



ANALYZING THE SILVER COINS FROM POTAISSA. LEGIONARY FORT VS. ANCIENT TOWN

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Abstract: This paper is centered on the study of Roman silver coins from the archaeological site of Potaissa using as its main source M. Pişlaru’s book “*The Roman coins from Potaissa: legionary fortress and ancient town*”.

The book focuses on the presentation of analysis results of monetary finds coming from Potaissa area while the article presents a different approach to the subject, by integrating part of the results in graphs that show a close-up perspective for the monetary evidence in chronological periods.

How this task was accomplished is explained below, in two chapters, one dedicated for the study of the two areas from Potaissa, legionary fortress and civilian town, and another dedicated for the study of private coin collections from all of Potaissa.

Keywords: Roman, silver coins, legionary fort, Potaissa, graphs.

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INTRODUCTION

The site at Potaissa, present day town of Turda (Romania), differs from other sites in the former Roman province of Dacia being of the two locations of Roman Dacia, where one can find a legionnaire camp next to a large civil settlement. In addition, it has been well researched in both areas, military and civilian, while in the case of the second site located at Apulum, present-day town of Alba Iulia, the legionary camp is located under the Austrian fortress of the seventeenth century.

From the numismatic point of view, Potaissa represents an important site, over 3,200 coins being discovered here and preserved in the local museum.

In the case of the History Museum from Turda, we can find many pieces brought from archaeological excavations as well as numerous pieces from private collections. Should we take into consideration the coins from collections when we’re trying to establish the economic circulation or should they be avoided?

The main purpose is to show the distribution of the silver coins inside the legionary fort and in the civil settlement, in this case study both of them being situated at Potaissa. Another important aspect represents the differences between the number of genuine and counterfeited coins, the situation from the fortress and that of the civil area.

Would there be any possibility if of a misinterpretation if taking into account the private coin collections when trying to establish the monetary circulation of the region. The research must be made with more caution when

