DIES FOR STRIKING REPUBLICAN AND EARLY IMPERIAL COINS FROM MOESIA AND THRACE: ANCIENT FORGERIES OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Abstract: This paper attempts to trace the distribution of unofficial dies for striking late Republican and early Imperial coins in Moesia and Thrace, discussing eleven dies and one hub (master die). It deals with the key issues concerning these rare numismatic finds, their occurrence in the Balkan provinces of Roman Empire and their interpretation as genuine monetary items or as forgers’ accessories. Such a large concentration of dies is found in a relatively constrained area, but so far understanding does not clearly revealed what their importance is. The problem appears to be essential for the comprehension of Roman political and military activities in the Balkans during the Augustan-Tiberian period, as well as for the general discussion on ancient coin techniques.

Keywords: coin dies, hubs, production of coins, numismatics, ancient forgeries, Roman Republic, Moesia, Thrace.

“There is no universally valid way of distinguishing between forgers’ dies and official dies”
(M.H.CRAWFORD 1974, 577)

1. The Evidence

Currently no less than twelve coin dies originate from the territories of ancient Thrace and Moesia. As far as I am aware, these are the following:

1. Obverse die, bronze mounted on iron case (h. 28 mm, diam. 28.8 mm, fig. 1) with negative impression of aureus/denarius of Augustus, legend AVGVSTVS / DIVI F – Lugdunum mint, dated to 15–13 BC (RIC I 162a; BNC I, 1361 type). A sharp chisel-cut in the right field. Found in 1898

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2. All ancient dies known up to 1953 (but not a single Republican) were collected in VERMEULE 1954, 20–26, with comments on 38–41, now fully superseded in MALKMUS 2008, 75 ff.
4. In fact this was the first series of Augustus produced at Lugdunum, see GIARD 1976, 199, no. 1361.

2. Obverse die – engraved (bronze mounted in iron sheath, h. 23mm, diam. 24.8 mm) for aurei/denarii of Augustus, with legend SPQR CAESARI AVGVSTO (fig. 2a-b). Found in the village of Dolna Dikanya (near Radomir, Pernik region) before 1901 for denarii assigned to an uncertain Spanish mint, probably colonia Patricia (modern-day Cordoba), dated to 17–16 BC (type Giard 1976, 1237; RIC I 148). National Archaeological Museum Sofia, inventory number 165.

3. Obverse die (bronze inset in hexagonal case) with impression of legionary denarius of Mark Antony (Crawford 1974, no. 544/?). Found in the 1950s in the ‘Kuryakovets’ locality on the bank of the Sava river near Sremska Mitrovica (Sirmium) in Serbia. Present location unknown. The outline of the original coin is clearly visible, off-centre (fig. 3b).

4. Reverse die (bronze inset in iron cylindrical shaft) for Caesar’s denarii (type Crawford 1974, no. 443/1, pontifical emblems), h. 48 mm, diam. 24 mm. Reportedly found in the vicinity of town of Montana, Northwestern Bulgaria. Apparently the impression was considered too shallow and later re-engraved, the outline of the original cast coin is well visible (fig. 4a-b). With no convincing arguments, the authenticity of this die was questioned by B. Woytek.

5. A pair of dies for denarii of Augustus with Gaius and Lucius Caesares, after ca. 2–1 BC (type RIC I 207, Lugdunum mint) – unknown provenance, reportedly from ‘Eastern Europe’, private property, examined in 2000 at Prähistorische Staatssammlung, Munich (fig. 5a-b). A. Obverse: bronze die mounted in iron case, h. 2.1 cm, w. 3.9x3.4 cm, diam. die 2.9 cm, 144 g; legend CAESAR AVGVSTVS DIVI PATER PATRIAE. B. Reverse: bronze die inset in iron conical shift, h. 4.74 cm, diam. die 2.55 cm, 172.61 g; legend CAESARES AVGVSTI F COS DESIG PRINC IVVENT, impression off-centered.

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7 It seems that BABELON 1901, 908–909, had confused the find-spots of those two dies from Bulgaria, and later BOJKOVA 1984, 15–18, had mechanically copied his error. This replacement has been corrected by KUBITSCHEK 1925, 134. See a note in MALKMUS 2008, 129, under no. V–21.


