WALKING ON A TREASURE... WITHOUT KNOWING!
A NEW HOARD DISCOVERED IN THE ‘CIVILIAN’ CITY OF CARNUNTUM¹

Abstract: The article is presenting the discovery of a new coin hoard at the Roman site of Carnuntum, Austria. The particularity on this discovery is revealed by the interpretation of the archaeological context. This approach indicate that the hoard ending with coins issued in the sole reign of Caracalla (AD 211–217) was discovered in a context dated in the second half of the 4th century AD. The coins were found in the south-western tower of the ‘civilian’ city of Carnuntum in a layer brought here to level the ground after the earthquake that took place in the mid–4th century AD.

Keywords: Roman coin hoard, archaeological context, Carnuntum

The finding of a hoard has always been an attractive event as in the most of the cases the composition is made of precious metal and/or stones. Usually, the discovery of such hoards/treasures takes place in isolated places and in most of the situations is a consequence of pure hazard. The situations were coin hoards were found inside various structures are very rare. This is not surprising as the owner wanted to hide/buried his treasure in a place where no one will think to look for it. On the other hand, each of the hoards that are discovered nowadays is a witness of human tragedies. The owner had a very serious reason to bury his hoard away from his place and, unfortunately for him, he never recovered it.

When such hoards, mainly in the shape of coin assembly are found during archaeological campaigns then they are even more interesting. The archaeological information on the context of discovery together with the numismatic and economic analyse of the coins can offer the story behind the monetary discovery: how much value had the hoard back in time when the coin were in circulation (what you could bought or how much you were paid); what has happened and when the hoard was hidden and not recovered by the owner?

In order to come to such a picture on a dramatic moment of daily life within a historical chronological segment some elements must be taken into account.

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account. Beside Luck – to find such a coin assembly during an archaeological excavation - an accurate archaeological technique is requested as it will provide the explanation of the hoard presence in that spot, and, certainly, the numismatic expertise of the coins followed by the economic and historical interpretation of the coin assembly.

In the last years the systematic excavations within a quarter of the so-called “civilian” city of the ancient Carnuntum (Pl. 1) has benefited from all these elements, the Luck included (sic !). Discovered coin assemblies within ‘House I’, ‘House II’ and the baths have been archaeologically documented in detail, catalogued and interpreted according to the archaeological context, their composition and framed within the historical background. The conclusions have demonstrated that they were all sequences of Roman daily life: a local fire (House I); a foundation offering (House II) and a robbery (baths)8.

During the summer archaeological campaign of 2012 at the spot known as the ‘Fischteich’ (‘Fishpond’) (Pl. 1) a new coin assembly came to the light.

One hundred and four Roman coins were retrieved from the south-west corner tower of the city wall (Pl. 1). After the restoration process, the coins proved to be all of very high finesse of silver (Pl. 2–3). Except for one antoninianus of Caracalla issued in AD 215 – the first year when this nomination was minted – all the other coins are denarii. The eldest coins of this assembly are the famous ‘legionary series’ (32–31 BC) of Mark Anthony issued before the battle of Actium (31 BC) while the latest ones belong to the sole reign of Caracalla (AD 211–217).

The numismatic analyse of the hoard indicate that the hoard was accumulated in a very short time if not at once with the coins in circulation at the time of hoarding. The arguments on this direction are: the large number of coins of Septimius Severus family members (80.7%); the eldest coins up to the ones of Domitian are all worn out due to a long period of circulation; while the coins depicting Septimius Severus family members are almost in fresh minting state of preservation.

In order to establish the value of this hoard we have to take into account, if possible, the prices and wages, at the time when the hoard was assembled, probably soon after AD 215.

At the moment, no evidence on the prices of daily transactions dated precisely has survived until nowadays. However, a list of products bought, probably for a banquet, of a guild (collegium) has survived on one of the wax tablets from Alburnus Maior (Roșia Montană) in Roman Dacia (nowadays, Romania)4. This wax tablet is dated between AD 131 and AD 135. The archaeological context shows that there is no certainty that the 104 silver coins represent the entire quantity hoarded as other pieces could have been lost during transportation to this place. At the same time, the transportation of all these layers containing the coins took place long after the hoard was hidden/buried as the workers did not know about the existence of these silver coins.

As a paradox, those who repaired the tower had no idea that they were walking on a precious treasure for their times when the coinage was taking a strong process of devaluation (4th century AD).

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Pl. 1. The map of the "civilian" town Carnuntum pointing the findspot of hoard.
Pl. 2. The main lot of the hoard (87 coins) before (a) and after (b) cleaning
Pl. 3. Sample of coins from hoard