

# FLAME Regional Bias Series: The Balkans

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## Geography

Geographically, the Balkans extends from Slovenia to the Black Sea and from the Danube to the Peloponnese. When referring to the Balkans in Late Antiquity, scholars have in mind the dioceses of Thracia, Dacia, and Macedonia, under the authority of the emperor in Constantinople.

## Coinage

The monetary economy of the Balkans from the 4th to the 7th century has a number of unique features. Coin circulation was shaped by the proximity to Constantinople, the imperial residence whose political and economic significance continued to increase over time. Unsurprisingly, the mint in Constantinople was the most stable and consistent, had the largest variety of types and denominations and probably the largest output as well, although this is notoriously hard to estimate. The second unique feature of the region is the fact that minting changed after the reform of Anastasius (498) when the Balkans and Asia Minor become harder to separate. Mints like Siscia and Sirmium, which had been important in supplying coin to the Balkan provinces in the 4th century were not reopened by Anastasius. Minting was restricted to Thessalonica and Constantinople and the two provincial mints of Propontis, Cyzicus, and Nicomedia. The next unique feature is the abandoning of the silver currency after 498. Unlike the West and North Africa, in the Balkans silver coinage was only minted for ceremonial purposes in the 6th century. The minting of currency was restricted to gold and copper. Finally, coin circulation in the Balkans was heavily dependent on the needs of the army on the Danube frontier and a clear distinction can be drawn between the economy of the northern Balkans and that of towns from the Aegean and Black Sea coast.

## Review of Scholarship

The study of coin finds in the Balkans has a long history of fruitful scholarship. Here as well, we note a number of unique features and challenges, which I will discuss briefly. 1. The Balkans may very well boast the largest number of published coins from Late Antiquity, and this is especially true for the Early Byzantine phase (6th–7th centuries). 2. One has to work with at least six different Balkan languages. This may not be an issue when collecting data from numismatic catalogues—coin lists tend to have a universal language—but it can become a daunting barrier when one reaches the interpretation phase. 3. Many finds were published half a century or a century ago by numismatists who used now obsolete catalogues; inevitably the modern researcher will have to verify the accuracy and make corrections, where needed. 4. Coins are rarely illustrated and many coins from old publications are impossible to re-attribute with sufficient confidence. 5. During the communist period (1945–1989), a strong network of regional museums was established in countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. Local researchers published their studies and archaeological reports in their museum’s journal and such publications are often difficult to find. 6. Because of financial constraints, very few sites have been excavated completely. Some settlements have undergone systematic study for over a century (e.g., Histria) and the scientific methods for collecting and processing finds have evolved tremendously. On other sites, only certain areas have been excavated and this can influence the nature of the material found (e.g., residential areas and religious complexes tend to yield different finds).

Moving to regional patterns of research and publication within the Balkan Peninsula, we note an additional set of unique features. The level of publication, style of publication, interest in particular coinages, or particular types of finds can differ substantially as one moves from the Danube Delta to Greece across the Balkans. The northeastern region of the peninsula, in today’s Romania and Bulgaria, has produced what I would call “the Dobrudja paradox.” A small frontier region has yielded more coin finds per square mile than any other province of the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire. Starting in the 1970s, Romanian numismatists kept an annual chronicle of finds, complete catalogues of ancient and medieval coins recently found in Dobrudja, as well as coins from the older collection of the museums in Tulcea and Constanța. The background to this massive output was not only scientific. In communist Romania, there was a strong ideological pressure to document every find dating to the Roman and Byzantine period in order to demonstrate the special status of Romanian culture in the Balkans, with its Roman heritage and Romance language. The scientific result, however, was this unprecedented body of published finds available to the modern researcher in journals such as *Studii și Cercetări de Numismatică*, *Cercetări Numismatice*, *Pontica*, *Peuce* and *Dacia*.

Drawing general conclusions based on finds from Dobrudja should be avoided until other regions of the Balkans and the Late Roman world reach equal levels of publication.

Similar to Romanian researchers, Bulgarian numismatists developed a strong interest in ancient coinages, which included not only imperial issues but also Roman provincial coinages minted locally. Unlike Romanian numismatists, who focused on single finds, with or without archaeological context, their Bulgarian colleagues preferred the study of hoards, published periodically in *Arkheologija*, in local museum journals, as well as in numismatic journals such as *Numizmatika* and *Numizmatika i Sfragistika*. Many of these works are written in Bulgarian and therefore are inaccessible to western researchers, but decades of numismatic work in Bulgaria allowed the compilation of important catalogues of hoards like Morrisson et al 2006. In the recent years, Bulgarian scholars have initiated a more systematic publication of coins from museums in different parts of the country (Smolyan, Pazardzhik, etc.).

Numismatic research in Yugoslavia, and the former republics of Yugoslavia in the last three decades, have largely followed the same pattern of publication, with significant emphasis on hoards, often published in *Numizmatičar*. In addition, the material from Serbian and Croatian museums is well published, with the large collections from Belgrade and Zagreb receiving special attention and detailed catalogues, although the provenance of the coins is not always secure. The same is true for the coins from the museum of Tirana in Albania.

Greek researchers were equally interested in coin hoards and many are published in special monographs, but the exceptional numismatic history of the Greek lands explains why Late Roman and Byzantine coins did not always attract the kind of attention devoted to the spectacular coinages of the classical period. Late Roman and Early Byzantine coins often receive brief mention in *Archaiologikon Deltion* and *To Archaiologiko Ergo sti Makedonia kai sti Thraki* (and sometimes tables are provided), but specific details are lacking. Many Greek historical analyses rely on coin finds but few include the type of information needed for the creation of complex databases.

The publication of site finds is particularly well developed in countries of the Balkans. Researchers can rely on dozens of monographs, most of which include separate chapters for the numismatic material, often accompanied by long coin lists. International teams excavated important settlements at Sadovec, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Sirmium, Caričin Grad, Novae, Ratiaria, Butrint, Histria, and numerous sites in Greece and the coin finds were often published in exemplary fashion. Some of the famous sites

excavated early, such as Corinth and Athens, lack sufficient detail about the coin finds, which are often presented in synoptic tables of limited use for in-depth studies. In other cases, such as Novae, Iatrus, and Histria, the numismatic material is scattered in many publications, monographs, and individual journal articles. Finally, important administrative centers such as Odessos and Thessalonica lack systematic studies covering the Late Antique centuries and our knowledge of the coins kept in the city museum remains limited.

*Work Cited*

Morrisson, Cécile, Vladislav Popović, and Vujadin Ivanišević. Les trésors monétaires byzantins des Balkans et d'Asie Mineure (491-713). 1 vols. Réalités byzantines 1147-4963 ; 13. Paris: Lethielleux, 2006.