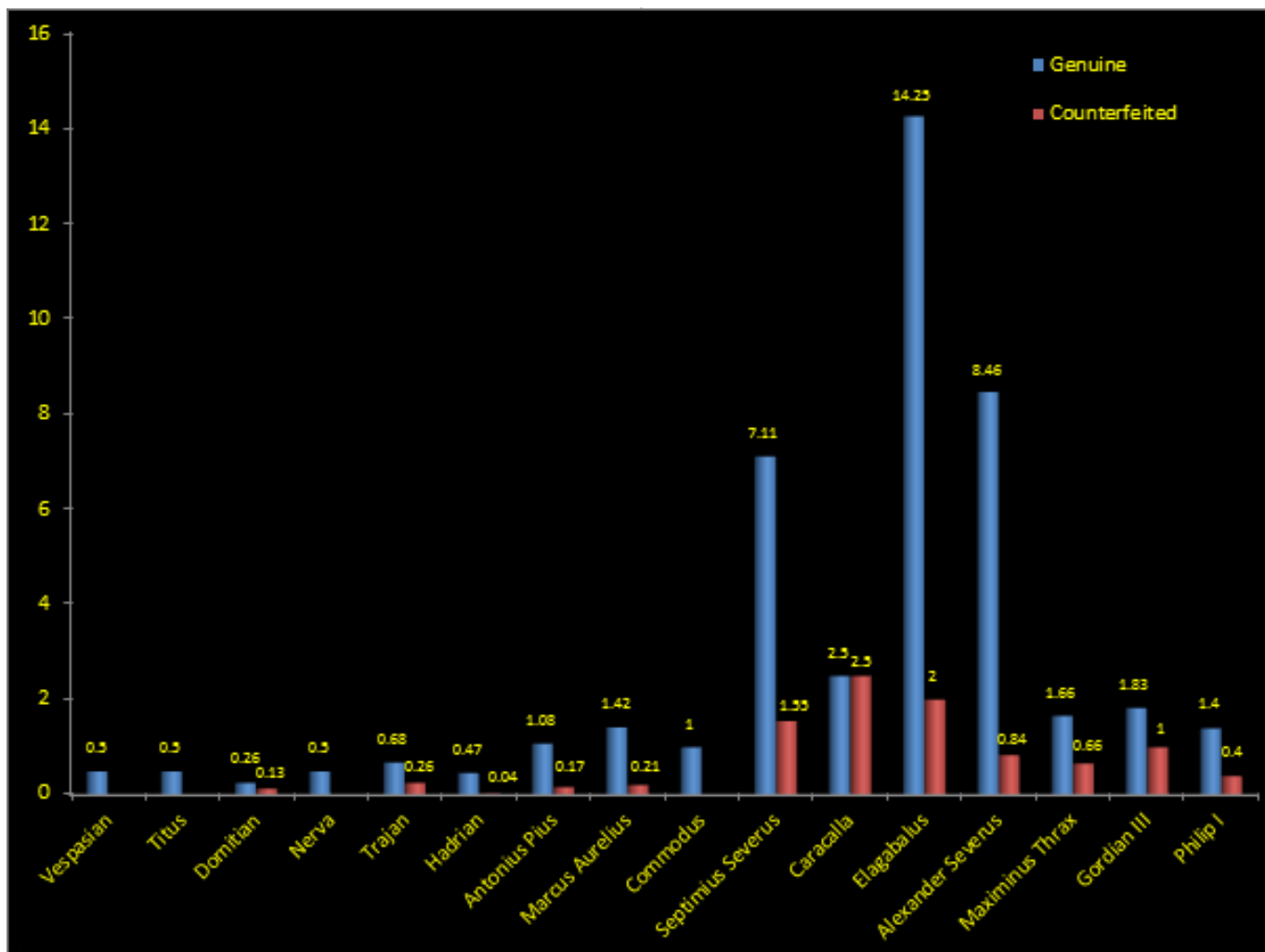


Fig. 1. Graph of the silver coins finds from Potaissa – legionary fort

looking at coins belonging to private coin collections.

Thus, all the silver denomination Roman coins from the first to the third centuries, more exactly from Augustus (27 BC–14 AD) to Philip the I (AD 244–249)¹, have been analyzed, separated in two categories as genuine or counterfeited, arranged according to the issuer and his period of reigning.

Graphs were made using a coefficient of entrance which consists of a simple mathematical formula that involves the number of pieces issued, divided according to the years of reign of the issuer. The result is a coefficient that shows the approximated intensity of coins in circulation for that chronological segment.

CIVIL SETTLEMENT VS. LEGIONARY FORT

Carefully looking at the graphs for the legionary camp (Fig. 1), we can easily observe a steady pace for the years 69-192 from Vespasian to Commodus with a small increase during the period 138-180 for Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Then follows a sharp increase and very intense for the Severan period more specifically since 193 from Septimius Severus (193-211), with a slight decrease in

1 The study stops with the period of Philip I because after his reign the Roman Empire enters a climax of crises. From massive barbarian attacks and natural disasters to emperors who lose power in a few years, all of this events having a toll on the monetary distribution in the Empire, plus the abandoning of Roman Dacia by the Romans around AD 270.

the time of Caracalla (211-217), then to touch the tip of the graph during the period of Elagabalus (218-222) and comes back with a resemblance value like at the beginning of the dynasty. After the year 238 and up to the death of Philip I (244-249), the chart reverts to a normal pace as intensity.

The coefficient that shows the intensity of counterfeited coins found on the site is very low compared to that of the original coins. Even during the Severan dynasty when the original currencies reached the highest values, the fake coins coefficient slightly increases, barely matching that of the real coins from the time of Caracalla (211-217). These values are very interesting because they do not compare to those of other archaeological sites in the area where military troops are quartered and where most of the times the false coins according to Severan period tends to equal or exceed the index of originals². Even the existence of a legionary camp should influence this index of fake coins. Where there are many troops, it takes a lot of money and in this area, we can see that money is not scarce.

Taking into account the possible relationship between the large numbers of coins issued during the Severan period and chronological events one can observe a significant amount of plated pieces issued for Iulia Domna, possibly due to the civil war³ of 193-197. At the same time, a significant