9 From 9 BC to AD 10 Sirmium remained in Roman Illyricum; then it was assigned to Pannonia.


12 Published by B. ZIEGAUS, in Wamser 2000, 350–351, no. 71.
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Fig. 5a-b. A pair of dies for denarii of Augustus, after 2–1 BC. Unknown provenance, Eastern Europe? (Photo after Ziegaus 2000, no. 71).

Here should be added another interesting item which appeared on the coin market in 1996:

6. Bronze obverse hub13 (positive) for denarii / aurei of Tiberius (type RIC I 2 25–30), said to have been ‘found in Eastern Europe’ (diam. 20 mm, h. 12 mm, 12.32 g), now in Geldmuseum der Deutsche Bundesbank in Frankfurt (fig. 6).14


7. Bronze reverse die (ending in tang for mounting in anvil, 13 mm × 20.5/21.5 mm) with negative impression of denarius/aureus of Tiberius, AD 14–37 (RIC I 2 25–30). REPORTEDLY FOUND IN THE AREA OF OESCUS IN MOESIA (FIG. 7).15

Fig. 7. Reverse die for denarii / aurei of Tiberius, AD 14–37. Found in the area of Oescus, ca. 2000 (Photo Manov 2002).

Twelve years ago two similar coin dies have become known. These are two iron shafts, ending in bronze with the legend engraved in retrograde, both for Mark Antony’s legionary denarii. A few years ago they simultaneously appeared on the American coin market with no provenance noted. According to anonymous sources, the obverse die below (no. 8) was found around 200016, somewhere around the town of Montana (anc. praesidium et castra Montanensium), in Northwestern Bulgaria. The possibility that both dies form a single pair seems plausible, but other experts doubt that.17 These are as follows:

8. Obverse die (bronze in iron sheath) for legionary denarii of Mark Antony (Crawford 1974, no. 544/7), 26 mm × 24 mm, 57.61 g (fig. 8a-b).18 Present location unknown. It has been considered from B. Woyte as a modern forgery.19

Fig. 8a-b. Obverse die for legionary denarii of Mark Antony (Cr. 544/7), after 32/1 BC (photo after Triton V, 2002, no. 1849).

9. Reverse die (bronze in iron cylindrical shaft) for denarii of the same series of Mark Antony (Crawford 1974, no. 544/19, for leg VI), 33 mm × 20 mm; 77.46 g, impression off-centre (fig. 9a-b). Present location unknown.20

Fig. 9a-b. Reverse die for legionary denarii of Mark Antony (Cr. 544/19), after 32/1 BC (photo after Gemini I, 2005, no. 299, courtesy of P. Davis).

13 On hubs and ‘hubbing’ see HILL 1922, 19–22 and CRAWFORD 1981, 176–177; M.H. Crawford fully rejected that hubs were used under the Republic (CRAWFORD 1974, 578), now supported by STANNARD 2011, 75–76.
17 I am grateful to Mr. Phillip Davis, H.J.Berk Ltd., Chicago, for this comment.
19 WOYTEK 2007, 504, Anm. 113.
Finally, another two forgers’ dies for striking of Republican denarii, again from Moesia:

10. Reverse die (bronze mounted on iron shaft) with a negative impression of denarius of C. Porcius Cato, after 123 BC (Crawford 1974, no. 274/1), corroded and rusted; dimensions not known. Found in Northern Bulgaria, examined in a private collection in Sofia (April 2008); present location unknown (fig. 10a-b).

\[\text{Fig. 10a-b. Reverse die for denarii of C. Porcius Cato, 123 BC (Cr. 274/1). Found in Northern Bulgaria (Photo I. Prokopov).}\]

11. Obverse die (bronze mounted on short iron sheath, height 32 mm, diam. 22 × 25 mm) – a negative impression of denarius of D. Silanus L.f. – helmeted head of Roma right, P behind (Crawford 1974, no. 337/3), after 91 BC. Reportedly found in the region of Vratsa, Moesia, kept in National History Museum Sofia.\(^21\) (fig. 11a-b).

\[\text{Fig. 11a-b. Obverse die for denarii of D. Silanus L.f., 91 BC (Cr. 337/3), found in Vratsa region. Front side and imprint (Photo after Penchev 2013).}\]

2. Discussion

According to the available record, the majority of surviving genuine early Imperial coin dies come from locations within Roman Gaul, especially from the period from Augustus to Nero.\(^22\) Having in mind that the main Roman mint for the period operated at Lugdunum (mod. Lyon)\(^23\), this concentration of dies fits well contextually. It is fascinating when dies originating from a distant location such as those from Moesia in the Balkans, having a different socio-economic environment, are found.

