sup>5</sup>. The monetary system of the Roman Empire was heading for disaster.

The Piła hoard was composed exclusively of debased antoninianii that were more scrap metal than actual silver coinage. Assuming that an average antoninianus weighed about 3 g, the hoard would have weighed at least

<sup>3</sup> RIC V / 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> HEICHELHEIM 1933, 96–113; ALFÖLDI 1967, 324–374; JOHNE 1975, 59–98; WIERSCHOWSKI 1994, 355–380; BLAND 1996, 64–66; HOWGEGO 1996, 219–224.

<sup>5</sup> COPE 1969, 145–161.

15 kg. In other words, the hoard consisted of more than 5000 bronze disks of limited monetary value. The actual value of the silver used to produce these coins corresponded to about ten contemporary aurei. There are no parallels from Europe for the structure of this hoard that was quantitatively enormous, but of limited value, especially as the coins were accompanied by a bronze plaque inscribed with the words: “LEG XXII or XXIII or something of the kind”.<sup>6</sup>

The first description of this hoard was published 15 years after its discovery, in the “Berliner Münzblätter”. The coins were described by H. Wefels, who is known only for this publication, a mere few pages, although prepared with considerable care. The descriptions were presented in tabular form and the identifications were given after the second edition of H. Cohen’s catalogue, entitled *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l’Empire Romain*. The schematic descriptions were sufficient by modern standards of coin identification. Cohen’s tables gave the obverses and reverses, occasionally a brief designation of the representations on both sides adopting the symbols presented by the Vienna numismatist O. Vetter in his “Die Münzen des Kaisers Gallienus und seiner Familie”.<sup>7</sup>

Wefels also described the circumstances of the find, quite obviously having no idea as to the precise location. Piła (then Schneidemühl in Prussia) was merely the place where the hoard was purchased and briefly stored after its discovery. Oral information cited by Wefels indicated a field owned by the Renkawitz family in the area of Piła-Leszków as the findspot. Learning about the find late in 1919 and intrigued by the lack of even a brief note about such a big hoard of Roman coins, the Berlin antiquary Dr. Hoffmann made inquiries and was told that it was found in the vicinity of Piła, although the first owner was unable to pinpoint the exact location. The hoard, as well as other Roman coins (“dieser Fund,

<sup>6</sup> WEFELS 1921, 146.

<sup>7</sup> VETTER 1901; VETTER 1912.

nebst anderen spätrömischen Münzen”), was acquired by a Piła antiquary (“zu einem Althändler in Schneidemühl”), who sold it immediately. The coins changed hands quite quickly and in effect several hundred were lost. The new owner sought identification of about 4700 coins in order to establish the real value of the set. He also supplied information about an inscribed plaque about 2.5 cm in diameter, apparently accompanying the original hoard. The disk had a loop and was supposed to be inscribed with the letters: LEG XXII or LEG XXIII, “or something similar”<sup>8</sup>. It was lost during the handling of the find. The disk merits attention, mitigated though by the information that a leather thong had been passed through a hole pierced in it. While the information is difficult to interpret offhand, the thong raises doubts as to the authenticity of this bronze disk.

The hoard was referred to next in the handwritten card index of Kurt Regling, now in the Münzkabinet, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz. This is an extremely important source for monetary discoveries from the turn of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The index was started by Julius Menadier and was continued by Regling, who was then director of the Coin Cabinet in Berlin in 1921–1935. In a letter dated 3 April 1937, Regling included in his index information about two antoninianii of Galerius (293–311) allegedly from the Piła hoard. He did not provide the name of his informer nor any additional explanation of who had seen these two coins and when, and whence the certainty, 30 years after the discovery of the hoard, that these two exemplars were actually part of it.

The composition of the hoard is presented in Table 1. The most numerous group are coins issued by Gallienus: 2774

<sup>8</sup> „bei der Münzen fand sich eine – leider verloren gegangene runde Bronzescheibe, etwa 2 1/2 cm im Durchmesser, oben mit breitem Henkel, auf welcher in zwei Zeilen LEG XXI oder XXIII oder ähnliche Zahl gestanden haben soll. Es wäre immerhin möglich, dass dies eine bulle war, die zum Verschluss eines Geldbeutes diente.“

exemplars, including 39 coins struck for Salonina. Therefore, the coins of this emperor constituted close to 60% of the set. The second most numerous group in the hoard are the coins of Claudius II: 1878 pieces, that is, 40.25% of the set. The latest in the hoard are antoninianii of Postumus (1 pc.), Aurelian (2 pcs), Victorinus (4 pcs), Tetricus I and Tetricus II (the latter two a combined 10 pcs). The hoard structure suggests that the deposit left the Imperium Romanum right after the issuing date of the latest coin, that is, around 275; otherwise there would have been more coins of these latest rulers.