2 GĂZDAC/COCIȘ 2004, GĂZDAC/GUDEA 2006, GĂZDAC/SUCIU/AFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2009.

3 GRANT 1985, 108-110.

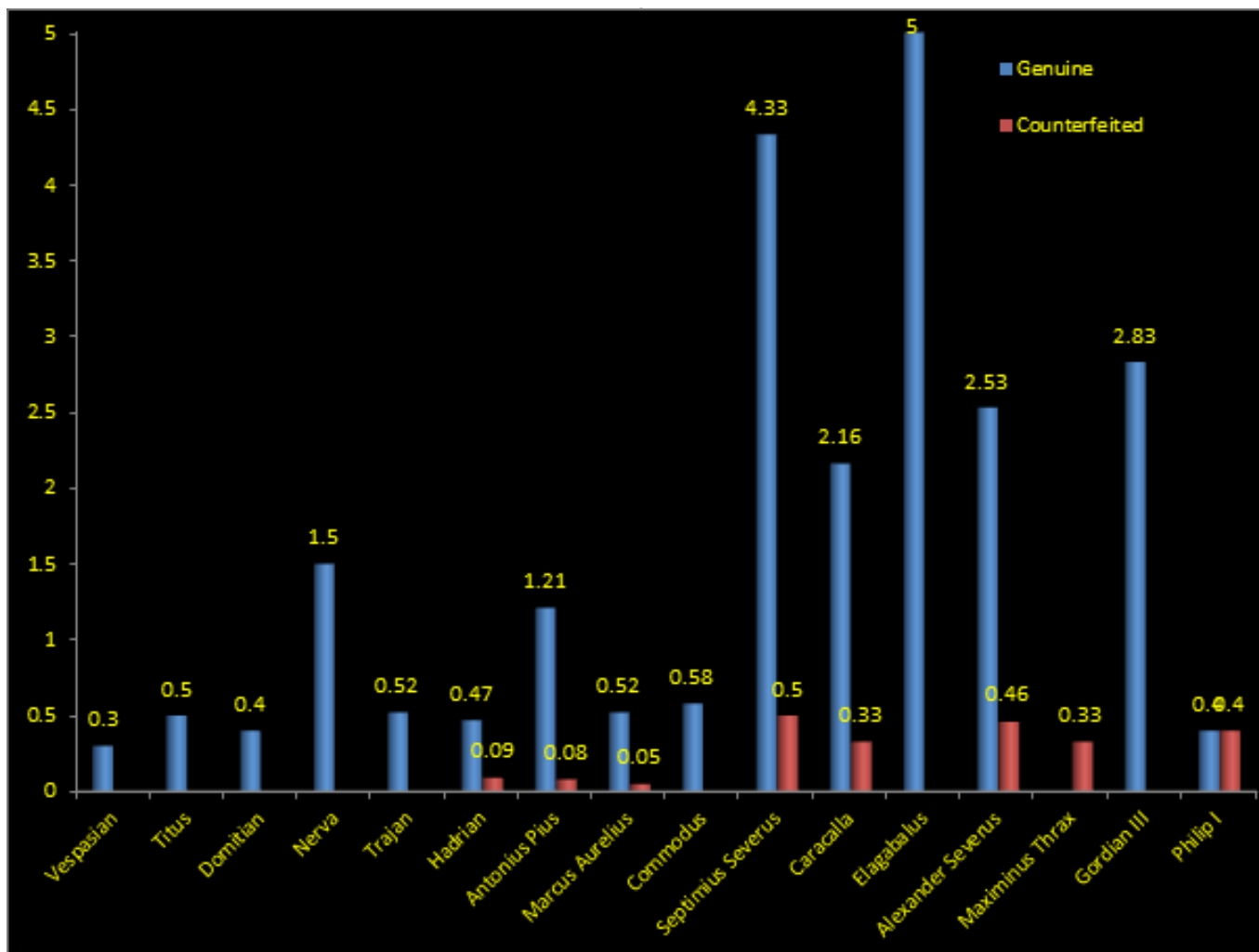


Fig. 2. Graph of the silver coin finds from Potaissa – civil settlement

number of coins in the period of the eastern military campaigns of the AD 197-199 with increasing in salaries for the military can also be noticed⁴.

In the civil area, the case is different. Here (Fig. 2), we can sense a rhythm that begins with the minting year of AD 69 of Vespasian's reign and which continues to Commodus as AD 192 with two sudden increases for the time of Nerva (96–98) and Antonius Pius (138–161). Then, one can see the same intensity eruptions during the Severan reign. During this dynasty the strongest growth occurs for coins issued during the reign of Septimius Severus (193–211) and Elagabalus (218–222) coexisting with small increases in the time of Caracalla (211–217) and Alexander Severus (222–235).

The situation of the counterfeited coins is much lower than the one representing the fort (Fig. 1) – only a few coins. This aspect leads us to deduce that these coins were known for their lack in terms of buying power and were avoided in using if possible.

In the case of the fake coins from the ancient town of Potaissa, the situation is different, their number is much lower than the number of counterfeited coins from the camp because most currency was bought from various collectors or arrived from isolated find spots⁵. It was normal for corroded coins to remain untouched, as collectors prefer beautiful and

4 MAZZARINO 1984, 435-437.

5 PÍSLARU 2009, 56.

rare specimens for their collections⁶.

The final graph (Fig. 3) results after merging the two previous ones into a single one, covering both civil settlement (Fig. 2) and legionary fortress (Fig. 1).

For the period of relative stability between the years 69 and 192, in the fort area the chart (Fig. 3) for genuine coins has a steady and stable path that can prove an existing peace in the region, while in the civil area there are those two small intensifications. These small intensifications can be explained by keeping on a longer period of time coins that were issued under the two emperors because they are of a much better quality than the later coins, so they are kept in circulation.

For the same period, the appearance of counterfeited coins can be explained by their creation later compared to the reign of the emperor who is portrayed. Whether they are part of a State policy or are produced by one individual, they were made with the image of an emperor who would have reigned during what many consider as the heyday of the Roman Empire, when the coins were of the best quality⁷. Thus, even if it was false, it was receiving more credibility in the eyes of the public.

The great 'economic boom' of the Severan period comes up, the number of issued coins resembles to what we