Most modern scholars agree that the majority of other dies, found outside Roman Gaul, are not official but contemporary forgers’ dies.\(^25\) The main argument has derived from the fact that these dies are usually produced not by real engraving (cutting) in negative, but by impressing (casting) a genuine coin into the heat-softened metal of the ‘fake die’, often called a transfer-die.\(^26\) By this mechanical copying, most of the details and sharpness of the genuine coin are absent. Other shortcomings also occurred in this mechanical process, in particular the flan shape of the model being carried over on the die, often with incomplete or off-centre images, lettering and spreading the design (fig. 12).\(^27\)

\[\text{Fig. 12. Obverse forgers’ die made by impressing (casting) a genuine coin of Hadrian. From Veliko gradište, Serbia (Pincum). National Museum Belgrade (after Saria 1927, 14–15, Taf. 1.10).}\]

The other reason is the basic rule that a genuine mint’s dies were systematically destroyed under careful supervision, and no traces are left behind. But what if certain minting was carried out in camps during military marches, or in small towns in dangerous areas? And when instant dispatch took place? Would it be possible that this would result in coin dies being discarded instead of being destroyed?

The above catalogue of Moesian/Thracian dies produced twelve finds (one is a pair), where all except two (nos. 2 and 4) are made by mechanical casting. Such a large concentration of dies is found in a relatively constrained area (see fig. 13 – online map), but so far understanding does not clearly revealed what their importance is. At first glance it appears rather unusual for original coin dies to originate from Thrace, Moesia and Dacia, even more importantly

\[\text{21 FENCHEV 2013, 391–393, figs. 1–7.}\]
\[\text{22 See a list of known genuine Roman dies in LE GENTILHOMME 1946, ii–vii; VERMEULE 1954; MALKMUS 2008, 128 f.}\]
\[\text{23 On the mint of Lugdunum, see SUTHERLAND, RIC I', 27–29, 87–88, 103 and 155; and GIARD 1983.}\]
\[\text{24 The majority of genuine dies of Lugdunum mint are listed in GIARD 1983, 27–30.}\]
\[\text{25 VERMEULE 1954, 23, 38–39; CRAWFORD 1974, 562, n. 3 and 576.}\]
\[\text{26 On the technique see CRAWFORD 1974, 560, n.1, 577–578; AMANDRY 1991, 95–99.}\]
\[\text{27 STANNARD 2011, 75–76, fig. 11.}\]
- before they had become Roman provinces. It seems that the phenomenon is a regional peculiarity, since the ancient coin dies are otherwise very rare monetary items.

The forgers’ verdict is assigned also to the famous hoard of dies for copies of Republican denarii from Tilișca near Sibiu, in Transylvania. This coin workshop set came to light in 1961 during excavations of a Dacian settlement and included fourteen coin dies (6 obverse; 4 reverse, 4 completely defaced) of types struck between 150 BC and 70 BC, and also three iron cases, all hidden in a clay pot.28 Other finds of forgers’ dies in Dacia were made in the so-called ‘Dacian mint’ at Sarmizegetusa Regia, published by Glodariu29 and elsewhere. Five dies from Sarmizegetusa range from an obverse die for denarius of C. Cassius (Cr. 266/1, 125 BC), of C. Hosidius Geta (Cr. 407/2, 68 BC), down to an obverse of denarius of Tiberius. Furthermore, a reverse forgers’ die for denarii of C. Marius Capito (Cr. 388/1a) was found in Ludești near Hunedoara.30 Traditionally, all those finds in Romania are related with the Geto-Dacian ‘state’ of Burebista and his activities in ca. 60–45/4 BC.31 But what is the situation in Moesia across the Danube? It may well be very similar, as the finds demonstrate. It appears that the local manufacture of Republican denarii under Burebista was organized on the southern bank of the Danube too.32

Therefore, if we dismiss all the dies of Republican and Mark Antonian types (nos. 4, 8–11 above) found in Moesia as undisputed forgers’ dies (transfer dies) for producing local copies of denarii, how should we interpret the early Imperial dies (Augustus and Tiberius) in question? Both Augustan dies in Sofia Archaeological Museum (nos. 1 and 2) have been labeled ‘forgers’ by Ph. Le Gentilhomme yet in 194633 and then called ‘de fabrique barbare’ by J.-P. Giard in the catalogue of the Paris numismatic collection.34 But what can their geographic and historical context tell us?