Most of Gallienus’ coins, including those struck for Salonina, as well as the coins of Claudius II were struck in the mint in Rome. Coins from this mint constituted 76.85% of the set. Coins from other mints were definitely less numerous: from Siscia 16.61%, from Milan 6.08%. Two of the coins from Rome turned out to be hybrids (RIC 341a, second indeterminate). Other mints represented included: Antioch (six coins of Claudius II), Cyzikus (one coin), and interestingly, Asia Minor (coin of Gallienus). The latest coins in the Piła hoard demonstrated a quantitative predominance of coins struck in the Western mints: the issues of Postumus, Victorinus and two of the Tetricus I and II coins were struck in Cologne, Trier and the Gallic mints. A few of the youngest coins were struck in Rome (Quintillus) as were, theoretically, the two youngest antoninianii of Aurelian, one from Rome and the other from Milan. These are assigned generally to Aurelian’s reign (270–275), but the coins of the two Tetricus are also generally assigned to their reign (270–274).

Four imitations of imperial coins have also been noted, although there could have been more. One piece imitated a coin of Victorinus (after 268), two others were modeled on coins of Tetricus (after 270)<sup>9</sup> and the fourth was not identified. The share of antoninianus imitations in 3rd-century hoards has been discussed by R. Ziegler.<sup>10</sup> Imitations

<sup>9</sup> SCHULTZKI 1996, 108–173.

<sup>10</sup> ZIEGLER 1983, 92.

**Table 1.**

<b>Issuer</b>	<b>Gallic mints</b>	<b>Trier</b>	<b>Colo-gne</b>	<b>Milan</b>	<b>Rome</b>	<b>Western mints</b>	<b>Siscia</b>	<b>Cy-zikus</b>	<b>An-tioch</b>	<b>Asia Minor</b>	<b>Imita-tion</b>	<b>Total</b>
Gallienus				30	2104		599					2734
Gallienus (Salonina)				3	23		10					36
Claudius				151	1460		66	1	6			1684
DIVO CLAUDIO				101	1	84						186
Quintillus					4							4
Postumus			1									1
Victorinus			4								1	5
Tetricus I		2	1								2	5
Tetricus II	4	2	1									7
Aurelian				1	1							2
Total	4	4	7	286	3593	84	675	1	6	1	3+1	4665

**Table 2.**

<b>Issuer</b>	<b>Gallic mints</b>	<b>Milan / Siscia</b>	<b>Rome / Ticinum</b>	<b>uncertain</b>	<b>Total</b>
Gordian III			2		2
Philipus I			9		9
Volusian			3		3
Gallienus		1	1		2
Tetricus	5	1			6
Claudius II		1	1	1	3
Aurelian			2	1	3
Probus				1	2
Carinus				1	1
Undefinite				1	1
Total	5	3	2	4	32

are quite common in hoards right up to the reign of Diocletian, that is, about 284. Their number in any deposit is an important dating criterion. The more imitations of official issues that are found, the later the actual hoarding of the set. Deposits of antoninianii closing with issues of the Tetricus (the case of the Piła hoard) and Aurelian tend to contain numerous imitations, much over 7% even, especially in the territories of the *Imperium Galliarum*.<sup>11</sup>

The Piła hoard appears to be a primary

<sup>11</sup> ZIEGLER 1982, 92.

one and its structure suggests that it was formed somewhere in the Rhineland and came to Pomerania in the form in which it was found there. In that case, it is difficult to explain the presence of the coins of Aurelian from Italic mints.

In conclusion, the set of coins found in Piła left the *Imperium Romanum* about 275 and was hoarded in the western territories, most likely Rhineland. It cannot be determined when the set reached Pomerania and under what circumstances. The nature of the set is

also difficult to explain. It is not possible for it to have been a contemporary collection because one cannot imagine anybody collecting in such numbers the unattractive coinage of just Gallienus and Claudius II. As suggested above, the set is a primary collection, the uncertainty centering rather on where it was found, whether in Piła itself or in its vicinity.

What could have been the circumstances of the arrival of this set in Pomerania? Coins from the third quarter of the 3rd century are generally on the rise among finds from this region of Poland. There are only two homogeneous hoards from this period known from Pomerania<sup>12</sup>, augmented by a few dozen single finds of this particular denomination, plus a few 3rd-century aurei and sestertii (see Table 2).