6 GĂZDAC/AFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2001, 144.

7 PENSE 1992, 214.

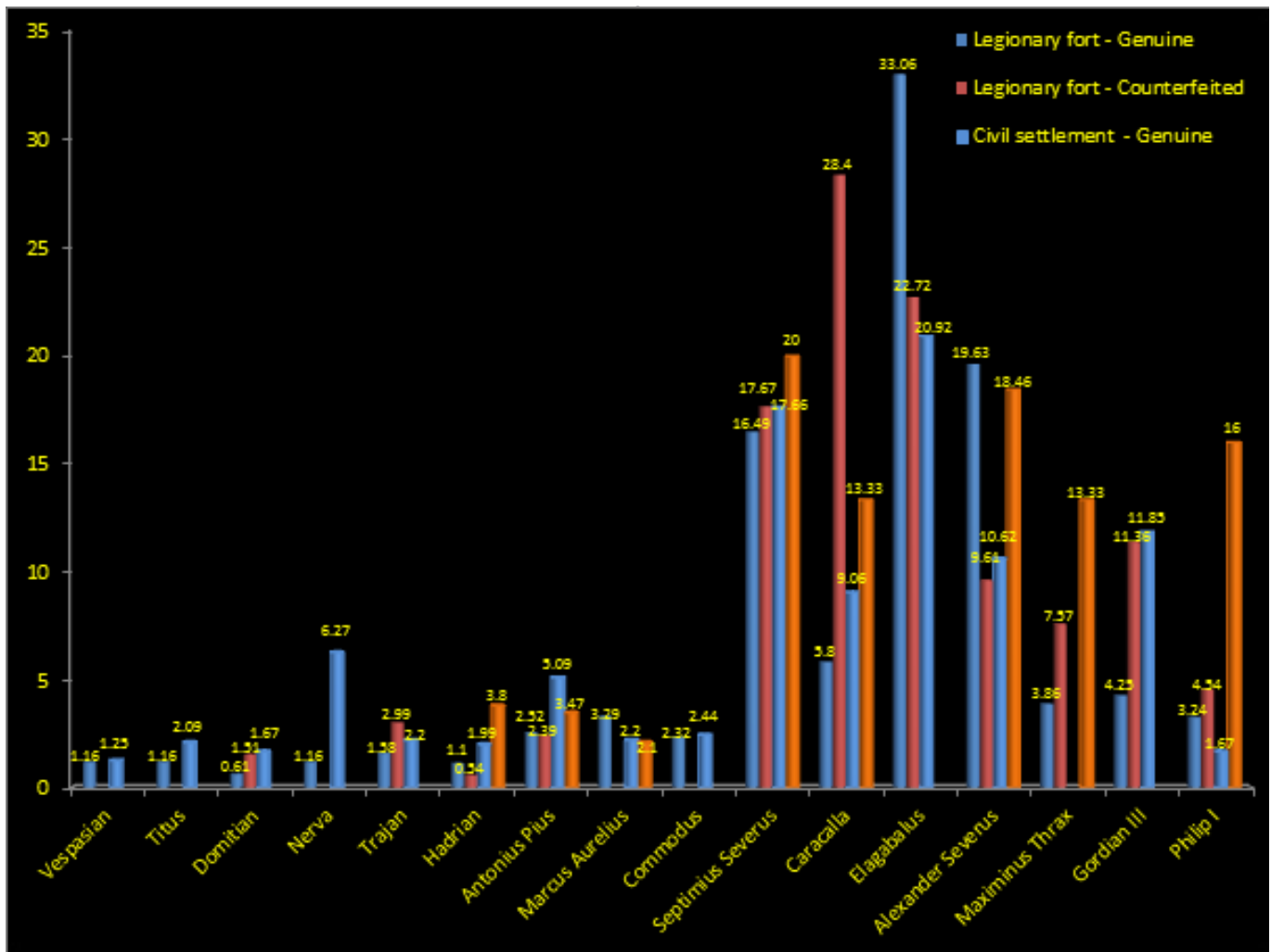


Fig. 3. Graph of the silver coin finds from Potaissa – legionary fort vs. civil settlement

see on nearby sites⁸, but what is not normal is that there are many genuine pieces for this range and very few false pieces. We can observe an equal coefficient between original pieces and fake ones for the time of Septimius Severus and one of coin framed as false which is 6 times higher than that of the original coins during the time of Caracalla. New peaks for the original coins appear, closely followed by the fake ones after which everything diminishes during the period of Alexander Severus with a last increase under Gordian III.

We can explain the intensity of these levels from the time of Septimius Severus, but we have to know the historical events that took place during this period. The legion was engaged in the struggles of the emperor against his rivals to the throne, Albinus (193–197) and Pescenius Niger (193–194). Alongside these events, there is also the raise in salaries and the giving of “donative” noticed in the considerable volume of coins discovered inside the legionary fort⁹.

Under the Emperor Caracalla (211–217) took place the first major onrush of Goths in Dacia (united with some tribes of Dacians, belonging outside Roman Dacia). In this context, we can notice a decrease in both locations of the original currency factor and an increase of the fake ones. Because of the surprise of this attack and the lack of

financial resources at the moment, in this part of the Empire troops were needed for the province’s defense and they were supplied with counterfeited coins, or have tried to produce their own currency if the state could not afford it.

Next follows a coefficient of values that reaches new heights during Elagabalus (218–222) and decreases under Alexander Severus (222–235). A new oddity is at the end of the graph under Philip I (244–249) we can see a very low coefficient of pieces that is contradictory to the historical sources that place the great attack of the Carpians in his period.

POTAISSA VS. PRIVATE COIN COLLECTION

Another study was performed to observe the difference between the coins found in the site and those from private collections, to see if there is any specific mentality between collectors. Is it possible that this mentality should lead them to buy other coins considered rare not being entirely satisfied with those available back home?

The lot of coins from the town Potaissa, which consists of 2,255 pieces, is mostly made up of three large collections from J. Kémeny, I. Botár and I. Téglás these coins being considered as arising solely from the region of Potaissa by J. Winkler and M. Bărbulescu.

