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 -4^{th} century AD.

Keywords: Roman coin hoard, archaeological context, Carnuntum

he 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

Cristian Găzdac

Institute of Archaeology and Art History Cluj-Napoca cgazdac2000@yahoo.co.uk

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v1i3.42 ISSN 2360 - 266X ISSN-L 2360 - 266X

¹ This work was made available owing to the financial support offered by research projects UEFISCSDI PN-II-ID-PCE-2012-4-0210 and PN-II-RU-TE 20123-0216. I express my gratitude the Roman-Germanic Commission Frankfurt am Main, Germany where the final version of this manuscript was finished during a research fellowship.

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'², 'House II'³ and the baths⁴ 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)⁵.

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 (Roṣia Montană) in Roman Dacia (nowadays, Romania)⁶. This wax tablet is dated between AD 131 and AD 167⁷. Among other products that were bought the list states that 5 lambs cost 18 denarii, while 1 piglet cost 5 denarii⁸. Although the prices are over 50 years older than the moment when, probably, the hoard under study was buried/hidden, and even with a double rate of inflation – some scholars

have agreed for a low rate of it 9 while others considers it as a severe one at the end of the $2^{\rm nd}$ century AD^{10} – it can be assumed that with 104 denarii a person could, still, ensure the food supply for a large family and for a long period of time at the beginning of the $3^{\rm rd}$ century AD.

Regarding the salaries the best, if not the only evidence, for our topic (both, the amount of money and the date) are the military payments. While Herodian states explicitly that Caracalla, in AD 212, increased the payment of praetorians by 50%¹¹, Dio Cassius suggests that all army payments have been doubled¹². According to M.A. Speidel, in AD 212 a basic legionary would receive 3,600 *sestertii*/year (900 *denarii*) while an infantryman from the *auxilia* 3,000 *sestertii*/year (750 denarii)¹³.

Returning to the discovery that is the subject of this article – the 104 silver coins – one can estimate the approximately value of this this amount of money. At the first sight, these coins could have bought an important quantity of food. On the other, if the owner was even a basic soldier from either an auxiliary troop or a legion, the sum of 104 could have been easily part of the three annual *stipendia*¹⁴ not to mention the usual money gifts to the army (*donativa*).

But are these 104 silver coins representing the entire quantity of money hoarded by the owner?

With this question we reach another aspect that everyone who studies a coin assembly found in archaeological environment must take it into account: the archaeological context.

The accurate archaeological research carried out at the spot where these coins were retrieved allows us to draw some important conclusions 15 .

The coins were not found in a container but in three lots of 87, 10 and 7 pieces. In each of the three cases the coins were scattered one next to the other. The layers in which were found consists all of sand, pebble stones and numerous residual material, including a large variety of pottery shards. According to archaeologists these layers were brought in to serve as a substructure for the walking level in the southwest tower of the city wall, after it was strongly affected by an earthquake in the mid-4th century AD.¹⁶

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 palce. 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 $(4^{th}$ century AD).

 $^{^{\}frac{1}{2}}$ GĂZDAC/HUMER 2002, 17–18; GĂZDAC/HUMER 2004, 107–135; GĂZDAC/HUMER 2013, 35–52.

³ GĂZDAC/HUMER 2013, 42-44.

⁴ GĂZDAC/HUMER 2013, 38-40.

⁵ GĂZDAC 2013, 28.

⁶ RUSSU 1975, 243-246.

⁷ RUSSU 1975, 175.

⁸ RUSSU 1975, 244, 246.

⁹ SCHEIDEL 2009, 68.

¹⁰ RATHBONE 1996, 323.

¹¹ Herodian, III.8.4.

¹² Dio Cassius, LXXVIII.36.3-4.

¹³ SPEIDEL 1992, 106.

¹⁴ SPEIDEL 1992, 87.

 $^{^{15}}$ The information on the archaeological context in which the hoard has been found were made available to the author of this work owing to the courtesy of Dr. Andreas Konecny (University of Vienna) to whom I express my gratitude.

¹⁶ DECKER/GANGL/KANDLER 2006, 479-495.

REFERENCES

DECKER/GANGL/KANDLER 2006

Decker, K./ Gangl, G./ Kandler, M., The earthquake of Carnuntum in the fourth century A.D. – archaeological results, seismologic scenario and seismotectonic implications for the Vienna Basin fault, Austria, Journal of Seismology 10/4, 479-495.

GĂZDAC 2013

Găzdac C., Coins revealing history: Case studies from Carnuntum, Carnuntum Jahrbuch, 25–29.

GĂZDAC/HUMER 2002

Găzdac, C./ Humer, F., The Hoard from Haus I, Zivilstadt Carnuntum, Nachrichten der Gesellschaft der Freunde Carnuntums 3, 2002, 17-18.

GĂZDAC/HUMER 2004

Găzdac, C./ Humer, F., Ein Schatzfund in einem Wohnhaus der Zivilstadt Carnuntum - Hinweis auf ein alltägliches Unglück?, Numismatische Zeitschrift 111/112, 107-135.

GĂZDAC/HUMER 2013

Găzdac, C./ Humer, F.,: Living by the Coins. Roman life in the light of coin finds and archaeology (Wien: Hollitzer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag).