Die no. 1 above (fig. 1a-b) for coins struck in 15–13 BC originates from ‘Voyvodin Dol’ – a locality in the Vratzata gorge in the Stara Planina / Balkan mountains / Haemus, a kilometer west from Vratsa.35 This is not far from the argentiferous lead ores at Zgorigrad (chalcopyrite in oxidized workings.36) Recently a Thracian and Late Antique fort has been excavated in the Vratzata pass only 100–200 m east from the actual place of discovery of this die.37 The adjacent region on the eastern side has yielded a number of Republican denarius hoards closing in the late 40–30s BC (such as Moravitsa, Vratts ‘Starata Mogila’, ‘Haemus-Vratsa’ 2006, etc).38 Additionally, the die from Vratsa was deliberately hammered with a chisel in the field (fig. 1a), apparently in an attempt to destroy it. Upon close inspection of the die surface it appears that a few small spots of silver are still stuck into Augustus’ portrait.

Die no. 2 for Augustan type officially struck at uncertain Spanish mint in 17–16 BC – is visibly cut-engraved, not cast (fig. 2a-b). It has been found near Dolna Dikanya on the course of the ancient road Serdica – Pautalia – Scupi, which was certainly in use during the march of M. Licinius Crassus, the proconsul of Macedonia, in Western Thrace and to the Danube in 29–28 BC39, if not earlier. It is hard to believe that a valuable and intact die would be easily discarded, if not enforced by an emergency. Not far from its provenance (only 1.5 km to the north) along the same road (still the shortest way from Sofia to Skopje), in 2001 hoard of about 250 Republican denarii was unearthed, reportedly closing with issues of Caesar and Mark Antony. Unfortunately, it was immediately dispersed among private persons and collectors, and is not available for study. However, its closing date should be set around the 30s BC according to the information available.40 To the north of Dolna Dikanya lies Bosnek in South Vitosha with its well known gold placer and iron workings.41

Therefore, it seems possible to see both dies above within the Roman military context of the period. At that time Moesia experienced rapid re-organisation, and there was an intensive Roman military presence (pre-provincial territory with a governor (Μυσίας ἄρχων), as early as AD 6 during the Pannonian revolt).42

3. An attempt for conclusion

In my opinion, both dies of Augustus are direct evidence for the wartime coinage of the Roman generals of the Augustan-Tiberian era, being found outside of the context of the established mints. The same applies for die no. 7 – for denarii of Tiberius, reportedly found in the area of Oescus. As it is known, Oescus has been an early Imperial military camp, the seat of legio V Macedonica since AD 6–9.43 Three finds listed above should be connected to the authority of the so-called imperium, including the right to strike coins while in a military march. Consequently, it is not surprising if the dies from Moesia are regarded as the dies of provisional military mints.44 A similar explanation was proposed by Manov.45 Furthermore, a die for Tiberius denarii (again for RIC I 25–30) was found in 2004 during archaeological excavations...
in a layer datable to AD 45, under a military officer’s house in
the legionary camp Vindonissa (Windisch in Switzerland)46,
fitting in well with the above stated hypothesis.

Thus, it may be presumed that the discussed dies from
Moesia, if not official, were used semi-officially47 by the
Roman military administration to manufacture coins in/
around the Moesian legionary camps (especially Oescus; see
find no. 5). This may be true for the period in the reign of
Tiberius which resulted in the famous shortage of credit and
currency (inopia rei nummariae) in AD 33 (Tacitus, Ann. 6.16–
17; Suet. Tib. 48.1; Dio 58. 21.1–5).48

The concentration of dies in Moesia is surprising and
unexpected. Since there is no reason to think that the popu-
lation there was more “criminal” than anywhere else, we are
left with two possibilities. Either the dies were produced in
“normal” numbers here, but for unknown reasons they have
tended to survive, or these are not forgers’ dies at all. In
the latter case, a “military mint” explanation seems plausible.

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