Kémeny József collection was constituted from artifacts gathered around Potaissa, including numerous

8 GĂZDAC/COCIȘ 2004, GĂZDAC/GUDEA 2006, GĂZDAC/SUCIU/AFÖLDY-GĂZDAC 2009.

9 PÍSLARU 2009, 383.

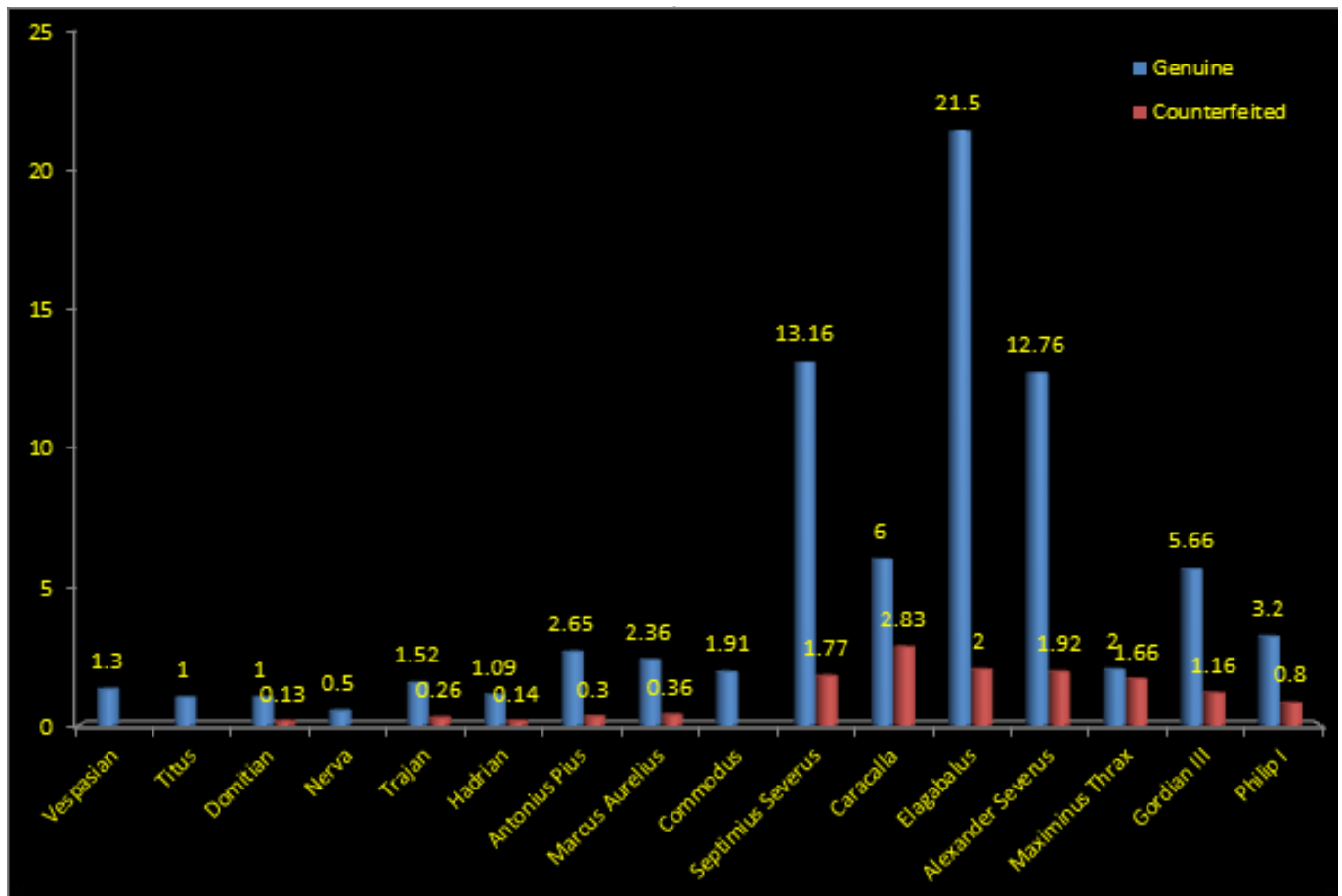


Fig. 4. Graph of the silver coin finds form Potaissa – legionary fort and civil settlement

coins, many of which were found during urban and agricultural works in the late nineteenth century¹⁰. Artifacts discovered in this period have helped found other collections as well such as that of I. Botár and I. Téglás¹¹.

In the surveying of the monetary lot from the ancient town, prevailingly made of coins from the former collections, a critical analysis was used in order to establish whether all the coins truly came from Potaissa. Its results show that only rare issues from the end of the third and fourth centuries from the former Botár collection and perhaps some early imperial coins from the Kémeny and Botár collections can be doubtful¹². It seems that rare coins were seized by collectors for them to be able to make complete collections of coins and as such could not be found in large quantities in this geographic region due to historical events¹³.

Thus, we can consider the coins from the I. Botár collection, at least the ones from the second and third centuries as being from Potaissa's territory. The coins of I. Téglás collection are very important because they can be charted on Potaissa¹⁴. As for the coins belonging to J. Kémeny collection, except for the coins from Augustus (27 BC–14 AD), show as if they were found in the legionary camp¹⁵.