An analysis of antoninianii hoards from Pomerania indicates that there was a low trickle of coins to the southern coasts of the Baltic from about 253 until the 270s. Starting it was a heterogeneous hoard of antoninianii from Owczarnia and at least a few dozen isolated finds of silver pieces from 238–253. A second stream appears to have started about 275; it is marked by two hoards: a poorly studied set from the neighborhood of Gryfice and the Piła hoard here discussed, the nature of which is difficult to ascertain. This stream also brought at least 16 isolated finds of coins of this denomination. This second wave of 3rd-century silver coins is of importance for the present considerations.

Coins potentially from the second stream described above demonstrate a definite predominance of mints from the western Roman provinces: Cologne, Lugdunum, Trier and the Gallic mints. This suggests a western direction for the contacts. The Piła hoard had a similar structure, having obviously been formed in the western Roman provinces.

The contacts were clearly not of an economic nature. They were short-lived and not homogeneous, often intermittent or weakened. Despite the poor state of research,

<sup>12</sup> CIOŁEK 2007, no. 89; 101.

which seriously hampers the analysis, the reasons for the influx of silver coinage of this denomination (as well as other 3rd-century coins, especially in the second half of the 3rd century AD) can be described as undoubtedly political, a suggestion that is based on an already extensive body of literature.<sup>13</sup>

The Roman–barbarian contacts in the 3rd century would have encompassed: one-time tributes, annual tributes otherwise called *annua munera*, ransoming captives, military pay (*stipendia*) and gifts. In the case of antoninianii, the most probable and principal source of coins were *stipendia* and *annua munera*. The silver coins of the 3rd century discovered in Pomerania may be evidence of military pay for the Germanic auxiliary units, as well as tributes. Hence, the Piła deposit may be an attestation of *annua munera*, because it was in the second and third quarter of the 3rd century that the largest number of tributes were paid into barbarian hands.<sup>14</sup> However, it is not quite evident which specific historical events confirmed in the written sources were responsible for this. One should keep in mind that most of the coins came from Gallic mints. An interesting suggestion that has been put forward, but which is not confirmed in the written sources, is that the monetary finds from northern Poland are proof of pay made to Germanic units in the service of the Gallic usurpers taking part in the Roman imperial infighting in the Western territories of the Empire.<sup>15</sup>

Another suggestion to consider is the idea of booty. It is usually assumed that few coins reached the Barbaricum as booty.<sup>16</sup> However, there are isolated cases of coins in bog deposits, which were quite obviously offerings made from booty.<sup>17</sup> Frank Berger did not consider these coins as booty<sup>18</sup> and yet it cannot be excluded that the Piła set of coins

<sup>13</sup> BERGER 1992; BURSCHE 1996; LUCHELLI 1998.

<sup>14</sup> JOHNE 1975, 75–91.

<sup>15</sup> BURSCHE 1983, 75.

<sup>16</sup> KÜNZL 1993/II, 1–7.

<sup>17</sup> LASER 1980, 38; BURSCHE 1993, 58; BURSCHE 1996, 105.

<sup>18</sup> BERGER 1992, 170.

was actually booty. It could have also been part of the treasury of a legion stationing on the upper Rhine, similarly as in the case of a well-known find from Novae on the Danube.<sup>19</sup> The hoard could still be booty from the Rhineland, just as a deposit found in Neupotz on the Rhine.<sup>20</sup> The said inscribed bronze plaque could point to the place from where the coins would have been pillaged. The Legion XXII (*Primigenia*) was stationed in Mainz for almost the entire period of its operation in this territory.<sup>21</sup>

The leather thong threaded through the bronze disk could actually suggest a bog deposit. The area around Piła, starting with the Gorzów Valley, is marshy and rich in peat bogs. Hence, the idea of a bog deposit, warranting the preservation of a leather thong, cannot be excluded. In this event, the booty theory becomes also more probable. However, it is impossible to verify these assumptions in any way, not to mention the reservations raised by the information about the leather thong.

Once again, the uniqueness of the Piła hoard should be emphasized: its seldom encountered size, chronological structure, provenance of the coins, presence of hybrids and imitations, and primarily the unique bronze disk with an inscription. Collecting 15 kg of extremely debased silver coins of practically only two Roman emperors, Gallienus and Claudius II, valued at practically just a few contemporary aurei, points to a rather atypical form of introduction of the set into Pomerania. Hoards of antoniniani are generally rare in the 3rd century because of their low value, hence finding a set of about 5000 coins is quite exceptional. Without knowledge of how the hoard had been hidden (for instance, the pot in which the coins were deposited), any conclusions concerning the nature of this set must remain dubious.

<sup>19</sup> KUNISZ 1979; 1987; 1992.

<sup>20</sup> KÜNZL 1993/ II, 26.

<sup>21</sup> PAULYS REAL-ENCYKLOPÄDIE, vol. 12/2, 1799–1815.

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