RATHBONE 1996

Rathbone, D., Monetization not price-inflation, in thirdcentury AD Egypt? In: King, C.E. / Wigg, D.G. (eds.), The thirteenth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History 25-27.3.1993. (Berlin: Mann), 321-339.

RUSSU 1975

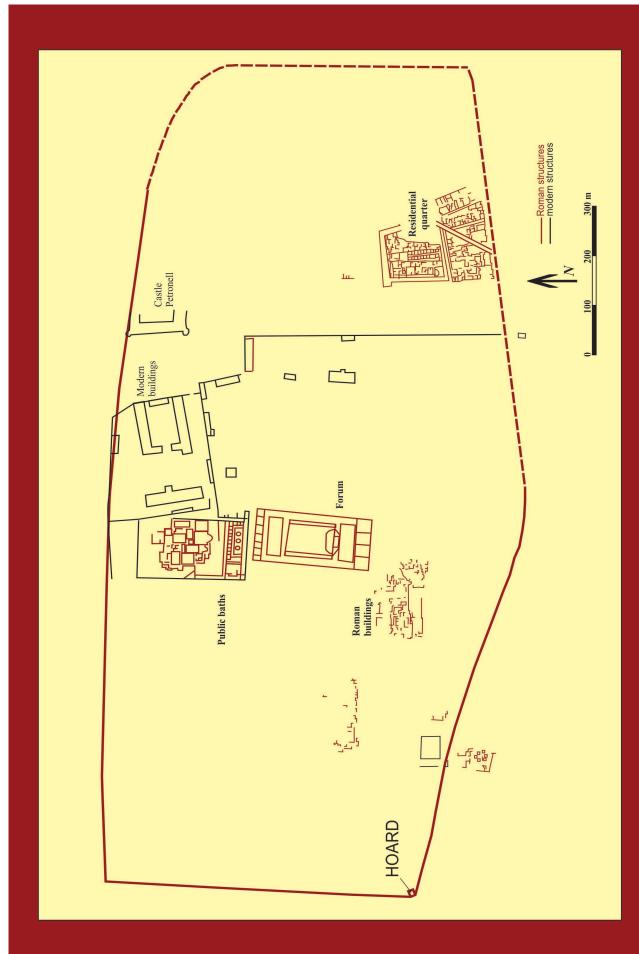
Russu, I.I. Inscripțiile Daciei romane. vol. I (București: Editura Academiei).

SCHEIDEL 2009

Scheidel, W., In search of Roman economic growth, JRA 22, 46 - 70.

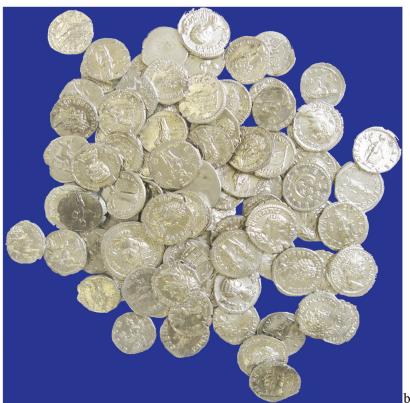
SPEIDEL 1992

Speidel, M.A., Roman Army Pay Scales, JRS 82, 87-106.

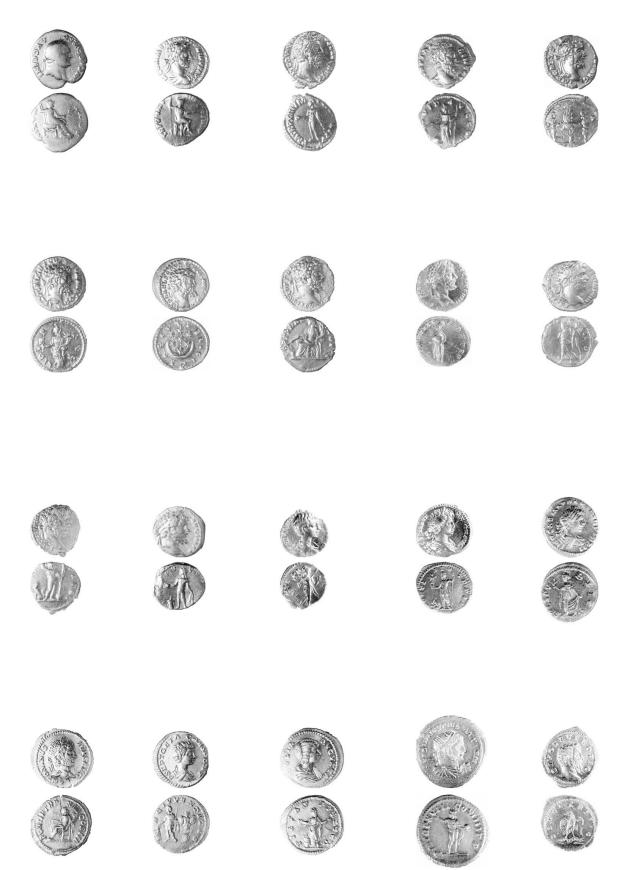


Pl. 1. The map of the 'civilian' town Carnuntum pointing the findspot of hoard





Pl. 2. The main lot of the hoard (87 coins) before (a) and after (b) cleaning



Pl. 3. Sample of coins from hoard