10 WINKLER, HOPÁRTEAN 1972, 35.

11 PÍSLARU 2009, 36.

12 PÍSLARU 2009, 84.

13 Dacia becomes a Roman province only after the year AD 106, the Roman coins which have been issued before this year are archaeological discovered in lower quantities that those which entered the province in the form of payments from Rome.

14 PÍSLARU 2009, 138.

15 PÍSLARU 2009, 84.

In addition, J. Winkler and A. Hopârtean agreed that the thoroughness proved by J. Kémeny, against enriching his own collection by buying rare coins, proved to be a good example¹⁶.

In the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, J. Kémeny began his famous collection of historical artifacts which included epigraphic monuments, stone and bronze sculptures, gems and hundreds of coins most of which were collected from Potaissa and its surroundings¹⁷. J. Kémeny wanted to donate his collection to the Hungarian History Museum of Cluj but the events of 1848 and 1849 made that most of the upcoming exhibits to be destroyed or lost. However, part of the collection could be recovered with the help of the owner's manuscripts and as well by using some notes from J. F. Neigeaur who visited the town of Turda in 1847 and had the opportunity to see and note down what he saw in the residence of J. Kémeny¹⁸.

The total number of coins from the collection of J. Kémeny is questionable because in 1847, J. F. Neigeaur mentions 964 coins, while J. Kémeny in a letter from 1853 mentions with deep regret that he failed to write down the entire batch of coins he owned. They were scattered in 1848, totaling approximately 4,000 pieces, from Turda and its surroundings¹⁹. J. Winkler and A. Hopârtean took into account the possibility that most of these coins have been seized from other towns by J. Kémeny, how else could he

16 WINKLER/HOPÁRTEAN 1972, 91.

17 BĂRBULESCU 1980, 286.

18 WOLLMAN 1978, 40.

19 WINKLER, HOPÁRTEAN 1972, 33.

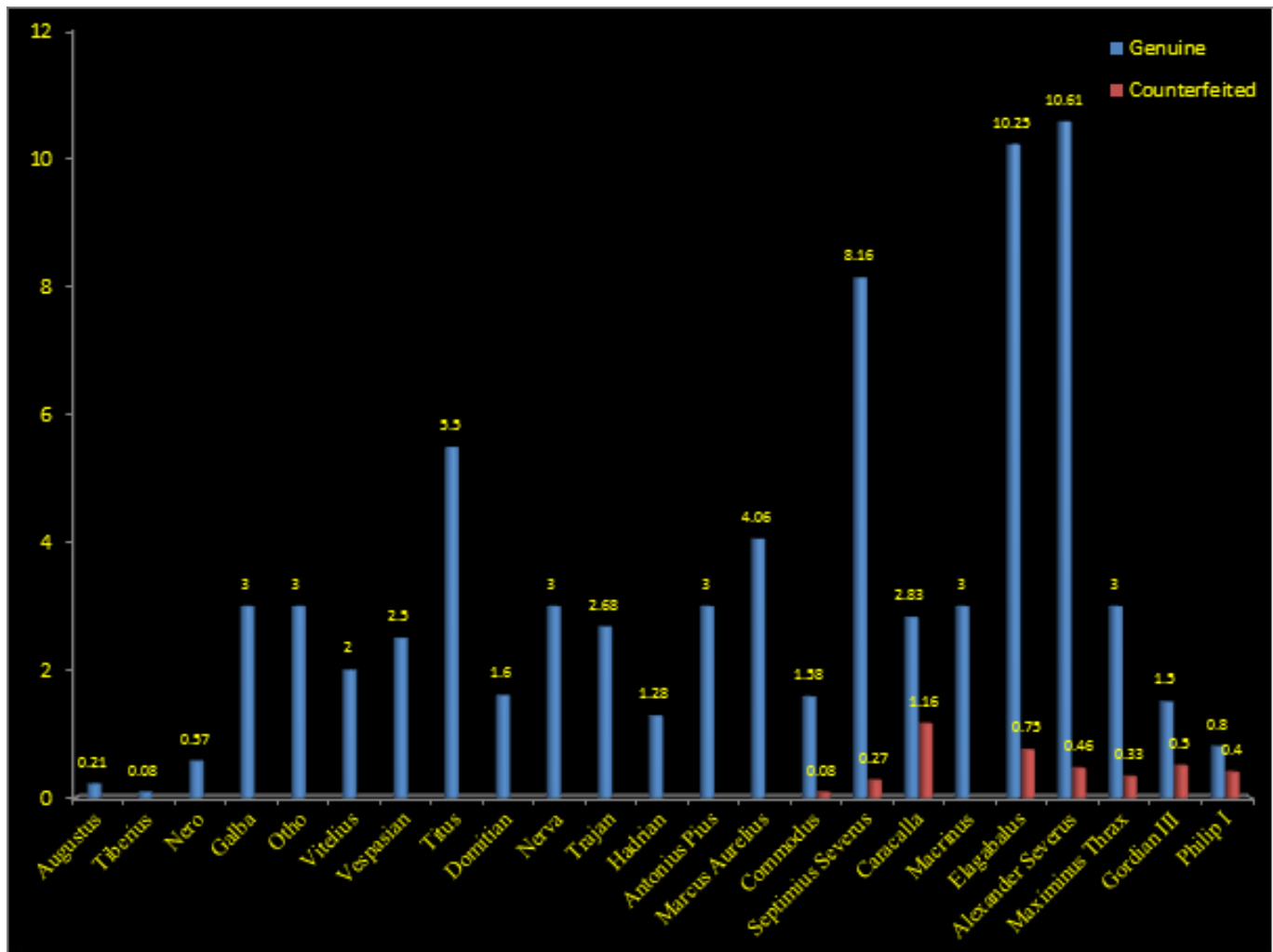


Fig. no 5. Graph of the silver coins from Turda - Private Coin Collections

have been able to gather 3.000 pieces during one year's time?

For a long time, József Kémeny (1795–1855) was considered one of the greatest historians of Transylvania. His reputation was formed as a result of the very large number of salvaged and published historical documents and for supporting the creation of the Transylvanian History Museum in Cluj.

At the time when these documents were published, nobody could refer to the fact that a lot of them were in fact J. Kémeny's own creations, even if at the end of the 19th century his integrity as a historian began to be put in doubt, only in the 1980' his entire work of forgeries has been revealed²⁰.

Due to the lengthy time required to see the full deception left by J. Kémeny, many of his works have already been used as primary sources or secondary sources by other historians in their works. Even more, many historians consider too difficult the work of separating the wheat from the chaff so that many of the false writings belonging to J. Kémeny remained in use and present a danger to contemporary historians who are unfamiliar with the reputation of the one who put them on the loose²¹.

He brought contributions to the history, promoted the rehabilitation of historical buildings and ironically, he is the first historian to present the 'Csiki Codex', which

20 RADY 1993, 103;

21 RADY 1993, 103.

promoted a Hunic origin for the Szekelys, as being a recent invention²².

In conclusion, M. Rudy states that not all the works published by J. Kémeny are forged, as an example, he presents 48 documents, which were found to be without historical value, merely personal creations, and four which turned out to be original but still believed by many as historical forgeries²³.

Enough sources present J. Kémeny and his work as a forgery in the field of historical documents. However, there is not enough evidence that would suggest his interest in coin creation. This being said, we must be very careful when examining the pieces coming from his collection, but without the requested evidence, not to try to consider them as fakes from the start.

On this way, several graphs are available now. One for coins discovered in the whole area of Potaissa, legionary fort and civilian settlement, another one consisting of pieces from the private coin collections of J. Kémeny and I. Botár which are now owned by the Historical Museum of Turda and were presented in the book of M. Pislaru.

As far as we can see, owing to the data from Potaissa (Fig. 4), discoveries have been combined, and the results appear to be broadly similar to those of the fort (Fig. 1) and civilian (Fig. 2) graphs. A steady rhythm of monetary index

22 SZÁDECZKY 1905, 11.

23 RADY 1993, 111.

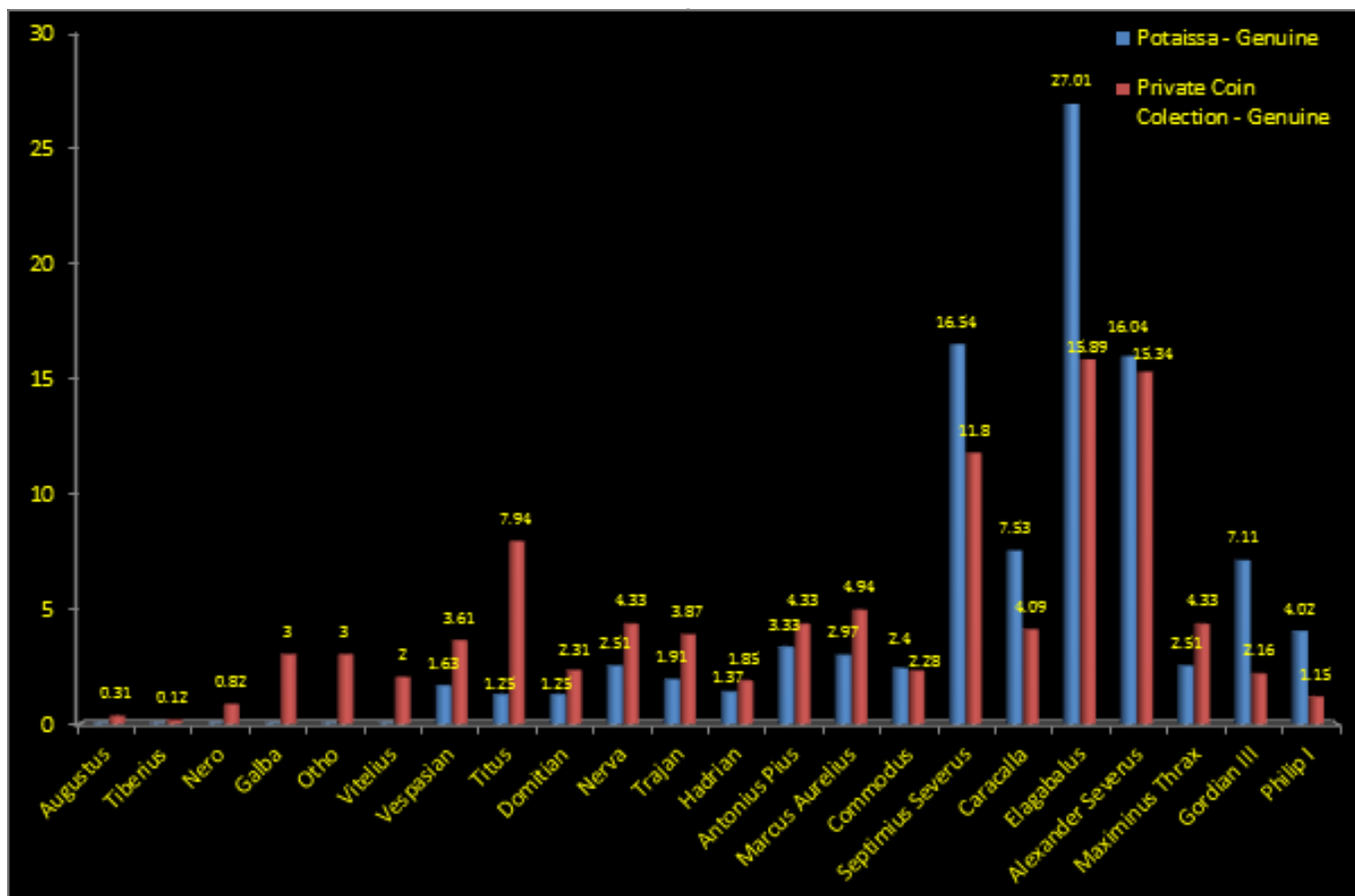


Fig. 6. Graph of the silver coins from Turda – Potaissa vs. Private Coin Collections

from Vespasian (69–79) to Commodus (180–192) followed by huge amounts of coins during Severan period followed by a small rising under Gordian III (238–244) and Philip I (244–249).

The settlement’s period of prosperity is during the Severan dynasty as the amount of currency from this period is very representative. As stated earlier, one can explain the first rise under Septimius Severus (193–211) as a direct response to military campaigns conducted by the emperor and the contribution to this cause by the legion 5th Macedonica. With the returning of the legion back home, the money received by the soldiers as pay entered the local circulation.

Nevertheless, about the time of Elagabalus (218–222) and Alexander Severus (222–235) nothing is known about any possible events involving legion 5th Macedonica. Many coins in a military area signify a concentration of troops, considering also the barbaric attacks that multiply in intensity, it is possible that new troops have been brought or recruited making Potaissa an important military center from where they could direct troops towards endangered areas.

The coefficient for coins under Philip I is still very low, right during the historical great invasions of Dacia by the Carpians. Are the troops away somehow?

On the other hand viewing the collections chart (Fig. 5), we finally get a real change of situation. At first glance, it seems chaotic but looking closer we can see why.

When the graphs with archaeological discoveries show peaceful times (Fig. 3), the collectors chart jumps full of life due to a couple of reasons. First of all, for coins belonging

from Nero (54–68) to Nerva (96–98), these pieces are seen as very rare by collectors because they are not easily found only very few examples in their home region for historical reasons. Secondly, coins from the “golden age” of the Roman Empire more precisely from Trajan (98–117) to Marcus Aurelius (161–180), are very beautiful pieces and issued with many different images that makes them a desirable set by those who collect them.

If we take into consideration the fact of coin high frequency for the Severan period, it is not abnormal that large quantities of these coins to be found in private coin collections.

The values of counterfeited coins are low but signal the beginning of monetary depreciation and early Roman economic failure, correct in terms of time of occurrence.

What happens when overlapping the two graphs (Figs. 4-5) is easy to understand? Collectors prefer coins that they cannot collect from their own area. The abundance in pieces, for a specific period in this case the Severan era, brings the collectors lack of interest in those coins as they can be easily found back home.

It seems that for civil settlements situated close to military areas, possible dangers lurks when trying to establish the monetary circulation if we take into consideration the private collections (Fig. 6) or treasures, both representing deliberate withdrawal of coins from the local economy.

CONCLUSIONS

After going through all this material, some interesting conclusions can be drawn that should affect the future way

of studying archaeological sites that have in composition both a civilian settlement and a military area.

First, it seems that if there is the case of having a large military encampment next to a big civilian town, the monetary circulation from these two places does not resemble. In fact, it is well known that a military area may influence the development of the civilian area because of the influx of coins coming from soldiers and going towards the local market. Thus, one place can be more active than the other can.

The graphs that were made prove that in any period, the coin coefficient may differ between the two places even if separated by only a few kilometers. If under Septimius Severus (193–211) all of coefficients are more or less equal for both places and both types of coins, under Caracalla (211–217) the counterfeited coins surpass the genuine ones in both places. As for Elagabalus (218–222) the civil area lacks in counterfeited coins while the coefficient of genuine ones from here and the fort have very high values.

Secondly, we should avoid using private coin collections in the configuration of the local monetary circulation. These pieces might have not always come from the place where the collection was made and further more they have been specifically selected by the collector to please his personal interests.

Finally but not least, we have to point out that a detailed analyze of the coin evidence is required when trying to establish the right coefficients of genuine and counterfeited coins on a site.

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